

The Young Worker and the Unions

An Interview with WM. Z. FOSTER

The following interview took place between Harry Gannes, and William Z. Foster, head of the Trade Union Educational League, and editor of the Labor Herald, in the office of the Trade Union Educational League at Chicago. The questions asked and answered reported down verbatim:

QUESTION (By Gannes): What proportion of the young workers in industry are organized in unions of any kind?

ANSWER (By Foster): That is difficult to state. But it is safe to say that it is a very small percentage, outside of the printing trades, the clothing trades, mining industry, and a few others. The young workers are, for practical purposes, entirely unorganized economically.

Q. Have efforts been made in the past, to your knowledge, to organize the youth in those industries in which they are exclusively employed, as for instance: Mail order houses, department stores, certain sections of the stock yards, telegraph companies, etc?

A. Not to speak of. The trade union movement has never had an organized young workers movement. It has had women's movements, and colored workers' sections; but not so far as I know a young workers' movement. Wherever an industry has been organized, like the packing industry for example the young workers were taken in along with the older ones if they reached the age limit set by the organization. But that was a hindrance to their complete organization as many came below the age limit set by the union. Those that fell beneath the age limits were usually neglected altogether, and no manner of appeal made to them educationally or otherwise.

Q. In other words, they were overlooked and left to shift by themselves?

A. Yes, they were. That is the sad part of it.

Q. Have there been any efforts made to educate and instruct the youth of the working class along trade union lines. I mean have there been any campaigns carried on, either by the unions or any other organizations, designed to awaken to working class youth to the need for economic organization?

A. Very little, if any. One of the weakest spots in the whole trade union program of this country is the fact that the education of the children of the workers has been abandoned completely to the capitalist class and its schools, newspapers, theaters and the other contraptions under its control. The trade unions, as such, have made little or no effort to

counteract the baneful effect and injuries of these sinister influences.

In most of the international journals there are sections devoted to the women, which, by the way are mostly made up of essays on fashions, but in dealing with the actual education of the children of the working class—that is virtually unknown, save among the clothing trades.

Q. What do you think of the Economic, or Industrial program of the Young Workers League of America as expressed in the Tentative Manifesto and Program; that is, what can you say as to its practicality and the results it may produce?

A. I think it is based upon correct principles. The general effect of it will be to rouse the young workers among the masses and to make practical battlers of them for the revolution. They will be able to put these ideas into practice. The very contact which they have with the masses will tend to clarify their program, to strip it of all impractical idealism and reduce it to concrete and practical realism.

Q. Should the Young Workers League of America concentrate its efforts on trade union or union work?

A. If it doesn't concentrate its efforts on trade union work, it should, at least, put the trade union proposition in a very important position, on its list of vital subjects, because one of the very first lessons that must be taught the workers as they enter industry is that they must belong to an economic organization and become active in it.

THE HOPE OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT IS THE YOUNG WORKERS. They are the most responsive to new ideas which must be applied as the result of the changing conditions in industry. **No work is more important for the trade union movement than the education of its younger members.**

Q. In what manner can the Young Workers League carry on its union work? Can you give us some practical pointers in this direction? We have some members within our organization who have had a lot of experience within the unions, but as an organization we are new but earnest in our endeavor to do constructive work in the unions.

A. Wherever the apprenticeship restrictions, or age limits do not prevent them, let your members get right into the unions; they should by all means belong to the economic organizations of the working class and function much in the same manner as the

older militants within the unions. But even where they are barred for one reason, or another, they can take an active part in the movement addressing meetings, writing for the union journals, visiting union meetings and circulating radical literature, speaking at strike demonstrations, and in a hundred other ways.

Q. Many of our members have expressed satisfaction with the work that is being carried on by the Trade Union Education League; some there are who urge that we endorse the League as an organization. Do you think that the Young Workers League of America should endorse the Trade Union Educational League?

A. Yes, I think so. The League is carrying on a wide-spread agitation among the unions at this time. It has incurred the wrath and most violent opposition on the part of the old reactionaries. You have noticed the recent attacks on the Trade Union Educational League and on myself that appeared in the capitalist press, and the Gompers episode wherein he bitterly scored the League's activities. This should be the signal for every radical and progressive organization to get behind it and give it their united support. Merely to mouth the ideal, or to uphold the program of working in the trade unions is not enough. The young workers should be told definitely that their place is in the ranks of the Trade Union Educational League, as union members — the principal organization carrying on that kind of activity in this country.

