

The Great West Coast Marine Strike

(By SAM DARCY.)

(Explanatory Note: Beginning with this issue we print a series of articles reviewing the maritime strike on the West Coast and the consequent General Strike in San Francisco. The first articles were originally written for and printed in the July issue of "The Communist." In other words, these articles were written PRIOR to the General Strike.

If we had to write them now for the first time we would have, with one exception, written them exactly as they are. That exception is the sections dealing with the need for exposing the leaders of the A. F. of L.

The actions of the shameless misleaders of labor during the General Strike makes even our strongest condemnation of them seem weak indeed! This is all the more so since it is now clear to every working class thinker that the prime cause for the defeat of the General Strike was the success of the capitalist class in imposing its own lieutenants—Vanderleur, Kidwell, Deal & Co.—upon its enemy, the ranks of the fighting workers. That the struggle against the crew was not a central point in the activities for the past decade shows the weakness of the understanding of the militants. This weakness constitutes the main danger to the working class today. Victory will only be achieved when this is no longer true.

We must deal adequately with the need for, and above all the life-and-death necessity of, discrediting and driving out of the labor movement these employers' agents in our ranks. This we hope to correct in the second half of this series where we discuss in detail the lessons of the General Strike.)

It is commonly agreed that the maritime strike was the largest ever conducted in the maritime industry, and the best organized and disciplined in any industry in the history of the West. There were about 35,000 workers involved. The main center, in the San Francisco Bay area, included 14,000 workers.

Participating directly in the maritime strike were all longshoremen and seamen crafts and seafarers, and indirectly, it included sympathetic action by teamsters, machinists, boiler-makers, shipyard workers and other minor crafts.

In order more easily to study the development of this movement, we are dividing our subject into four main headings:

1. Problems in developing the movement for struggle.
2. Problems in the calling of the strike.
3. Problems in the conduct of the strike.
4. Perspectives for the outcome of the strike.

Problems In Developing the Movement For Struggle.

For about a decade, with but minor exceptions, San Francisco longshoremen have been operating under a "Blue Book Union." This is a company union operated by the shipowners which has all of the characteristic evils of every other company union in the country. Yet it had been recognized by the Central Labor Council.

At the end of 1932, at the initiative of the militant elements on the waterfront, agitation for the organization of a real workers' union began. This agitation centered chiefly around the publication of a mimeographed bulletin called the **Waterfront Worker** which had an average paid circulation of about 1,000 to 1,500 copies. In the group which published the **Waterfront Worker** were included a minority of Communists, and other militant elements. The guiding line for this group was above all to develop a militant group of workers united with the objective of breaking the Blue Book Union and to establish a real union. At times, there was criticism of the **Waterfront Worker** for not taking a clearly enough militant stand or his or that policy. When this criticism was justified, it could be very instance be traced to the desire of the Communist elements in the group not to sacrifice the unity of the militant elements for a clearer formulation in minor questions. In other words, the group felt it was more important to attain the larger objective of developing a united militant group (not limited to Communists alone) than to refuse to make a concession to this or that backward idea amongst the workers. Occasionally the Communist elements in the group made errors, in that they bent back too far. However, in the main, the **Water-**

The Fight Against the "Blue Book" Company Union — Waterfront Worker Organizes Sentiment — Rank and File Convention — Strike Begins May 11.

front Worker is responsible for developing the spirit for organization and crystallizing the sentiment for the movement against the company union. During this time, the Marine Workers Union attempted, in various forms, to organize the men. These met with very small success. The chief reasons were:

Weaknesses.

1. In the two or three years previous the Marine Workers Union had made some serious sectarian errors. These were utilized by the reactionary elements on the waterfront to prevent any response from the men. This could have been easily broken down, if the Party and the Union had any of its members actually working on the docks. Unfortunately, however, our Marine Workers Union, although having as many as four and sometimes six full-time functionaries in San Francisco, had not a single worker on the docks. Because of this, we approached the entire situation from the outside, and were not able to break down the agitation against our union and against the Party on the waterfront. The reactionary elements were led by some members of the old Red Book Union of 1919. This old union had a reputation, whether justified or not, for militant struggle. Under the activity of the company union, it had long since disappeared. However, some of the reactionaries who were formerly members of this old Red Book Union, by use of militant phraseology, succeeded in turning the minds of the men away from a militant union.

About the middle of 1933, an initiative group was formed, which included all elements (also some militants from the **Waterfront Worker**), to establish a regular local of the I.L.A. The sentiment for the I.L.A. rapidly developed. Yet there was some tendency among the Communists at that time to organize competitive M.W.U. recruiting. The I.L.A. movement was so overwhelming among the men, however, that it would have been suicide to take the handful of militants away from the general stream of the movement. The Party, therefore, took a determined stand against it.

