

# "Stagger" Plan and Gradual Firing Steel Bosses' Weapon

By WM. Z. FOSTER.

The meeting of the National Executive Board of the Metal Workers' Industrial League, held in Pittsburgh on Dec. 26-27, brought forth facts of heavy unemployment in all metal centers. Particularly devastating is this in the steel centers. Production generally in the steel industry has dropped to 40 per cent of so-called normal, or 25 per cent of capacity. But this does not indicate the full extent of the unemployment, because the tremendous rationalization is enabling the production with ever diminishing forces.

In the steel industry the "stagger" plan is being widely applied. This spreads the misery of unemployment over the whole body of workers. In the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Co plant the system is typical. They have what is called the double crew. That is, the full crew is present at all times in the mill but only 50 per cent works. While one-half works the other half "spells." But there is no pay for "spelling!" Which means that for an eight hour day a worker gets four hours' pay. It is by the application of such a slow starvation system that the United States Steel Corporation lyingly boasts that there is little or no unemployment in the steel towns.

But while the steel companies work their stagger

plan, either by the double crew system or by working full crews two or three days a week, they at the same time develop a body of totally unemployed by following a policy of gradually firing and never hiring. They realize that the prospect is more than remote of the industry ever employing again the full forces of former times, and they slowly slough off the surplus into the army of completely unemployed. It is significant that in these discharge or final lay-off cases it is the older and the very young workers that suffer most. Apparently the bosses have it figured out that the most efficient workers are those who have had time to become acquainted with the work and to harden their muscles, but have not yet lost their speed.

Despite the lies of the publicity agents of the steel companies, every steel town in the country has a large and rapidly growing army of unemployed. In Pittsburgh a conservative estimate puts the number of jobless at 80,000. Other steel centers have similar masses entirely without work, not to speak of the great army of impoverished one-half or one-third

time workers.

Characteristically, although the steel companies are this year paying even larger dividends than last year,

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# "STAGGER" PLAN AND GRADUAL FIRING STEEL BOSSES' WEAPON

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they are extending little or no relief to their poverty-stricken workers. The situation in Youngstown is typical of the smaller steel towns. The city government does nothing, leaving the whole relief problem up to the companies. The Youngstown Sheet and Tube Co. gives relief to desperate cases, but only once. After one helping of groceries the worker is left to shift for himself. It is about the same on the local soup line, but here a worker can come every second day for a bowl of miserable, hard-times soup. Where workers live in company houses they are given a day or two's work a month and then the amount of the rent, light, etc., is deducted. The cost of even this miserable relief is shifted over onto the workers, the latter being assessed a day's wages now and then to pay for it.

Wherever the steel companies are giving such relief they do it very strategically with strike-breaking purposes in mind. Thus, Americans are favored at the expense of the foreign-born. The Youngstown Sheet and Tube Co., which expects a strike sooner or later, is by means of giving relief attempting to corrupt the Negro workers. There, our organizers report, the Negroes are told when given relief that if they have anything to do with the Metal Workers' Industrial League the relief will be discontinued at once. It is significant that half of the workers who have so far joined our Metal Union are Negroes. But the situation is one that we must give urgent attention to.

### Evictions Daily Occurrence.

In Pittsburgh the steel companies leave the relief problem more to the city. So far the local government has voted for this purpose only a beggarly \$100,000. Here evictions are a daily occurrence. Even while the Metal League Board was meeting the local Unemployed Council stopped several evictions. One was of a Negro woman with several children. The workers were mobilized to prevent the eviction, and when the landlord and the constable appeared to put the widow out of her "home" the workers made such a militant resistance that these worthies not only did not go through with the eviction, but were lucky to escape with whole

Conditions in all the steel towns, while not yet so desperate as in the adjoining mining regions, are fast reaching the breaking point. In many places the homeless workers are sleeping in city halls, jails, railroad stations, garbage incinerators, etc. Just outside of town in Pittsburgh there is a "jungles" in which many hundreds of workers lead a miserable and precarious existence. Everywhere the unemployed are treated as criminals. Vagrancy laws are used against them. In Wheeling the unemployed workers are given the alternative of accepting such jobs at such wages as may be offered them (if by any chance there are jobs) or else go on the chain gang. In these towns, as in the mining districts, the "crime wave" is rapidly mounting, the workers refusing to starve in the midst of plenty.

### Must Speed Up Organization.

The situation is ripe for organization and struggle. The workers are militant and responsive to our efforts. They have no one else but us to look to for leadership. The bosses are fully aware of this and wherever we become active they at once counter us by their twin methods of terrorism and extension of "relief." In Pittsburgh our fight against evictions, although but poorly executed, has been so effective that one of the largest landlords in the city (he owns 1,100 houses) actually came in person to our Party office to urge that we give up our fight against evictions. He went out quicker than he came in.

The Trade Union Unity League holds as its major industrial task the building of the union of metal workers. Upon this it concentrates its main forces. And one effective way to accomplish this vital goal will be to carry through militantly our unemployed campaign in the steel towns. Every steel center must have its hunger march, its mass collection of signatures, its delegate to Washington, its demonstration in the great national unemployed demonstration on Feb. 10 in the steel and coal towns can well develop into a great mass political strike. The steel workers are ready for us. Are we ready for them? If we are we can best show it by big unemployed struggles in the steel centers.