

PROBLEMS OF A LABOR EDITOR

BY NORMAL THOMAS,
Recent Editor of The New York Leader

The problems of the labor editor cover a broad field, for different editors have different problems. Much depends upon whether one is editing a monthly, a weekly, or a daily. Much depends upon whether one is editing the official organ of a labor union or a publication appealing to labor in general rather than to a particular union. Nevertheless, in a broad sense all labor editors have certain problems in common which can be set down in black and white.

Monuments to Dullness.
To begin with, there is the problem of turning out an interesting paper. I don't mean that labor news and serious discussions of labor tactics can always be jizzed up. I do mean that labor papers have too often been written, edited and printed as if with the intention of discouraging readers. That remark sounds harsh, but it is born out of the experience of a number of years in keeping track of labor papers. A lot of them are monuments to dullness. In appearance, typography and subject matter they are no credit to the labor movement. They are scarcely more than bulletins of routine party or union news with a few ill-considered, stereotyped editorials and articles. I imagine their chief use in the homes of the workers is to light the fire in the kitchen stove.

For this situation the editor is not always the only or even the principal man to blame. He gets no encouragement and little money. He has no staff. His is a one-man job. He is not expected to put out an attractive looking paper. He is not chosen for his ability in that line. As long as he is a good, regular supporter of the administration, warranted never to stir up trouble for it, little more is asked.

It used to be said in days when some of the old church folks were shocked at the catchy style of gospel songs that "the devil ought not to have all the good tunes." By the same token the workers ought to realize that the bosses and millionaires and self-seeking politicians ought not to have all the good papers.

Fortunately, on this point the last few years have seen an enormous improvement. Labor papers are going in for attractive typography, good pictures and high grade articles. It may be said without flattery that The Journal of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers has been a pioneer along this line. No one who has not tried can know how difficult it is to handle this matter of turning out an interesting paper, and therefore how much credit must go to the editor who succeeds and to the union which encourages and supports him.

Loyalty to Labor's Ideals.
Another problem of the labor editor is the problem of loyalty. That sounds simple, especially if the paper is the organ of a party or a union. But, it is not so simple as it sounds. Of course, the editor is the servant of the party or the union; he owes it the best he has; he must work in harmony with, and under the general direction of, the chosen officers of the union. Yet

the problem of loyalty is not solved by this rather obvious statement. Is the editor of a labor paper merely the literary errand boy of some political chief or union official? Is it not his duty by virtue of his position to remember his loyalty to the labor movement as a whole and interpret that loyalty to his readers? Here is a movement with an heroic history and glorious aspirations. Can the labor editor let his mind or his columns be so crowded with routine material that none of this thrills and passion of a great loyalty is conveyed to his readers?

Again, does loyalty to a particular union or party mean such loyalty to a given administration as to shut the doors of discussion on important issues? I know the journal of a powerful union which has refused space not only to individuals of that union but to officers and committees for discussion of matters of the most vital interest. Only what the president and editors like gets into the paper. Is that true interpretation of loyalty? Does it make for the health of the labor movement?

Truthfulness and Fair Play.
Closely related to the problem of loyalty is the problem of accuracy, truth and fair play. And that may be the hardest problem of all. Any labor paper worth its salt is dealing with live controversial issues. It is in the thick of labor's battles. Those battles are not only against anti-union employers and against a wasteful, exploiting social order. They are often factional between different unions or parties within the unions. And factional fights are the bitterest of all.

There is an old maxim that "all's fair in love and war." On that maxim labor's factional battles too often are carried on. "Fair? Only liberals and other damn fools talk about being fair," was the way one labor leader put it. Now I believe that even in conflict it is possible to fight fair. No good society can be built on the foundation of lies, unwarranted attacks on one's enemies, false innuendos, misrepresentation or concealment of facts. Victories won that way substitute one despotism for another. Society is a machine more complex than any engine and to go at it blinded with hate, prejudice, or preconceived dogma, is as disastrous as the same tactics would be for an engineer. Of course, it is harder to ascertain and interpret social facts than the objective facts of the laboratory or of the engine. "What is truth?" is never an easy question to answer. We need the scientific habit of mind which learns by trial and experience; which holds theories subject to rectification by new knowledge. I am not pleading for a futile open-mindedness that never believes anything with enough fervor to act. I am not forgetting that one's view of truth must depend upon one's background of experience and conviction when I urge that courage and vigorous opinion are consistent in the editorial office with the effort to give one's views truthfully and to deal fairly with one's opponents. Many, perhaps most, labor editors will agree on this point. But the

fact remains that one sometimes finds in labor papers as gross inaccuracy on certain issues and as deliberate misrepresentation as in the capitalist press. Surely truth is on the side of the workers. Their cause is just and fair and they can trust to truth and fairness.

