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# THE RUBBER FRONT IN AKRON

BY JAMES KELLER

**I**N DEALING with the questions of the rubber unions and our work there, it will be necessary for me, in the course of this report, to touch somewhat on other phases of our work in Akron and on the position of our Party as a whole. The year 1936 was the biggest year in rubber production since the days of 1929, and the indications are that there will be a still larger output in 1937. But the basic feature in the industry in 1936 was the great union organization drive.

The other day, a member of the Goodyear local went down to North Carolina and went to the waterfront wearing his union button. The striking marine workers insisted on taking his button of the U.R.W.A. away from him. They said, "You boys in Goodyear started the ball rolling, and we want to keep your button here."

## THE ORGANIZATION PUSH

The victory over the large Goodyear corporation in March, 1936, had, of course, important effects on labor struggles nationally. We are not ready to say that it was Goodyear which started the ball rolling. But we can say that the Goodyear strike was the big push which organized the rubber industry. As a direct result of the Goodyear strike, the International

union was able at its 1936 convention, to register a growth of over 800 per cent. Still more important, the "big three" in Akron—the Firestone, Goodrich and Goodyear plants—are, on the average, over 85 per cent organized. Many of the smaller plants are now organized 100 per cent.

The rubber industry nationally is still far from being 100 per cent organized. The unions are still weak in such important places as California, Michigan, and the eastern states, although organization work in these places is making progress and numerous struggles have been carried on. One fact stands out, however. The Akron district, center of the world's rubber industry, has been organized. This fact has had very serious consequences and confronted the Party with many new problems. This fact has also had serious effect upon the policies of the union leadership.

It must be remembered that the sit-down struggles which began in January, 1936, in the rubber industry and the Goodyear strike itself resulted from spontaneous action taken by the rubber workers. The slogan of the International leadership and the local officials was: "Organize first, then negotiate, and then strike if necessary". When the Goodyear strike

started there was hesitation on the part of the union leadership to authorize the strike and a good deal of vacillation with regard to the conduct of the strike.

*The Goodyear strike aroused the militancy of the workers and was followed by a wave of sit-down strikes and gains by the workers. But this strike on the other hand caused a great deal of anxiety to the leadership of the International.*

Soon after the Goodyear strike the efforts of the International leadership, and especially of the leadership of the Goodyear local where strikes were most frequent, were directed towards pacifying the workers. The policy of the Party during this period was to organize and direct this militancy of the workers towards larger gains and eventual recognition of the International union by the rubber companies. But the International leadership took a different course. Their policy was (1) immediately to put a stop to sit-down strikes; (2) to show the companies that the U.R.W.A. is a disciplined and "responsible" organization; (3) on the basis of these two conditions to win the good will of the companies and eventually to get a round-table settlement of major questions and obtain recognition this way.

A resolution on sit-down strikes was introduced at the last rubber convention, which our Party endorsed because it coincided with the policies of the Party. This placed the blame for labor disturbances upon the vicious policies of the companies, and warned against spontaneous, unauthorized sit-down strikes. At the same time it provided for the effect-

ive use of these struggles, in an organized way, to improve conditions and promote the growth of the union. This resolution was defeated at the convention by a vote of 35 to 27, but present developments show that this resolution is becoming a guiding force for the policies of the union.

#### PRESENT PROBLEMS

At the present time there is a changing line of policy on the part of the union leadership in the rubber industry. It is moving definitely closer to the line of policy which has been patiently advanced by the Party since the Goodyear strike.

How did this change come about? We know that the rubber companies have in the past used the weak and defensive line of the union leadership. They delayed settlement of minor grievances in an effort to cause conflicts between the union leadership and the rank and file. They transferred company-union men into departments which were nearly 100 per cent organized for the purpose of creating friction. They launched intensive attacks against the rubber unions, raising the threat of decentralization, and creating a fascist Greater Akron Civic Association which unloosed a continuous barrage of propaganda against the unions, through the press and radio.

The unions, on the other hand, considered it inadvisable until recently to counteract this vicious barrage of the rubber barons and their agents. They directed their main efforts towards pacifying the workers, hoping thereby to pacify the employers and win their recognition.

