

# WHITHER THE AMERICAN LEGION?

By JOHN GATES

THE AMERICAN LEGION, the nation's largest veterans' organization, held its 28th National Convention in San Francisco from Sept. 30 to Oct. 4. Approximately 3,600 delegates, representing 3,300,000 members in 15,400 posts, attended. The Legion had about one million members prior to World War II, to which have been added about 2,300,000 World War II veterans who now comprise more than 68 per cent of the total membership. Despite the fact that the newer veterans now make up over two-thirds of the organization, they comprised less than 20 per cent of the delegates.

Although the Legion leadership has cause for satisfaction in the organization's growth among World War II veterans, it was greatly disturbed by the relatively poor turnout of veterans at the convention. They confidently predicted prior to the convention that there would be an influx of 150,000 Legionnaires into San Francisco. No more than 25,000 registered. This compared with 42,000 in New York in 1937 and 39,000 in Chicago in 1939 when the Legion membership was less than one-third its present strength. Moreover, the

expected 14-hour parade lasted less than 4 hours, with virtually no World War II participation, in contrast to the 20-hour parade in 1937.

These figures would seem to indicate that the World War I members are beginning to feel their age and that they may want to take a back seat to the younger and more numerous veterans of the recent war. The small participation of World War II veterans in the convention plus their poor attendance at post meetings undoubtedly results from the refusal to grant the new members a role commensurate with their membership, as well as from the failure of the Legion to fight vigorously enough for the needs of World War II veterans. Millions of new veterans have flocked into the Legion because of the immense power the Legion wields in adjusting disability claims, its influence in local politics, etc., but they do not as yet look upon the Legion as *their* organization, nor do they feel a deep loyalty to it. Nevertheless, it would be foolhardy to underestimate the power of the Legion and its ability to indoctrinate World War II veterans with reactionary ideas.

## FOREIGN POLICY

As was universally expected, the Legion convention adopted an extremely reactionary program, following the line of the N.A.M., the U. S. Chamber of Commerce, the F.B.I., American Action, Inc., the Hearst press, and the Republican-led bi-partisan coalition in Congress. It

undoubtedly aided considerably the Republican electoral victory. The Legion thus openly reasserts the reactionary aims on which it was founded and which have characterized its entire existence, except for the few short war years when it toned down its anti-labor bias and anti-Communist crusade and pretended to be anti-fascist. Having waited until millions of new veterans joined its ranks, the Legion leadership now feels strong enough to resume the offensive.

On foreign policy, the Legion backed the Byrnes-Vandenberg foreign policy and a "big stick" program of gigantic military expenditures and universal military training. William K. Jackson, President of the U. S. Chamber of Commerce, stated at the convention: "There's no longer any strategic or morale reason for double-talk on the subject. The Soviet regime was 'oversold' to us during the war, and it is high time that we undid the mischief." The convention, following this lead, provided the platform for an endless stream of brass-hat speakers, each trying to outdo the other in whipping up a war hysteria and attacking the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. There was a veritable orgy of Red-baiting for which the tone was set by J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover made clear the broader objectives of the anti-Communist campaign when he called for war, not only against the Communists, but also "their satellites, fellow travellers and their so-called progres-

sive and phony liberal allies." Here all progressive Americans have, right from the horse's mouth, what they may not yet have learned from experience—that the attack against Communists is but the prelude to destroying the liberty and freedom of all.

#### VETERANS AFFAIRS

With an eye towards the World War II veterans, the convention adopted a demagogic program on veterans affairs. One resolution called for the repeal of the ceilings imposed on the on-the-job training earnings under the G.I. Bill of Rights, which resulted in wage cuts for thousands of veterans and eliminated thousands of others from the program altogether. The Legion leadership was motivated on this issue not so much by sympathy for the victimized veterans as by the personal feud of the retiring national commander John Stelle against General Bradley, director of the Veterans Administration. This feud dates back to early 1946 when Stelle launched a violent attack against Bradley for refusing to grant the Legion the same favoritism it enjoyed when General Hines headed the Veterans Administration. Stelle was repudiated by public opinion, which backed Bradley, and he suffered a great loss in prestige. He nursed his wounds and bided his time until an issue arose on which he could "get" Bradley. His opportunity came when Bradley recommended to Congress that ceilings be

placed on the on-the-job training wages and continued to defend the cut after the entire trade union movement, most veteran organizations and even some employers had condemned the cut. In this instance, General Bradley carried out the will of the "economy bloc" in Congress, whose idea of economizing is to do so at the expense of veterans.