All this may sound as if I had little but criticism for labor's papers. On the contrary, I greatly admire many of them and am much improved by their steady improvement. And I know the hard work and loyalty to ideas to be found in editorial offices. Let the critic exchange places with the editor and face the distractions, interruptions and pressure of petty things and petty complaints, and he may think more kindly of those now in charge of labor's papers.

The Death of Labor Dailies.
The exception to the generally forward looking condition of the labor press is to be found in the field of English language labor dailies. Very few of them exist in all of the United States; only one, The Milwaukee Leader, so far as I am aware, is in a satisfactory financial condition. I cannot profess to write on this subject as a disinterested observer. As editor of the short-lived New York Leader I was partly to an effort that failed. Doubtless, readers will bear that fact in mind in judging whatever I may say as to the problem of the labor daily.

We will probably all agree that the present newspaper situation from the viewpoint of labor and of fair-minded citizens is a menace to democracy. The business of news dissemination and interpretation is controlled by millionaires for profit. Monopolization and standardization of newspapers grow by leaps and bounds through the chain paper system. Standardization may be a good thing in Ford cars; it is a bad thing in newspapers. And this standardization tends to be socially conservative and anti-labor. Not even demagogic papers that make loud professions of devotion to the "pee-pul" can be trusted by labor in certain emergencies. Every railroad man knows how unfairly most of the press treated the recent shopmen's strike and how this misrepresentation helped the railroad executives.

To some extent this attitude of the capitalist press can be counteracted by labor weeklies and monthlies. But not wholly. Everybody reads a daily. It is part of the atmosphere we live in. It is one of the educational factors in bringing up our children. And that press is inaccurate devoted to the great god profit.

Make lists of comics, cartoons, features, even articles about sports; you may be surprised, as I was, to find how the anti-labor bias creeps in. For instance, a clever writer in a New York paper describing a world series game said that the teams which had often played as if they wore overalls instead of uniforms, went to their work with snap and energy as if they were non-union men! Is it any wonder under such conditions that boys and girls grow up to smile at their father's union enthusiasm? The only remedy is for labor to establish its own dailies. But how and what sort? Any daily is an enormously expensive thing to establish, but the cheapest sort is one which does not attempt to compete in fullness of news or in features with the established dailies. It will specialize in news of interest to labor and in propaganda for the group behind it. Such a paper was The New York Call. At its best it was very useful. Such a paper will probably be The Daily Worker, soon to commence publication in Chicago. Even those who, like myself, emphatically do not accept the philosophy or tactics of the Communist Party within the United States, will probably find much ability and force in the conduct of The Daily Worker.

But such a paper, if it gets any circulation to speak of, will probably be for most of its readers an "and paper;" that is, a paper bought in addition to the "regular paper." To counteract the influence of the commercial press we want a paper as broad as that of the millionaires' organs. No purely propaganda daily will fill the bill for the average American worker. He wants news, features, sports. I hope he does not want the sensationalism of the Hearst organs, but I know from experience that he wants a paper that interests as well as instructs him.

Does Labor Want an Independent Press?

Can labor afford such a paper? Yes, if it wants it. Newspapers, to be sure, live on advertising, and a labor paper loyal to its principles may have trouble getting advertising. Yet our experience with The Leader convinced us that in ordinary times a labor paper without compromising its principles can get considerable advertising, provided it can first get enough circulation among workers who can only be reached through its columns. In other words, vigorous labor support of its own paper will probably get it enough advertising to come somewhere near self-support or to leave a deficit which labor organizations could handle.

