

HISTORY OF A MILITANT UNION

By Morris U. Schappes

HAS there ever been an American trade union quite like the one built by the fur and leather workers in the past 40 years? Has any union faced such obstacles, beaten so many and such powerful enemies and won so much for its 100,000 members? Is there another union the very existence of which today is such a living refutation of the thousand and one lies and slanders to the effect that communists and left-wingers are the enemies of American labor?

Small in numbers as unions go, and in an industry far from basic, the fur and leather workers' union is yet particularly the one against which monopoly capital is launching almost its whole arsenal of weapons in order to smash its strength and obliterate the inspiring example it has been setting to forward-moving workers throughout our land. One of its greatest leaders, Irving Potash, is one of the 11 Communists so disgracefully and unconstitutionally convicted at Foley Square. Several others among the union's most experienced leaders are being subjected to deportation proceedings by another section of the Department of Justice. The Taft-Hartley Law is creating unprecedented difficulties for the union. The CIO leaders, obedient to the voices of their masters, have tried to raid this union, have sent in strikebreakers to break its strikes, and have recently forced the union out of CIO ranks.

If the furriers and their union have always been close to the hearts of the American Jewish workers, that is because the union was practically built, originally, by the intelligence, the courage, and the bloody self-sacrifice of immigrant Jewish men and women. It was these Jewish workers who won Greek workers over to the union, and the German workers, and the Negro workers, and recently, in the leather division, the New England workers and the Virginia mountaineers.

When the Jewish furriers began their battles, their conditions were miserable indeed. Sweatshops in filthy holes were the rule. Grasping and autocratic contractors sat on their necks. Interminable were the working hours during the seasons and endless were the weeks of unemployment. Wages were at less than the sustenance level. Occupational diseases tore at the lungs and hands and lives of the workers. And even in their wretched jobs, the workers had no security, with the job-hunt beginning anew each season.

And what are the present conditions? The average wages of the fur manufacturing workers are the highest in the United States: \$3 an hour for a 35 hour week. In other parts of the fur industry, the rates are lower, but still superior to those in most other crafts. And the leather workers, whose affiliation with the furriers began only in 1939, succeeded by 1948 in pushing their rates up from 70 cents to

\$1.50 an hour. As for shop conditions, paid holidays and vacations, health insurance, pension plans, job protection for elderly workers and job security, the fur workers are the pace-setters for the country.

Real Union Unity

To protect and improve these gains, the workers have the greatest of their achievements: the International Fur and Leather Workers Union, united, and cleansed of its right-wing socialists, of the thugs, thieves, bureaucrats and red-baiters that used to infest that union and still have a strangle-hold on other unions. A strange combination? Incredible? But look, and look carefully, at the evidence revealed for the first time in that plainly written but exciting book by Philip S. Foner which has been the immediate stimulus to these reflections.¹

Foner amply lives up to his claim to have "brought to light hundreds of hitherto unpublished documents that reveal in all their nakedness the unsavory role of the leaders of the American Federation of Labor and of the Socialist Party in the American labor movement. Here is the irrefutable evidence which shows how these labor leaders conspired with every enemy of the fur and leather workers, with employers, police, underworld gangs and other anti-labor agencies, to maintain their dominance over the workers in the interests of the employers." Yet it was from the archives of the AFL itself that Dr. Foner dug up many of the devastating and damning letters reproduced photostatically in the book!

Having beaten this unholy combination, the union now exists as a solid united front which includes Negro and white men and women of various political beliefs from Communist to Republican, and of various religions and countries of national origin, Jewish, Greek, Italian, etc. This united front operates through a system of effective inner union democracy that makes the membership the real controlling factor. The union involves the utmost rank and file participation in all its affairs, from policy making to mass picketing to dues paying (the union has consistently rejected the "easy" method of dues check-off). Leading the union are men like Gold, Potash, Winogradsky, Schneider, Burt, Klig, Feinglass, Galanos, Lyndon Henry, Pickman, O'Keefe and others who are described by Foner, without exaggeration, as "a tested, incorruptible, fearless and responsible collective leadership . . . of proven integrity, ability and loyalty to the progressive principles of demo-

¹ *The Fur and Leather Workers Union*, by Philip S. Foner, Nordan Press, Newark, N. J. \$5; in progressive bookstores, \$3.

cratic trade unionism." I should add one more adjective: "resourceful." Membership and leadership are also farsighted enough politically to take active parts in all progressive movements and struggles that confront our working class, nation, and the world.

