

Labor at the Crossways

HELEN Marot writes a thoughtful review of the present state and tendencies of the American and British organized labor movements in the New York "Dial" of February 22.

In comparing these movements she finds a significant development in the British Labor movement which is at present not in evidence in the American movement. This development in Britain, she claims, is a manifestation of the workers' desire for control over the industrial processes of the nation. A desire which has been given impetus and clarity of vision through the example furnished by the proletariat of Russia. This desire of the workers for control, which she is pleased to call a spectre, first raised its head in Russia two years ago but which, she thinks has not yet crossed over to America. We will let the writer speak for herself. . . .

But it has taken up its abode for the time in England, and looks so like a native there that they forget to call it by its Russian name. It has made it clear in Great Britain that its special mission is not confined to the protection of wage rates but that it is concerned primarily in jacking up labor into the belief that political states and financiers are incompetent to carry industry forward to the satisfaction of the people of any land. The most recent reports which have come from England, Scotland and Ireland show developments which were not defined when Mr. Cole's article which appears in this issue of The Dial was written. The strikes are developing unusual significance as they are advancing. The latest reports show that the men are out for something quite different from collective bargaining between employer and employed. The most favorable settlement terms fail to bring a sense of permanent peace. A forty-hour week seems to be no greater accomplishment than a forty-eight. There are boilermakers, shipbuilders and engineers who "impudently" assert that they are out for the control of industry, that they intend to see that it no longer pays business men to carry on. But more significant is the fact that the strikes represent a rank and file movement; that the old leaders and organizations are defied; that the movement in throwing off the old leadership has substituted an organization which has a centralizing power of its own rather than one imposed from above and existing by the weakness of its membership. The European movement on the continent and in Great Britain is characterized by a decentralization of power and an attempt of the worker to gain status through control and self-government, in his organizations as well as in the workshop.

Referring to the proposal of the railroad workers in the United States to congress that they take over the entire operating control and financial management of the roads. She says: "The proposition wears indeed the same air of 'impudence' which was objected to in England. But the animus is not the English nor the Russian. It is not impudent and is not compelled by any revolutionary thoughts or intention. Specifically it is a defensive move against the federal regulation which denies government employees the full right of organization. Although the proposition may be no more than a matter of trade-union strategy, as it comes at this time when the industrial and labor situation is highly sensitive to suggestion, it cannot fail to mark a new era in labor psychology. What will be said in the next few weeks on the question of acceptance or rejection of the proposal must inevitably leave an indelible impression on the future if not on the present policy of the labor movement.

In the first place the proposal involves a complete shift from craft to industrial unionism. It is implicit in the very statement of the proposition that industrial organization is the prerequisite of mastery and control, for the very simple reason that it is the basis of actual industrial operation. Whatever disposition is made of the scheme, the 500,000 members of the Railroad Brotherhood and

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the 1,500,000 members of the A. F. of L. craft unions which are involved in the proposal will all recognize that any suggestion which insures a change of status for labor or places it in a position of control will require this shift from craft to industrial organization. For the advancement of industrial unionism the event could not have been more timely. During the war the development of efficiency methods in the factory reduced many of the so-called skilled processes to mechanical operations which would fit the strength and experience of women and young people. This dilution of skill and of male labor has its serious, direct and obvious consequences for the craft unions.

One of the most important effects of industrial unionism is the compulsion which it imposes on labor to think in terms of the enterprise rather than the job. On the other hand, industrial unionism does not, as is often supposed, insure industrial democracy or give of necessity opportunity for self-government. In respect to the latter this scheme of the railroad unions furnishes a striking contrast to the English movement of the shops, which is also industrial in its direction. It is not the industrial form of organization of the shop stewards movement which gives it its democratic character; it is the desire of the shop workers to participate in industrial management. The existence of this desire in England and its absence in America is a pertinent illustration of the differences which exist in trade union psychology. The division of labor and the successful competition of machine production with hand production, of the factory with the workshop or the craftsman, never destroyed completely the British tradition that bound the workman to his industry. This tradition which has persisted for nearly two centuries without apparent warrant or value has made its contribution at last in the swift development of labor organization which is determined by the men at work in the shops. Even should this shop steward movement end without complete victory over the unionism which is superimposed, this habit of mind of the British worker toward industrial responsibility is a labor asset with which the vested interests of Great Britain will eventually reckon.

