

The Decatur Battle

By Wm. Z. Foster

THE convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, held in Decatur, Sept. 10-16, was one of the sharpest and bitterest clashes that have yet taken place between revolutionaries and reactionaries in the American labor movement. The latter won heavily. They were well prepared for the fight. For months previous to the convention they had been drumming up their forces, with the result that when the gathering assembled it was by far the largest convention ever held by any State Federation. Almost 700 delegates were in attendance, of whom at least 300 were paid officials. The Milk Wagon Drivers of Chicago, for example, sent 43 delegates, their full quota, at \$25.00 per day per man. The whole delegation of Chicago teamsters numbered 120, who voted as a unit against every progressive proposition. The reactionaries were determined to beat the revolutionaries at all costs.

The Labor Party Fight

The first big battle and the decisive one for the whole convention occurred on a resolution calling upon the American Federation of Labor to change its constitution so as to permit the organization of a labor party. This resolution, with small changes, had been earlier submitted to the Chicago Federation of Labor and passed unanimously by it at the instance of left wing delegates and then sent on to the Illinois Federation of Labor. The resolution committee recommended non-concurrence and the fight was on. Various reactionaries put forth the usual twaddle which passes for argument with them. Then John H. Walker, long known as an advocate of independent working class political action and formerly National Chairman of the Farmer Labor Party, shocked the convention by arguing in principle against the labor party. He urged that all parties and groups in the United States vigorously apply the Gompers policy of rewarding friends and punishing enemies. He declared that it was by this method that the British Labor Party had been built and that by it also the labor party would come in this country. After him, I got the floor and spoke. Then the crash came. For three days the convention had been under the utmost tension expecting the great battle against the "reds." The newspapers were full of stories about it and much excitement prevailed. The speaker following me, Oscar Nelson, Vice-President of the Chicago Federation of Labor and a confirmed reactionary, released this tension and gave the keynote to the whole convention. A powerful speaker, he stirred

up a wild anti-red hysteria. He made a bitter attack upon me and everything "red" and swept the convention with him. All the bitterness and hatred of the reactionaries for revolutionary ideas burst forth during his talk. A wave of terrorism spread through the convention. The merits of the resolution were lost sight of. The issue was Communism versus Capitalism. Denying me the right to reply to Nelson's slanderous statements, the stampeded convention was rushed to a vote on the labor party proposition, which was lost by a vote announced to be 456 against 65.

The Amalgamation Fight

Encouraged by their success with the labor party issue, the reactionaries determined to finish the "reds" forthwith. They reported next on the amalgamation resolution, not to concur. This provoked the bitterest fight of the convention. This measure was the one above all that the reactionaries were determined to defeat. They had made elaborate preparations. First, there was the great gathering together of delegates to jam the convention. Then, a letter was got from Mr. Gompers in which the latter, in diplomatic language, practically told the State Federation to keep its hands off such broad issues as amalgamation as they were outside its jurisdiction, a hint which the committee followed in recommending non-concurrence. Besides, Mr. Gompers sent the Crown Prince, Matthew Woll, to attack amalgamation in person at the convention. In addition, the flamboyant series of six articles issued by the Mine Workers' Union had been timed to appear just at this strategic convention and all the reactionary officials had copies of them. But the most effective of all their weapons was an anti-amalgamation statement issued by John Fitzpatrick and Edward Nockels of the Chicago Federation of Labor. Reactionaries all through the labor movement have greeted this statement with great joy, and well they may for it is no less than a repudiation of amalgamation by these two men who were supposed to be its champions. The statement was carefully timed to do all possible damage to the amalgamation fight. It appeared in the current issue of the official organ of the Illinois Federation of Labor and was distributed to the delegates at the very instant that the resolutions committee was reporting on the amalgamation proposition. By their early support of amalgamation Fitzpatrick and Nockels helped the cause greatly. But that sin is now off their heads. Their recent statement was a dagger in the back

of amalgamation and it did more to injure that movement at Decatur than any other weapon of the reactionaries.