But does labor at present really want a labor daily? There's the rub. If we were all agreed on a political policy and on one general labor philosophy, it might be different. But we aren't. Each different group or faction is suspicious of any paper that does not shout its slogans. And all would unite in being suspicious of a paper that tried

to be so neutral that it had no policy. While labor quarrels it reads this commercialized press.

It was our hope that we could make The New York Leader so accurate and fair in its news columns, so loyal to labor as a whole, so interesting, so impartial to conflicting labor opinions in its readers' forum, so vigorous yet reasonable in its editorial policy, that it could win general support even from groups not in accord with every editorial. We failed. Doubtless the failure was partly our fault. Yet if labor was united and as keen for a labor daily as for labor banks, it could have surmounted our mistakes. As it was, we had an able staff; we were turning out a paper which those workers who knew it regarded as worth while. Our directors differed in opinion, but cooperated. The unions, however, put on no intensive campaign for circulation, and finding the sort of paper they wanted too expensive to support without more circulation and advertising, they let it die. Some of the lieutenants in New York's labor forces were rather relieved to be so easily rid of a paper that tried to be fair to labor rather than the mouthpiece of one faction.

The story suggests the problem of the editor of the labor daily. Must he wait for his chance until

labor has become more united? Must he make himself the spokesman of one faction even to the extent of censoring his own news columns by factional standards? Or can he help to bring about greater unity and strength by editing a paper that has a vigorous policy and yet somehow transcends factionalism? It is a very difficult problem. Perhaps it is insoluble. The answer is up to labor. It is labor that will be sorely handicapped if the day of the strong labor newspaper must wait for the establishment of one accepted policy for organized labor on the economic and political field, or for the increase of the principal factions in labor to such strength that they can support their own warring daily organs. When all is said and done, the problem of the labor editor and of the labor movement is the problem of keeping clear before one's eyes in the midst of the pressure of routine things and in the heat and dust of the day's strife, the vision of that better world which it lies within the power of organized, disciplined and intelligent workers to create. The labor editor at his best is the prophet of the world without poverty, without war, without exploitation.

PAINTERS TO HOLD AN OPEN MEETING ON WEDNESDAY NIGHT

Painters Local Union 1123 will hold an open meeting next Wednesday night to which all non-union painters, and all contractors and employers will be invited. It is expected that a large crowd will be present for this booster occasion. Spring time is coming, and spring

time is always paint time, and this meeting is for the purpose of getting all the forces interested in painting together and discussing the ways and means for best advancing the interests of those who are responsible for the outward appearances of Charlotte and vicinity.

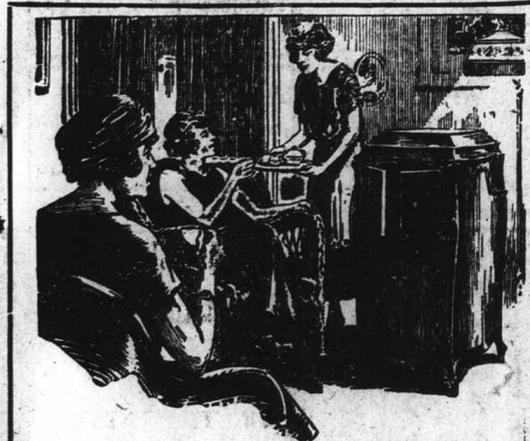
BONUS SYSTEM FOR SOUTHERN

Washington, March 5.—A new principle of co-operative effort in the relations of railways with their employees was introduced in the agreement of the Southern Railway system with its conductors, trippers and yard men, announced yesterday by Vice President H. W. Miller, in charge of operation of the Southern.

ers a period of three years with an increase of approximately five percent in the base rates of pay for the entire period and a bonus for the second and third year, dependent upon the degree of efficiency reached by the train employees. The bonus is to be gauged by an agreed ratio of expense of train operation to gross revenue. In this way, the Southern and the train employees will share in the benefits arising from increased efficiency and the control of such expenses as are to a great extent in the hands of the men.

The agreement established an additional community of interest between the Southern and its train operatives. The men are given the opportunity to earn a bonus through increased efficiency by decreasing expenses which are directly under their control. The agreement cov-

PROFITS OF 56 PER CENT.
Detroit, Mich., Feb. 27.—Last year's profits of the Paige-Detroit motor car company increased 56 percent. The amount is \$3,181,971, after all charges were paid.



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