

The Coal Strike

By WM. Z. FOSTER

AS I write this article in Pittsburgh, on June 11th, the strike is in the process of development. Mines are being struck every day. Already the total number of strikers mounts to 25,000 and the strike is just beginning to spread into Ohio. So it is difficult, in this stage of the struggle, to speak of the lessons of the strike or to deal in detail with perspectives, and this article makes no such effort.

But a few things are already clear. And central among these is the complete justification of the Comintern and the R.I.L.U. line, and, of course, of the general line of our Party and the T.U.U.L., for the building of revolutionary unions in the United States. More than that, the correctness of the R.I.L.U. strategy and tactics for the development of the organizations and their struggle has been equally justified by the course of events in the strike. The Lawrence strike gave a first demonstration in the United States of the correctness of the R.I.L.U. line. This strike re-emphasizes it.

The strike is a brilliant exposition of the correctness of the analysis of the growing radicalization of the workers. The workers are in a flame of indignation and revolt at the intolerable starvation conditions under which they live. Their slogan is that they may as well starve fighting as starve working. They turn to the National Miners Union for organization and leadership with an enthusiasm and determination which is sending the shivers down the backs of the capitalists and their hangers-on in this vicinity.

The rapid development of this struggle under the leadership of the N.M.U. fully supports the program of building the new unions. It is a blow in the face to such people as the Lovestoneites, Cannonites, and the main Muste group. All the croakings of these elements that the N.M.U. is isolated from the masses, have been dealt a deadly smash. The way the N.M.U. has been able to develop this struggle indicates the vitality of the revolutionary unions. We may expect that such struggles will develop in other industries. There should be a feeling now of much greater reliance on the correctness of building the T.U.U.L. It would be interesting indeed to see Lovestone come here and tell the workers to go back into the strike-breaking U.M.W.A. or Cannon to try to herd them into the fake Howat organization.

Despite many glaring weaknesses in the application of the R.I.

L.U. strike strategy, this strike, regardless of its future development, has already given ample evidence of the fitness of that strategy. Just a few months ago the N.M.U. had merely a handful of members and was confined to only a few mines. But by concentrating upon a single mine or two, by developing small strikes around simple demands, minor victories were won. This attracted the attention of broad ranks of the miners, who had been largely demoralized by the terrible betrayal and defeat of 1927-28. They began to look to the new union with hope. It began to establish contacts with many mines. Then came the attempt to further cut wages in the Avella mines of the Carnegie Coal Company and, in consequence, the organized strike by the N.M.U., beginning on May 26th.

This strike immediately set the miners afire. Manifestly, a broad movement was in the making. The previous strategy of close concentration upon individual mines was developed into a systematic spreading of the strike by marches, mass picketing, etc., on an unparalleled scale. This spreading has been going on, at this writing, for two weeks and there is no end to it yet. The strategy now is to spread the struggle into Ohio and West Virginia and then, if the scope of the movement justifies it, to call a national conference or convention of the miners and to seek to extend it all over the bituminous fields and to really build the National Miners Union.

Naturally, with the spread of the strike, the character of the demands has been varied accordingly. More basic demands are being raised with the strengthening of the movement. Should the movement develop nationally or over the decisive sections of the bituminous fields, a real fight may become possible for still more basic demands.

The strike has also already completely justified the rank and file strike committee system of the R.I.L.U. At this writing, there are broad strike committees at almost every struck mine. These are joined together in section committees, and the central rank and file strike committee links all the local committees into a broad committee of about 200 made up of delegations ranging from 3 to 5 from each mine.

These strike committees have already proved invaluable in setting up the first elements of organization, in giving the rank and file control of and confidence in the strike and union and in developing new forces to lead the strike. Without these committees, in fact, it would have been quite impossible, with our small forces, to have set this mass into motion and to maintain any control of the situation. Naturally a real trade union democracy is the very

breath of life of the strike committee. The workers took to the formation of the mass strike committees as naturally as ducks take to water, although such democratic forms of organization were quite foreign to the autocratic practice of the U.M.W.A.

The strike has also already shown the correctness of the theses of the growing fascization of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy. The U.M.W.A. has openly done everything possible to hinder the strike and, unless all signs fail, we are about to witness one of the most shameful instances of union strikebreaking in the history of the American labor movement. The capitalist press, mouthpiece of the coal operators, are openly calling for the rebuilding of the U.M.W.A. as a barrier against the N.M.U. and the companies are everywhere telling the men to quit the red unions and to get back into the old organization. The U.M.W.A. is desperately trying to get a mass basis in preparation for the strike-breaking now being organized. Under police protection, in face of the militant hatred of the workers, they are, in open cooperation with the bosses, setting up fake locals here and there. Doubtless the operators' strategy is, using the Pinchot government as its tool, to try to bring about some fake settlement with the U.M.W.A., probably via arbitration, and then try to drive the workers back to work by duplicity, terrorism and starvation. The U.M.W.A. is ready for such open strike-breaking, no matter how brazen it will be.