Most veterans support Bradley generally as against Stelle because of Bradley's efforts to clean up the notoriously inefficient Veterans Administration in contrast to Stelle's inaction on behalf of veterans and war-mongering as expressed by his statement: "Let's aim atomic rocket bombs at Tito and Moscow now." Unfortunately, Bradley weakened his whole case at the convention against Stelle and the Legion bureaucracy by defending his own erroneous position on the ceilings. Interestingly enough, he justified the wage cut by the fallacious A.V.C. slogan, "Citizen First, Veteran Second." The Legion spokesmen demagogically ripped this argument to shreds, saying that what was in the best interests of the veterans (who with their families make up the majority of the nation) was good for the nation. This was, of course, sheer demagoguery on their part, despite the fact that their arguments were correct on this issue, since the general program of the Legion convention was in the interests neither of the nation nor the veterans.

Bradley must be opposed on the

ceiling issue as well as on his denial of unemployment compensation to striking veterans. He deserves support against the Legion bureaucrats insofar as he fights their attempt to retain the Veterans Administration as a huge pork barrel, and fights against slashes in veterans' allowances. At the moment it appears that Bradley is to return to army duties and the danger is that he will be replaced by a man like General Hershey, a darling of the Legion and well known for his anti-labor bias in favoring super-seniority. Veterans and the labor movement should fight against any appointment that will return the Veterans Administration to Legion domination and to an anti-union policy.

### SUPER-SENIORITY

The convention came out for cash payment of terminal leave for enlisted men and for income tax exemption for World War II veterans up to \$5,000 for three years after the official end of the war. These were undoubtedly sops thrown out to World War II veterans and it remains to be seen how seriously the Legion will fight to win these demands. But lest one may think the Legion has become progressive on veterans' needs, its stand on super-seniority will disabuse him. Refusing to accept the rejection of super-seniority by the Supreme Court, the Legion has served notice that it will press for legislation in the new Congress to legalize super-seniority—that

is, a veteran is to be guaranteed re-employment in his old plant for as many years as he served in the armed forces regardless of greater seniority of non-veterans. Despite the fact that all unions grant veterans seniority equal to time spent in the service and that seniority has largely become a settled question among veterans since the Supreme Court ruling, the Legion stand constitutes a serious threat to the entire seniority system built up by the unions and threatens the very existence of unions. If unions are weakened on the seniority issue or any other, most veterans will be the losers in the long run regardless of any temporary advantages a few veterans might receive.

The danger is that this threat of a new super-seniority law may not be taken seriously by the trade union movement because the relatively high employment at present seems to make it an academic issue. But it will cease to be an academic issue when the economic situation worsens and there is a growth of mass unemployment. Then it will be much easier for employers to set worker against veteran. This is exactly what the employers want—two workers for each job, let the workers fight it out among themselves, the veteran against the non-veteran, with the employer on the sidelines egging on one against the other and laughing up his sleeve all the time. Veterans and unions must not fall for this game. They must not only work

to defeat the so-called super-seniority legislation proposed by the Legion, which is really *anti*-seniority, anti-labor, and anti-veteran, but must put forward *now* a positive program to meet the coming mass unemployment along the lines of government public works, a shorter work week without reduction in pay, an annual wage, government operation of unused war plants, etc. Of course, there was not a word about this kind of program in the Legion's resolutions.

#### THE BONUS ISSUE

The popular impression exists that the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars favor a federal bonus for veterans of World War II, but such is not the case. Bonus resolutions were buried in committee and not acted upon at the conventions of both organizations. This reflects the influence of Big Business interests on the policies of these organizations. However, it can be expected that the pressure from the millions of World War II veterans in their ranks will inevitably force the Legion and V.F.W. to come out in favor of the bonus. The only veterans' organization which has actually *opposed* a bonus is the American Veterans Committee. This is so because it is as yet a very small organization with a mainly middle-class membership and does not accurately represent the wishes and demands of the great majority of veterans. As this is written, not a single major veterans' organization is on

record in favor of the bonus. The only forces favoring the bonus now are some unions, the Communist Party, and practically all of the veterans. That public opinion generally, as well as the veterans, favors a bonus has been conclusively proved by the recent elections in which state bonuses received the support of the electorate wherever the question was on the ballot, as in Michigan, Illinois, and Rhode Island.

