

# Some Major Lessons from a Minor Strike

By I. AMTER

THE question of strike strategy grows ever more important in view of the increasing number of strikes forced upon the workers by the crisis and the wage-slashing campaign of the bosses, the growing influence of the Trade Union Unity League and its revolutionary unions, and the strikes that they lead and those in which the revolutionary opposition is called upon to exercise leadership when the reactionary leadership attempts to or actually sells out the strikes.

Two phases of strike strategy must be noted: the strategy required in preparing and conducting strikes under the leadership of the revolutionary union directly, or through the united front; and that demanded during strikes carried on and led by the fascist or social-fascist leadership of the A. F. of L., the Musteites, and the Socialist Party.

In the former, the revolutionary union must build up grievance committees or groups of workers on the basis of the united front of the members of the revolutionary union, A. F. of L. or independent union and the unorganized workers. All the strike machinery must be prepared and organized—defense, relief, publicity, strike fund, special organizational forms for youth, Negro and women. The basis for the struggle is the economic condition of the workers, which forces the workers to carry on a fight. A splendid example of this united front from below is the miners' strike, which has taken on the broadest character in the fields of Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky, and is likely to spread to other bituminous fields. This united front which has drawn in militant workers into the central and local strike committees is manifesting excellent militancy, strategy and leadership, despite the weaknesses that necessarily arise out of the inexperience as yet of the T.U.U.L. in handling strikes of such dimensions, despite the inexperience of the miners themselves in organization, leadership and strategy, and despite the forces that were sent against them in the form of starvation, terror and attempted treachery of the U.M.W.A. officialdom. This form of united front has also been built up in Paterson, where the silk workers (at this writing) are preparing for a

general strike. It takes on a broader character outside the confines of Paterson—where the united front is based upon the National Textile Workers Union, members of the Associated Silk Workers and the United Textile Workers, and especially unorganized workers—being tied up with the growing united struggle of the silk workers of Central Falls, Pawtucket and Allentown (under U. T. W. leadership). The united front from below is the form of strategy that is uniting the broadest masses of workers under the leadership of the revolutionary union. (This is called the “sectarian (!) trade union line” by the Lovestoneites).

In the latter case, when the strike is led by the reactionary officialdom of the American Federation of Labor, the revolutionary opposition, building its forces within the union, strives for the independent leadership of the workers themselves, organizing them into the revolutionary opposition. The opposition demands rank and file strike committees to conduct the strike, puts forward its demands and settles the strike under the direct control of the rank and file. The revolutionary opposition does not stop with the forces within the union, but lines up the unorganized workers and the unemployed, with special stress on youth, women and Negroes, if such are employed in the industry. It does not confine its efforts to carry on a struggle solely for the organized workers in the union, but draws the unorganized and unemployed into the revolutionary opposition (or industrial union), and makes a fight also in their interests. It watches every step of the reactionary leadership, exposing every attempt at treachery and sell-out, strengthening the demands of the rank and file. When the sell-out is attempted, it calls upon the workers to take the leadership of the strike into their own hands, thus eliminating the fascist leaders and their lieutenants.

This requires great skill, care, and tenacity, for the reactionary leaders will try to have the sell-out complete before the workers know about it. It will have the forces lined up for the sell-out, thus trying through a completed action to send the workers back to work. To arouse the workers in the midst of the sell-out, to mobilize their forces, to take the leadership out of the hands of the betrayers and to continue the strike, is *imperative*. Otherwise the workers will continually be betrayed, and no successful strike will be possible.

The methods of fascist leadership of the reactionary unions are demanded by the capitalists. The crisis is forcing the workers to struggle. The capitalists are trying to put the crushing burdens of the deepening crisis on the shoulders of the workers, through wage cuts, speed-up, unemployment. The United States Steel Corporation

announces that at the next meeting of the stockholders in late July the question of wage cuts or a lowering of dividend will be considered. There is no question that wages will be slashed, and the steel workers will be forced to struggle against starvation and misery as the miners and textile workers are now doing.

To take over leadership in such a situation requires skill, initiative, daring. This is a situation that requires the utmost concentration of energy, a powerful offensive on the part of the rank and file, the immediate setting up of the necessary strike machinery and the drawing in of the reserves, by the revolutionary opposition. To miss the moment means to sacrifice the workers to the reactionary bureaucracy. It means to make the workers once more the victims of the bosses through their fascist tools within the working class, the reactionary officials of the A. F. of L., the Musteites, and the Socialist Party.

A complete misconception of revolutionary strike strategy and an opportunist collapse before the situation was recently manifested in the strike of the pocketbook workers in New York City. This strike involved 4,000 workers of an unimportant industry but it is of tremendous significance to the American workers in that it was the first instance during the life of the Trade Union Unity League that the revolutionary opposition had the opportunity and duty of assuming independent leadership in a sold-out strike. In this task the revolutionary leadership failed, and the lessons of this failure must be drawn and learned for the benefit of the entire American working class.