The highly political character of strikes in this period is doubly emphasized by this struggle. Almost instantly the government got into action with all its weapons of terrorism and "conciliation." Armies of state police, coal and iron police, local police, company thugs, deputy sheriffs, etc., were immediately thrown into the strike area to terrorize the miners. Sheriffs in the strike districts abolished the right of assembly, etc., making a crowd of three a riot when any local policeman wants to so declare it. Workers on the picket lines have been mercilessly clubbed, gassed, shot and arrested.

But the most dangerous aspect of the state interference will doubtless be its efforts to "settle" the strike. Under the guise of "peace" the "progressive" Pinchot will try to break the strike with the cooperation of the U.M.W.A. and to drive the workers back to work. To defeat these strike-breaking efforts of the government and the U.M.W.A., jointly with the operators, will doubtless present the greatest problem of the strike. It requires a high politicalization of the struggle. This is a major task. Efforts are being made in this direction by demands for the right to picket, strike, assemble, etc., by demands for removal of the armed forces, for the right of self-defense of the workers, against arbitration, etc. At present, the capitalist politicians and labor fakers are run-

ning around frantically to "settle" the strike, a grave danger, but also a testimonial to the powers of the strike.

The strike is a great demonstration of working class solidarity. Men, women, children are participating in it en masse. On many of the picket lines often not only every miner in the camp, but practically all the women and youngsters too, take part. Compare this with the old U.M.W.A. system of a handful of paid picketers.

There has also been established real solidarity between Negroes and whites. Even the capitalist press had to remark this. Almost everywhere they struck solidly together. The Negroes play a leading role in all strike committees and activities.

The problem of consolidating our forces, of actually organizing the strike and of building the union is an acute one. Although the first order of business up to date has been the spreading of the strike, the work of solid organization is being pushed as fast as our limited forces will allow. A mass recruitment is being made, locals formed, women's auxiliaries, etc. Besides the first steps are being worked out for setting up youth sections and the development of special committees for work among Negroes. High pressure is used to develop new forces from the strikers for the multitude of tasks to be accomplished.

The strike also offers a splendid illustration of the solidarity of the employed and the unemployed. I have yet to hear a single striker express fear of the unemployed as strike-breakers. Both categories are being lined up for the strike. The unemployed are joining militantly in the mass picket lines. The combined forces of unemployed and strikers are now organizing gigantic demonstrations to take place in the coming period to demand relief for both unemployed and strikers. These will take on a real mass class character.

It is too early to speak of the mistakes and shortcomings of the strike. But one thing was glaring—the weakness of the Party nuclei in the mine field. This gravely handicapped the development of the struggle. In fact, most of the nuclei became more or less paralyzed at the outset of the strike and have played little or no leading role. This was a great weakness. The District in general however, has been extremely active, throwing every available force into the fight. The same, of course, is true of the C.C. of our Party. Now the strengthening of the Party forces is going ahead systematically—the recruitment of members on a large scale, the setting up of nuclei, the development of the Party's leading role in the coal camps, etc. This situation should emphasize to the Party the supreme necessity of building shop nuclei in key plants in the basic industries in preparation for such struggles.

This strike should definitely place the Party on the map in the coal industry.

It is necessary that all forces of the Party, T.U.U.L., etc., be rallied to win this strike, which is so vital to the building of the revolutionary forces generally. The most urgent phase of this support is strike relief. The miners are actually starving. Broad relief committees must be set up. Intense campaigns of collections of money, food, and clothes, must be started. These must be started quickly as the miners have no reserve. And they must be on a mass basis, as already at least 100,000 people are involved.

It is difficult to forecast the perspective of the strike. The bosses are preparing to try to drive the workers back to work quickly by a combination of terrorism and strike-breaking A. F. of L. agreements. The great task of the union is to defeat these efforts by spreading the strike as widely as possible, by rallying the masses solidly behind their economic demands, by consolidating the strike through broad strike committees and organizing the union, by exposing the strike-breaking role of the government and the U.M. W.A. and by mobilizing the workers to defeat their machinations by a militant strike which must be based upon the mass action of the workers on the picket line, control of the strike by a huge collection of relief, and avoidance of the pitfalls of arbitration through insistence upon direct dealing with the coal operators. How long the strike will last, and just how the settlement will work out, is highly problematical. We may be sure, however, that the strike will mark a decisive point in the development of the revolutionary unions in this country. The National Miners Union must dig in for a hard and bitter struggle to become established.