In some of the smaller ports, on the West Coast, especially in the Northwest, functioning locals of the I.L.A. already existed, and in the short space of about six weeks, the overwhelming majority of the longshoremen on the West Coast joined the I.L.A.

Militant's Raise Demands.

From the moment of organizing a struggle began between the militant elements on the one hand who wanted action—to: (1) Improve conditions; (2) Destroy the Blue Book; (3) Establish West Coast Unity of all longshoremen—and the reactionaries, on the other hand who aimed to organize a typical A. F. of L. reactionary union. In the course of this fight between the reactionary and militant elements, the militant elements succeeded in putting through a proposal to call

an early West Coast Rank-and-File Convention. The reactionaries resisted such a movement, but their own radical phraseology counted against them. The men were convinced of the necessity for a rank-and-file controlled convention, and even succeeded in putting through a motion that the Rank-and-File Convention, paid officers of the union should not qualify as delegates. This convention met in February, 1934, and remained in session for about ten days. The convention was a continual battle between the militants and the reactionaries. The reactionaries concentrated everything on winning the organizational leadership of the union, and in this they succeeded. At various times in the course of the convention they "laid off" in their opposition to certain militant proposals for fear it would antagonize the men. They did succeed in winning organizational leadership of the union. They elected an Executive Board and other posts, composed, for all practical purposes, of reactionaries. However, in the course of the convention, a series of militant proposals were adopted. These included:

Struggle for improved conditions, including raises in wages from 85 cents to \$1.00 per hour, a forty-hour week, hiring through I.L.A., and a united West Coast agreement with a uniform expiration date.

Political Level Raised.

There were also a number of directly political achievements at the convention. These included: 1. The adoption of a resolution against the loading of ships flying the Nazi flag. 2. The adoption of a proposal for a waterfront federation which was a first step towards united action between longshoremen and other marine crafts, especially the seamen, and for gang committees, port conferences, etc. 3. Unemployment insurance. 4. Against arbitration.

When the convention adjourned, the reactionaries felt victorious because they had succeeded in gaining organizational control of the union. They even thought they had dealt a blow of another sort at the militants in the course of the convention. This happened in the following way:

S. F. Militant Force.

The San Francisco local had sent a very militant delegation. This delegation was the backbone and leadership of the militant sentiment in the convention. In the course of the convention a delegation was elected to present the workers' demands to the shipowners. When these demands were presented, the shipowners answered that they could not deal with this convention because it was largely dominated by Communist elements, and they gave as evidence that the San Francisco delegation allegedly had 16 out of 20 members who were Communists. The reactionary elements were in glee at this answer of the shipowners. But when this reached the men, they were highly indignant. The general

sentiment being expressed by one non-Communist speaker from the ranks in the convention, who declared:

"Do the shipowners think we are still in the Blue Book, that they are trying to dictate to us who our representatives should be?"

From this, it can be seen that although the rank-and-file convention ended organizationally successfully for the reactionaries, yet the whole movement crystallized and spread the militant sentiment of the men. But the convention did not end in complete organizational loss to the militants. In fact, as a result of the convention, a fairly strong permanent militant group was established in San Francisco with connection in all other parts of the West Coast.

Immediately after the convention the representatives of the I.L.A. entered into negotiations with the shipowners. These began on March 5, 1934, in a meeting with the Regional Board of the Federal Administration and the shipowners participating. The shipowners turned down the demands of the convention daily. The negotiations dragged on until finally, about the middle of March, the men became somewhat fed up. Due both to the physical advantage position of leadership which San Francisco holds on the West Coast, as well as the activities of the militants, action in San Francisco became of decisive importance for the entire coast. Therefore, when negotiations were obviously futile, the San Francisco local pressed forward, and by popular vote, set a strike date for March 23. They also elected a strike committee of 25 in the leadership of which were the most militant elements of the union.

Fakers Halt Strike.

The fakers, knowing they could not hold the men, did not act to stop this movement until the afternoon of March 22, the day before the strike date, when as a result of what clearly was co-operation between George Creel, head of the Regional Labor Board, the shipowners, and William Lewis, who was elected president of the entire West Coast Union, a telegram was negotiated from President Roosevelt, personally appealing to the men not to strike until the Federal Government could take action. It was clear from subsequent actions that one of the primary objectives in postponing the strike was to hold it until the college term would end, so that a plentiful supply of student seabs might be obtained. Without consulting any official body, Lewis immediately announced that the strike was off, and even tried to cancel a meeting of the strike committee which was slated for the evening of March 22. Since the strike was called for the very next morning, there was practically no opportunity to counteract this treacherous action of Lewis.