This policy was most strikingly expressed in the leadership of the Goodyear local which, as you know, was the main object of attack by the anti-union forces. The Goodyear local leadership was among the most conservative, expounding an open policy of class collaboration, talking about "saving the goose which lays the golden egg" and directing its main fire against the most militant workers involved in sit-down struggles.

It is very significant, therefore, that recently a definite change has appeared in the outlook and the line of action of the Goodyear leadership.

On December 24, in an article published in *Local 2 News* John House, the union president, made a reply to the attack of the Greater Akron Association in which he mildly placed the blame on the company. This article, though inadequate, was definitely a step towards the line of the resolution on sit-downs. But in this same article, House still had a very dangerous position. I quote this part of the article:

"The vast majority of those who are members of the U.R.W.A. have only one fault. They are too charitable in their attitude toward persistent offenders. They need only to stand up and give active and vocal support to the principles and policies of the Union refusing to go along with those who are incapable of self-discipline and refuse to allow their minds to be poisoned and their judgment warped by listening to the propaganda put out by the enemies of the Union disparaging and attacking the character of officers and members of the Union. I think we should do just that, in spite of all the agitation the 'stoolies' and others stir up. As for the Greater Akron Association, I would say it would have plenty to do cleaning up its own back yards."

This quotation and the whole article conveyed the idea which was the

practice of the Goodyear leadership in the past. "We shall clean out our back yard, so you can deal with us as responsible people." The step forward was the mild request to the companies that they begin thinking about cleaning some of their back yards. But still the main stress was laid against certain sections of the union.

As a matter of fact in both the Goodyear and the Firestone locals the officials tried to impose harsh disciplinary measures against leaders involved in sit-downs, and even against certain outstanding leaders who had nothing to do with sit-downs but who were under fire by the company. It seems that the leadership thought it necessary to make concessions to the company by attacking and trying to eliminate such people.

Despite all such "good-will" gestures on the part of House and others, the company only took advantage of such opportunities to increase its attacks against the union. The company followed one consistent line all the time: "There is not room enough for both the Goodyear Company and the union in Akron." And the Goodyear local officials, it seems, are beginning to realize this.

A few days ago a so-called "New Year's message" appeared in the name of Paul Litchfield, the president of the Goodyear Company. This message violently attacked the union, declared that decentralization was not a threat but a living reality and spoke of lay-offs of thousands from the Goodyear plants in Akron.

To this message, John House replied on January 7. It is important to quote some of this reply. Explaining the Goodyear strike House states:

"This came about simply as a spontaneous rebellion and as a result of an accumulation of grievances which had been created through the failure of the management to deal fairly with the representatives of the employees. . . . The strike is history and we should have it so. The only reason for this reference to what transpired during the period covered above is to show you people who may have forgotten that it is not the union that is to blame for the present situation but that it comes about as a result of the failure of the management to recognize and deal fairly with the representatives of the workers in a spirit of cooperation rather than from a sense of expediency. . . ."

"If these people really want to help Akron obtain and keep industrial peace and harmony, let them quit trying to intimidate the workers with their scare-head advertising. Let them probe deeper into the problem to see what really is the cause of so much unrest and then do something toward correcting the conditions which allow for this sort of thing toward the elimination of the causes of industrial strife."

This article is extremely significant in comparison with the one previously written by Mr. House. It omits any sort of threat against any section of the union membership and it lays the blame squarely upon the company and its union-busting organizations. Secondly, this article is primarily an answer to the threat of decentralization, and shows no tendency to capitulate to this threat. We know, of course, that any line towards capitulation in the face of the decentralization threat, any tendency to soft-pedal aggressive union action, would destroy the unions. Furthermore, it would not stop but would encourage decentralization as a matter of future policy by the companies. Such statements alone, however, are not sufficient to meet the present situation. What should be the proper line of action for the unions and for our Party forces?

#### DRIVE FOR AGREEMENT

Some of the locals are already beginning to provide the answer, which in large measure is the result of the persistent action followed by the Party at the last rubber convention and in recent months. Some locals, for example, are drafting agreements which they propose to place before the companies. The leaders of these locals are tired of handling thousands of grievances in a disorganized fashion which is very much to the liking of the management. These locals are preparing to settle a good many of these grievances through an agreement covering major points, providing definite machinery for the speedy settlement of grievances—and *aiming at the recognition of the union*. This is the line of action, which should become the line of action for the entire Akron district of the U.R.W.A. and for our Party forces.

