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Working Class Militancy in the Depression

by James Green

This essay is a critical review of recent literature on labor struggles in the '30s. It is also an attempt to answer some of the questions radicals are asking today about the most explosive period of working-class militancy in American history.

If we can understand the history American workers made during the Depression, we might be able to see the contemporary working class more clearly. We might be able to offer a better explanation for the coincidence of class consciousness and conservatism in some older workers and for the explosive militancy and potential radicalism of many younger workers. We cannot understand where the American working class is going until we find out where it has been.

The history of the CIO in the years during and after the Second World War has made it easy to underestimate the importance of working-class militancy in the 1930s. But George Rawick has wisely placed the period in comparative perspective. In 1940, when working-class organizations in Germany, Italy, Spain, and France were suppressed by the Fascists, American workers looked back on a decade of "victories of a scale and quality monumental in the international history of the working class". These victories resulted from the power of rank-and-file workers; they certainly produced the rapid expansion of the CIO and probably prevented the growth of an American Fascism. (1)

In fact, by 1940 the percentage of unionized blue-collar workers had more than doubled in all industries, except building and clothing. Overall, this meant that the number of workers in unions increased from 3.1 million in 1930 (11.5% of the non-agricultural work force) to 7.0 million

in 1940 (21.8%). Of course, the most important gains came in the mass-production industries, especially rubber, auto, and steel, the keys to the modern American economy.

But, as Rawick points out, the "formal organization" of workers into unions is only part of the labor history of the '30s. In order to understand the scope of working-class militancy during the Depression, we have to know "how many man-hours were lost to production because of strikes, the amount of equipment and material destroyed by industrial sabotage and deliberate negligence, the amount of time lost by absenteeism, the hours gained by workers through slow-downs, and the limiting of the speed-up...through working-class initiative". Not all of this information is now available, but there is data on strikes. Only 840 were recorded in 1932, 1700 in 1933, and 1856 in 1934 (before the CIO appeared); 2200 work stoppages were launched in 1936 and 4740 erupted in 1937 (the year of the sit-downs); the figure dropped to 2500 in 1938, when the "Roosevelt recession" struck out against the labor movement, and climbed back up to 4288 in 1941. "All of this occurred in the midst of a great depression and after more than a decade of inactivity..." Rawick notes. "But most important, it all occurred not because the older unions attempted to organize industrial workers," but because the workers organized themselves, often in spite of the old unions. (2)

This high level of strike activity increased in the 1940s despite the effects of World War II and exacted a high economic price from employers; it also won union recognition and unprecedented political power for industrial workers. More significantly, perhaps, militant action in the '30s gave unskilled laborers a greater sense of self-respect and class consciousness; it also forced the most powerful segments of the ruling class — industrial manufacturers — to recognize the working class as more than simply "labor power". What capitalists considered a "passive, fragmented object of exploitation and technological manipulation" in the 1920s they accepted in the 1930s as "an active, unified political subject". The needs of industrial workers could no longer be suppressed; they had to be satisfied to some degree in

order to "ensure continued economic development". (3) In short, the achievements of the American working class in the 1930s are impressive on any scale; and their impressiveness should not be obscured by subsequent historical developments.

INTERPRETATIONS OF LIBERAL LABOR HISTORIANS: VIEWS FROM THE TOP DOWN

I. The Question of Rank-and-File Militancy

Irving Bernstein's Turbulent Years is the leading liberal interpretation of labor history in the 1930s. (4) The book treats all of the violent high points of the decade, but on the whole it flattens out the story. The author describes mass strikes as simply eruptions in the inevitable process that led to bureaucratic unionism. As Staughton Lynd points out, Bernstein treats militancy from below as a form of "crowd-like" behavior that had to be channeled into bureaucratic unionism and collective bargaining in order to stabilize "unbalanced" industrial relations. (5) Turbulent Years is supposed to be A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941, but it is mainly a history of relations between leaders in unions, management, and government. Bernstein describes the big strikes of the period, but he ignores the rank-and-file workers who made those strikes. These people are supposed to be the subject of his next book. However, the study of workers' lives and jobs should not have been separated from the story of their actions; we cannot understand the latter without having a clear knowledge of the former.