How the fur workers out-maneuvered and outfought their combined enemies is an instructive and moving lesson in unity, skill and sheer physical bravery. Had they had to deal only with the bosses, the problem would have been comparatively simple. But it soon became clear that the bosses could be defeated only if the workers pushed out of the way those among their own leaders who were collaborating with the manufacturers. At the founding of the International in 1913, the leadership consisted of Socialists of the Jewish daily *Forward* persuasion, bureaucratic, resourceless, and afraid of the militancy of the workers. "One must use the whip" against the workers, wrote one such character, Isidore Cohen, manager of the New York Joint Board, in the *Forward*. The "whip" included the use of gangsters and the stealing of elections. After Cohen was finally ousted, he became an open shop fur boss. So did Albert W. Miller, the International president and also a Socialist, after he was forced to resign. A tougher nut to crack was Morris Kaufman and the gangster machine with which he ruled both as manager of the New York Joint Board and president of the International. The *Forward*, needless to say, poured salt on the open wounds of the furriers. On one occasion, when several workers, including two

women, were beaten up by Kaufman's thugs at a membership meeting, and Ben Gold was attacked and slashed so that 11 stitches were required on his head, the *Forward* reported that the left-wingers had themselves beaten Gold to make a martyr of him! But the turning point came at a mass meeting on January 5, 1924, when the long-suffering workers decided to build up "an organized defense committee" to "take practical steps to free the workers from terror." At least five more workers were to be murdered by gangsters before that freedom from terror was realized.

Great Strike of 1926

One of the finest sections of the book is the 65 pages given to a description of the 17-week New York fur general strike of 1926. Foner's simple, even plain, style takes on eloquence, excitement and a new pace as he recounts this historic battle in which proletarian determination and brilliant leadership defeated a terrific combination of enemies. With Kaufman's machine defeated in New York and a united front that included the left-wing now leading the Joint Board, the strike made labor history in many ways. "A new technique in strike strategy" was introduced: a General Picketing Committee of 1,000 with a "women's battalion" of 200. The officials renounced their salaries for the duration of the strike. The Jewish strikers, the majority, spurned the crude attempts of the *Forward* to incite them against the Greek strikers.

Unity, militancy and mass picketing by all the 12,000 on strike were the weapons used against gangsters, police, and the treacherous right-wing Socialists of the International union. William Green, head of the AFL, it is now known from Foner's researches in their archives, was deeply involved in a plot to smash the left-wing and bilk the workers of demands they could well win. But Gold's shrewd strategy was, as Foner points out, "to differentiate between the right-wing leaders of the International and leaders of the AFL. . . . An open conflict with the Federation must be avoided if possible." The strikers made it impossible, by their mass solidarity, for Green to break the strike, but then, having always left him a way out, gave him an opportunity "gracefully" to help settle it on terms of victory.

In this resourceful and skilful strategy there is perhaps a clue to the reason why the fur workers were able to rid themselves of the right-wing Socialist shackles, while other needle-trades workers in the millinery and men's and women's garment unions are still saddled with Dubinskys. Although Foner does not stop to analyze this important problem, he does make this passing observation: "At no point in the strike did Gold fall a victim to the isolating policies into which left-wing ultra-militants in the American labor movement so often slipped. In spite of every provocation of the right-wing to cause a break between the General Strike Committee and the AFL, the union, as a result of Gold's leadership, maintained its position." The first 40-hour week contract in American labor history was one of the victories won.