It is interesting to note that the demands which are now being considered by the rubber unions have been advanced for some time by the progressive forces. The fact that the unions are taking up such policies now is not only indicative of the forward movement of the unions, but is at the same time a vindication of the course of action advocated by the progressives.

What are the issues now confronting the rubber workers? They are:

1. Recognition of the union.
2. Elimination of company unions.
3. Raising of wages in the lower brackets and setting a minimum of 75 cents per hour.
4. A sweeping adjustment of accumulated grievances and provisions for

speedy adjustment of future grievances.

5. Embodying these points in an agreement.

6. Putting an end to attacks on the unions, now practiced by the companies, through threats of decentralization and through the activities of Akron Civic Association, the Stahl-Mate Club and similar organizations.

We should also consider the influence of certain demands which have been raised by the automobile union and which find a warm response among the rubber workers. Among these are reduction of speed-up and the abolition of piece-work.

As steps for action along these lines, I believe it is necessary to draw up carefully a program of demands or an agreement which the International could present to the rubber companies. There is no doubt but that conditions are favorable for an aggressive fight for such demands. There is no doubt also that such action by the International would meet with wholehearted and militant support by the rubber workers and would help organize the entire rubber industry.

It is important to consider those methods which should be used by the union in presenting the agreement. The terms of the agreement should be thoroughly discussed by the membership of the local unions. Such discussions in local union meetings should be preceded by conferences of shop committeemen where preliminary discussions on the agreement will take place. Local union meetings at which the agreement would be discussed can be used to have a real turn-out of the membership. In order to do this it would be necessary to pub-

licize and announce in advance that, at a specific meeting of the local, the agreement would come up for discussion. Something of this kind has been done by the Goodyear local in connection with seniority questions. Such a meeting was held in the city armory and shows that any serious question, if announced in advance, will result in a heavy turn-out on the part of the union membership.

It would, of course, be a mistake to try and keep the intentions of the unions and the International secret. On the contrary, the Akron district of the rubber workers and International itself would achieve the best results if they openly proclaimed their intention of seeking genuine collective bargaining with the companies on all outstanding issues. Every effort should therefore be made to inform and enlighten the public and to win public sentiment and support behind the justified objectives and demands of the rubber workers. After such preliminary steps, the ground would be well prepared for the International to approach the rubber companies on the question of collective bargaining and the drawing up of an agreement.

#### RUBBER AND THE AUTO STRIKE

We have seen from what has been said here that there is considerable difference in the situation in rubber from that in auto and steel. This difference arises mainly from the fact that the rubber unions went through their major organizational struggles and growth in 1936, whereas the auto and steel unions are now in various stages of such organization. This is an important factor which must be borne in mind. At the same time, however,

we must see the close connection between the movements in auto and steel with the movement among the rubber workers. Especially between auto and rubber is there not only a close productive connection but actual living interest between the two groups of workers.

We must develop the greatest possible support for the organizing drives of the auto workers in the rubber unions. In due time, if needed, finances will have to be raised in support of the automobile workers. The ground for all this should be prepared through the rubber workers' press, through speeches on the automobile situation at local meetings, through mass meetings in Akron and other rubber centers, where representatives of the auto unions would speak, and similar activities.

The nation-wide developments in auto are having important effects upon the rubber unions and the leadership of the U.R.W.A. The whole C.I.O. movement has been tremendously stimulating to the rubber workers. Organizers and leaders of rubber unions are coming in contract with other figures and sections of the labor movement. Time and again these people come into contact with our Party with the result, of course, that they receive whole-hearted co-operation and support. The result is a continuous broadening of outlook and deeper understanding of labor problems by these people. Last but not least, there is a growing respect for the Communist Party and a very rapid exploding of the "Red menace" and the prejudices which capitalist influences have erected against the Communist movement.

These prejudices, of course, still exist in the minds of a good many leaders and a section of the rubber union membership. But, the unions are rapidly moving forward on the path of class struggle. During recent weeks we have seen two events which indicate the forward movement of the trade unions in Akron. One of these was the campaign developed by the local trade union movement in support of the maritime strike. The other was the reception for the youth delegation representing the People's Front government of Spain.

