

The Building Industry in Chicago

By ARNE SWABECK

(This is the first of a series of articles to appear in the Voice of Labor on the principal industries in Chicago.—Ed.)

Nearly two years ago the so-called "Citizens Committee" to enforce the Landis' award was organized. This marked the first sign of a complete combination of the forces of capital against the workers in the Chicago building industry. The conflicts over wages and working conditions were removed from the small realm of warfare between the individual trades and the not too well organized contractors. The bankers and owners of a large industry, who invest in buildings, now assumed power to dictate conditions to the workers. In order to eliminate the unions as a negotiating factor, they declared for the "open shop" as a prelude to their intended complete annihilation of unionism.

Purchasing Power Lower Than In 1913.

With the popular slogan "reduce the cost of building in order to bring down high rents," an intense fight was launched against the prevailing standard of wages and working conditions. Naturally the "Citizens Committee" had no thought of attempting to apply this slogan to the prices of material, although this has been on the continual upgrade, and from 1913 to March 1923, according to the Monthly Labor Review, (published by the U. S. Department of Labor) increased 98 per cent. Real wages, on the other hand, that is the nominal wages compared to the cost of living, are today lower than 1913 in the Chicago building industry. In 1913 skilled mechanics were paid from 65 to 75 cent an hour. Today the scale ranges from \$1.10 to \$1.25 an hour, an increase of from 66 to 69 per cent. However, during the same period, the cost of living, all commodities, according to the same statistics has increased 70 per cent, and at the peak of high prices, in June 1920, reached 117 per cent.

The Worst Is Yet To Come.

So far this onslaught has only reached the stage of a preliminary skirmish; the building boom temporarily halted the advance against

wages and working conditions. Yet of the entry of organized capital as it clearly indicates the sinister aspect a powerful contending factor; and the setbacks already suffered by the building trades unions in the form of division within their ranks should be a warning portent of the dangers facing them in the future. These organized capitalists are interested only in finding new ways and means of more effectively fleecing the workers. The conditions of the past, where building trades workers, by organizing their skill, were able to maintain a favored position of wages, and working conditions, compared to workers in other industries, the capitalists intend to bring to an end. To do this they are not only taking advantage of the introduction of new materials, labor saving devices, together with the constantly enlarging size of construction jobs, more gigantic factories and power plants, which greatly eliminates skill and makes the old methods of organizing ineffective; but also by using the tremendous power thus concentrated in their hands to drive the wedge further into the unions by establishing the principle called the "open shop."

Labor Fakery Assists Bosses.

From its very formation the "Citizens' Committee" declared as its object the enforcement of the Landis' award. This award has now expired and yet the committee assumes authority to regulate wages and working conditions. Composed as it is of 175 so-called "leading" "citizens", notorious scab shop advocates, we may rest assured that it will never dissolve as long as it sees an opportunity to continually weaken, and perhaps ultimately smash the unions. It even enjoys the full support of practically all the lackeys of capitalism who are heading the international building trades unions. It will be recalled how 16 of these international presidents last year and with but one dissenting voice came to Chicago, and advised the local unions to abide by the Landis' award. Today the greatest lackey of them all, John H. Donlin, President

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of the Building Trades Department, conscious of the violation of the constitution and bylaws of his own organization, in view of the "open shop" demand by the "Citizens' Committee" writes the Building Construction Employers Association in part as follows: "The Citizens' Committee to enforce the Landis award was brought into being for a worthy cause, and up to the present time has met with my approval. Every city should have a Citizens' Committee to represent the better interests of all citizens, one that will stop the commission of injustice and feels that it has served well and has been rewarded when injustices cease." Such are the benedictions given by a so-called labor leader to a Citizens' Committee which insists that organized workers shall work with non union made material, engage in no sympathetic strikes for any cause whatsoever and work with non union men, who are often in reality imported strike breakers.

Increase Due to Temporary Boom.

True the Citizens' Committee and the bosses have today consented to a restoration, in the main, of the pre-Landis scale of wages. This however is no gain to be counted to the unions. It is not a result of labor's power; but simply a concession given due to the present building boom and the great demand for men. Meanwhile the enemy is sharpening his weapons to fight the workers so much more effectively when the boom ceases. The fact that some dissension has appeared among the ranks of the contractors and that some of the smaller ones have severed their connections with the Citizens' Committee, must also be attributed to the pressure of the boom. There is nothing in the world to prevent the committee from lining them up again when this pressure ceases.

While the Chicago building trades unions are becoming ever more divided among themselves; most of them working with non union men of trades other than their own and many of them actually signing up "open shop" agreements, for trades other than their own.

