

# The Needle Trades Convention

By J. W. Johnstone

IN the month of May, conventions of three principal unions in the clothing industry will take place. On May 5th, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union opens its biennial convention in Boston; on the 12th, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers meet in Philadelphia; while on the same date the Furriers are called to meet in Chicago. In these three unions, in one of the most advanced sections of the labor movement, will be fought out three phases of the battle for progress in the trade unions.

## Fur Workers Ruled by Gunmen

It is the Furriers' Union that presents the most extreme form of reaction in the needle trades. Although the rank and file of the union, in large majority, are progressive and revolutionary, yet the administration of Kaufman, supported by the machine of the Jewish *Daily Forward*, still keeps the union committed to right-wing policies and ruled by right-wing elements. The methods by which this has been accomplished are well known. Thugs and gunmen have been called in to break up local union meetings to prevent action against Kaufman and his cohorts. In the elections, all the left-wing candidates were arbitrarily ruled off the ballot. No member could vote unless he voted for a right-wing candidate. Also, the Convention is taken to Chicago, away from the large locals.

In the Furriers we thus have the most extreme type of reaction in power. It rules by brute force, the exclusion of opposition from the elections, and by alliance with the reactionary forces in the other unions. It is bold and unashamed, and makes no pretenses of working-class democracy. Ruling by such methods over a rank and file that is naturally revolutionary, this bureaucracy is headed directly for a smash-up. It is possible that their boasts of complete control of the Chicago convention may be made good—but the downfall of the Kaufman machine in the not distant future is guaranteed by the primitive nature of its methods of rule. It cannot last. The progressive forces must and will organize their rank and file support which is in a vast majority, and take over the Furriers' Union.

The I. L. G. W. U. has been, for the past year, a scene of battle between the left-wing elements, led by the Trade Union Educational League, and the right-wing administration, led by the *Forward*-S. P. alliance. The left wing has been fighting for amalgamation of all needle

trades union, the right wing for craft separatism; the left for an all-inclusive Labor Party, the right for an exclusive S. P.-bureaucratic collaboration; the left for the shop delegate system of union organization, the right for continuation of the present cumbersome local forms; the left for militant struggle against all reductions in wages, the right for compromise and collaboration.

When, a year ago, the left wing was sweeping into power in the principal local unions throughout the country, the reactionary general administration launched a war upon the left, in a desperate effort to stem the tide of progress. Expulsions, disfranchisements, and discriminations, were the principal weapons relied upon, although even in the I. L. G. W. U. strong-arm men were occasionally brought in and at the famous Chicago protest meeting, shots were fired at Wm. Z. Foster. The I. L. G. W. U. officials became the principal exponents of the tactics of the Amsterdam International, expulsions and splits to destroy the left wing; and the Boston Convention on May 5th, will have this expulsion issue as the main question before it.

## "Repudiate the Expulsions!"

"Repudiate the expulsion policy" has been the slogan of the elections to this convention. The membership has rallied to this issue very decidedly. In spite of the fact that all members of the Trade Union Educational League have been removed from the ballots, and the most arbitrary obstacles set up against any effective protests being made, still the reports from all the large centers of the trade show that a majority of delegates elected are pledged to repudiate the expulsion policy, and to restore the right of free propaganda for amalgamation, the Labor Party, the shop delegate system, etc. Although opposition to the expulsion policy does not mean support of all left-wing issues, yet every one recognizes that it is really all the progressive measures that are at stake, and not an abstract question of "rights."

The absurd charge of "dual unionism" against the T. U. E. L. and the adherents of the R. I. L. U. has been completely exploded. How such a charge can still be made at the convention, after the expelled Chicago members have been placed in responsible posts in the strike now going on, and again proved that they are among the best fighters even while they are officially "outside" of the union, will be hard for the delegates to

understand. The expulsion will be indefensible before this convention. That it will be repudiated, all the expelled members re-instated, and the I. L. G. W. U. brought back into the path of progress is a result to be expected. The majority of delegates so far elected at this writing give promise of a real battle for this result. Upon this issue there can be no compromise.

## Amalgamation a Burning Issue

The question of uniting all needle trades unions into one industrial organization through amalgamation will be a most vital issue at the Convention. Even though the avowed amalgamationists have been deprived of their rights as delegates, still the facts of life itself will force amalgamation upon the attention of the delegates.

In Chicago the strike now going on shows again the necessity of amalgamation. The dressmakers are battling bravely alone, with the other branches of the needle industry expressing their sympathy. All recognize that a defeat for the dressmakers is a defeat for the entire industry. But loose alliances do not give the necessary strength to do battle with the well-organized employers. The very best that comes from the loose connections now existing is irregular and un-systematic financial assistance. Amalgamation is the only real solution to the question of solidarity.