END OF GLASGOW STRIKE

The Clyde workers, after one of the greatest fights in industrial history, were advised to resume work on Wednesday, and did so with a view to resuming the offensive to win the 40 hours at the first opportunity.

The advice to resume was given in the following notice in the Strike Bulletin on Tuesday:

The Joint Committee, having fully considered the whole position of the strike, and due consideration being given to the attitude of those officials of certain Trade Unions in supporting the government and the employers against the workers in their demand for 40 hours, recommend a full resumption of work by all strikers on Wednesday, February 12, until such time as we can perfect the organization of our forces with a view to making our claim for 40 hours on a national basis, and to enforce it by a national strike of all workers in the near future.

The Joint Committee in control of the strike is to be kept in being, and meets again next week. The brutal alliance of government and profiteers have employed military force to crush a Trade Union movement for reduced hours. The effect of this repression has been to make the workers more determined than ever to establish social and industrial equality.

The Clyde strike originated among the workers,

Because modern industry has made little impression in Russia, the Russian workers as a whole have never experienced an industrial environment which is as irresponsible as is our own for production. Producing wealth in Russia has always been a matter for serious concern, and the brunt of the concern as well as the labor was borne by the peasant. It is not difficult to trace the idea of industrial self-government for which the Soviet stands to the old Zemstvos and to understand that the Russian workers are better prepared for the assumption of industrial responsibility than the workers of the United States. It is important to remember in estimating the elements which have given the workers of Russia and Great Britain their impetus for industrial democracy that in both of these countries the workers' co-operative enterprises have persisted with the strong tendency to preserve the idea of responsibility for productive enterprise which had rested with workers before the days of business enterprise.

The attitude of American labor toward production is the national attitude of giving as little and taking as much as we can get away with. This attitude is common enough in modern Europe but in America it is without inhibitions sufficiently important to have had their effect, either conscious or unconscious, on industrial responsibility. I have not space to speak of the part this attitude may play in the revolutionary changes which are apparently scheduled to come off sooner or later on this side of the Atlantic. But as industry is reorganizing for the benefit of financial interests it has become apparent that the interest of labor and its sense of industrial responsibility must be aroused if American industry is to hold its own in the world market. There is no known way of developing responsibility except by experiencing it, and this proposal of the railroad workers is the first suggestion that the unions may seriously regard themselves as responsible factors. While this proposal is not as yet representative of current thought in labor organizations, it will be received there as a highly agitating event and one with which the interests in some connection will have to deal. Today the situation in this: the officials of unions representing 2,000,000 wage workers have broken down all precedent as they have proposed in serious form to take over the management of the railroad systems of the United States. Here is adventure and imaginative matter injected at a time when suggestion counts. —Helen Marot.

and was by them carried on for three weeks against powerful opposition which included, I grieve to say, Trade Union executives and "leaders." These men were eloquent about the need for "discipline" on the part of the workers, but had never a word of protest against the military and police brutality against the strikers. Instead they had so much advice to give the latter to submit meekly to punishment and accept whatever scraps the employers are pleased to give them, that it seemed as if they imagined they were paid to regulate labor for the benefit of profiteers. The workers have enough enemies to overcome without having to carry faint-hearted executives and leaders on their backs.

One effect of the strike will surely be a movement towards full autonomy for the Trade Unions in Scotland. The London "leaders" seem to know little more about the aspirations of the Scottish workers than, say, Mr. Balfour. The Clyde strike was a general action in which workers from all crafts and trades fought together as one man for a common aim. In this lay their honor: weakness resulted directly craft divisions were re-introduced by the "leaders."

All sections of capitalism fought unitedly against the Clyde strike, and they could only be beaten by a combined movement on the workers' side. —Myner Collier, in the Labor Leader, Feb. 13.