

The Story of John L. Lewis

Puzzling and fighting his way through the jungle of wrong-headed policies left by Gompers gave the miners' chief a very good schooling

By Bruce Minton and John Stuart

IN THE fourteen years that followed the 1919 bituminous coal strike, John L. Lewis watched the United Mine Workers lose membership and its power steadily diminish. During this time Lewis was to learn that so long as he followed the lead of the A.F. of L. executive council, which in turn received its direction from the Gompers heritage, the United Mine Workers were doomed to ineffectiveness. Whatever mistakes Lewis made in this period were the mistakes of decades of A.F. of L. leadership. For Lewis they became a reservoir of experience which he eventually drew upon in his attempt to transfuse life into the American labor movement.

By 1920, Lewis had been officially elected to the presidency of the United Mine Workers. Because of his retreat during the 1919 strike, he faced dissension in the union. The militant Alexander Howat, president of the Kansas district, defied Lewis by leading a strike against a newly passed state law instituting compulsory arbitration. When Howat was jailed, he continued to conduct the strike from his cell. Lewis opposed the strike on the ground that it violated a contract between the union and the operators. Actually, Lewis reasoned that Howat's open opposition would obstruct the official leadership of the U.M.W. Lewis removed Howat and the Kansan's supporters from the union. The conflict between the two men stretched over many years; Lewis, however, managed to retain his original victory though the running fight split, and so weakened, the union.

Likewise, he quarreled with the Illinois district president, Frank Farrington, a far different man from Howat. Farrington, corrupt and reactionary, was building a strong place for himself in the Middle West by arousing discontent against Lewis among the rank and file. Lewis sparred cautiously with Farrington for years, waiting for an opening which would allow him to demolish the Illinois clique. Finally, in 1925, with Farrington in Europe, Lewis disclosed that the district president was receiving \$25,000 a year from the Peabody Coal Co. Farrington admitted the charge. But his expulsion by no means ended the factional war which he had promoted, and as a result the membership of the United Mine Workers dwindled.

Again, in the 1922 bituminous strike to preserve the 1920 wage scale, Lewis pursued a short-sighted policy. On the first day of the strike, he signed a contract with the employers in western Kentucky whereby the miners resumed work in that district in re-



"Organization upon an industrial basis."

turn for an extension of the old terms until the following year. A few days later, he signed two-year contracts for southeastern Kentucky and Tennessee. The flow of coal from these sections hampered the progress of the nation-wide strike.

Unfortunately, Lewis's lack of vision did not end here. He greeted the spontaneous walkout of nearly 100,000 non-union miners in southern Pennsylvania with delight—but when it came to signing contracts at the strike's conclusion, Lewis abandoned them to the mercy of the operators. His excuse was that the industry included "twice too many mines and twice too many miners." To preserve the bargaining strength and jobs of the U.M.W. membership in the face of an oversupply of miners, Lewis mistakenly deserted the non-union fields where, lacking organization, the miners were unable to resist disastrous wage cuts. The competitive advantage thus gained by the non-union operators over those operators who had signed wage contracts with the U.M.W. provided an excuse for the owners of union mines to violate contracts. And Lewis discovered that his attempt to save the U.M.W. by excluding the "surplus" workers from the United Mine Workers not only did not help the union, but seriously threatened its very existence. Partial unionization failed; it was another lesson which later caused Lewis to realize not only the necessity of organizing all the mines, but also all industry.

The 1922 strike ended with another victory that in reality was another setback. Membership in the U.M.W. decreased. The union was forced by terror and injunction to withdraw from one district after the other. Gone

were Alabama and West Virginia. Union control vanished in Colorado, Utah, Texas, Maryland, Virginia. When Lewis extended the bituminous contract in 1924 for three more years—the famous Jacksonville agreement—he achieved this agreement only by paying a stiff price for it: he relinquished western Kentucky, and maintained only nominal control over less than one quarter of the mines and miners in Oklahoma, less than two-thirds of the miners in Arkansas. Within a year, the owners were violating the Jacksonville agreement: 110 mines in Pennsylvania alone shifted to open shop.

In an attempt to preserve the Jacksonville agreement, the U.M.W. called another strike in 1927. But Lewis now knew that the owners were too powerful for the union to expect improved conditions; he raised the slogan, "No backward step." Years of negotiations, the method Lewis had learned from Gompers, had undermined the principle of blanket agreements covering all union mines. Now the U.M.W. had no alternative but to allow each district to settle on whatever terms it could obtain from the operators.

