

# The "New Unionism" of Sigman & Co.

By J. W. Johnstone

**D**EVELOPMENTS of the month in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union reveal some details of the Sigman policies that, soberly considered, can only be described as a repudiation of the fundamentals of unionism. The unions in Philadelphia refused to endorse the Sigman order for expulsion of all members and sympathizers of the Trade Union Educational League, the officials of the I. L. G. W. U. revoked the charters of all Philadelphia locals and announced that they would all be re-organized. New charters were issued under new numbers, and a "membership commission" was set up to examine and re-register the members. On December 13th, 12 former members were called before that body and the following points were laid down as the requirements for re-admission to the I. L. G. W. U.

1. They should sign a written statement that they will have nothing to do with the T. U. E. L. nor any organization in sympathy with it.

2. They should not read or circulate any literature which is not in accord with the official policy of the administration.

3. They should not attend any meetings or entertainments given by the T. U. E. L. or any organization in sympathy with the League.

4. They should not sell or buy any tickets for meetings or entertainments of the above-mentioned types.

This sort of "peonage" contract, binding the members to the official machine in perpetuity, has resulted in less than 25% of the former members of the Union in Philadelphia being re-enrolled in the organization. It is hard to imagine the stupidity of a policy that demands of union members that they shall not read radical literature, attend radical entertainments, or oppose expulsions of progressives. It is difficult to realize that union officials are actually putting up such points as qualifications for membership in the union. Yet that is what is actually going on in Philadelphia. The result that is bound to come, the disastrous condition flowing from such insanity, will quickly be apparent. The garment workers of Philadelphia, in common with the members all over the country, may well rue the day that Sigman & Co. took office in their union.

In all the garment centers the same policies are producing like results of disorganization. Revocation of charters, disfranchisement of members, removals from office, expulsions from the union, removal from the shops, the blacklist, slugging of protesting members, and breaking up of

local meetings—these are the weapons by which the Sigman regime has undertaken to rule the I. L. G. W. U. and to break the influence of the left wing within the organization.

The struggle that began over the issues of amalgamation of all unions in the needle industry, the shop steward system, and the recognition of Soviet Russia as three outstanding questions, has now become a struggle to maintain the very existence of the Union. But are the reactionary officials so stupid as to believe that they can settle any of these issues by their tactics of violence? No, Sigman and his cohorts are facing a militant rank and file that cannot be clubbed into submission to arbitrary orders. But even if his membership were such slavish and degenerate people that his orders should go unchallenged for the time, the demands of progressive and revolutionary elements are so rooted in the needs of the industry that they must recur again and again, until they are realized in life.

Amalgamation is a question that cannot be settled by slugging those who advocate it. Expulsion of members from the union because they propagate the shop steward system still leaves that question to be settled. Disfranchisement and the blacklist for workers that protest against the expulsion policy is only an admission that the officials cannot bear scrutiny. Despots of medieval autocracies learned a lesson centuries ago that Sigman has still to learn, that even a despotism must be tempered by common sense. And the workers in the garment trades are not slaves or serfs who can be forced to accept even an enlightened despotism. The attempt to establish a black autocracy will either cease, or the organization, weakened by this internal poison, will fall beneath the blows of the employers.

The situation is indeed serious. It is not a factional dispute. And though it began as a fight over the issues of amalgamation, the shop steward system, and other left-wing measures, the tactics of the wildly reactionary officials have aroused the membership to protest. It is now a fight between the rank and file and the International officials. Members who, up to two months ago, took no particular interest in their union meetings, are joining in the protests.

Members who do not know how the struggle began, go to their local union meetings to find out what is going on. Here they find that no discussions are allowed. Members are being expelled by star-chamber proceedings, but no votes are taken and no information given. Strong-arm

crews roam about to enforce official rulings. Meetings are broken up in confusion to prevent discussion and action. All these things, done brazenly by paid union officials rouses a storm of resentment against officialdom. The members become staunch supporters of the expelled left-wingers. The result has been a rank and file revolt against the Sigman machine.

The officials move from one desperate expedient to a more desperate one. Faced with a hostile membership, they did not dare allow any kind of free expression. Now they are abolishing elections. That is the only meaning of the action of Mayer Perlstein in Chicago in the local elections. Perlstein is an exceptionally treacherous bureaucrat, hypocritically professing sympathy for those whom he is betraying and blacklisting. He is a tool in the service of Sigman, and his actions in Chicago reveal the policy of his master. It is to disfranchise the whole membership.

Perlstein went about the job by assuming the authority to examine all candidates in the local union elections. Then he arbitrarily removed from the ballot all those who refused to pledge allegiance to the policies of Sigman & Co. One candidate was removed because, when questioned about the expulsions, he said he was impartial. Six candidates were arbitrarily removed from the ballot of one local union. This was done without consulting the local or the joint board. In defiance of the rules of elections requiring three days notice, he notified the members of election on the same day on which they were held. The machinery is being oiled for obtaining a 100% delegation to the coming international convention pledged to support Czar Sigman. The membership is disfranchised.

At the same time that the membership generally is being deprived of its right to vote for progressive candidates, Perlstein was depriving others of the right to work. Unable to accomplish this through the local unions, which unanimously refused to do his bidding in throwing

workers out of the shops, he had recourse to the manufacturers' associations, and through the bosses' organizations obtained the discharge of three men, former members expelled on his order.

Sigman and Perlstein are two outstanding figures in this fight against unionism, but behind them, in the shade of the Amsterdam International, stands the sinister figure of Abe Cahan, the crafty editor of the Jewish *Daily Forward*. He is the ringleader in the entire fight against progress. Parading before the world as a socialist, he is the incarnation of blackest reaction. His pen, his voice, his paper, and his influence have long been at the service of the most reactionary forces. He and his henchmen aspire to the complete control of the Jewish workers and all their organizations. He is out to crush all who do not bow to his dictation. He is against amalgamation because that will remove his small-minded lieutenants, who are incapable of directing a great industrial union of the needle trades, from the highest positions. He naturally affiliates with the reactionary forces wherever they are found. **He is a menace to unionism wherever Jewish workers are organized.**

Those who did not understand the complete indifference with which the reactionary officials regard the welfare of the workers, were under the illusion that the smashing tactics would soon come to an end. These innocent dreams have been largely dissipated by the latest developments, which demonstrate that the desperate officials will stop at nothing to continue to rule with an iron hand. It means nothing to them that in Philadelphia they have already reduced the Union to one-fourth its previous strength. They do not worry over the almost complete cessation of organization work. They are not concerned that the bosses are planning another drive to take advantage of the weakened condition of the organization. The rank and file, if it would protect itself, will have to take its affairs out of such irresponsible hands. The issue is up to the membership.

#### **The United Front. A T. U. E. L. Leaflet.**

**F**OR the first time the fundamental problem of how to obtain solidarity of the working class, industrially and politically, in the struggle against capitalism, has been stated so briefly and yet so clearly that every worker can understand, without the slightest difficulty, the fundamental program of the T. U. E. L. Amalgamation and the Labor Party are shown to be measures growing out of the most vital and pressing every-day needs of the workers. This will be a most popular leaflet.

**50c. per hundred, \$4.00 per thousand.**

Every militant should order a quantity for distribution in his local union. League groups should order thousands for systematic distribution.