Also, the militants on the Strike Committee made a mistake in not contacting other ports immediately after they were elected, and taking the leadership out of the hands of Lewis and the District Executive Board. This mistake came about in the following way:

March 23, the date of the strike, was on Friday. On the previous Monday of the same week, in the San Francisco local meeting, a motion was put through giving full power in the strike to the District Executive Board which, as we have already pointed out, was composed of reactionaries. This motion made of the strike committee a body without any real authority. The passing of this motion also clearly indicated that even the San Francisco longshoremen still had strong illusions concerning the District Executive Board. As a result of this motion, the militants in the strike committee refrained from communicating with other ports, because they were afraid of being accused of exceeding their legal authority. By Thursday night, when Lewis, at the request of President Roosevelt, called off the strike, it was then too late to correct the mistake of passivity that had been committed in the five previous days. Thus, the militants lost their opportunity in this first instance, in not aggressively seeking leadership of the West Coast.

Negotiations.

The reactionary District Executive Board, a few days later, okayed the action of Lewis, and again began negotiating with the shipowners, this time together with a delegation of representatives from President Roosevelt. The negotiations dragged from March 28, when they were renewed, to the beginning of May. During this time, the negotiators made various reports to the men of

the attack at the moment of the moment of the marine workers' strike more than offset these futile efforts.

Try to Recruit Hoodlums.

To save face, and strengthen their forces for another attack, the Anti-Red Week dwindled off into a "membership drive" during which the effort was to recruit especially those elements who could be counted on to do gangster work. The Legion heads themselves, lacking even the low grade of "courage" required for such work, of course recruited others to do the job, just as they in turn were organizing it for their bosses, the Industrial Association and the shipowners. And the marine workers' strike must be broken at all costs, the bosses ordered.

The Legion heads set up Finance, Publicity, Anti-Communist, and Membership committees, afterward merging the latter two into one. When their first effort failed they drew in other groups to develop their scope and cover up the Legion because of the growing opposition of the rank and file.

This was the infamous "Citizens Committee," organized with the capitalist papers to work in a scared scare.

Ship in Chicago Gunmen.

The mayor's Committee of 500 reactionaries was organized as the general strike movement gained headway. Bergoff, notorious Chicago thug agent, sent gunmen and agreed to supply 100 a day by plane as long as needed, "to maintain order" as "loyal San Francisco citizens."

The Legion Anti-Red Committee met with O'Meara, new head of the police red squad, who was setting up a "red identification bureau." He passed on among the things about 100 photos of Communist leaders, seeking information as to whether they were aliens, had families, and their methods of work.

About this time, over the names of Homer Chailloux, James Fisk, Stephen Malatesta, Archie Closson and Harper Knowles, advertisements appeared in the capitalist press attacking the Communist Party as subversive and calling on "citizens" to support their attack on the Party. Back of these advertisements was the aim of the Industrial Association and Waterfront Employers' Union to smash organized labor unions and establish the open shop.

Not a Worker Among Them.

Who are these men who signed the advertisements?

James Fisk is Legion state adjutant, who is well paid out of subsidies received by the American Legion.

Homer Chailloux, former Los Angeles mail carrier, using the Legion to further his political ambitions and willing to do anything to prove to the bosses that he is a "right guy."

Harper Knowles, employed by the McGilvray-Raymond Granite Co., a firm which is a member of the Industrial Association.

Stephen Malatesta, well-to-do insurance broker and reputed to be Rossi's right-hand man in

"progress." So far as the men knew, no agreement had been reached of any sort, but they generally took for granted that the shipowners were at least making some concessions to their demands. Subsequently it appeared that Lewis and his gang had secretly concluded what has since become known as the "April Third Agreement." This agreement was a complete sell-out. It provided for:

"Central registration and hiring hall under joint control of employers and union representatives, for the purpose of limiting the men eligible to work in this port."

This was obviously a new Fink Hall, which aimed to blacklist the militants.

The next problem for the employers and these treacherous "representatives" of the I.L.A. was—how to "limit the men eligible to work." The reactionaries began to maneuver in such a way that the limitation be organized under some rule that would eliminate the militants. The head of the Industrial Association, in a statement issued several months later, exposed the entire game when he complained that the sell-out April Third Agreement "was never made effective because the men could not agree, on a date, after which only workers who had been employed prior to that date, would have the right to register for employment."