The inevitable result was loss of membership. The United Mine Workers fell from 402,700 members in 1924 to approximately 150,000 members in 1932. For all his energy and determination, Lewis closed his twelfth year as president of the U.M.W. with the operators more secure in their oppressive power than they had been for thirty years.

The blame did not rest solely with Lewis. During the war, the coal industry had expanded; by 1923, the capacity of bituminous mines alone surpassed one billion tons. Production never exceeded half this tonnage. Oil, gas, electric power, improved combustion methods, rationalization of processes in the railway and iron-and-steel industries restricted the already oversupplied market still further. The price of coal sank; operators speeded up the workers, mechanized the mines, chiseled wages. In three years, 200,000 miners were squeezed out of the industry; those still able to find employment averaged 171 work days a year. The disparity between the labor supply and the falling demand helped shatter union standards and union strength. In the space of twelve months, the number of non-union mines increased from 40 percent to 60 percent. The southern coal fields, 50 percent organized during the war, by 1927 had completely succumbed to the open shop. Moreover, the output of non-union districts rose precipitously; the unorganized fields in West Virginia and Kentucky produced 23 percent

datory on the government to license interstate coal corporations while guaranteeing the right of labor to organize into authentic rather than company unions, failed to pass Congress. A year later, Lewis expanded this plan, envisaging legal guarantees of wages and working conditions to include the nation's entire productive mechanism. He proposed to the Senate Commission on Finance that the Sherman Anti-Trust Law be suspended and that labor be granted strict protection. He still lacked any definite suggestion as to how labor's rights could be safeguarded while the anti-labor industrialists and bankers controlled the government. And Congress still ignored his proposed legislation.

While Lewis wrestled painfully with his legislative program, Congress passed the N.R.A. which included Section 7-A, embodying most of the labor provisions Lewis had advocated in the Davis-Kelley bill. The N.R.A. expressly acknowledged the right of workers "to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing." But legal permission to organize meant nothing unless workers were brought into strong, aggressive unions. Wherever the A. F. of L. craft officials attempted to take advantage of the N.R.A., as they half-heartedly did in the rubber and automotive industries, they were hampered by craft divisions and by the growth of company unions, which thrived under the vague wording of the act.

Lewis saw the danger of delay. He swept into the coal fields; the U.M.W. shot up from 150,000 members to triple its size in four months, recaptured the South, the Middle West, all the districts lost in the preceding decade. The National Miners' Union, which had expanded into the Mine, Oil, & Smelter Workers' Industrial Union, along with the other affiliates of the Trade Union Unity League, voluntarily disbanded for the sake of greater unity in the labor movement, throwing its strength into the revived U.M.W. and other forward-moving unions. For now there was emerging a group of leaders within the A. F. of L. who, like Lewis, were beginning to launch realistic organizing campaigns.

The operators, caught napping, retaliated by disregarding wage contracts. This time Lewis thought he was ready for them; he demanded the passage of the Guffey bill, written by him and establishing the National Coal Commission with powers to fix prices and allot production. The bill also created a Coal Control Board designed to settle disputes between operators and the union. The labor provisions of the Guffey bill were vague. The U.M.W., so strongly organized, was in the position to force through Congress a bill embodying stronger guarantees for higher wages and granting workers greater protection against the employers. But Lewis learned slowly. When the bill passed Congress, he called the much-postponed strike and through it raised wages to \$5.50 for a seven-hour day, \$5.10 in the South, thus proving that labor's economic power alone, in the last analysis, assured the attainment of those gains conceded by law.

Lewis had brought the U.M.W. back into the sun. But in 1920, when he had first become president of the union, the United Mine Workers had been strong, yet within ten years it had been on the verge of collapse. Lewis resolved not to repeat the mistakes of former years. He could see now that it was insufficient to rebuild the U.M.W.; without a strong labor movement to support them, the miners suffered the brunt of the owners' attack and lacked strength to withstand it. Coal was only a link in the vast industrial chain; so long as steel remained open shop, so long as auto, aluminum, rubber, and similar industries lacked strong organizations, the isolated U.M.W., with only a tiny segment of the working class, was attempting to withstand the full virulence of the anti-labor drive. Barely one-tenth of the working class had been enlisted into the A. F. of L. Lewis concluded that the only course left was to stake out a far larger field than the coal industry for unionization.