In support of marine, the Goodrich local went on record supporting the maritime strike, voted \$500 out of its treasury and decided to raise \$2,000 more through shop collections; \$50 was voted by the Goodyear local, \$100 by the Firestone, \$25 by Barberton C.L.U. Over \$800 was raised.

Still more significant, however, is the fact that the International, with the help of Sherman Dalrymple, its president, arranged a mass meeting for Joe Curran which was held January 3. At this meeting a number of labor leaders were present, including Brother House of the Goodyear local.

Although the attendance was small, Mr. Dalrymple and others seemed to realize more and more as the meeting went on its full significance. It was indeed the first act of this kind by the rubber unions in solidarity with another important section of labor. The results were greatly instructive to all who attended. Towards the end, Mr. Dalrymple, who acted as chairman, asked everyone to constitute himself a committee of one to collect funds for the maritime strike. He was followed by Brother L. L. Callahan, president

of the Goodrich local, who appealed to his committeemen to see to it that every union man in the shop donated at least 25 cents each to the maritime strikers. When Brother Callahan finished, a rubber worker got up in the audience and addressing Brother John House requested him to instruct his union members in the same way that Brother Callahan had just done.

While Brother Curran spoke, the rubber workers lived through the marine struggle and compared it to their own. When Curran told them of the longshoremen carrying their "hooks" they remarked to each other, "that's like the tomahawk (a tool used in the rubber shops)—a dangerous weapon," etc.

In the reception for the Spanish youth delegation, a still broader committee was organized than was the case in the meeting for Curran. The present committee includes President Dalrymple and another member of the International Executive Board of the U.R.W., presidents of the Akron and Barberton C.L.U.'s, president of the Goodrich local, professors, attorneys and two ministers. Committees have been on the job in a number of unions, distributing leaflets, posters, and announcing the meeting.

The vote in the last election demonstrated that the membership of the rubber unions held uppermost in their minds the fact that their union had grown, had secured better working conditions and had made other definite gains. The membership showed that they were not ready or willing to make any changes in leadership at this time. They did not go into the consideration of various issues which had developed during the

Goodyear strike and on other occasions. They voted on the basis of results. Both in the International convention last September and still more so in the local union elections this was the predominant feature.

It is, of course, an undeniable fact that there was justification for considerable criticism of the strike leadership during the Goodyear strike. There were other situations in which the International leadership as well as the leadership of some locals hesitated and even made serious mistakes. These mistakes, however, did not justify a full slate in opposition to the present leadership. As a matter of fact there was no candidate running against President L. L. Callahan of the Goodrich local but there were contesting candidates for every major office in the Firestone and the Goodyear locals. Such complete slates had the effect of drawing a line of division within the locals and reflected unfavorably on some of the candidates who should have been and possibly would have been elected for minor positions.

It is possible on the basis of friendly criticism to influence the course of the present leadership of the International in the proper direction. There is every possibility for constructive work within the rubber unions on the part of every tendency. For this reason it is necessary to eliminate any sort of opposition movement within the rubber unions.

The method of slates, therefore, has definitely proven to be undesirable. There is no obstacle to anyone in the rubber unions obtaining recognition from his fellow members providing he aggressively voices a correct line of

policy, advances constructive proposals and proves himself to be a sincere worker for the union. It is on this basis that the more far-sighted elements in the union should expect to receive recognition. This method, moreover, will avoid any sort of feeling of special groups and group divisions in the organization which is created by such methods as slates.

On the whole the mistakes committed have not gone so deep as to create any serious problems. The feeling of friction created by the slates is being eliminated. This is assisted by the fact that the rubber unions are moving more and more along the lines of policy which has been put forward by the most conscious elements in these unions. The outlook for the future development and growth of the unions therefore appears bright.

Our main tasks are twofold. First, to facilitate and advance as rapidly as possible the forward movement in the rubber unions. Second, to build the Party in Akron, and particularly in the rubber unions as one of the chief guarantees that such a forward movement will continue.

#### BUILDING THE PARTY

How do matters stand with our Party organization in Akron? About one-third of our membership is made up of rubber workers. As compared with last year, the figures, which have only increased by 20 or so, do not show the actual qualitative change in membership which has taken place in our section. Last year our branches were recovering from the change which occurred from the shift of our main activities to the trade union

field. A good many unstable elements who were never secure in the Party and some of whom did not know whether they had joined the Party or the unemployed council have dropped out. Their places have been taken by a new and a much more stable membership with mass connections, which increases the influence of the Party manifold.

