

Machine Politics and Relief

By Marguerite Young

WASHINGTON, APRIL 2.

ALARGE hot potato rolled into Washington last week from Kansas City. You remember Kansas City. Where on Election Day in 1934 Boss Tom Pendergast's men rode past the polls without license plates and with machine guns bared to the sky; and by night there were many wounded and four dead innocents who had thought they had a secret ballot.

Kansas City where, you probably know, federal authorities were prosecuting 1936 vote fraud scandals when 1938 Election Day rolled around last Tuesday. The federal authorities themselves worked under deadly threats. One of them was awakened by a telephone call at 2 a. m. and, answering, he heard, "You dirty sonofabitch, you better get out of town quick or you'll get a bullet in your back."

Kansas City where the *Star*, a southwestern New York *Times*, finds page one news in the sudden closing of the honkey-tonks before sunrise in honor of this year's "clean" election. Where a homecoming gangster snorts disgustedly to the reporters about the low quality of the hot spots. And girls stand behind windows tapping with a coin to signal the sad price . . . tapping on the glass with four bits, two bits, even a dime.

Boss Tom's machine, founded in the Eighties and supreme since 1926, won again Tuesday over an opposition coalition including Democrats, Republicans, and Labor's Non-Partisan League with its affiliated twenty-six union locals. But it was no rout for the League, all things considered. And the League comes out of it with experience that will be mighty useful in summer and fall contests throughout the country, and with proof that Kansas City's "clean" voting was preceded by practices constituting another scandal.

I saw the evidence. It proves that Boss Tom, frightened beyond depending on his control of municipal offices, moved in on the federal work relief apparatus and turned it to Pendergast machine ends that shocked New Dealers in Washington.

Two classic forms of intimidation were used. Votes were bought with federal relief jobs, and votes were coerced with threats to take federal relief jobs away.

Such general charges are not startling. But the batch of affidavits which League officials have laid in Federal Administrator Aubrey Williams's lap are. I will have to make judicious deletions in quoting them, for the affiants made them in peril of Boss Tom's retaliatory power.

Here is one from an intelligent worker—and remember he names names where I leave them out:

My name is — and I live at —. I have been

on the W.P.A. this last time since —, and am still working on W.P.A. at —. The Assistant Superintendent, Mr. —, was talking to a number of us workers, and he said he wanted us to go to the polls the next day to vote. He said, "I never tell a man how to vote but I am a great believer in the old adage, 'Never bite the hand that feeds you.'"

And "the hand that feeds you" in Kansas City is not the New Deal federal Democratic Administration in Washington, which supplies the funds, but its local representative, who is mixed up with Boss Tom's machine. This representative at times actually is a known worker for the machine. Indeed, the Missouri State Administrator of the W.P.A. is Matthew S. Murray—who is also Pendergast's City Director of Public Works. Murray gets \$8,000 a year from Boss Tom's city administration, and only \$6,000 from Harry Hopkins's administration!

Non-Partisan League officials in Washington assert that a great many of Kansas City's administrative relief jobs are filled by ward and precinct workers for Pendergast—and the affidavits prove there is a relationship between them. The Kansas City *Star* reported quite simply: "Sweeping use of political pressure should be no surprise in any organization that is completely in charge of the Kansas City machine. *The whole state organization of W.P.A. is dominated by it. The foremen and timekeepers in Kansas City are machine workers.* . . . Many cities have had vote scandals; but Kansas City went farther than most of them. Several cities have had W.P.A. scandals. It remains to be seen whether Kansas City has outdistanced them." One affidavit now before Washington W.P.A. officials reads:

On March 8, which was Primary Day, I voted the Coalition ticket, and shortly thereafter, Mr. —, who is the precinct worker for the machine, came to me and asked me why I voted the Coalition ticket and did not vote for the machine. He informed me that he was going to take — [the affiant's sole support—Ed.] off the W.P.A. . . . It is my information that this was done today. Mr. — said he was under orders from —, whose last name I do not know, but he was indicted recently by the Federal Grand Jury.

Sometimes the local W.P.A. executive intimidated directly, while Boss Tom's regular precinct headquarters finished off the job. As one bold worker tells it under oath:

I was interviewed and signed the application (for W.P.A.) which was okayed last Monday by —, who stated to me there would be no more W.P.A. employment after the first of April if the machine lost the city election. I was told to go to the headquarters of — and see the precinct captain's assistant, a Mr. —, who said he would get me on the W.P.A. He advised me to do my bit and said, "If you will show us you are all right, we will give you employment on the W.P.A."