On May 1, the agreement of 4,000 pocketbook workers with the manufacturers of New York expired. Of the 4,000 workers, 1,500 had lost their jobs owing to the removal of certain shops from New York City, and many hundreds more were unemployed because of the crisis. On May 1, the bosses locked out the workers. The workers put forward their demands through the leadership of the union, headed by Laderman, a socialist, and member of the executive committee of the Conference for Progressive Labor Action (Musteites). These demands were for the 40-hour week, unemployment insurance paid by the bosses, and an increase in the minimum scale of wages. The answer of the bosses was to demand a 25 per cent cut in wages and 20 per cent reorganization. This was the first time that the bosses ever raised the question of reorganization. No doubt they thought they could put it through, owing to the fearful unemployment and the general crisis. Reorganization means rationalization and disemployment of at least one-fifth of the workers. This merely increases the tre-

mendous unemployment in the trade and puts the best weapon into the hands of the employers for weeding out all militant workers and blacklisting them.

In typical strikebreaking fashion, the leaders negotiated with the bosses behind the backs of the workers, ignoring both the strike committee and the workers. As a social fascist—and presumably a “left” socialist, since he is a member of the executive committee of the C.P.L.A.—Laderman brought the Socialist Party officially into the picture. A socialist dentist, by the name of Hendin, once a member of the Communist Party, began his role as intermedator between the manufacturers and the socialist leaders of the union. This was the method of betrayal. The manufacturers emboldened by the sell-out policy of the social fascist union leaders, made new demands, and an agreement with the leaders was effected on the following basis: addition of a second helper to each mechanic, a wage cut of  $7\frac{1}{2}$  to  $12\frac{1}{2}$  per cent, plus  $2\frac{1}{2}$  per cent more to be deducted from the wages of the workers for the unemployment insurance fund, and the creation of a board of standards, which will mean more intense rationalization and unemployment. Hendin, the socialist, has become the administrator of the unemployment insurance fund, in which he will play the foul role of the German and Belgian insurance fund administrators, who cut the militants off the insurance list altogether.

This is the “settlement” which Laderman, the social fascist leader, had the nerve to present to a packed meeting of the pocketbook workers. At the meeting he tried, like a fascist, to drown the voice of the rank and file. Despite his fascist methods, at this meeting of more than 2,000 workers, he secured only 745 votes for the “settlement,” against 701 against. Flinching under the “success” of such an “approval” of his settlement he added 350 more votes from New Jersey. It was clear to the workers that the majority of the workers were against the settlement and had voted against it. But the faker did his own counting and rammed things through.

The revolutionary opposition in the union was organized into the Pocketbook Makers Industrial League, affiliated to the Trade Union Unity League. The League was well organized and added to its strength during the progress of the strike. It carried on good propaganda before and during the strike and pointed out the danger of treachery to the workers. But the leaders of the revolutionary opposition were taken by surprise by the tremendous support that they received in the vote on the settlement. They were caught napping and consequently did not carry on the fight as they should have done. At a meeting called by the Industrial League two nights

later, with an attendance of close to 1,000 workers, the leaders of the Industrial League failed completely to carry out revolutionary strike strategy. They failed to size up the situation, the character of the meeting—a meeting of militant workers, who were outraged by the sell-out and looked for leadership. They hesitated, became over-cautious, and lacking daring and initiative, gave up the leadership of the strike. Instead of continuing the strike under independent leadership, putting up their own strike committees, pulling more shops on strike (three large independent shops were working) and mobilizing the unemployed for militant strike activity, they advanced a program of organization in the shops—with a large part of the workers unemployed, and the season slack! They advocated shop strikes when the workers returned to work. They feared to assert the leadership of the Trade Union Unity League—even electing as chairman of the meeting not one of the leaders, not even a rank and filer of the Pocketbook Makers Industrial League, but a non-League member, who is opposed to the policy of the T.U.U.L.

What were the chief errors in the struggle of the revolutionary League?

1. The leaders could not see the difference between *calling* strikes under revolutionary leadership, and *taking over* strikes. In the former case, there is the necessity of building up grievance and shop committees and all other organization in the shops on the basis of the united front that will connect the revolutionary league with the workers in the shops. In the latter case (taking over the leadership of the strike), it is necessary quickly, energetically to set up the necessary machinery for assuming leadership in the strike that has been sold out by the reactionaries, with the workers willing to fight.

2. This failure to estimate the situation properly, and to see the duty of the revolutionary opposition to assume *independent leadership* in the strike over the heads of the social fascist leaders, showed a complete underestimation of the workers' strength, militancy, and willingness to struggle against the bosses, reactionary leaders, and government. It is a clear opportunist lack of faith in the masses, an underestimation of the radicalization of the workers. It constitutes a betrayal of the workers.

3. Giving up the leadership in the strike, the League failed to see the possibility of *spreading the strike* to the three large shops where the workers had voted against the settlement. This would not only have made it possible to continue the strike, but to extend it. The leaders of the League in an opportunist manner demanded a 100 per cent guarantee of success in taking over the leadership. They

did not recognize that militant leadership, with proper policy, would in itself furnish the *only* guarantee for winning the strike.

4. The League leaders could not see that the *unemployed* instead of being a force against them were the most powerful force at their disposal for fighting against the settlement and the sell-out.