Lewis reached a further conclusion. While the N.R.A. had given the coal miners the opportunity to organize the industry, the craft unions had met with no such success. Wherever they had attempted to follow the example of the U.M.W., jurisdictional disputes had reduced their campaign to inter-union squabbles. Craft separatism meant defeat. Moreover, the majority of the A. F. of L. executive council continued to disregard the mass-production industries which employed the majority of workers. By concentrating on the organization of a handful of highly skilled workers (largely displaced through mechanization and technological advance by the semi-skilled), the clique which controlled the executive council displayed its real desire to exclude the bulk of the working class from the Federation rather than to bring it in. Obviously, effective action could be achieved only through industrial organizations which "combined the workers on the basis of the product made or material used, regardless of skill or craft."

Throughout America, the standard of living among wage earners (which never approached the glowing picture of comfort and security

over which after-dinner speakers rhapsodized before chambers of commerce) sank during the depression for the majority of workers to a bare subsistence level or worse. Unemployment had reached the incredible figure of almost twenty million. Agricultural workers, Negroes, employees in most mass-production industries had experienced ever-increasing exploitation long before 1929. For example, workers in steel, as John L. Lewis pointed out in 1936 when he began publicly to explain the campaign to organize the industry, were "never throughout the last thirty-five years paid a bare subsistence wage, not to mention a living wage." Steel profits mounted dizzily, he continued, but "greater payments have not been made to wage and salary workers because the large monopoly earnings have been used to pay dividends on fictitious capital stock. . . ."

What was true for the steel workers held good for those engaged in all mass-production industries. The discontent arising from the need for increased earnings, diminished speed-up, shortened hours, and improved working conditions, presented the A. F. of L. with the opportunity to recruit great numbers of the unorganized. Of their own accord, searching hopefully for strength through organization, workers throughout the nation flocked into the Federation's federal unions wherever these were set up or authorized. The craft officials, instead of capitalizing on this trend, quarreled over the distribution of dues and jurisdiction, while denying the new-comers votes at the convention, and endeavoring to stifle rank-and-file militancy. Discouragement and disillusion followed in the wake of mismanagement: with a gain of 352 federal unions in 1934, the Federation had lost or suspended 610 by the next convention, a net loss of 110 federal unions. Workers searching for leadership found themselves in the same old inert Federation and quickly dropped out again in disgust.

Furthermore, John L. Lewis was not oblivious to the growth of reaction throughout the world. Fascism in Europe, it was plain to anyone who would examine it, had doomed even the most conservative labor leaders. If fascism were to be prevented in America—and there were alarming indications, which Lewis could not dismiss, that the large financial and industrial interests were anxious to institute fascism in this country—Lewis realized that only a firmly established, unified labor movement could provide an adequate defense. Such a movement necessarily demanded industrial organization. It was not until several years later that Lewis crystallized what was at first a vague fear of reaction into a firm anti-fascist position. Then he declared:

The establishment of a fascist dictatorship in the United States would undoubtedly assure a retrogression from which civilization might not recover for ages and from which it would certainly not recover for many years. I know of only one means of insuring our safety—the workers of America must find self-expression in economic, in social, and in political matters. . . . Labor to us extends from the unskilled industrial and agricultural workers throughout the so-called white-collar groups, including technicians, teachers, professional groups, news-



Lyn David

paper employees, and others. . . . If the fate of Germany is to be averted from this nation, we must and we shall secure a strong, well-organized, disciplined, and articulate labor movement.

But even in 1934, John L. Lewis was sufficiently aware of the fascist menace to lend force to his conviction that industrial organization should not be delayed. At the convention held that year in San Francisco, Lewis urged the inauguration of a strong campaign to unionize industrially. The convention yielded so far as to vote unanimously that:

the executive council is directed to issue charters for national and international unions in the automotive, cement, aluminum, and such other mass-production and miscellaneous industries as in the judgment of the executive council may be necessary to meet the situation.