David Brody, a leading liberal labor historian, wrote the following in a review of Bernstein's book: "There is not much that is fresh in the way of analysis in Turbulent Years. With some exceptions here and there, Bernstein tends to follow familiar and well-marked paths. The puzzling questions remain unanswered. What was the nature of rank-and-file militancy? What was its effect on union

policy?" (6)

Brody poses important questions about the nature and effect of rank-and-file militancy in the '30s, but he is unable to answer them. In a recent essay, he writes that organized labor was "nearly bankrupt" of resources and ideas at the onset of the Depression. "John L. Lewis seemed merely a labor boss of the most conventional kind, and a largely discredited one at that," Brody continues. "What was there hidden in this sad spectacle that drove Lewis — without taking anything away from the man's qualities — to play so extraordinary a role over the next few years?" (7) (my emphasis)

The "hidden" variable that Brody seeks is not so hard to find; it was the insurgency of rank-and-file workers that swept the country in the early Depression years and peaked in the mass strikes of 1934 at Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco. Art Preis, a Trotskyist labor editor, emphasized the importance of these strikes in his critical 1964



Minneapolis General Strike Battle, 1934

account, Labor's Giant Step. Although Trotskyists were significant only in Minneapolis, Preis notes that other radicals (A. J. Muste's American Workers Party in Toledo and the Communist Party in San Francisco) helped to make all three strikes "magnificent examples of labor struggles". (8) The labor actions of '34 were opposed by most AFL leaders, but they forced other trade unionists, led by John L. Lewis, to form new industrial unions in order to recruit millions of discontented workers in mass-production industries. As Saul Alinsky wrote of the 1934 strikes in his "unauthorized biography" of Lewis:

Before the year was out, seven hundred thousand workers had struck. Lewis could read the revolutionary handwriting on the walls of American industry. He knew that the workers were seething and aching to be organized so they could strike back. Everyone wanted to hit out, the employer against the worker and the worker against the employer and anyone else whom they felt was not in the (working) class. America was becoming more class conscious than at any time in its history. (9)

Alinsky's recently reprinted biography demonstrates the importance of Lewis's personal qualities and of his undisputed control over the largest national industrial union in the nation (the United Mine Workers), but it also shows that rank-and-file insurgency transformed a "conventional labor boss" (to use Brody's words) into a militant leader. As with William Cobbett, the great British labor radical, Lewis's popularity grew out of what E. P. Thompson calls a "dialectic with the people". (10) Liberal historians like Brody only look at Lewis's relationship with the rank and file from the top down. Therefore, they do not see that John Lewis was a follower as well as a leader.

It is interesting to note that Bernstein implicitly recognizes the importance of the 1934 insurgencies by devoting a very long chapter to these struggles which he entitles "Eruption". (11) However, Turbulent Years does not elabo-

rate on the influence these mass strikes had on Lewis and other CIO leaders. Sidney Fine's book Sit-Down, which describes the wave of factory occupations in 1936-37, also tries to diminish the significance of rank-and-file initiatives. The author admits that the important sit-down strikes against Akron rubber companies "began spontaneously" in early 1936, but he writes more about the subsequent supportive role of the CIO leaders than he does about the initial creative role of the rank-and-file workers. (For an excellent account of the events in Akron from the bottom up, see Ruth McKenny's Industrial Valley, reprinted by Greenwood in 1971.) Fine also admits that the massive French sit-down strikes in the spring of 1936 were like the subsequent actions in American industry, because "they were initiated without official union authorization at a time when the labor movement was weak". He suggests that the UAW leadership "noticed" the militant sit-down strike wave in France which the Popular Front government opposed, along with the leadership of the CGT unions and the French Communist Party. But Fine does not suggest that American auto workers, who also read the newspapers and heard the radio, might have noticed the effectiveness of the tactics adopted by their French counterparts. (12)

In discussing the important sit-downs at South Bend, Detroit, Atlanta, and Cleveland that led up to the crucial strike at Flint in 1937, Fine refers to several cases in which the initiative came from the rank and file, but he gives more attention to the strikes in which there was evidence of UAW leadership. For example, he notes that the crucial sit-down at Fisher in Cleveland has usually been viewed as "spontaneous in origin", but in the text he only quotes UAW leaders who supposedly agitated for the strike. Fine assigns the following quote from a rank-and-file leader to a footnote: "It was just a spontaneous movement on the part of the workers." (13)