In the old Blue Book, only the most browbeaten, meek and loyal company men got "regular" work. Under this new system, which was being proposed, these men would be the only ones eligible to work, and large sections of the longshoremen, especially the militants, would be eliminated from the industry. While the fakers did not announce their agreement, they did try to get the local to accept their proposal to

who signed the ad in the name of the Legion, repudiating the ads as anti-labor, and demanded to know the source of the funds for the payment of the ads.

When pinned down on this at the next meeting, Knowles asked that the Comag Council's motion be rescinded, so as not to embarrass anybody, and finally declared the funds must be considered a matter of "personal record."

Challenged by the Communist Party to debate what Communism is, and what it means to the American workers, before the Legion Posts, Chailloux sent a reply which reached the Western Worker at 47 Grove Street just three hours before the raid on July 17. He refused to debate the issue, repeating his vicious stand and warning that "I would suggest that it would be far safer for you to tell your programs to those who have not studied them and to those who may stand for them."

Vets Support Workers.

During the raids the attitude of the rank and file was evident in many cases. In Richmond, where violent attacks were among the worst, Legion members warned the comrades in time for many to escape the attacks. In Oakland the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Post 1010, came out in full support of the strike against the terror, and refused to be deputized either for this dirty work or to protect scabs. In Hayward, since the attack on the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Union hall, many Legion members, realizing that in the union and in the Communist Party's ranks are many of their former buddies, workers like themselves, have denounced the attacks.

In the convention here, rank and file members of the Legion should crystallize that sentiment and defeat the attempt to set up any statewide organization of vigilantes under a patriotic cloak to help the bankers and industrialists. Demand that a resolution be passed repudiating the action of Chailloux and his gang in using the Legion for the dirty work of the bosses. Demand the right to hear, in your own posts, invited Communist speakers who can give you a clear picture of the Communist program and what it means to you as workers, instead of letting Chailloux speak for you and give a view distorted by the interests of the class that exploits you.

While many of your buddies are in the Communist Party fighting for the working class there, you can within the Legion fight for and take control out of the hands of the gang that now runs it and make of it what you thought it would be when you came back from overseas—a strong, democratic organization, controlled by the members, not the officials, and whose program is for a job and better conditions on that job.

Make this Legion Convention a real step forward in your fight for better conditions. And in that fight the Communist Party will be glad to help you, as it does the struggles of workers everywhere.

determine who were "legitimate" longshoremen. This was met with indignation and active opposition by all the longshoremen.

Votes Strike.

Finally, negotiations were ordered broken off at the beginning of May, and on May 7, the San Francisco local took a strike vote. The decision was unanimous—to strike the morning of May 9. The labor fakers were frantic. The afternoon newspapers of May 7, only a few hours before the strike vote was taken, contained a story issued by President Lewis which said:

"An adverse vote (to the employers' proposals) did not necessarily mean a 'strike'."

And on May 8, even after the strike vote was taken, International President Ryan wired from New York to the Northwest locals, which he considered more willing to follow his leadership, urging them not to strike. At the very last moment before the strike vote, a telegram was announced from the Department of Labor in Washington, speaking for President Roosevelt, which urged the calling off of the strike. This time, the men were prepared for such maneuvers, and they threw both telegrams out. In Seattle, the first telegram of Ryan succeeded in making the local waver so that on May 8, they still voted 60 per cent against a strike, but when they received information concerning the action of the San Francisco local, a second meeting was called, and a pro-strike vote was carried by a large majority. In the two or three days following the entire West Coast longshoremen followed. Thus, the strike began, on the morning of May 9, and by May 11, stevedoring work on the entire West Coast was tied up.

(Continued in next issue.)

CHALLENGE

By R. J. PEARSALL.

"What of the Western Worker? Have you heard?"
The "Red" news vendor knows me not, but smiles.
"Comrade, it's here." Together we exult,
And to the passing crowd he flings the cry:
"Read the truth in the Worker. Read the truth!"
Some buy. Some stop to talk. "It's out again."
In spite of fire and terror, the Worker's out.

Strangers we are, but comrades. To my mind
Come thoughts of other groupings I have known
In California valleys, on her coasts,
Under Humboldt redwoods, on the northern bays,
Here in Seattle, there in Oregon.
Farmers and fishers, sailors, lumberjacks,
A growing workers' army, ever growing,
Reading the Western Worker for the truth,
Reading for understanding of their plight,
Reading for guidance out of black despair.

Oh, fascist groups! Oh, fake "vigilantes!"
Think you to crush out progress with your clubs?
Think you to stay the elements with your threats?
Think you with Czarist methods to succeed
Better than he? Humanity's on the march.
Time dooms you, and the workers' press goes on,
With ceaseless blows against this system's rot,
With flaming urgency toward a workers' world.