

Lessons of the Laundry Workers Strike.

The drift of "poor whites" to the towns which is taking place at present is creating a new white proletariat, which, like the native proletariat, lacks those traditions of struggle, that experience which the working class of Europe and America has gained in its long bitter struggle with Capitalism. It is therefore doubly necessary for the Workers Party of South Africa to conserve every scrap of experience, to look carefully over its actions, to discuss openly its mistakes and their causes in order that similar errors may not be committed in the future, in order that the Workers Party may become capable of giving a correct lead to the inexperienced proletariat in the coming struggles. That is why we make such frequent use of the words "lessons" and "tasks". The lessons learned in struggle prepare our party for the tasks that lie ahead.

The Comintern, too, speaks of the lessons and tasks of the Communist Parties, but always the lesson is that "our line was correct." After the Anglo-Russian Committee had led to the betrayal of the British workers, after the bloc with the Kuo Min Tang had led to the betrayal of the Chinese workers and the murder of thousands of Chinese Communists, after the catastrophic defeat of the German workers by Hitler's Nazi rabble, after every disastrous blunder the Comintern has declared that "events have shown that our policy was absolutely correct," and the old errors are committed again. We must learn from this that our party will only become strong by honest self criticism arising from a genuine desire to steel ourselves for our tasks.

In June, 1934, the Bolshevik Leninist League (which has since become the Johannesburg branch of the Workers Party of South Africa) commenced the task of reorganising the Laundry Workers' Union which had ceased to exist more than a year before. The laundry bosses had of course taken advantage of their loss of organisation to subject them to the most oppressive conditions. Their miserable wages were further reduced by compelling them to live in the barracks attached to some of the laundries, and to eat the rations (plain mealie-meal without even salt) supplied by the bosses. For "food and quarters" an exorbitant amount was extorted from them by deduction from their wages. Even married men, who did not live in the barracks because women were not allowed to enter, were compelled to submit to this robbery. Workers were paid monthly but were discharged at a week's notice or even 24 hour's notice. Their growing discontent and irritation made them turn eagerly to us when we came forward and held factory-gate meetings. After energetic work by Comrades Purdy and Mngade, the Union was formed and a committee elected with Comrades Purdy and Mngade as secretary and organiser respectively. Membership mounted rapidly in all the larger laundries except "Crystal" the largest which stood aloof. The laundry workers already had their leaders, thanks to the experience of previous unions, and rapidly pressed forward to their first struggle: some minor victories were gained and then by concerted action the workers left the laundry barracks, refused the bosses rations and demanded cash in place of these. Pressing the attack their leaders presented further demands, for weekly pay and union recognition, and delivered an ultimatum to the bosses that unless these demands were acceded to, they would strike on Sept 5th.

The manager of "Reliance" (the most militant of all) in an interview with the secretary offered to give in to the demands for weekly pay and cash in place of food and quarters, to all demands except union recognition. Gathering the workers in the presence of Government officials, he repeated this offer conceding weekly pay on Tuesdays instead of Saturdays; but the workers stood firm demanding Saturday pay and further that he "also sign", (i.e. grant union recognition by agreeing to the demands in a letter addressed to the union) This he refused and locked the workers out, thus placing himself on the wrong side of the law, accomodating as the law is to bosses.

At this stage it was possible for the "Reliance" workers to compromise by abandoning the demand for a signed agreement and returning to work on the basis of "Reliance" offer. This they refused to do on Comrade Purdy's advice. Here was the fundamental error of the strike. Once "Reliance" workers were out, it became urgently necessary to call out the other laundries to support them, and none of the other laundries responded to the call except "New York" and "International", whose workers came out less than fifty per cent. In this way was revealed the unpreparedness of the laundry workers for a decisive struggle. The strike commenced with a weak union, not prepared for struggle, with 1/2 in the funds, without headquarters, and in the case of the "Reliance" workers, without their last month's pay. Under these circumstances the strike was an adventure.

The main events of the strike were as follows:

Ultimatum sent to bosses.

Textile laundry agrees to union demands.

Reliance workers locked out 100% (28th. August.).

Appeal to all laundry workers to strike in sympathy.

Ultimatum expires on September 5th.; no response to call to strike, except from Leonardo's. Leonardo's workers return to work after one hour's strike, with demands for weekly pay and 2/6 weekly increase satisfied.

On September 6th. New York and International workers strike, the former 37 (about fifty per cent), the latter 20. (less than fifty per cent). Strikers demonstrate with banners through the laundry districts. Comrade Purdy arrested and released on bail.

Reliance workers arrested en masse and released on bail.

Rand Steam laundry workers refused to come out on sympathetic strike.

Reliance workers tried on charge of desertion. Acquitted.

Comrade Purdy charged and acquitted.

International workers arrested - tried on charge of absenting themselves from work and found guilty; fined 10/- each.

New York workers tried on charge of absenting themselves from work and acquitted.

Strike defeated. Twenty Reliance workers given their jobs back.

Comrade Maboia from the Reliance awarded £6. 2. 7. wages in lieu of notice. Reliance appeals against decision.

The laundry industry is one of the few industries of South Africa in which native workers have the power of holding up activity without the co-operation of the white workers. (The Baking industry is another and of course the mines.) The leading stratum in the union was the ironers, whose work requires a high degree of skill plus great stamina, but as the strike dragged on, the bosses, by dint of scouring the country, succeeded in partly replacing even the ironers. The others were comparatively easily replaced at the expense of a partial dislocation of the works organisation. The lack of workers traditions among the native proletariat made it very easy for the bosses to obtain scabs. This is a position which must be squarely faced by the workers' party and only the broadest propaganda in urging the need for workers' solidarity, only the most strenuous driving home of the lessons of every strike, every struggle, will build up in the workers' minds the consciousness of their class-interests, of the need to stand together as a class.