We have now a new shop branch, built up in the Goodyear strike and we have registered in this unit all the decisive elements who had joined during the Goodyear strike. We have a much better trade union composition in the section, including some good recruits from other trades beside rubber. We have recruited some from among the intellectuals and these comrades are now conducting a Marxist study circle among a group of some twelve to fifteen intellectuals who carry considerable influence in the community. We have also had some good recruits from among the W.P.A.

As you see, the relative weight of our Party organization, its composition and influence, is far improved as compared with last year.

But it is necessary to say that our gains are still negligible in comparison with the possibilities and requirements of the situation. We are still confronting the outstanding and immediate problem—that of building a mass party in Akron, and first of all a mass party in rubber.

The question is, what shall we do further to correct our past slow pace in the building of the Party?

We have begun to issue a printed shop bulletin which has had excellent response in the plants. We have to establish this bulletin on such a stable

foundation that it will come out on the dot each month and will be so alive that its influence will continuously expand. We have begun to collect names of union members and officials for the purpose of mailing this bulletin. If, in addition to shop distributions, we succeed in regularly mailing such a bulletin to several hundred men each month, this bulletin will become a force in the rubber locals.

Above all we need the application of such methods as we use in making our general trade union contacts. When, for example, we want to initiate some measure in the trade unions, we visit certain people, we work with them, we educate them and advise them. They come to depend upon us and to seek our opinions and advice. What we need in every branch in the rubber shops is a core of comrades who would have around themselves in different fields of activity a number of trade unionists that they could activize, guide and advise, that they could systematically supply with liter-

ature and take to important meetings. Such work even extends to social activities, joint dinners, friendship among the wives of such people, etc. It is such work, conducted systematically, that we have been weak in, and which is vital for the growth of the Party.

We come up here against a very acute difficulty, the political development of our comrades. In order to play such a role, our comrades have to read, our comrades have to receive political education or else they cannot play such a leading role. At all costs, if we are to make any advances, we have to begin serious educational activity in the section.

We are experiencing many difficulties and have many shortcomings. But we are meeting with increasing successes and we know that our difficulties are difficulties of growth. One of the chief remedies for the solution of our problems is to take seriously the line of the last Central Committee plenum for building the Party. This we intend to tackle seriously.

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# PARTY MOBILIZATION IN OHIO

BY JOHN WILLIAMSON

**T**HE last Central Committee meeting of our Party emphasized that we "see in the overwhelming defeat of reaction in the elections a great opportunity for the forces of the People's Front to move forward, for labor to achieve some of its demands, for all of the oppressed to win improvements in their situation. . . . There is a mounting mood of confidence and readiness to struggle. This is the mood that must be roused, stimulated and organized to drive the whole movement forward for the People's Front."

All this has been verified by the great activity of the masses, first of all in the heroic auto strike, but also in the organizing campaigns in steel, the increased legislative activities of the trade unions and the growing spirit of unity of all progressive-minded people against reaction, wherever it raises its head.

## A "C.I.O." STATE

What do we find in Ohio—one of the large and decisive industrial states—where our Party line must express itself in life if the entire Party is successfully to move forward on a nationwide scale? A state where steel, auto, rubber, mining and electrical appliance industries predominate can be characterized as a "C.I.O. state". Successful organizing

work has been conducted in the auto, steel and electrical appliance industries and gradually stronger and more mature unions are evolving. Aggressive struggles stimulating this organizing work have taken place in the auto industry particularly. A growing consciousness is evident, especially in rubber, of the need for a broader outlook than merely their own industry and successful beginnings have been made in solidarity actions with other unions, as the rubber union support to the marine strikers; trade union support to the struggle for Spanish democracy, etc.

There is still evident, however, an underestimation of united action on the political field, behind important political issues of concern also to the trade unions. This is a reflection of the slow development of these militant workers and their organizations in drawing the class conclusions from their successful economic struggles, and the weight of the old practices and political ideology of even the C.I.O. unions, whose first impulse is to depend upon some other political force, rather than take the initiative and solve their own problems, relying upon their own organized force and that of the common people generally.

Participating ever more actively in these mass struggles and unionization