

The Listener

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Daily chronicle of efforts to organize workers by communists and neighborhood councils. Tells of visitors stopping by to get copies of The Catholic Worker. (DDLW #269).

July 12 –

Saw Francis Gorman of the Textile Union this afternoon. They were having an emergency meeting up at the union headquarters. The men all looked very tired. He was holding his head in his hands, wondering how the Industrial Recovery Administration was going to enforce the code. . . . The situation in the mills is bad. The manufacturers speeding up production right now. The stretchout system working everybody overtime. The situation in Paterson very bad. They are much in need of organizers, with every labor body trying to organize the workers now that organization has been admitted as legal.

July 13 –

A hotel employee called at the office of The Catholic Worker to put in a complaint as to how the Hotel Men's Association was ill-treating its help, twelve hour shifts, seven day week, no food and very small wages being the general rule. The man who came in was a Frenchman who had worked all his life in hotels and knew whereof he spoke. He was enthusiastic about our recommendation, in the July-August issue, to organizations to investigate conditions at hotels before using their facilities for Communion Breakfasts.

July 15 –

As we sat in the office (a Saturday evening) a Communist meeting started just a few doors down the street under the lamp post. There are always street noises, – the children playing ball, the taxis and cars tooting for them to get out of the way, mothers calling to their children, the constant screaming of brakes, radios, the roar of the “L” a block away, but for a long while as I sat at my typewriter I had been conscious of a new and louder sound. It was a bellowing, a shouting that resounded up and down the street. I had not noticed it for a time because when a prize fight is being broadcast every radio down the street multiplies the sound of the one voice until the voice seems to fill the air to the exclusion of everything else. That was the way it was this evening, and I had not been paying any attention to it.

I looked out of the window finally and saw a white painted kitchen chair, an American flag tied on one side, and a group of perhaps twenty-five standing around listening to the speaker. The buildings before him acted as a perfect sounding board. The acoustics were excellent for his purpose, and he could be heard up and down the length of the block. People indoors could hear every

word, and people sitting on their stoops and hanging out of their windows seeking a cool breath of air, were listeners willy-nilly.

They were, we gathered, members of an Unemployed Council in the neighborhood. They were distributing their organ, the *Hunger Fighter*, and they were announcing a dance, the admission to which was ten cents. They talked too about the lying press – about politics – about their fellow workers. Fellow worker, fellow worker, fellow worker, the voice went on relentlessly. Usually it is “comrades and fellow workers.” This speaker must have formerly been a wobbly, in other words an I.W.W., from the West.

The speaking went on and on. A policeman went up and down the block, circled around like an uneasy watch dog, and finally took up his station in the middle of the street in back of them.

Two little boys passed under my window. “Those guys never shut up talking,” one of them was saying.

“Oh shut up, fellow worker,” little Ethel who lives upstairs protested. Her bed was at the window and she too was an unwilling audience.

A half-mad woman passing by went up to the chair and shook her fist in the speaker’s face. Then she went and sat down on her stoop. As one speaker got down from the chair, another got up. The visible audience was sparse, but they had the whole street listening. It was a hot night and there was nothing else to do.

When finally they went away, with their chair and their American flag, I counted them and there were twelve, half the number who were grouped around them.

There are not many Communists speaking in the squares now. Their new policy is to go around to the residential streets and talk to small groups and distribute their literature. Active work is being done by the Unemployed Councils, and it is along these same lines that Catholics should work. See story on Neighborhood Councils, page 2.

July 18 –

It was just after writing the above that Miss Kathryn Dalton came into the office to find out about our work. She had found a copy of the paper in her parish church and she wanted to know how she could help. She had not come to tell us about her work. It was very modestly and diffidently that she spoke of it, finally, after discussion of many other things.