Only a small minority of veterans receive assistance from the G.I. Bill of Rights. Since three-quarters of all veterans are workers, and are in no position to take advantage of the education provisions, the G. I. Bill of Rights in effect discriminates against workers. A federal bonus is especially needed by worker-veterans. This explains why trade unions and the Communist Party, which is a workers' party, are the main forces fighting for a bonus at the present time, while the veterans' organizations, which are largely led by Big Business and middle class interests, either do nothing or oppose it. The bonus will increasingly become a major issue as the economic situation worsens. It is particularly incumbent upon the trade unions to become the main driving force in mobilizing mass support for the bonus, to develop unity between unions and veterans, and to defeat the maneuvers of fascist demagogues who will seek to utilize this issue for their own reactionary purposes.

That the Legion attack means far

more than attack against the Communists alone is proved by the resolution calling for compulsory arbitration of "labor disputes" and for governmental "regulation" of trade unions. This resolution clearly does not represent the will of the majority of veterans in the United States. The most recent Fortune poll again confirms the trend already noticed in previous polls that the majority of veterans favor unions and that the overwhelming majority are opposed to the prohibition of strikes. The pro-labor trend of veterans is greater than that of the public as a whole. Of course, the veterans had very little to say about the Legion position, about as much as they had to say about the election of their officers. The new National Commander, Paul Griffith, was actually chosen by the Kingmakers (the clique which runs the Legion) back in 1943. He is an electrical corporation executive and a "retread" (as veterans of both World Wars are called). His army service consisted mainly of acting as assistant to General Hershey, director of Selective Service, and he is the outstanding champion in the Legion of super-seniority, that is, of anti-unionism.

Negro veterans were conspicuous by their absence. Not a single Negro speaker addressed the convention, nor did a single Negro grace the platform at any time, let alone be nominated for or elected to office. These facts are an accurate reflection of the Negro's status in the Le-

gion. He is tolerated only in Jim-Crow posts and is allowed absolutely no voice within the organization. The convention passed pious resolutions against discrimination, but the Legion has never been known to throw its powerful support behind such measures as the F.E.P.C., and the anti-poll tax and anti-lynching bills. In fact, the convention deleted the word "lynching" from a resolution and substituted the phrase "mob violence" so as not to offend the Southern white delegates. It can safely be said that the Bilbos and Rankins were not offended by, and have nothing to fear from, the Legion's resolution against the Ku Klux Klan, which was neatly balanced and negated by granting an Americanism award to William Randolph Hearst.

#### WORLD WAR II VETERANS

The biggest news of the Legion convention was the men who weren't there—the veterans of World War II. This was and will continue to be the irrepressible issue. The value of the Legion to reaction will progressively decrease with the years unless it proves able, not only to recruit, but to keep millions of World War II members. The perfect setup for the old guard of the Legion would be for the new members to stay in the background and let the old "experienced" men act as their spokesmen. But the G.I. will refuse to take a back seat. He will demand leadership in proportion to his strength and will insist on action on his de-

mands, failing which he will leave the Legion en masse. The bureaucracy makes eloquent speeches about wanting the World War II men to come in and take over but they do not practice what they preach. As Harry Moses, a U. S. Steel Corporation executive and a Kingmaker, stated: "After all, this Legion is a billion dollar business. You don't just throw something that big over to a bunch of inexperienced boys." Eventually, World War II men must come into leadership, but the Kingmakers plan to hand over power on their own terms and on condition that their reactionary policies be continued. They are already selecting their men and grooming them for leadership.

