

# Russian and American Trade Unions

By WM. Z. FOSTER.

FROM time to time the overlords of the American trade union movement, in their employer-inspired propaganda against the Russian Soviet system in general, take sneering flings at the Russian trade unions. They never tire of scattering slanders against these organizations. Typically, a resolution adopted at the recent convention of the A. F. of L. referred to the "so-called trade union movement of Soviet Russia." Yet even the most cursory glance at the Russian unions shows that they are miles ahead of the reactionary A. F. of L. unions in every essential respect. Let us make a brief comparison of the Russian and American unions. And in this comparison the odium rests chiefly upon the trade union bureaucrats. They are ultra-reactionary and color the whole movement with their reactionary spirit. They maintain their positions of control mostly by force against a rank and file which wants to bring the unions to a higher state of development.

## Social Point of View.

In the matter of their analysis of society and their estimation of the goal of the workers, the Russian unions completely outdistance the American. They have long since broken entirely with capitalism and capitalist conceptions. Their goal is the building of a new society controlled by the workers. They aim at the destruction of imperialism and the establishment of world rulership of the world proletariat. They are revolutionary thru and thru.

On the other hand, the American trade unions are still wedded to the capitalist system. They are permeated with the capitalist ideology. They are nationalistic, imperialistic, and the most reactionary unions in the world. Their foreign policy is almost identical with that of the capitalist class. They do not aim to abolish the capitalist system, but to subordinate themselves to it. Their official programs hardly rise even to what might be called reformism. Their aim is collaboration with the employers and the sacrifice of the workers' interests. The new forms of class collaboration developing in the American labor movement, such as the B. & O. plan, trade union capitalism, etc., are a menace not only to the workers of this country, but to those of the whole world.

## Leadership.

A comparison of the Russian and American trade union leaders is very much to the latter's detriment. In no country is there such a low grade of trade union leadership as in the United States. The upper strata of leaders are capitalistic, not only in ideology but often in the fact of their owning substantial fortunes. Many of them are grafters, and the overwhelming mass of them are totally unacquainted with the first rudiments of a working class understanding. There is a steady procession of them into the ranks of the employers, the case of Farrington being typical. Berry, the strike-breaker leader of the pressmen, is a hero among the bureaucrats. Their fabulous salaries are a disgrace and menace to the movement.

Compare this body of materialistic self-seekers to the Russian trade union leadership. All of the latter are Marxian revolutionists and veterans of innumerable struggles. Most of them have long jail records won thru their fights against the exploiters. Tomsky is a real proletarian leader; Green is a petty bourgeois follower of capitalism. And the comparison of the whole body of the Russian leadership with that of the American unions amounts to about the same.

## Union Structure and Size.

The American trade unions, notwithstanding the fact that they have to fight the best organized, richest, and most militant system of capitalism in the world, are, from the standpoint of their structure, as well as in many other respects, the most backward of any to be found in any great industrial country. They still cling tenaciously to the antiquated craft union system, altho this has been repudiated in every other country. They consider



The Palace of Labor which is the headquarters of the Central Committees of all Russian Unions

amalgamation as synonymous with Bolshevism. In this country we have the unparalleled spectacle of 20 unions in the railroad industry, 25 in the metal industry, 20 in the building trades, etc. It is a brand of unionism of the vintage of 1890.

The Russian unions, on the contrary, are structurally the most perfect of any in the world. They consist of 23 industrial unions, based not upon the obsolete local union of the American pattern, but upon the shop committee.

In the matter of size, the Russian unions dwarf the trade unions of this country. They contain over 8,000,000 members, comprising 95 per cent of the Russian working class. They have grown 3,000,000 in the past three years. Whereas the American unions contain only 3,500,000 out of an organizable total of workers of 26,000,000. They comprise chiefly only the skilled trades and do not touch the masses in the basic and key industries. In spite of unparalleled industrial activity, they are decreasing in membership and influence. They are on the retreat before the attacks of the employers and are yielding to company unionism, both from within and without their ranks.

## Control of Industry.

The Russian unions have a real voice in industry. Their members get the full product of their labor, minus the funds necessary for the upkeep of the government and the development of industry. They have to deal with a working class improving its wages, hours, working and living conditions at an unprecedented rate. Go to a Russian trade union congress and you will hear the leading governmental industrial leaders making their reports to the organized workers. All the boards and committees operating and directing the industries contain representatives of the unions. Their role

in production is far-reaching and recognized.

Compare this decisive role of the Russian unions in industry with that of the American unions. First of all, our trade unions can influence the standards of only a small percentage of the workers, the great mass being almost entirely at the mercy of their rapacious employers. And the unions' influence for good over even this small percentage is a diminishing quantity. The time was when they made a bit of a fight to wring real concessions from the employers. But now their whole tendency is away from this. With the B. & O. plan, the Monroe Doctrine of labor, the "new wage polity" of the A. F. of L., and other similar projects, they are repudiating all idea of struggle and are degenerating the trade unions into mere appendages of the capitalist production mechanism. The ultimate result of their policy is to assist the capitalists to still further exploit the workers. The greatest bunkum of the international labor movement is the claim of the A. F. of L. that it is responsible for the high wages paid to American workers. This is the result of the bonanza development of American industry and to the growth of American imperialism.