“I am doing the same thing the Unemployed Councils are,” she said. “Not having a job and wanting to keep busy, I started to take up some cases which had applied to the Home Relief Bureau without getting any relief. I took the cases into the offices and got attention for the people. I saw the way the Communists were going about it, and I did the same thing. Only without the noise. I’ve seen them going up to a man waiting in line with a dispossession notice in his hand and grab him. Two weeks later this man is a member of the Unemployed Council

and demonstrating with the rest of them. 'But they got help for me,' he tells me. 'They forced the office to listen to my trouble. I couldn't have gotten the relief without them.'

"I decided right then and there that what Catholic women who want to work for the cause ought to do was to become members of Catholic Neighborhood Councils. To take up cases in their neighborhoods and work for them.

"I've had my hands full ever since I started some months ago. If I find children sick in the families, I arrange hospital or clinic care for them. I go to see landlords. I go into court with people when they get a dispossess notice, and talk to the judge for them to get a delay so that there will be time for the Relief Office to take care of them.

"There is all sorts of abuse of power in the Home Relief offices, of course. But one can only do what one can."

July 19 –

Mr. Geiss and Mr. Burke called. Geiss is speaking now at Long Island Depot in Brooklyn, and Mr. Burke is distributing copies of The Catholic Worker. Michael Gunn is also helping as a propagandist.

July 20 –

Called on a Catholic lawyer who professed to believe in the frame-up system and the third degree methods of the police. They were necessary, he insisted. This is the sort of Catholic who is held up by the Communists as an example of Church teaching. One such Catholic may do much harm to the Church in the eyes of the man in the street.

July 22 –

An informal gathering of Italians on the front steps discussing the Unemployed Councils and their work. Distributed The Catholic Worker.

July 24 –

A Redemptorist Father, born and raised in this neighborhood, dropped into the office to order three hundred copies of The Catholic Worker monthly for his parish. He said he wished it was weekly as his was a working class parish and needed the paper.

July 28 –

J Lehane, of Long Island City, a member of the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks and a most energetic member of his union, called to get copies of the paper for distribution at local meetings. He said that there were 250 members of the local and only about 25 were regular attendants at the meetings. More activity needed. He told, too, of a friend of his who had worked at the Hotel Montclair, seven days a week, supposedly for seven hours a day, but her hours usually stretched out to ten. When she had to stay home on account of illness she was laid off.

In regard to this question of the seven day week, Pope Leo XIII wrote in his encyclical:

"To consent to any treatment which is calculated to defeat the end and purpose of his being is beyond his (the worker's) right; he cannot give up his soul to servitude; for it is not man's own rights which are here in question, but the rights of God, most sacred and inviolable.

"From this follows the obligation of the cessation of work and labor on Sundays and certain festivals."

Patrick Clare, an Irish Labor Party man, came to the office with copies of the Labor Party paper and talked of a United Front. "Catholics," he said, "ought not to be afraid of fighting for social justice just because Communists are doing it."

July 31 –

A call from the mailman. He spoke of the substitutes' demands for work and the parade they had made on City Hall.

There had been no replacements in the post office service, he said, only the doubling up of work. On his route he covered an atheist book shop where they are very zealous about handing out literature. When they discussed atheism with him he said, "A man is not a man if he does not believe in God." He himself was a Jew, but he was a believer in the Creator. "Who could make a blade of grass?" he asked the atheist, who replied, "Oh, you're too smart for me," and gave up arguing with him.

The next visitor was a chauffeur from the Edison Company who is active in parish work. But as for distributing copies to his fellow employees, "We don't dare talk about such things. No matter how long you may have worked there, you don't know where you stand. You never know when you are going to lose your job!"

Oh, the lack of security, the uncertainty as to the future is a sad thing for a grown man with a family, hurtful to his pride and his manhood!

August 9 –

A member of the Workingmens' Ex-Service League was a caller. His League is a Communist affiliate. Why don't the Catholics get out and demonstrate against war and against evictions, he wanted to know.

A priest came in while he was talking and he left, but the priest continued the conversation by saying that Catholic laymen should be far more active in studying these questions and expressing themselves on them.