Ben Gold addresses picket line at fur strike in 1938.

The Lepke-Gurrah gangsters were finally physically driven out of the fur market by the mass defense of the workers in 1933, without, for instance, the kind of cooperation the right-wing millinery union got in 1932 from the governor, the district attorney, and the police. The furriers did the job alone and made it stick; in fact, in 1936, when the city officials were unable to find anyone with the courage publicly to testify against Lepke and Gurrah, the fur union leaders Irving Potash and Samuel Burt dared to take the witness stand and won a conviction from the jury.

The furriers proved another thing in the 1930s: that gains could be won for the workers in the depths of the crisis in 1932 and also in the depression of 1938. While other unions assumed that such times are not propitious for successful workers' struggles, the left-wing leaders of the furriers operated on the theory that unity, militancy, and boldness can turn the tide. That is why in 1949 some of the locals were winning contracts for their *fifth* rounds of post-war wage increases while some right-wing unions had not even entered the second rounds for fear of inconveniencing the employers.

Some Limitations

Dr. Foner's book, with all of its wonderful qualities of unprecedentedly revealing materials and insight into complicated aspects of union policy and high readability, has one serious limitation. He concentrates so much on the important bread and butter issues and struggles, which are of course the backbone of any union, that he all but ignores the continual attention to the broader issues that made this union not only militant but progressive. The miners' union, for instance, is militant, but is it a progressive union on the level of the fur and leather workers? The difference must lie in the understanding and approach to major social problems, in the ideology of the rank and file and the leadership, the core of which has, for the past 25 years, been Marxist. The slighting of this element in the history of the fur union not only leads to omissions and the playing down of many events (such as the vigorous opposition to the first imperialist world war, which is barely mentioned), but reduces the force of the lessons to be learned from this union and the inspiration it can give to other workers.

A part of this limitation is expressed in Dr. Foner's treatment of the union's approach to the Negro question. Now there are some two score references to the need of unity of Negro and white and to the high level of attainment of that unity in this union, which has two Negro leaders on the general executive board of the International, and which has followed a policy that has put it way out in front among American trade unions on this question. But the matter is treated as if it were just a routine part of the democracy that is practised as a matter of course. It seems to me that this is not all there is to the answer, that in fact it was a Marxist approach to the Negro question on the part of some of the leaders and members that accounts for the present achievements. To omit this factor is to make it harder for



Irving Potash

those workers who might wish to emulate the example of this union to appreciate how it is to be done.

But the limitation is only and exactly what it has been called, a limitation. Fundamental is the fact that the progressive movement has produced this book and is again greatly indebted to Dr. Foner for placing his superlative professional talents as a historian so directly in the service of the working class. The women's garment workers and the headgear workers have had books written about their unions by economists or journalists, all of whom glorified the ruling social-democratic machines and their leaders. For the first time we have a history of a trade union written by a historian, and the difference in objectivity and craftsmanship is obvious.

Jewish Peace Signers in France

The Jews of France are playing their part in the vast and broad campaign to sign the Stockholm Peace Petition. Following is a typical list of signers: writers Jean-Jacques Bernard, Andre Spire, G. Benoit-Levy, Edmond Fleg; artist Mane Katz; Chief Rabbis Morali, of Nancy, Avram, of Besancon, Simon Fuks, of Colmar; Rabbis Paul Bauer Gourevitch, Zaoui, Schilli; Leon Lyon Caen, president of the French Court of Cassation; Andre Blumel, lawyer; Mme. Kagan, president of the Women Zionists of Casablanca; M. Orfus, president of the Jewish War Veterans and vice president of the Zionist Federation of France; Dr. Vital Modiano, president of the Representative Council of French Israelites and honorary president of the Zionist Organization of France (General Zionists); Jacques Lillienbaum, president of the Zionist Union of Eastern France; M. Studi, president of the Bessarabian Fraternal Society; Dr. Werthheimer, Professor of Medicine at the University of Lyon.