

# Class Struggle Candidate in SF Printers Union

Fred Ferguson, editor of *Militant Printer*, a union newsletter politically supported by the Bolshevik Tendency, ran as a candidate in the November 1990 elections of the San Francisco Bay Area Typographical Union (BATU). Running on a class-struggle program, Ferguson stood for the Local Executive Committee and Elected Scale (contract negotiating) Committee. His campaign was supported by a wide layer of the ranks of the union.

The Typographical Union, now affiliated with the Communication Workers of America (CWA), was formerly known as the International Typographical Union. It is one of the oldest craft unions in North America. Over the last 25 years it has suffered the effects of a technological revolution in printing that has seen a huge increase in individual productivity. Work once done by highly skilled compositors is now done by less skilled (and lower paid) computer operators outside the traditional composing rooms of most of the country's newspapers and commercial printing plants (see: "The Decline of the Printers Union," 1917 No. 6).

This process was aided and abetted by the cowardly union bureaucrats, who signed attrition agreements that "guaranteed" jobs for printers already on site, while allowing the employers to assign the work wherever it could be done cheapest. As a result, membership in the union has declined by nearly two-thirds in 20 years. For example, at the *New York Times*, the workforce has shrunk from over 1,000 to fewer than 300.

In 1965 the *New York Daily News* employed more than 900 composing-room printers. In the recent strike at the *Daily News*, the printers were contractually required to cross the picket lines and act as strikebreakers against their fellow workers. The gutless union leadership refused to violate this rotten deal. The printers' "reward" at the end of the strike was that 100 of them (half the total) were laid off.

## Union Control of Hiring Threatened

Unlike workers in the rest of the industrialized world, American workers have never attained the class consciousness necessary to form a national political party of their own. Yet they have in many cases obtained control over hiring in the plants. In longshore, union-run hiring halls dispatch workers to the shipping companies, day by day, on a seniority basis. In the printing trades the control was restricted to new-hires in plants with a steady workforce.

Whatever the method, the result was that the bosses were denied the right to pick and choose among the available workers. Employment applications, "security checks" and all the hat-in-hand humiliation of job hunting in North America was replaced by a fair and, in most cases, more dignified process. In the Typographical Union the system gradually evolved into a complicated

method of mandatory hiring of substitutes whenever workers in the regular workforce were absent. The system even included a provision that forced the companies to hire a substitute worker every time the equivalent of a shift of overtime had been worked by a member in the regular workforce. The owners hated this arrangement and repeatedly tried to get rid of it. As the bureaucrats gradually weakened the union over the years, the union hiring system was eroded bit by bit. Today, it is fully in effect in only a few places on the West Coast.

In BATU/CWA the system remained more or less intact until July 1989, when the bureaucrats negotiated a ten-year supplemental agreement to the main contract that retained nominal union control over *who* would be hired, but gave the companies the right to say *when*, or rather *whether*, they would be hired. In return, 18 substitute workers were added to the list of workers who were "guaranteed" employment for the rest of their working lives. This was only pushed through after a bitter internal union fight in which the labor bureaucrats used the bait of the "guaranteed" jobs to convince enough workers to approve the gutting of union-controlled hiring.

## *Militant Printer's Campaign*

The 1989 fight angered a substantial minority of union members, including many substitute workers. They have been looking for revenge against the bureaucrats ever since. For eight years, *Militant Printer* has campaigned against the givebacks and treacherous class-collaborationist policies of the union tops. Ferguson's November 1990 election campaign, which drew wide support, was a continuation of this struggle.

BATU/CWA is one of the more political unions in an area of the United States long noted for left-wing political activity. For many years, the leadership was dominated by a generation of supporters of the reformist Communist Party. Demoralized by the results of its own class-collaborationist policies, the entire leadership announced its retirement in early 1990. When nominations for union elections were held later that year, the majority caucus, which had dominated the political life of the union for 20 years, was so thoroughly discredited that it did not try to run a slate of candidates.

Instead, individual supporters of the caucus nominated Charles Tobias, a former full-time Local 21 organizer, for president. Tobias then presented an "independent" slate to run on his ticket. George Williams, an unaffiliated candidate, was nominated by an ad hoc rank-and-file committee of shop-floor activists, some of whom had engaged in reformist community organizing projects for the elderly. The majority caucus (operating under a classic misnomer as "the Progressive Club") attempted to deny Williams a spot on the ballot on a technicality. At a subsequent union meeting, rank-and-

file members rejected this bureaucratic maneuver and voted by a two-thirds majority to allow Williams to run.

*Militant Printer* published its program early on and, in so doing, forced the other candidates to do the same. The election campaign took place in the midst of the *Daily News* strike and a hotly-contested round of contract negotiations at the major San Francisco area newspapers. The issues in these negotiations—job losses and declining real wages—became the central focus of the election campaign. It was clear from the beginning that the other candidates could offer only mushy platitudes and vague statements of “concern” over the predicament the union found itself in after 20 years of give-back, sell-out contracts. Both presidential candidates published programs full of vague generalities that avoided posing class-struggle solutions for the problems facing the BATU and the union movement. On the basis of their programs, neither candidate warranted even critical support.