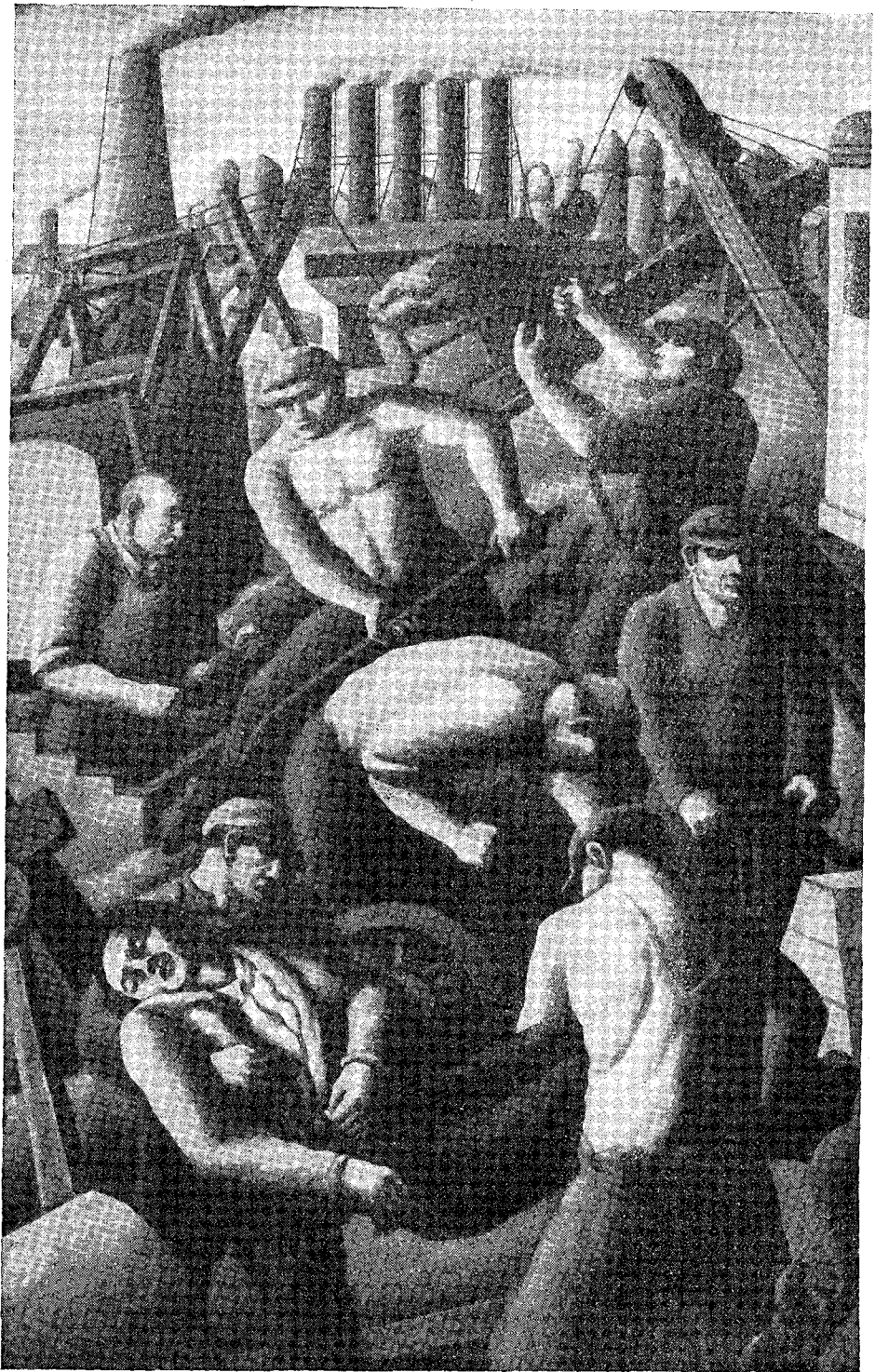
During the ensuing year, the craft officialdom controlling the executive council disregarded this mandate. To be sure, it granted international charters to automobile and rubber workers; but the United Automobile Workers was denied jurisdiction over the skilled workers in the industry, and the rubber workers were refused an industrial charter. Applications by groups or federal unions for international charters were also rejected in the radio, cement, aluminum, oil, public utility, gas, and by-product coke industries.

