

Students Swing Into Action

The C. W. A. Workers Meet the Cops

MARGARET WRIGHT MATHER

WHEN cartoonists for the commercial press want to picture Mr. John Public, they sketch a frail man, timid, retiring, a tiny derby seated atop a worried brow. Generally he is depicted taking it on the chin; forever oppressed with taxes, apprehensive about the coming mortgage payment, he is the buffer between horny-handed Labor and silk-hatted Capital. If railroad-men want to strike, then the cartoonist has poor Mr. John Public digging deep into his pocket for extra freight charges. If the miners strike for living wages, then Mr. John Public—how these cartoonists weep and worry for him—goes shivering from his unheated house to the office downtown. He is forever getting the dirty end of the stick in this incessant war between capital and labor. That's how the cartoonist sees it.

Mr. John Public is the White Collar Worker.

That is the average cartoonist's conception. Mr. Public is the Doctor, the Lawyer, the School Teacher. He clerks in the A. and P., and he sells electric appliances. He is the great lower middle class. He once tried to own a home. Maybe even a car. He had aspirations of climbing into the upper brackets. Sometimes he even joked wryly of making out income tax reports.

Last Saturday he was down before the doors of the Welfare Department with a banner in his hand. He shouted "We won't starve!" and "We want relief!" The police rushed out and knocked Mr. John Public's derby off his head. They mauled him and knocked him to the pavement. They kicked him in the ribs and violated his last shred of middle class dignity.

The large representation of white collar and professional workers was a historic feature of the demonstration of 2,000 unemployed and relief workers who picketed the Department of Public Welfare in New York City May 26. Police attacked with savage brutality. In a battle lasting more than thirty minutes (the police used clubs, blackjacks and guns; rifles were carried by some) these workers defended themselves. Some used the sticks torn from placards. Scores were injured, including several police. Thirteen demonstrators were arrested. Eleven were framed on the serious charge of felonious assault (which carries a three- to ten-year sentence). Their crime was to dare defend themselves against unprovoked attack.

The demonstration had been called by the United Committee of Action on Unemployment and Relief, a united front body comprising unemployed, employed and relief groups

of professional, white collar and manual workers. They came to protest the following:

1. The city administration's announcement that 15,000 to 20,000 destitute families are to be dropped from the home relief rolls June 1. Further drastic cuts are scheduled for the ensuing months on the theory that it is easier to starve in balmy summer weather than in winter.

2. Those remaining on work relief are to have their subsistence wages lopped off by heavy pay-cuts. The new system of cash relief, replacing food and rent orders, widely heralded as an ease to the families receiving home relief, is proving less tolerable than the former system. Home relief is now limited to a strictly subsistence food basis; no provision for clothing, shelter, medical care nor household needs.

3. The official terrorism against the C.W.A. workers' attempt to organize. To a recent protest against overtime without pay, a director, a certain Mr. Corsi, replied: "Give me the names of those that are dissatisfied. I'll fill their places with employees who do not mind overtime." In another instance, a supervisor known as "Hitler" Kontner stalked into a meeting of relief employees with a gang of American Legionnaires and threatened all with dismissal.

These were some of the conditions against which the demonstrators were protesting; these were the "childish complaints" to which Assistant Commissioner Howe referred when he refused to grant a hearing. (Commissioner Hodson was in Kansas City, telling the social workers there how his heart bled for his "clients.")

To many white collar workers who never before participated in a "riot" the newspaper reports proved a revelation. All played up the police casualties while the scores of demonstrators carried from the fray with broken heads were reduced to "three or four injured Reds."

The press does not realize that stamping every militant working-class action "Communist" has unexpected effects. Intended to frighten away the masses by raising a Red Scare, it actually serves to identify the demands of the workers with Communist action. The white collar groups, along with other workers, sense this. As Alexander Taylor, secretary of the Associated Office and Professional Emergency Employees—comprising teachers, engineers, stenographers, research workers and clerks on relief projects—explains: "Ours is not a Communist organization. But we are not afraid or ashamed to have Communists among us. We are learning that wherever there is action in defense of living standards, there you will almost certainly find Reds in the thick of the fight, and where there are Communist leaders, you may be sure there will be no sell-out."

