Steel Convention

(From Report of the Proceedings of the Atlantic City Convention of the American Federation of Labor June 9-23, 1919)

WHEREAS, Many steel corporations and other industrial institutions have instituted in their plants systems of collective bargaining akin to the Rockefeller plan; and

WHEREAS, Extensive experience has shown that while the employers are busily carrying on propaganda lauding these company unions to the skies, as a great improvement over trade unions, they are at the same time just as actively enforcing a series of vicious practices that ham-string such organizations and render them useless to their employees. Of these practices the following are a few;

1. Unfair Elections and Representation--The first essential for the proper working of a genuine collective bargaining committee is that it be composed entirely as the organized workers may elect and altogether free from the company's influence. Only then can it be truly representative of the men and responsive to their wishes. Upon such committees, bosses, representing as they do the antagonistic of the company, are so much poison. Not only is it impossible for them personally to represent the men, but they also negate the influence of the real workers' delegates. Knowing this very well, the steel companies, through campaigns of intimidation and election fraud, load their company union committees with bosses, usually to the point of a majority. So baneful is this practice that, were the company unions otherwise perfect, it alone would suffice to entirely destroy their usefulness to the workers.

2. No Democratic Organization Permitted--It is com on knowledge that, in order for the workers to arrive at a uniform understanding through the systematization and formulation of their grievances and demands, it is necessary for them to enjoy and practice the rights of free speech, free assembly and free association. They

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must conduct an elaborate series of meetings under their own control, and generally carry on their business in a democratic organized way. But with the company union system this is impossible. All independent organization and meetings are prohibited on pain of discharge. Consequently the workers are kept voiceless and destitute of a program. They are deliberately held down to the status of a mob. Under such circumstances, intelligent, aggressive action by them is out of the question.

3. Intimidation of Committeemen--As part of the general plan to keep their company unions from being of any possible service to their employees, it is customary for the companies to summarily discharge committeemen who dare to make a stand in behalf of the workers. The records show a multitude of such cases. Being unorganized, the men are powerless to defend their representatives. The natural consequences are that the committee soon degenerate into groups of men supinely subservient to the wishes of the company and deaf to those of the workers.

4. Expert Assistance Prohibited--When dealing with their employees in any manner, employers always thoroughly safeguard themselves by enlisting the aid of the very best brains procurable. The only way the workers can cope with this array of experts is to have the help of experienced labor leaders, but under the company union system this is impossible. All association with trade union officials is strictly prohibited. The company reserves to itself the right to expert assistance. As a result the green workers' committee, already weakened in a dozen ways is left practically helpless before the experts upon the company's side.

5. Company Union Lacks Power--In establishing wages, hours and working conditions in their plants, employers habitually use their great economic power to enforce their will. Therefore to secure just treatment, the only recourse for the

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workers is to develop a power equally strong and to confront their employers with it. Unless they can do this their case is hopeless. In this vital respect, the company union is a complete failure. With hardly a pretense of organization, unaffiliated with other groups of workers in the same industry, destitute of funds, and unfitted to use the strike weapon, it is totally unable to enforce its will, should it by a miracle have one favorable to the workers. Weak and helpless, all it can do is to submit to the dictation of the company. It can make no effective fight for the men.

6. Company Diverts Aim--As though the foregoing practices were not enough to thoroughly cripple the company unions, the employers make assurance doubly sure by seeing to it that their committees ignore the vital needs of the workers and confine themselves to minor and extraneous matters, such as fake safety-first movements, problems of efficiency, handing bouquets to high company officials, etc. Discussions of wages, hours and working conditions are taboo on pain of discharge for the committeeman who dares insist upon them. Thus the company unions complete their record of deceit and weakness by dodging the labor question altogether.

WHEREAS, In view of the foregoing facts, it is evident that company unions are unqualified to represent the interests of the workers, and that they are a delusion and a snare set up by the companies for the express purpose of deluding the workers into the belief that they have some protection and thus have no need for trade union organization; therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That we disapprove and condemn all such company unions and advise our membership to have nothing to do with them; and, be it further

RESOLVED, That we demand the right to bargain collectively through the only kind of organization fitted for this purpose, the trade union, and that we stand loyally together until this right is conceded us.

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Your committee concurs, with the following exceptions, that in the first resolve the word "heartily" be stricken out and insert the word "disapprove", and making the first resolve read, that we "disapprove and condemn."

The recommendation of the Committee was adopted.

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