At county and state conventions of both the Legion and the V.F.W., World War II veterans expressed their discontent in many ways. This often took the form of spontaneous caucuses which nominated World War II men in opposition to official slates and formulated programs around their own special needs. These "revolts" were crushed in most cases, were successful in a few, but in every case badly frightened the Legion leadership. Learning from these experiences, the old guard decided to head off any World War II protest at the national convention by itself organizing the World War II caucus. The caucus was convened by a national vice-commander, Dudley Swim, a railroad executive and former member of the America First

Committee. There were about 100 World War II men at the caucus. There was a flurry of protest at the choice of Griffith for commander and some grumbling about the notorious inaction of the Legion on the housing crisis, but the meeting was so packed with old guard stooges that the whole protest was steered into harmless channels. The criticism of the Legion's inactivity on housing was transformed into an attack against government controls, public housing projects, and the Wagner-Ellender-Taft Bill, while the protest against Griffith was turned into an endorsement of him.

Another significant development with respect to the World War II issue was the attempt to expel the Duncan-Paris post, a New York City post, consisting of former writers for *Yank* and *Stars and Stripes*, whose crime evidently consisted in that it had organized the best housing action of any Legion post in the country, and which was accused of having some Communists as members. The New York State Legion had recommended to the National Executive that the post be expelled. During the convention a secret meeting of the Executive expelled the post, without a hearing or formal charges ever having been preferred against the post. However, this secret action was made public, and a delegation from the post, led by Marion Hargrove, flew out to the convention to protest. The incident received tremendous publicity, on the whole

very unfavorable to the Legion. Despite the efforts of the Legion leadership to present it as a Communist issue, it was recognized generally as a World War II issue and as the cracking down by the Legion hierarchy upon an aggressive World War II post that was trying to get action on the number one issue confronting veterans—housing. As a result of this damaging publicity, the Legion heads retreated, reversed the expulsion decision, and suspended the post until the next meeting of the National Executive when, allegedly, the post is to receive a "fair hearing." Obviously, the intent of the Legion remains to expel the post, only in a more "legal" fashion.

The significance of the World War II veterans development in the Legion is not its failures or weaknesses. This movement is only in its infancy. Most World War II members of the Legion have been in less than one year. What must be understood is that this movement will inevitably grow and assume mass proportions, especially with the advent of the economic crisis. The millions of World War II Legionnaires will not remain passive instruments of the Legion leadership. They will increasingly come into conflict with that leadership.

Whether the millions of new members will remain within the organization or drop out in droves is a question that no one can answer as yet. In any case, progressive-minded veterans, trade unionists, and Com-



munists must be among these millions of veterans, helping to influence their movement in a progressive direction. There should be no illusions that there is any serious likelihood that the American Legion as a whole can become a force for progress. Its leadership and organization is too closely integrated with Big Business, the F.B.I., and the War Department. But the millions of members of the Legion are not reactionary and should not be left to the tender mercies of the leaders of the Legion. The reactionary policies of the Legion leadership can and must be defeated and this must be done from within and without.

### THE OUTLOOK

The year 1947 will be a crucial one for veterans. The Republican electoral victory will hasten the economic crisis, of which the veterans will be the first and worst victims. What is in store for them is shown by Senator Taft's proposed veteran's budget of six billion dollars for 1947. The veterans' outlay for 1946 was seven billion dollars, and since the 20 per cent increase in disability payments did not go into effect until September, at least eight billion dollars will be necessary in 1947 to maintain the veterans' program at even its present level. Veterans must organize and act as never before in unity with the trade unions to prevent slashes in the present program, to win increases to meet the higher cost of living, to stop rent increases, and to force the

mass building of low cost and low rental housing for veterans.

The reactionary program of the Legion leadership is only one side of the picture. The other side is represented by such actions as the Missouri Bonus March, the Athens, Tennessee movement, the sitdown of veterans in the New York Legislature, the squatters movement now developing. *These action are just the first previews of the great actions which are to come.*

The veterans movement is not developing in a vacuum. The course of events is forcing a new political realignment leading toward the formation of a new mass people's party. It is inevitable that there will be a veterans' movement corresponding to the development of this new party. At present, the progressive veterans movement is divided into many currents—the World War II veterans' movements in the Legion and the V.F.W., the trade union veterans, the Negro veterans, the student veterans, the A.V.C., etc. The need is to work among all of these, strengthen them to the maximum, and to develop the broadest united action.

The united action of the veterans, in alliance with the trade unions, will lay the basis for the eventual merging of the many progressive currents in the veterans movement into a mighty stream that will be able to defeat the reactionary program of the Legion and the V.F.W., and be a major ally of the working class in the fight for peace and progress.