The court that evening tried two of the

workers arrested at the Saturday demonstration. White collar and manual workers packed the courtroom and protested. As a result one worker received a light sentence. The case of the other was postponed. An impromptu march afterward was attacked by the police near Forty-second Street and Times Square. More beatings, more arrests. The next day at Tombs Court the white collar men and women again attended the trial en masse. In the first two cases, the judge set bail at the extraordinary figure of \$1,500 each. When the spectators shouted in amazement, the judge ordered the room cleared. Dozens of cops and plainclothesmen emerged from near-by rooms where they were hiding. They attacked with unprecedented ferocity. (A graphic newspaper account of this attack is quoted on page 9 of this issue.)

Such incidents occurring throughout the country have their indubitable effect: they weld the union of the white collar worker and the proletarian. As the Communists put it, the alliance of the working class with the lower strata of the middle class, is being effected. These professionals and white collar men come to militant class action. There they discover the Communists. And they fight shoulder to shoulder under the guidance and leadership of the true revolutionary party and the various organizations in which its members play leading roles.

The white collar workers today find themselves actual participants in the struggle. Many are no longer afflicted with the disease of spectatorism. These can never again be pictured by the capitalist cartoonist as Mr. John Public with the idiotic derby. Nurtured on the fiction that they belonged to a white collar "class" that stood above the battle, they now have their eyes open to reality as they are turned away from employment in droves, attacked, kicked around like ordinary industrial workers.

They come from a class, of course, providing potential Hitlerites. But if the real forces of revolution in this country—the Communists—do their work effectively, rapidly, indefatigably, then the white collar workers nationally will follow the example of their New York brethren and fight bravely shoulder to shoulder with the manual laborers.

As one participant in the Saturday demonstration—a former university instructor now an emergency teacher in adult education—put it while nursing his bruises: "The bitter but enlightening lesson of the class struggle is best taught at the point of actual physical conflict. I have just learned there are two classes in society and that I belong to one of them. You will find me there from now on."

Early American Labor and Literature

ALAN CALMER

WE CANNOT properly speak of the existence of a body of working class literature in the United States until the epoch of imperialism. It was not until the first years of the twentieth century that men of letters like Jack London and Upton Sinclair identified themselves with the Socialist Party or that a worker-poet like Joe Hill emerged from the ranks of the I.W.W. Moreover, it is only today, with the development of the Communist movement, that we can begin to talk of an American proletarian revolutionary literature that is attaining maturity.

Nevertheless, it is to be expected that the struggle of the American proletariat during the last half of the nineteenth century, together with the beginning of the Socialist movement (chiefly among the German immigrants in this country), would be reflected at least in fugitive writings during this period. Most of the floating literature of the time may never be recovered; while numerous scattered poems, stories, and essays in rare labor newspapers of the time have yet to be collected. In addition to other literary treasures that some day may be discovered, we already know of at least two historically important groups of working class writings of this period. These are the songs and ballads of the fighting Irish and English hard coal miners of Pennsylvania, and the German-American Socialist literature composed in the United States before the beginning of this century.

The folklore that flourished in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania during the last third of the nineteenth century was of a very striking nature. Although the custom of balladry and minstrelsy had been transplanted from the British Isles, these homespun songs and poems were rooted deep in the life of the coal miners of the state. These ballads were spread by wandering bards and minstrels who were themselves miners. Isolated by the mountainous barriers of this section of the country, Pennsylvania proletarians created their own oral literature reflecting every aspect of life in and around the hell holes where they were forced to labor. Not only did they sing of tales told around the village green and bar-room; almost all of their ballads are full of the serfdom of the miners, of the agony of child labor, of the horror of mine disasters.

But even more important, one finds in these ballads¹ the fighting spirit of the workers and the growth of their class-consciousness:

¹ An American newspaperman preserved this "seam of folklore which once ran through life in the hard coal fields of Pennsylvania." He gathered them from the last survivors of the generation that composed and sang them. They are collected in his volume, *Songs and Ballads of the Anthracite Miner*, by George Korson. The Grafton Press, N. Y. 1927.