John L. Lewis raged at this betrayal, and resolved to push organization whether the executive council liked it or not. Earnestly, at the 1935 Atlantic City convention, he defended the minority report of the resolutions committee on organization policies. As he urged industrial unionism, he utilized all the tricks of oratory he knew so well: now cajoling, now flattering, now defiant. He clinched each paragraph with clear logic, and from beneath the well-known histrionics rang a passionate conviction that only industrial unionism would save the official labor movement. So far, he told the tense convention, the Federation had been burdened

by reason of the fact that the American Federation of Labor has not organized the steel industry and the few industries similarly situated. . . . We are assured the way is now open for an aggressive campaign of organization in the steel industry. What kind of a campaign—a campaign to organize them in fifty-seven varieties of organization? . . . If you go in there with your craft unions, they will mow you down like the Italian machine gunners mow down the Ethiopians. . . . The proponents of this minority report are asking the convention to adopt a policy designed to meet modern requirements under modern conditions in this industrial nation of ours. If we fail to have this convention adopt this policy, then, of course, the responsibility falls upon the American Federation of Labor, and the world and the workers will believe now and for the future that the American Federation of Labor cannot and will not make a contribution toward the obvious need of our present economic conditions in this country of ours.

The craft officials listened. They thought of what Lewis's "aggressive campaign" entailed, the threat it carried to their sinecures, the break with tradition. They voted Lewis down.

But Lewis had determined what his course



Study for an Industrial Mural

Paul Meltzer (Midtown Galleries)

must be. A week or so after the convention, he met with seven other presidents of A. F. of L. unions to form the Committee for Industrial Organization

for the purpose of encouraging and promoting the organization of the unorganized workers in mass-production and other industries upon an industrial basis . . . [and] to bring them under the banner and in affiliation with the American Federation of Labor as industrial organizations.

Among those participating were David Dubinsky of the International Ladies Garment Workers with 225,000 members, and Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers with 150,000 members, both semi-industrial unions. Charles P. Howard of the International Typographical Union was desig-

nated secretary, Lewis was chairman. As a start, the committee, which also included the United Textile Workers, the Oil Field, Gas Well, & Refinery Workers, the International Union of Mine, Mill, & Smelter Workers, and the Cap & Millinery Workers, voted \$500,000 for the steel campaign. These unions affiliated to the C.I.O. had all undergone experiences similar to those of the U.M.W.: the weakness of the Federation, with the resultant lack of organization among the workers, had handicapped them and often endangered their very existence. The formation of the C.I.O. testified to their resolution to change all this by unifying workers into effective unions.

(This is the second of three articles on John L. Lewis)

The Socialist Party Convenes

Torn by factional strife, the organization, at its special convention, finds its membership and influence on the wane

By Theodore Draper

WHETHER the Socialist Party will insist on committing political harakiri or whether it will make a fresh start is the choice before the party's special convention, opening in Chicago on March 26. The ominous feature about the present crisis is that it may mark the end of the Socialist Party as a force in the labor movement. The distinctive feature about the crisis is that it coincides with a period of unprecedented advance by the labor movement as a whole. The history of the Socialist Party shows alternating periods of growth and decline. But this is the first time that its decline paralleled a union feat of such magnitude as the organization of auto and steel.

Membership figures always have to be broken down in order to gauge the real effectiveness of a party. A party vitiated by factionalism will be less effective than another which acts as a unit. The Socialist Party suffers from two maladies. Its membership has reached an all-time low; at the same time, a furious factional struggle rages within what still remains. In November 1935, party membership stood at 17,437. In November 1936, it had fallen to 6820. Later figures are not yet available, but the decline has undoubtedly continued. The former all-time low was 7793 in 1928.

A most emphatic sign of decline for working-class parties is loss of attractive power for the youth. In New York City, where the Socialist youth have always been stronger than elsewhere in the country, dues-paying membership has fallen from 900 in 1936 to less than 300 in 1937. The latter figure was reported at a city-wide conference of the Young People's Socialist League last month.

The figure on party membership takes on even more serious meaning by virtue of more than half being concentrated in just two states, Wisconsin and New York. As for the country at large, there are simply no longer enough Socialists to go around for a working organization in countless cities and towns.