Another fact that forces consideration of the proposal to amalgamate the needle trades unions, and forces to I. L. G. W. U. to take a leading part in this amalgamation, is the growing centralization taking place in the industry. The factories hitherto confined to making men's clothing are beginning to take over production of women's garments. The section system is being applied to cloak making. What may be expected soon is indicated by the fact that Hart, Schaffner & Marx, large producers of men's clothes, are now turning out large quantities of women's cloaks. If there is to be any effective control of this change that is going on in the industry, to protect the interests of the workers involved, it can only be done by uniting the two unions with jurisdiction over the two fields that are thus being united in the industry itself.

There is but one alternative to amalgamation to solve this question—that is to engage in a war of jurisdiction between the two unions. This would be destructive of all unionism in the needle trades. It is a method that cannot be defended even by the blackest reactionary. There is not one argument against amalgamation left. The I. L. G. W. U. at its Boston convention will

be called upon to enter into a movement for unity in the needle trades.

In the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, in common with all unions in America, the issues between right and left wings have become more acute. The line-up on policies, for class collaboration by the right wing and for class struggle by the left, is becoming clearer all the time. But this ideological struggle has not taken on the same destructive character of open warfare against the left wing and its rights in the A. C. W., such as occurs in the other unions. The attitude of the administration has, on the whole, assisted in preserving the A. C. W. from wholesale right-wing disruption.

## Issues in the A. C. W. of A.

But distinct danger-signals have appeared also in the A. C. W. The administration group has been catering to the reactionary elements in New York City—a most dangerous course, for it thus invites them to begin emulation of the Sigman-Perlstein tactics of warfare, tactics that would be fatal to the A. C. W. as a militant union. This tendency to the right was shown in the appointment of Wolf, a reactionary, as manager of the N. Y. Joint Board. The election in Local 2, where the right-wingers stole the election, while the administration looked the other way—if it did not assist—is another warning to the left wing to be on its guard.

Participation in the June 17 Convention for the formation of a Farmer-Labor Party on a broad national scale, inclusive of all class elements ready to unite upon a common program—this will be one of the major issues before the A. C. W. of A. Convention in Philadelphia. Notwithstanding the action of the Convention of 1922, which favored an all-inclusive class Farmer-Labor Party, the administration carried out only the letter of the resolution, but not its spirit. It did not play a responsible and active role in the great July 3rd Convention, at which was formed the Federated-Farmer Labor Party. Further dallying on the issue, now that the Farmer-Labor movement is approaching the critical months of the general election, should not be allowed. It will be a major task of the left wing in the A. C. W. Convention to fight for a whole-hearted instruction to throw the Amalgamated into the political battle in a united front with all class forces willing to cooperate in a mass Farmer-Labor Party. This means full endorsement of and participation in the June 17th Convention at St. Paul.

The general referendum taking place in the Journeymen Tailors' Union for general secre-

tary-treasurer, shows the same line-up between progress and reaction witnessed throughout the needle trades. There are numerous candidates, but the real struggle is between Max J. Sillinsky, backed by the left wing, and T. J. Sweeney, present incumbent, backed by the reactionaries. The issues are exceptionally clear.

Sillinsky has been endorsed by 35 local unions; in his letter of acceptance he states the program upon which he solicits the vote of the membership: this contains, in addition to the purely trade issues, amalgamation, the Labor Party, protection of the foreign-born; recognition of Soviet Russia, organization of the unorganized, and other planks.

Sweeney, on the other hand, is a follower of Gompers. He voted against amalgamation in the A. F. of L. Convention at Portland, although his own union is in favor of amalgamation. He voted to unseat Bill Dunne, an act that aroused high resentment among the tailors. He has made a personal organ out of the official journal, to slander his opponents. He is calling for the support of every reactionary element.

The writer has never met Sillinsky, but has watched his record in a number of conventions and in the movement generally. Sillinsky has made a consistent record of voting and fighting for progressive measures, even when they were decidedly unpopular. He was one of the few that voted for all the progressive measures in

the Portland A. F. of L. Convention, and against the expulsion of Dunne. He has no affiliation with any organization but the Tailors, but by his record he has won the support of the left wing and of all progressive tailors. If all such elements actively support him, Sillinsky stands a good chance of election.

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The next few weeks will be a period of intense interest in the needle trades. Prospects are good for a decided left-wing advance in the needle trades, in common with the general advance throughout the labor movement of the left-wing forces. Repudiation of the expulsion policy in the I. L. G. W. U., participation in the June 17th Convention by all the unions, particularly the A. C. W., endorsement of amalgamation by the I. L. G. W. U., adoption of the shop-delegate principle of organization, election of Sillinsky in the Tailors' Union—all or any one of these will mark a great advance in the labor movement. In all unions the left wing will be fighting militantly for these principles of the R. I. L. U., and for many other measures, particularly for measures against unemployment. Victory on all of them is quite possible if the whole left wing strength is thrown into a real fight for them, because they represent the pressing life-needs of the needle trades unions today. The left wing is fighting with history on its side. Let every militant needle trades worker do his part.

## Canadian Railroaders' Convention

By J. Lakeman

THE Convention of Division No. 4, Railway Employes' Department, A. F. of L., met in Montreal, March 24th to April 3rd. It was preceded by the First Conference of the Canadian Committee for Amalgamation of the Railroad Organizations. These two gatherings were of utmost importance to the labor movement of America, as well as to the Canadian railroaders. They marked the first definite crystallization of a class policy in opposition to the bureaucratic collaboration with the employers.