The backbone of the labor forces in the campaign was the Chevrolet auto workers' union, Local 93; and Boss Tom's boys, using the traditional tactics of striking from within where a frontal attack could not smash the opponent, went right to work among the union men. This is what happened, again in the documented words of a union man:

I was employed at the Chevrolet plant and continued to work there until — when I was laid off, with many others. . . . About a week ago I was approached by —, who I understand is employed by the Police Department and he asked me if I wanted to do some work for the Democratic machine and said there would be money in it for me. I said "Yes" and he explained to me that he wanted me to see Union employees, and he gave me a number of cards containing names and addresses of Union men. . . . He promised me a job on the W.P.A. and gave me a letter dated —, on W.P.A. government stationery, addressed to me, to register at — where I secured an identification card. . . . The letter was signed by — and —. [Two well-up relief officials—Ed.] This job was promised me if I would do the work which he requested. I have known Mr. — since — and he told me that he had secured employment on the W.P.A. for 275 men. When he talked to me, I asked him how he knew he could get work for me on the W.P.A., and it was then that he informed me that he had obtained employment for 275 men.

Boss Tom thus offers the New Dealers heading work relief in Washington an opportunity and a test. The Kansas City situation is a culmination rather than a beginning of a problem to which the NEW MASSES pointed some time ago. Then, W.P.A. labor policies that look nice on paper here in Washington were being reversed in practice by local administrations—including the Missouri administration—dominated by reactionary pre-New Deal machines. The authorities here sympathized with complaints that local "two-bit dictators" were influencing local relief officials, but did little. They pointed out what is an unfortunate fact: local appointees by long established patronage practice are approved by state Congressional officeholders, and when the latter are allies of the local machine, they make it tough to put a non-machine man on the job.

"Well, the flagrant violation in Kansas City of the strict rule against the use of relief for political pressure on relief workers offers a chance to clean house," they told me at the League's headquarters. "We, who support the W.P.A. and are fighting to get adequate appropriations for relief, cannot and will not tolerate abuses."

The League—and the League alone of all the coalition forces in Kansas City—exposed and made an issue of Pendergast's hoisting his flag over the W.P.A. administration. Complaints and affidavits were fired into Washington. The

first few convinced federal officials that here was something warranting investigation. "If any politics is being played," said Acting Administrator Williams, "somebody will be fired." Since then the League has added to the evidence and the W.P.A.'s central division of investigation has directed W.P.A.'s midwestern area head to follow through. The League also is following through.

Confident that labor and progressives next fall will clean out quite a few of the office-holding creatures of major and minor duplications of Boss Tom's machine, the League is mobilizing now to play a leading part next summer and fall. It is picking candidates. Letters have gone to units throughout the country, seeking information, especially data on possible candidates against Tories, both Democratic and Republican.

The fall contests are to elect 435 congressmen, thirty-four senators and as many governors, and important mayors and other municipal officials. Although the League's official list is far from complete, some nationally significant choices can be given. It has the hatchet out for the senatorial scalps of Hearst's Democrat McAdoo of California; Republican Davis of Pennsylvania; and Nye of North Dakota, the "independent" who fought Supreme Court reform and joined the Liberty Leaguers' assault on the National Labor Relations Board and the C.I.O. It thinks it has a good chance to beat some of the reactionary Southern Democrats who have united with Republicans against progressive legislation—George of Georgia; and the landlord, "Cotton Ed" Smith of South Carolina. It may support a well known liberal writer against Tydings of Maryland; it is busy now on behalf of a rail union leader who is chairman of the Indiana League, and who is challenging Van Nuys of that state. With equal vigor it will battle to return New Dealers faced with reactionary opposition—men like Barkley, the Roosevelt floor leader in the Senate.

Ten powerful Congressmen, most of them Southern Democrats, got the League's solemn warning last month in the form of a bulletin distributed in thousands in the ten's districts. In boldface type in the center of the bulletin the League named the ten who "have consistently blocked wages-hours legislation." They are members of the Rules Committee, which wields enormous power by dictating which legislation shall be advanced and which pigeon-holed. "These ten men," the League pronounced, "have shown themselves to be enemies of the American working people." They are Cox of Georgia, Driver of Arkansas, Smith of Virginia, Clark of North Carolina, Dies of Texas, Lewis of Colorado, Martin of Massachusetts, Mapes of Michigan, McLean of New Jersey, and Taylor of Tennessee.