Had you told this to a Socialist but a year ago, the likelihood is he would have laughed scornfully at the prospect. The left, or "Militant" element had just cut adrift from the right wing or "Old Guard." Decline in prestige, fall in membership since 1934, and mistakes in policy had invariably been traced by the "Militants" to the baneful influence of the "Old Guard." Much valuable energy was necessarily consumed in the struggle which culminated in the defection of the right wing. But all that was supposed to be a thing of the past after last year's convention. Every-

thing now seemed to be geared for progress.

Why has just the contrary happened?

The fundamental reason for the unexpected turn of events is the acquisition of an even more baneful influence than the "Old Guard" proved to be. The Trotskyists came into the Socialist Party just before the right wing went out. No convention ever discussed the question of their entrance; they were surreptitiously admitted by locals dominated by pro-Trotskyist elements.

In the brief period between the last convention and the coming one, Trotskyism has infected the whole party with its specific varieties of pollution: intense factionalism, an advanced stage of divorce from the labor movement, adoption of policies which assist Reaction camouflaged by provocative, ultra-revolutionary phraseology.

The real tragedy about this internal situation is that the new factions overshadow the party. The groupings jockey for position at every turn as though the party were a federation of conflicting tendencies. The factions hold their own caucuses on orders from "top" or leading committees of high strategy. Individuals are identified in terms of their factional connection or leanings. The groupings publish their own literature, while party literature is poorly written and as scarce as bock beer in winter.

Under these conditions, the convention's decisions will be made mainly through a give and take by the various conflicting tendencies. The different currents have to be defined really to understand the basis of the coming debates. The following does not pretend to be exhaustive.

1. The Trotskyists maintain a tightly-knit, disciplined, nation-wide faction. They control at least three state organizations: Illinois, California, and Minnesota. They may not be directly represented at the convention because most of them have been in the party less than two years. A fight is sure to be made on this score on the ground that the Trotskyist-controlled state committees will get no representation unless the two-year rule is waived.

The Trotskyists spread their propaganda through two papers which they control outright. The *Socialist Appeal*, edited by Albert Goldman in Chicago, is their theoretical organ; *Labor Action*, edited by James P. Cannon, was started a few months ago as the official organ of the Western Federation of the Socialist Party, due to Trotskyist influence in the California party. Two other papers, the *Socialist Call*, edited by August Tyler in

New York, and the *Challenge*, official organ of the Y.P.S.L., published in Chicago, are heavily freighted with Trotskyist opinion.

The Trotskyists are on principle opposed to the farmer-labor party; they attack it as a reactionary step. They are bitterly opposed to the people's front and have assailed the Spanish People's Front government, headed by the Socialist, Largo Caballero, as "counter-revolutionary." The American Student Union has come in for Trotskyist abuse; their faction called the A.S.U. a "company union on the campus" at the Y.P.S.L. caucus held during the recent convention of the A.S.U. (The national secretary of the A.S.U. is Joseph P. Lash, a member of the Socialist Party.) The Trotskyists put the Workers' Alliance, national organization of the unemployed, in the same category as the A.S.U., and have started to build a dual unemployed organization. (The national chairman of the Workers' Alliance is David Lasser, another member of the Socialist Party.) Needless to say, the Trotskyists are the chief promoters of the "Leon Trotsky ueber alles" drive in the Socialist Party, with the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky as the spearhead of the movement.

2. The so-called Zam-Tyler faction plays along with the Trotskyists on most essential questions. Tyler was formerly a member of the original "Militant" caucus which fought the "Old Guard." Until recently, he was identified with the Y.P.S.L. leadership. Herbert Zam came over to the Socialist Party from the Lovestoneites just about two years ago. Both dominate the *Socialist Call*, which acts more or less as their factional organ. The editorial policies of the *Call* swerved sharply in favor of the Trotskyists immediately after the defection of the old guard. Tyler has frequently voiced his personal allegiance to the general line of the Trotskyists.

The *Call* has "supported" the farmer-labor party in a way which excellently typifies the degree of difference between the Trotskyist and the Zam-Tyler tendencies. According to the Trotskyists, the farmer-labor party can do nothing but harm. According to the *Call*, the farmer-labor movement would do much harm if it lasted for any appreciable time but, fortunately, the movement will show its "impotence" long before any such unfortunate eventuality. The following is given as the reason for Socialist "support" of the farmer-labor movement:

The early impotence of a Labor Party [never Farmer-Labor Party] in the United States in win-