In their fight against amalgamation the reactionaries used the same general method, to stir up "red" hysteria. The merits of the proposition were lost sight of altogether. Matthew Woll made a bitter attack against me. I replied with a lengthy speech, which was well-received by the delegation. Then Victor Olander, Secretary of the State Federation, made a two hours' speech. By the clock he devoted a full hour and a half to a personal attack on me. The rest was slobber. Olander is a cunning politician and he utilized his wits to the utmost in assailing me. Character assassination was his method. He built up the most elaborate frame-work of falsehoods about my activities that it has ever been my doubtful pleasure to listen to. I let him go ahead uninterrupted. The night before John H. Walker had promised me, with much emotion, that he realized I was up against a hard fight and that he, as Chairman, would give me ample opportunity to reply to my detractors. So, foolishly, I believed he would keep his word and give me a chance to reply to Olander. But when the latter finished his mass of lies and I demanded my undoubted right to answer them, Walker denied me that right and he took the floor himself. It was a good illustration of his sense of honor and fairness. Walker spoke for half an hour, combatting amalgamation in principle. As he talked tears streamed down his face and his voice was broken. Though what he was crying about few could figure out, except it was that in this convention the pressure from the Gompers machine had forced him publicly to repudiate practically every principle he had ever stood for. When Walker finished at least forty delegates rose to speak, but right in their teeth the debate was cut off and the amalgamation resolution rushed to a vote. It lost by 313 to 80. Great resentment was expressed by many delegates at these shameless steam-roller tactics.

Soviet Russia — American Legion

In several previous conventions the Illinois Federation of Labor endorsed the recognition of Soviet Russia. But this ultra reactionary convention repudiated it. Victorious, the old guard overwhelmed this proposal along with all the other hated "red" measures. And worse yet, many progressive delegates in the convention, firm believers in Soviet Russia but disgruntled at the fiasco made by their Farmer-Labor Party at the famous July conference and eager to get revenge, were weak enough to vote with the reactionaries. Not only did the convention vote against recognizing Russia, but it also took a

direct slap at that country by amending a resolution demanding the release of political prisoners in this country to the effect that those in Russia should be released also.

Part of the program of the A. F. of L. is to go along in alliance with the strike-breaking American Legion. John H. Walker, President of the Illinois Federation of Labor showed himself more than willing to co-operate in this anti-progressive work. In his annual report he devoted 12 closely printed pages to lauding the work of the Legion. He wound up by saying:

I therefore recommend that this convention go on record as recommending that our members who are eligible to membership in this organization, join it and where, in communities that have sufficient numbers to be able to maintain such a post, that they apply for charters for trade union posts.

To grease the skids for this reactionary proposition the Commander of the Illinois branch of the American Legion was invited to speak. As soon as he had finished a delegate hopped up and moved that the work of the Legion be endorsed. This created a furor. Instantly a dozen delegates took the floor in opposition. Among them was a miner who declared that in his town at that very minute the American Legion was breaking a strike. Seeing the opposition, Walker asked that the whole matter be held in abeyance until the convention came to consider his report later on. This was done. But when in due time the committee reported about the Legion it ducked the issue by first praising the Legion and then advocating that trade union ex-soldiers join *some* ex-service men's organization. Denouncing this evasion as hypocritical, a delegate moved an amendment to carry a straight endorsement of the Legion. This was tabled and the motion carried as proposed by the committee. Walker, the so-called progressive, was badly compromised in this affair. Not even the ultra reactionary convention would go as far as he in setting up an organic alliance with the anti-Labor American Legion.