## Control of Government.

The weakness of the American trade unions in the governmental machinery is notorious the world over. There is no real workers' representation in the national congress, and very little in the respective legislatures. Even the city councils in the big industrial centers are almost entirely in the hands of the employers. In no industrial country is the working class so devoid of representation in governmental bodies as in the United States. This is because of the criminally stupid political policy of the trade union bureaucrats. They have not yet broken their

allegiance to the two capitalist parties, and taken the fundamentally necessary step of building a mass political party of the workers. They are lined up neck by neck with all the crooked politicians in the country. The disastrous results speak for themselves.

Compare the Russian situation with this political debacle. The government is in the hands of the workers. They dominate the whole political and industrial situation. The workers have their own party, the Russian Communist Party, and it is the master of the situation. In the United States the capitalists are in complete control, and in the Soviet Union the workers are in control. Yet the American trade union bureaucrats venture to sneer at the Russian workers.

## Workers' Education.

Within the past few years the A. F. of L. unions have made a faint gesture in the direction of workers' education. But this, as expressed thru the Workers' Education Bureau and various other organizations, only emphasizes the weakness and capitalistic character of this education. American trade union journalism is a calamity to our labor movement. Many of the papers are indistinguishable almost from those of the company unions. This is to say nothing of the dozens of grafting sheets in various industrial centers, which brazenly take bribes from the employers to fight everything progressive in the labor movement. One can read miles of printed matter in American trade union journals and never run across an idea of importance in the solution of the workers' problems. By and large, no important labor movement has such a pitifully weak educational system as the trade unions of this country.

On the other hand, the Russian unions are absolutely supreme in this respect of education. It is safe to say they are carrying on more education (not to speak of its incomparably better quality) than all the rest of the world's labor movement put together. Their splendid workers' clubs and various other educational systems are carrying on an enormous work of enlightening the workers everywhere. Their system of trade union journals are beyond compare. A splendid example is the daily paper of the railroad workers, The Gudok. This paper has about 300,000 circulation, and is of an enormous influence in the life of the railroad workers. Compared to the Russians, the American trade union leaders have not learned the first A, B, C's of workers' education.

## Ugaroff's Question.

When in Leningrad recently our party met with Ugaroff, the secretary of the local Central Labor Council. As we were about to leave he said: "Well, we have shown you our unions and how they are carrying on their work in the factories. You come from a great industrial country where the unions are much older than ours. Now you tell us what your unions have to teach us in the way of labor organization. What have they that is better than ours? We will be only too glad to learn from them if we can."

We were stumped. It was such an unexpected question. We cudgelled our brains, trying to conjure up a single feature of the American unions that the Russian unions could profitably pattern after. But in vain. We could think of nothing, and we said so. In their structure, leadership, manner of conducting business—in every respect, the Russian unions are a thousand miles ahead of the American unions, cursed as the latter are with reactionary and faker leaders, antiquated craft structure, B. & O. plan class collaboration conceptions, etc. All the way back to Moscow, in fact all the way back to the United States, we pondered over Ugaroff's leading question. And our final conclusion is that our answer to him was absolutely correct. The American trade unions have nothing whatever to teach the Russian workers, except how not to build a labor movement; whereas the Russian workers have innumerable lessons to teach the American workers on how to construct a real labor organization.

## The Tractor

By KARL REEVE.

THE sun hung low over the far-reaching steppes. The black soil of the Northern Caucasus is rich in promise of bountiful grain. But for centuries the Russian peasant has merely scratched the surface of the ground, planting with a wooden point for a plow, sowing his shriveled grain broadcast, by hand. He had been a prey to vicissitudes of drought and impoverished by the czar's taxes.

In the middle of a slightly rolling field a broad-shouldered peasant stands over an American tractor. He cannot make it go. For a week it has been thus. The peasant, tall, thick featured, big limbed, is playing a new game. While the precious hours of seeding time slip by, he has taken the tractor apart, put it together again, cranked and cranked, but the engine remains dead. A look of perplexity is stamped upon the peasant's face. "Do so and so to the clutch before starting," the directions read, "the carburetor must be placed so and so." But the peasant cannot read the English directions. His big square fingers slip heavily over the spark plugs, cleaning and re-cleaning. He takes out the battery, looks at it, and replaces it again. Still the tractor will not go.

The peasant belongs to a collective with six others. All are poor peasants. They had nothing but their little homes, their strength and their separated patches of land before the revolution. But the Soviet government is the friend of the poor peasant. The Collective has been granted ample land in one piece, and credit on easy terms with which to buy this tractor.

A kulack (rich peasant) rides by in a four-seated carriage behind his team of horses. "If you used a pair of bicks (oxen) you could just beat them and cry, 'saup,' and they would go," the kulack calls sarcastically. "You'd better rent my bicks again and get in your wheat." The poor peasant does not answer. He bends his head low over the tractor engine, beads of perspiration standing out on his face. "My three months at the tractor school were not enough to get me through this situation," he thinks.

But finally the repair man arrives from the service station at the Okrug (district) headquarters. The repairman is overworked and spare parts are scarce, but the trouble is found at last, a part is replaced and the tractor again rolls over the plain, leaving in its wake a deep double

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