The extent to which the disunity among the workers has reached may

be judged by taking a glance at the steam fitters. Today they are working under the Landis' award and thus compelled to work with unorganized and strike breaking plumbers and gas fitters scabbing upon part of their own international organization.

While the Building Trades Council has completely ceased to be the center of gravity, the bosses are busily strengthening their forces and gradually undermining union conditions. 41,560 men placed in the "open shop" trades to date, is the boast made by the Citizens' Committee. Although these figures may be termed outside figures, that is the same man may have been placed twice or several times on different jobs, yet it naturally leads to the question "What will happen when conditions are so that the bosses can afford to let union men walk the streets while scabs are employed? Although the Citizens' Committee has declared some of the trades "open shop" or outlaws, it will easily be seen that it is treating them all in the same manner as far as it has power to do so, and insists on having the "open shop" prevail in all trades, and there lies the real danger. To again reduce wages will be just a matter of routine when the slack season sets in and all non union men and strike breakers have received sufficient training to take care of the most pressing jobs.

New Methods Required.

Out of the 2,000,000 workers employed in the building industry throughout the country only about 847,000 are organized. To a great extent, at least we may be sure that this proportion applies to Chicago. Before these men are organized the unions can never hope to successfully establish union conditions; but to organize these men, requires up to date methods. To continue the present tactics of each union fighting or submitting individually, that is, to continue the present state of disunity while the bosses are solidifying and strengthening their forces is suicidal. The present building boom is surely not going to last forever. That it is indeed of a very temporary character we are told by Roger Babson, the prominent Wall Street economic expert. He says:

that any farm or labor organization has been missed, a communication stating that fact sent to the national office at 166 West Washington-St., Chicago, will bring an invitation by return mail.

International Unions Accept.

It might be worth while to state again that, in addition to the organizations mentioned above to whom the convention call has been sent, an invitation to send delegates to the convention was sent out about two weeks ago to more than 300 state and national farm, labor and political organizations. The response from these invitations has exceeded the most optimistic hopes. International unions, district labor organizations and state farm bodies have accepted the invitation and advised that they would be represented. Indeed, some have already elected delegates.

Invitations were sent to these organizations thus early in order to permit the matter brought before conventions or meetings of the executives of various groups. Press reports state that the powerful State Federation of Labor of Pennsylvania, with probably an affiliated membership of over a million, considered the matter and by an almost unanimous vote endorsed the movement and voted to participate. Other large labor bodies have notified this office that the matter would be considered in the near future and predicted favorable action. One state organization of women has expressed its pleasure at receiving an invitation and hastened to accept. All seem to get the right understanding of what the Farmer-Labor Party is trying to do: Bring about real unity of the wealth producers of the country on the political field; and a willingness to join hands to make the undertaking a success is being shown on all sides.

"The present boom cannot be long lived. It is not based on a firm foundation. Many of these men now getting an increase in their wages will be out of work before 1924 is ended."

A United Front And Amalgamation.

The situation is indeed fraught with danger to the Chicago building trades workers unless they awaken from their present lethargy and stand up on their hind legs and fight the inveterate enemy before it is too late. But remember that nothing short of complete unified action will do. A united fight to establish the closed

make ends meet while reading of the juicy dividends being distributed among the stockholders of the corporation by which he is employed, have a consciousness of outrage that others do not know.

These are the ones who should be heard. They have a story to tell well worth hearing. They have held the hand of first one of the old parties and then the other. They have played mistress to both the republican and the democrats. They have received the mistress' reward from whichever of these parties happened to be in power. They have been scorned, ignored, cast off.

For a United Front.

The coming convention will afford an opportunity by which the long suppressed indignation can become articulate. More than that—foolish divisions that have rendered them helpless in the past can be brought to an end. All can join hands in creating an agency through which a solid front can be presented to the common enemy in political campaigns of the future.

The Farmer-Labor Party hails with gladness the coming of the rank and file to the Chicago convention. It feels their voices will be the deciding factor in the outcome of the gathering. It feels they will set their seals to a new declaration of independence on the nation's birthday in 1923. The great Ashland Boulevard Auditorium has already been secured to accommodate the hundreds and thousands that will come from the farm and factory. If necessary, other halls will also be engaged. All will be welcome. All will be heard.

The advice and counsel of the leaders in all movements is most necessary and helpful, but the inspiration and the thrill of new resolves can come alone from the rank and file.

union shop; to establish a uniform scale of wages for building mechanics, and have all agreements expire at the same time. When once this United Front has been created the workers can meet power with power and that is what counts in the struggle between capital and labor. It must be fought till the workers are victorious.

Are any further arguments needed for the necessity of a complete amalgamation of labor's forces based upon the industry in which the workers are occupied?