To all forthcoming contests, the League's Kansas City experience bears distinct relevance. For Boss Tom's performance showed a range of reaction's strategies that must be met elsewhere; and the coalition suffered from weaknesses that can be averted elsewhere.

In addition to all this, the League faced the splitting force of President William Green of the American Federation of Labor. He delivered a direct blow by telegraph from Washington in the critical last days of the campaign. It was all the more significant in view of the fact that hundreds of A. F. of L. men in Kansas City locals were supporting the League. Indeed, one of the League's two candidates on the coalition ticket was a past president of the Firefighters' local, A. F. of L., who had been forced out of his job with eighty-odd others for union activity. League forces had picked this candidate partly for the purpose of demonstrating their solidarity with their A. F. of L. brothers. The latter had responded fully: was told by a League representative that the overwhelming mass of A. F. of L. union members supported the League ticket, and several made speeches at League campaign rallies. Yet, just a couple of days before the election, the head of the Kansas City Central Labor Union received the following wire: "So-called Labor's Non-Partisan League is a C.I.O. agency. For that reason we are advising Central bodies and State Federations of Labor to have nothing to do with Labor's Non-Partisan League, but in-



Martin

Valentine to the Slums

Spring is contemptuous of induced ideals.
Squalor of mud, grime-crusted snow—
Hers is the backyard way of birth.

Malodor of the frame-flats, paintless,
warped in the ice-grip.

"I don't see how they live here during the
winter."

They don't, madam, they retrench. Winter
here is a time for endurance.

... They don't live here during the win-
ter, madam.

Spring comes odorously warm:
Tar smells, fresh-sawed lumber on the rat-
tling trucks.

Spring is not contemptuous.
This district understands the backyard way
of birth,

Frost-sharpness, wintry death.

Spring is gentle above the cocoon of joy
opening timorously in these unsheltered
lives:

Sweeter here than any place, where clan-
nish, implike children dam the gutter
rivulets.

RAY SMITH.

stead to form Non-Partisan Committees of their own. Official communication containing these recommendations will reach you within a few days. (Signed) William Green." Published at once in the *Labor Herald*, the telegram lined Green up not only against the C.I.O. unions, but against the Kansas City rank and file of the A. F. of L., against the railway brotherhoods which also supported the League. It lined Green up squarely in support of a reactionary aggregation whose corruption had been a byword for decades and whose character was epitomized, this time, in the relief-work angle of the campaign.

On reaction's side there was no novel principle. The basic technique was classic. It consisted of the ruthless application of pressure through pre-existing power, as in the relief-work episode, and of efforts to disrupt and discredit the opposition from within. It was the application of the latter part of that technique that was significant. For instance, the traditional "smear" tactic was carried to near-fascist lengths. It included an attempt to create a sort of Black Legion gang within coalition ranks—designed, in the conclusion of coalition leaders, "to create a fear on the part of the voters that we were attempting to foster an intimidation group." First, coalition headquarters was approached privately by an outsider with a suggestion that a "secret" organization be formed to combat possible rough stuff from Boss Tom's side. The coalition emphatically rejected and condemned the idea. But such a "secret" organization soon afterward was discovered by Labor's Non-Partisan League workers, who immediately reported it, enabling the coalition to expose it. Workers invited into the "secret" group had been told that the coalition was doing it! And that the "secret" phalanx would be "deputized" to work at the polls on Election Day!

Last year's campaign in Detroit taught the labor forces the danger of a campaign and program too narrow to embrace full support from labor's progressive middle-class allies. Kansas City showed the danger of the opposite extreme. There, the League was submerged within the coalition—which learned, for the first time, that progressives could not beat reactionaries unless labor plays a central role. The League had only two candidates on the coalition ticket, and coalition put chief campaign emphasis on attacks on Pendergast corruption, vice, tax "kickbacks," and similar proverbial aspects of machine rule, without consistently and directly relating them to the daily lives of the masses of working people.

The League sent a national representative into the field only three weeks before Election Day. It had little expectation of defeating Boss Tom. If its exposure of the relief-work episode bears results, it will demonstrate that labor's mere presence in a campaign can bring direct benefits to the citizenry. And it is difficult to see how Washington's investigation can fail to strike Boss Tom's allies in Missouri's W.P.A.