State Political Action

The question of independent working class political action in Illinois came up under two heads. The first was in the form of a resolution demanding that the Illinois Federation organize a state labor party under its jurisdiction. This had the backing of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. It was beaten by the usual vote. The next was a recommendation by Walker that the Joint Legislative Board (the typical Gompers machine for lobbying and rewarding political friends) be continued and financed afresh. Lillian Herstein opened a vigorous battle against this. She was one of the very few members of the Farmer-Labor Party at the convention who stood by the principles of progress and did not allow

herself to be driven into the camp of the reactionaries. She nearly wrecked Walker's project. When the viva voce vote was taken the volume of "noes" was so heavy that even the reactionary Chairman, who would have been glad to call the thing carried if he had dared, had to announce himself in doubt as to the result. He called for a rising vote. When this was taken a remarkable illustration was given of the state of mental terrorism prevailing in the convention. Only 83 delegates actually ventured to stand up to be counted, although at least 300 must have voted "no" in the vocal vote.

A Few of the Lessons

In many respects the convention was a wonderful gathering. For one thing it was a striking illustration of the great fear in which the reactionaries hold the Trade Union Educational League, which means the vital policies that our organization advocates. The tremendous preparations they made to fill up the convention, and the frantic efforts they made to terrorize the delegates by strirring up "red" hysteria were eloquent proofs of that. Matthew Woll tipped off the hand of the reactionaries when he referred to the article recently appearing in the LABOR HERALD, entitled "Gompers Faces Triple Revolt" and pointing the mass character of the present movement for amalgamation, the labor party, and recognition of Soviet Russia. He admitted the validity of our claims that these are the three measures most threatening to Gompersism by demanding an overwhelming defeat of them at the convention. The direct and terrific opposition of the reactionaries was a tremendous tribute to the power and influence of the Trade Union Educational League.

Another striking and instructive feature of the convention was the attitude of the so-called progressive elements, mostly affiliated with or sympathetic to the Farmer-Labor Party. They were sore because, due to their own stupidity, their party was wrecked at the July conference. Hence they were determined to get even with the hated "reds" whom they blame for their discomfiture. So they plumped right into the arms of Gompers. They would not vote for amalgamation, the labor party, or recognition of Russia (though they believe in all three) simply because the "reds" proposed the resolutions or identified themselves with them. What a silly attitude, what an ostrich policy. Such pseudo progressives do not realize the patent fact that these great measures correspond to the most urgent needs of the working class and that the latter must adopt them whether they are proposed by respectables or not. Do the progressives believe that because of their frowns the despised radicals will abandon the advocacy of

these vital measures? If so they are in for a rude awakening. The only effect of their defection will be to practically give the revolutionaries a monopoly on these great and burning issues, it will merely strengthen our grip inevitably among the rank and file. Our progressive friends may recover as quickly as they please from their present acute attack of respectability, which expresses itself by a shameful surrender to Gompers. Whether they like it or not the revolutionary minority, in the future as in the past, will be found in every trade union convention identifying themselves with and fighting valiantly for amalgamation, the labor party, and recognition of Soviet Russia. At the present time the only element in the United State that is making a real fight for these measures is exactly this revolutionary minority. And it will continue to be so. The progressives will eventually be compelled to go along with that fight. By trotting back to Gompers and allowing themselves to be made tools of by his reactionary machine, as they did at Decatur, they are not only rendering themselves ridiculous but are also betraying the most sacred interests of the working class.

Many reactionaries believe that they decisively beat the League militants at Decatur. This is nonsense. The Decatur convention was only one round in a long fight that must go on until the labor movement is revolutionized. The workers in Illinois, particularly the 100,000 coal miners, are largely tinged with radicalism. They will not accept the verdict of Decatur. They will gird their loins for a fresh struggle next year against the reactionaries. Although the Decatur convention was an historic one, that next year in Peoria will be even more epoch-making. The militants will assemble there in larger numbers and more determined than ever to put the Illinois labor movement upon a constructive and progressive basis.

A most vital task in forwarding the T. U. E. L. program is to establish the League finances. This is easily done through the sale of Sustaining Fund Certificates to members and sympathizers. Every group secretary and League correspondent can assist mightily in this work by making the Sustaining Fund a regular order of business. Certificates that have been sent out should be sold. New supplies can be obtained upon request. The League depends upon every member to do his part.