Ferguson traveled throughout the 3,000 square miles of the union’s geographical jurisdiction and visited virtually every concentration of more than a half-dozen members. Thousands of copies of three campaign issues of *Militant Printer* were distributed.

When the votes were counted, it turned out that

Ferguson had lost a very close election. He received 593 votes for Executive Committee, losing by a mere 13 votes. The top candidate of the five elected polled 758 out of a total of 1,005 votes cast. In the race for Scale Committee, Ferguson’s total of 584 was only 12 votes short of election. This was remarkable considering that in the presidential race, the “independent” candidate, covertly supported by the Stalinist-led “Progressive Club,” buried the unaffiliated reformist in a near two-to-one landslide (615 to 378).

*Militant Printer* has a wide readership among the working printers, and is respected as a serious and sane political alternative to the bureaucrats, even by those workers who do not necessarily agree with parts of its program. For example, one of the younger members of the Stalinist caucus told Ferguson confidentially that he was going to vote for him because he thought the contract negotiating committee needed a “little yeast.” The nearly 600 workers who cast their ballots for the only class-struggle candidate represent a solid base for socialist politics in the union. One of the lessons of this campaign is that, even in a reactionary period, it is possible to raise the flag of class-struggle unionism and get a hearing. ■

# Militant Printer's 1990 Election Program

## **1. Break with the Strikebreaking Democratic and Republican Parties!**

The labor movement must have its own political party, a workers party based on the unions, committed to the fight for our interests, up to and including a workers government! Not a dime, not a vote for the strikebreaking, racist Democrats and Rep-ublicans! The Democrats and Republicans have taken us to war four times in this century and now threaten to do it again. It is our sons and daughters who will die in Saudi Arabia—No to Bush's war for Big Oil!

## **2. For a Four-Day, 30-Hour Workweek, With No Loss in Pay!**

The answer to unemployment, homelessness and poverty is not some phony "guaranteed job" that disappears when the individual named on a list retires (or the company goes bankrupt). The answer is a shorter workweek with no loss in pay. The right to a job should be the birthright of every worker!

## **3. For a 100% Cost-of-Living Clause in Every Contract!**

The "Voodoo Economics" of the Carter/Reagan/Bush administrations have resulted in a loss in real wages for the American worker. The real wages (after inflation) in the newspapers in Local 21 have declined more than \$100 a week since 1975.

## **4. For a Merger with the Guild and GCIU!**

The day of the print crafts is over. The employers we face today are multi-national conglomerates, and the crying need in this industry is for one big union of all communication and print workers, with company-wide and industry-wide contracts.

## **5. For a Fight to Protect and Regain our Jurisdiction!**

In their haste to appease the employers, previous administrations signed contracts that gave away much of our jurisdiction on the spurious basis that it was "lost" to automation. In reality, much of the work was only moved to other departments and is still being done there. Page makeup, proofreading and typesetting *is our work!*

## **6. Picket Lines Mean Don't Cross!**

No crossing of picket lines for *any* reason. The last 15 years have seen a virtual orgy of union-busting with the employers using us and other unions to break strikes (Chicago, Washington D.C., etc.).

## **7. For Union Action Against the Racist Skinhead Nazis and Klan!**

For a return to the days when the union movement in

this country stood with the oppressed against the night riders and Hitler-loving thugs like the Nazis. For Labor/Black defense against Klan/Nazi terror!

## **8. Organize the Unorganized!**

For a serious and aggressive organizing drive to get the hundreds of non-union printers in the Bay Area into this union! An aggressive, fighting union that wins a few struggles will have the appeal to pull in the unorganized—who in turn will increase the union's clout in future confrontations. Only by reversing the attrition of the union membership can we ensure that the industrial pension remains sound. Let's not have tomorrow's pensioners end up on welfare, as happened when the ITU Fraternal Pension went broke!

## **9. No Lawsuits Against the Union!**

Every time a member sues the union, the courts and government use it as an excuse to gain just a little more control over our affairs! (Six years ago we had the ludicrous example of then-First Vice-President Robert McMichen and his fellow playmates in Colorado Springs dragging the union and each other into court over "election irregularities").

## **10. Take Back and Use the Strike Weapon!**

Local 21, the CWA and much of the rest of the labor movement have virtually abandoned the strike as a weapon. Most of the problems facing the union can be traced in the long run to this policy. Organizing unorganized workers, for example, can hardly succeed when the employers know that even in the unlikely event that there is a strike, the worst that will happen is an impotent consumer boycott (Chicago, Vallejo, etc.). The same is true in the fight for a shorter workweek, cost-of-living contracts, etc. The employers must know that we are able and that we have *the will* to strike. The strike, the only real weapon workers have, is essentially a political question. A strike, any strike, almost immediately becomes a confrontation with the city, state or national government when the employer asks for and gets police to bring scabs into the plant and a court injunction against pickets (PATCO, meatcutters, Greyhound, Eastern Airlines, etc., etc.). A militant leadership must be prepared to show active solidarity with other unions engaged in struggles with the corporate pirates. The problems we face as a union have been a long time in the making and there certainly are no overnight answers, but taking back the right to strike is the place to begin. Carefully prepared, militantly prosecuted strikes, with mass picket lines and a leadership committed to winning, are the key to putting this union back on its feet.

***Let's get this union off its back!***