On three days a week, boys, our living we make,
And we work like mules for the bit that we ate;
But now we have a union let them say what they may:

We will strike for more wages than a dollar a day.

Supported by the forces of press and pulpit, the coal operators launched a widespread campaign of villification against the workers' unions, in order to demolish them. This is reflected in a poem written during the time and printed in a miners' journal:

What's that you say? What makes us strike?
Well, now!—you've hit a subject which I like
To talk about to strangers, for you'll understand
A very wrong impression fills the land—
That we are lazy, bloody, reckless men,
Who live beneath the ground, in a cave and den,
And come out once in a while to get the light—
To burn a breaker, kill a boss, or fight—
That miners ain't like other folks do be,
All is wrong, which I will let you see.
We're men like you—though not so finely clad—
Some of us good, and others very bad,
Just as you will find in any other set
Of men who work their daily bread to get.
A pretty independent lot we are likewise,
And will allow no boss to tyrannize,
We hate that, like the Devil hates the water
Blessed by the Priest—and so we ought'er.

Gowen says he is the workman's great admirer,
While we, in turn, say he's the great conspirer
Against our price, our liberties, our rights,
And the instigator of one-half our fights.

These miners, who occupy a prominent place in the splendid revolutionary tradition of the American proletariat, fought determinedly against the onslaught of the coal operators and their Pennsylvania Cossacks. This conflict came to a head in the strike of 1875, in which the miners' strongest union, the old W.B.A., was smashed. One of the finest examples of how a literary form may serve as a direct weapon in the class struggle is the ballad, *The Long Strike*, written during the course of the strike in order to cheer the workers. In the midst of this major contest with their class enemy, the miners sang defiantly:

In eighteen hundred and seventy-five, our masters
did conspire
To keep men, women and children without either
food or fire.
They tho't to starve us to submit with hunger
and with cold,
But the miners did not fear them, but stood out
brave and bold.

Now two long months are nearly o'er—that no
one can deny,
And for to stand another month we are willing
for to try,
Our wages shall not be reduced, tho' poverty do
reign,
We'll have seventy-four basis, boys, before we'll
work again.

When the miners rose once more at the end of 1887—under the leadership of the Knights of Labor and in support of the railroad work-

ers—John Hory, an Irish miner-poet, composed their battle song:

Here's to the Knights of Labor,
That brave and gallant band,
That Corbon and old Swigard
Is trying to disband.
But stick and hang brave union men;
We'll make them rue the day
They thought to break the K. of L.
In free Americay.

When this strike is at an end,
And we have gained the day,
We'll drink a health to our miner boys,
Both near and far away;
And our brothers on the railroad
In free Americay.

A number of other songs were written about the Knights of Labor, especially in the western section of the country. While many of the ones collected in the pamphlet, *Sing, Brothers, Sing!* (1886), seem to be written by sympathizers rather than by workers on the picket line, nevertheless they express the militancy of the workers. Most of them are new lyrics set to the tune of popular songs. One of the best known, which was written in California, includes the refrain:

Hurrah! Hurrah! Labor free to all!
Hurrah! Hurrah! hasten to the call!
Shout the joyful tidings, *King Capital* must fall;
Now we are marching for Labor.

The most famous one of all, *Storm the Fort, Ye Knights of Labor!* was sung throughout the West:

Strong entrenched behind their minions,
Sit the money kings;
Slavery grabbers, thieves and traitors
Join them in their rings.

Who will dare to shun the conflict?
Who would be a slave?
Better die within the trenches,
Forward, then, ye brave!

Another deals with

Oh, the idle, useless things,
Worshipped as "Industrial Kings,"
Buying legislators, lawyers, courts and all,

while another, *The Bondholder and the Soldier*—sung to the tune of *Susannah*—reflects the development of the indigenous revolutionary tradition of America, from the first Civil War to the coming second one:

We met the foe on many fields
And drove them to the sea,
We thought the Union then was saved
And all our people free

O bondholder! Fear you no wrath divine?
The blows we dealt on Southern heads
Shall surely fall on thine.

Even before the Civil War, the American workers used the weapon of verse in their labor clashes. George E. McNeill, in *The Labor Movement*, recounts the incident of girl