What were the errors of the Bolshevik Leninist League in the Laundry Workers' strike? The first mistake was to undertake the serious responsibility of organising and leading a large body of workers with very small resources, too few members. The early part of the strike was for our tiny group a nightmare (a waking night mare, for we got very little sleep) of dashing around, of important tasks botched, of endless days in the police courts, of scraping up funds, of never ending speech making. When we turned in desperation to the Communist Party for technical assistance (printing) the party officials offered this help on condition.....that we hand over control to them and vouch for them to the strikers. Needless to say, we refused and obtained the printing elsewhere. Tackling a task beyond our strength was a mistake of too great zeal; we must not fall over ourselves in our eagerness.

A much more serious error was our failure to build an adequate fraction in the union, to stiffen it. The workers' party can ensure a correct policy in the union, not through a couple of officials, bureaucratically, but through a ~~conscious~~ conscious section of the workers who have been drawn into the party. Through such a fraction the party has a grip on the rank and file, a nervous system by means of which the whole body can be co-ordinated. Put to the test, the Laundry Workers Union proved flabby. There was a rapid weakening of the rank and file from the very first days, necessitating a constant exhorting of the workers to stand firm; there was an endless explaining to unconvinced workers of the most elementary things, such as, for example, that it was not practicable to prosecute scabs in the law courts. A fraction would have taken these tasks from the shoulders of the leaders. In view of the absence of a fraction an error was committed when the workers were not advised to compromise by withdrawing the demand for "union recognition". This demand was not important enough for the workers to risk all. The Labour Department and the Wage Board did in fact recognise the union; the bosses recognised the union to the extent of attempting to bargain with the secretary; even if they had "signed" a written undertaking this would not be binding on them; only a military union could guarantee the carrying out of the undertaking, desirable though it may be, is not absolutely necessary. There remains only the "psychological effect" of a signed capitulation. But the "psychological effect" of weekly pay and extra money would have been good enough. And what of the "psychological effect" of the defeat which has brought the union close to collapse?

This failure to recognise the necessity of compromise at the critical time was an ultra-left error. This matter could not be more clearly expressed than in Lenin's words: "But proletarians, schooled in numerous strikes (to take only this manifestation of the class struggle), usually understand the very profound (philosophical, historical, political and psychological) truth expounded very well by Engels. Every proletarian has gone through strikes and has experienced "compromises" with the hated oppressors and exploiters when the workers had to go back to work without having achieved anything, or after consenting to a partial satisfaction of their demands. Owing to the conditions of mass struggle and of the sharp

intensification of class antagonism in which he lives, every proletarian observes the differences between a compromise extorted from him by objective conditions (such as lack of strike funds, no outside support, hunger and extreme exhaustion), a compromise which in no way lessens the revolutionary devotion and readiness for further struggle of the workers who agree to such a compromise, and a compromise by traitors, who ascribe to objective reasons their own selfishness (strikebreakers also effect a "compromise"!); their cowardice, their desire to fawn upon the capitalists and their readiness to yield to threats, sometimes to persuasion, sometimes to sops, and sometimes to flattery on the part of the capitalists."

To sum up: our errors were (1) too much zeal in tackling a task beyond our strength; (2) we failed to build a fraction in time which led us to attempt to control the union bureaucratically, an attempt inevitably doomed to failure; and (3) the ultra-left attitude of "no compromise" on the part of the union officials would have been disastrous in any case, and was doubly disastrous in the absence of a Party fraction to strengthen the union. If we have learned the lessons that follow from the realisation of our errors, we are ready for our future tasks.

When at the commencement of its activities, the Wage Board awarded improved conditions to laundry workers, the latter received an agreeable surprise. Not realising that this legislation resulted from the "white labour" policy of the Pact Government, that it was an attempt to force native workers from industry to replace them with white workers, the laundry workers began to look upon the Wage Board as a benevolent institution of a paternal Government. They have not lost this illusion; they continue to look to the Wage Board for an improvement in their conditions, and they are now urging that the union apply for a Wage Determination.

When the Communist Party controlled the Baking Workers' Union (now defunct) a letter was received from the Wage Board inviting the union to send a representative to its sitting. The Communist Party, arguing from the perfectly correct premiss that the Wage Act and all class conciliation legislation is detrimental to the interests of the workers, came to the false conclusion that it was necessary to withhold the letter from the workers. The letter was destroyed, and the workers did not take part in the Wage Board deliberations, but not because they realised what the Wage Board was. The decision was made bureaucratically, from the top, and the result is that the baking workers still believe in the benevolence of the Wage Act.

It is not enough that the party should know the meaning of class conciliation legislation - the workers must themselves realise its nature, and this they cannot learn from mere preaching. They must pass through the experience of Wage Boards and learn in actual practice that our condemnation of reformist machinery has been correct. Reformism is a phase that cannot be skipped in the development of workers class consciousness. It is our duty to lay the matter of the Wage Board openly before the laundry workers, to take part in the sittings of the Board while all the time avowing that it is our purpose to expose the Board to the workers.

The Workers' Party takes part in the daily struggles of the workers, in their trade union struggle, etc., because the interests of the Party are identified with those of the workers. But we must not lose sight of our ultimate objectives, the overthrow of the ruling class, above all we must not sacrifice our ultimate objectives to the demands of the every day struggle. In the case of the present problems of the laundry workers, this means marching side by side with them through their inevitable disillusionment with reformism, while hastening that disillusionment by our criticism and pointing the lesson to them: the need for a workers' seizure of power as the only solution.

Collection Number: AG2722

WORKER'S PARTY OF SOUTH AFRICA, 1933-1935

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

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