Division No. 4 includes all railroad workers organized in the A. F. of L. throughout Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific ocean. It has shared with the miners the reputation of being the militant section of the Canadian labor movement. That the Canadian railroaders are responding today to the necessity for more militant struggle is evidenced by the fact that the Amalgamation Conference on March 23rd was at-

tended by 74 delegates from local unions of eight crafts and from the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employes, while the official convention of Division No. 4 had about 200 delegates, being larger than any previous convention of that body.

The tremendous interest in these gatherings is in striking contrast to the general apathy now engulfing union activity in general. In spite of the fact that the shopmen have suffered great losses since 1920, wages being reduced 18c per hour, overtime rates enjoyed for 20 years being lost, pressure of an extended industrial depression and unemployment being heavy, yet the workers were aroused about these gatherings, and expected much from Division 4 convention.

But if the membership was sending its delegates in unprecedented numbers to Montreal to demand that a new chapter be opened in the union history of Canada, other people were also at work. From Washington, Chicago, and other

union headquarters in the United States, came Wm. H. Johnston, president of the Machinists' Union; Bert M. Jewell, of the Railway Department; Edward Evans, of the Electrical Workers; O. S. Beyer, Jr., efficiency engineer; together with a host of lesser fry, descending upon the Convention with a well-organized program to block the progressive forces. From Ottawa, Canada, came also Tom Moore, president of the Canadian Trades Congress and member of the directing board of the Canadian National Railways, with his own special purposes that fitted into those of the international officials.

### "Amalgamation is Power"

The desires of the rank and file were clearly expressed in the amalgamation conference on March 23rd. Reports showed that over 300 local unions had endorsed the Minnesota plan for amalgamation. "The problem of the working class," declared the Conference, "is the development of our power, and only through amalgamation can power be obtained." Definite and practical organizational steps were taken to establish the amalgamation movement and to hook it up closely with the headquarters of the Committee in St. Paul.

That the officialdom was preparing to block amalgamation by means of the Johnston cooperation scheme was realized by the left-wingers. The conference therefore adopted a resolution pointing out the dangers of class collaboration, how the cooperation scheme was being used against the amalgamation movement, and affirming its lack of faith in all such nostrums.

When Division No. 4 Convention met, therefore, it found the rank and file standing for amalgamation, on the one side, determined to prepare a militant struggle to win more food, clothing and shelter. On the other side were Johnston, Jewell & Co., prepared to chloroform the delegates with collaboration propaganda; with Tom Moore on hand to tell about the "good will of the management of the Canadian National Railways" and the non-existence of the class struggle. For three days the delegates were bombarded by the propaganda of Johnston, Jewell, Evans, and Beyer, and all of the official pressure of the trade union officialdom as well as the daily press was put upon the convention.

Meanwhile the reactionary officials had suddenly become quite "progressive" and even "pink." They swore by all that was holy (outside of the convention, of course, and over a social cup) that they were for amalgamation, for the class struggle, for the social revolution, and for everything else that anyone might want

—if they could also just put across the collaboration scheme as part of their "revolutionary program." And after the amalgamation forces had shown that the convention was overwhelmingly for this measure, they even joined in adoption of an "amalgamation resolution" which very slickly endorsed the "principle" of industrial unionism and instructed the officials to work for amalgamation.

The chloroform worked on many delegates. Fooled by the fake endorsement of amalgamation, the weaker ones among the delegates were confused and overawed by the official family. They were not convinced and they did not vote in favor of the cooperation plan; but when the crucial test came neither did they vote against it. The resolution committee recommended the endorsement of the principle of the collaboration plan and an experiment in one selected shop. It was adopted by a vote of 85 to 29 with a large block of the weaker progressives not voting.

A feature of the convention was the talk on amalgamation given by Tim Buck, Canadian Secretary of the Trade Union Educational League, when that measure was before the body. He was received enthusiastically, to such an extent that some delighted rank and file delegates moved that he be given a seat in the convention. That was, of course, an irregular proposal and doomed to defeat, and the officials made the most of it by announcing a great victory for themselves over the "red menace." The incident was a demonstration, however, of the completely revolutionary sentiments that dominated the delegates, even though there was much confusion on practical measures that allowed the wily bureaucrats to defeat their wishes.

### "Down With Collaboration"

The fight against class collaboration in the railroad unions has only begun. Already the delegates who weakened in the convention are finding their bearings. The chloroform is losing its effects and the brains of the delegates are being cleared by the atmosphere of the class struggle as they return to the shops and local unions. The melodious phrases of Johnston and Beyer about the glories of efficiency and good locomotives, lose their charm outside of convention halls. The issues of starvation wages, bad conditions, unemployment, and all the actual evils of working-class life, are pressing upon them. From now on the railroaders of Canada will be faced with the issue of "amalgamation or class collaboration." The slogan of the left-wing is: "Down with collaboration: On with the Fight!"