Q. You know that a large number of our members are already in the Trade Union Educational League, and that we count within our small numbers several union officials. Chicago leads in this work?

A. I am glad to hear that.

Q. What would you advise as practical steps to make one an efficient worker in the trade unions?

A. This can only be done by the young workers carrying on the drudgery and work of the movement. In times of stress and strike, they must be the leaders, the ones who run the risk of jail or worse. In every critical period of the organization, when the big questions come sharply before the movement, during wage disputes and at other stirring times, the young worker must be on the job, point out to the masses the meaning of the various forces at play. If the young worker is known as conscientious in his organization, it matters little how radical his program may be; it will receive a sympathetic hearing from the mass.

Besides this necessary every-day work, the young workers should thoroughly familiarize himself with the constitution, rules and customs of the labor movement so that in battling the reactionaries

he will be able to use to advantage his knowledge of the constitutions and regulations of those bodies.

I will tell you why this is important. One of the most serious failings on the part of the radicals and with conservative labor in the past is that they have had nothing but contempt for the constitution and other regulations of the unions with the result that the reactionaries have been able, in the name of discipline and law, to turn the masses against the radicals in a crisis.

The young worker should make it his definite goal to reach the strategic positions in the labor movement. There is where the thinking of the organizations is done; there is where its policies are controlled, and that is the point where every rebel should aim to occupy.

In ninety per cent of the unions of the United States, it is safe to say that the positions of secretary, president and so forth, that is, those that are unpaid, are going begging for men to fill them. The worker who shows any initiative whatsoever in the mass organizations will immediately acquire a large following, and will secure a ready hearing for his program. The young workers should jump into those openings and pave the way for proper action.

Q. Which do you consider the most important for the young worker, revolutionary theory or practice?

A. It is difficult to say which is the most important. Both are vital. Hitherto, the greatest stress has been laid upon the theoretical aspects of the movement. But since the advent of the Russian Revolution, the question of practical application of theories is receiving more and more attention.

In my judgement, a revolutionist who is only a theoretician is of very little value. The thing that makes him really a factor — the one who really counts is the theoretician who has practical experience, and who daily puts his theories into use in the mass struggle. On the other hand, the practical worker in the movement who has no theoretical foundation for his activity is almost as bad off as the theoretician who has no practical experience in the class struggle, the real fight as it wages from day to day.

The ideal type of revolutionist, in my estimation, is the one who has a clear understanding of the class struggle and all the forces behind it, and at the same time possesses a practical understanding of the actual working of the mass labor movement.

Q. That, I think, is endeavored to be expressed in our motto: **Clarity and Action**. I think we are working in that direction. At least that is what I think the Young Workers League has in mind.

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A. A motto is not enough. Every young worker should try to make of himself such a type of revolutionist. He should read deeply the standard, revolutionary, scientific and economic works, and then plunge headlong into the actual mass struggle of the workers.

Q. You know that our educational program is based on the idea of "education through active participation in the class struggle," and is written with a view of bringing our members into the actual struggle of the workers?

A. That slogan, of course, carries the essence of the real, working class educational program. But in carrying on the every day struggle, it must not be forgotten that we have to read and understand substantial works. This reading should not be confined to economics as is too often the case, but should include the widest possible range of science. No worker, no matter how well grounded he may be in economics, can really understand society unless he has some acquaintance with the principles of historical materialism, psychology, and especially should he make an effort to master the general principles of evolution, biological and sociological.

Q. Now, I am going to ask you the closing question. Can the labor movement effectively carry on its struggle against the capitalist class by neglecting the working class youth, or failing to take it into account in its organizations political and economical?

A. In my judgment, the education of the youth is one of the supreme necessities of the labor movement. The capitalist class realizes this fact, and spares no effort to poison the minds of the young people in the schools and elsewhere. We may rest assured that if we don't win the young workers to our side, capitalism will win them over to its side and make of them fascisti and strike breakers.

The young workers, if left to the mercies of capitalism, will be the mainstay of the reaction, but if taken in hand and educated and organized by the labor movement, will be the vanguard of the revolution.