5. Underestimation of the *leading role of the Industrial League* in the united front played a serious part in the strategy. Although the united front was established and functioned well, the Industrial League leaders believed that the workers in the united front could not be trusted, because they were in the united front for the first time, many of them members of the capitalist parties including the socialist party, and not readers of the revolutionary press. Many of them were, until recently, followers of the reactionary machine in the union. The leaders could not understand the rapid changes in ideology that are taking place at present, when the struggle forces the workers to fight because of the impact of the crisis and, in this case, the most shameful sell-out. In this situation, the Industrial League, and especially the leaders, should have assumed real leadership. Either this, or the role of the Industrial League—the revolutionary opposition—is not understood in the united front, and the revolutionary opposition actually has no role.

6. The Industrial League leaders had illusions regarding the *character of the reactionary leadership* of the union, believing that “real” democracy existed in the union, that the leadership would not dare to sell out the strike. As a result, the Industrial League did not clearly see the coming sell-out and, therefore, was not prepared. They believed that because the reactionary leadership allowed the Industrial League a free hand to carry on its propaganda work, through leaflets, forums and meetings, that democracy was an established fact in the union. They did not see that this was part of the strategy of the reactionaries, to give the glamor of democracy and “left wingism” to the union (in true Muste style), in order better to betray the workers when the struggle began.

7. The comrades had a *legalistic* attitude that makes impossible the assumption of independent leadership in strikes. The Industrial League leadership were convinced that the T.U.U.L. League was so well established in the union that the reactionary leaders would not “dare” to take any steps that would outlaw the T.U.U.L., that the membership would protect the T.U.U.L. group against any action in the union. On the other hand, they failed to see that the taking over of independent leadership means the open challenge to the leadership, means the setting up of machinery to take over the union—the real and only method of ousting the leadership from the

union. The Industrial League leaders did put up the slogan of "oust the (reactionary) leaders," evidently not knowing what this involved. Ousting the leadership can and, in this situation *must*, take place in the midst of struggle. This is the only way unless workers harbor the opportunist conception that the reactionary leadership of the A. F. of L. can or will be eliminated at this period of struggle. The A. F. of L. will remain even though the rank and file is won away. The capitalists have the greatest need of the A. F. of L. today, as witness the revival of dead United Mine Workers of America, now being brought back to life by the coal operators and Governor Pinchot. The employers are reviving and trying to reestablish this fascist, strike-breaking organization as a means of fighting the revolutionary unions. Hence the only way—not of capturing the reactionary unions—but of winning the rank and file, is in the struggle itself.

8. One of the main errors in the situation was the inability of the Industrial League to proceed *from propaganda to action*. It still lived in the period of the Trade Union Educational League—as a league of propaganda within the reactionary unions. Today in the period of sharpening struggle, when we must take rapid steps from propaganda to action, the Industrial League, and particularly the leaders, who do not make the *sharpest turn*, completely fail.

The responsibility of the Party and the T.U.U.L. cannot be over-stated. The T.U.U.L. in particular, which knew that the strike was coming, should have made the proper preparations. The Party should have prepared the T.U.U.L. through the fraction. This was not done. The Communist fraction did not carry on systematic work during the strike. The rank and file of the fraction was not kept informed of the developments of the strike and the coming sell-out. The leader of the Party fraction, weak and vacillating, with strong opportunist tendencies, failed to assume the leadership in the League that was required by the situation. The Trade Union Unity Council of New York paid little attention to the Pocketbook Makers League prior to and during the strike, and although the Party and the T.U.U.L. took sharp measures at the crucial moment for the Industrial League to assume independent leadership in the strike, on the basis of the united front, the opportunist leaders failed to carry out the line, and the moment was gone. The workers, some of whom have returned to work, are discouraged, demoralized and disgusted.

The Party fraction believed that the policy proposed by the leadership of the fraction was the Party policy. Only after the strike, when the matter was discussed at length, was it possible to win a

part of the fraction to the correct Party line, although the leaders still persist in their opportunist position.

All the predictions of the Party have been fulfilled. The workers have already met with wage cuts and reorganization. Contrary to the prediction of the fraction leaders, the workers have not been drawn out again in strike. Now plugging work must be carried on to establish the leading role of the T.U.U.L. among these workers.

The Pocketbook Makers Industrial League must now begin to build groups and shop committees in all the shops. It must prepare energetically for shop strikes in all shops in which attempts of reorganization and wage cuts are made. It must organize the unemployed for joint action with the employed workers. It must develop a program of demands and action for the unemployed together with the employed workers. It must carry on a campaign of exposure of the reactionary leadership of the union—Laderman, the socialist and member of the Muste group, employing typical Muste strike-breaking methods.

The Party and the T.U.U.L. must thoroughly discuss the lessons of this failure to apply proper strike strategy. The meaning of independent strike leadership by the revolutionary opposition, on the lines of the R.I.L.U. decisions, the breaking down of all legalism, the development of the united front in struggle, the mobilization of the widest forces for the struggle—these are some of the lessons that the Party and the T.U.U.L. must thoroughly understand if they are to be prepared to meet and properly lead the growing struggles of the American workers.