When he comes to the Flint sit-downs, Fine says that the first action in Fisher Plant Number 2 was "entirely spontaneous" and that the follow-up strike in Fisher Number 1 was initiated by Bob Travis and Windham Mortimer, both

"We Won": Strikers at Fisher Plant #1



Left-wingers. However, he later writes that the strikers in the "Number 1 sit-down community displayed a fierce independence in their relationship with the UAW leadership". In discussing the secret tactics used in taking the key engine plant at Flint (Chevy Number 4), Fine gives most of the credit to Travis and Roy Reuther of the UAW international. (14) Using his own oral history interviews, Staughton Lynd challenges Fine on this point. Lynd found that Kermit Johnson, a local leader, initiated the strategy to take Chevy Number 4 with rank-and-file support. (15) Fine tries to cast doubt on the notion that the CIO was "caught unawares by the sit-downs in Cleveland and Flint", but he is not very successful, because much of his own evidence shows that the initiative for the mass strikes of 1936-37 in auto came from the bottom.

Like Bernstein, Fine sees the growth of the CIO as an inevitable development that channeled the explosive militancy of the early '30s into collective-bargaining agreements which outlawed local wildcat strikes. (16) Therefore, these liberal historians do not look carefully or critically enough at the origins of the CIO. They do not realize, as Saul Alinsky wrote, that Lewis and the other leaders of the new unions had to respond to the sit-downs even though they

opposed them. (17) The militant auto workers did "force" Lewis's hand. He wanted the auto industry organized, as Fine argues, but if it had not been for the sit-downs, Lewis would have organized it from the top down as he did in coal and steel. Because they view the bureaucratic development of the CIO as inevitable, liberal historians like Fine and Bernstein do not see the influence of the rank-and-filers at the outset, nor do they explore the options open to the labor movement in the crucial years of the mid-30s. Lynd's article in this issue attempts to deal with both these issues.

Another recent study, Donald Grubbs's liberal history of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), Cry From the Cotton, also provides some hints as to the relationship between the militancy of the unorganized and the organization of the CIO. (18) In 1935-36 thousands of sharecroppers and agricultural laborers (blacks as well as whites) joined the STFU and launched spontaneous "marching" strikes against the planters in the eastern Arkansas Delta in spite of the racist and repressive measures launched against them. In 1937 the leaders of the union decided to join the CIO and link up with the militant national labor movement that was sweeping industry. However, the STFU's affiliation with the CIO's Communist-led Agricultural Workers Union was a disaster. As Mark Naison points out (in an article Grubbs fails to cite), the CIO officials "smothered" the STFU with clerical work and "crushed" it with financial and bureaucratic obligations. (19) As STFU organizer H. L. Mitchell said in a recent interview: "The CIO and the CP tried to force the STFU into the pattern of a regular trade union, and it couldn't work." (20)

Liberal labor historians fail to understand the nature of rank-and-file militancy and its effect on the CIO because they have an elitist bias that leads them to mistrust or fear the "masses". The bias is reinforced by the questions they ask and the methods they use to answer them. For example Bernstein is rightly interested in the mass strikes of 1934, but he does not ask who started them or what their later effect was on organized labor. Furthermore, he uses traditional printed sources that force him to emphasize the

roles of well-known leaders in business, labor, and government. When he does use interviews, they rarely include the perspectives of rank-and-filers or local leaders. Fine actually does have access to scores of interviews with workers who participated in the sit-downs, but he uses them mainly as footnote material. However, it is not simply an elitist bias or conventional methodology that leads liberals to ignore the workers on the line. Ideology is involved as well.

The liberals' unwillingness or inability to use class analysis in their work leads to a top-down view of the struggles in the '30s, a view that emphasizes the conflict of interest between labor leaders and corporate managers without evaluating the larger conflict between classes. The liberals' language includes references to "class war" and "class struggle" — it's hard to describe the '30s in any other terms — but their ideology prevents them from accepting a class analysis that could place the violent episodes of the Depression into a larger historical framework.

II. Liberals' Views of the Historic Role of the Left

If the liberal historians' ideological assumptions prevent them from seeing the importance of rank-and-file militancy in the class struggles of the 1930s, their grosser political prejudices prevent them from accurately assessing the part the Left played in those struggles. Although Bernstein's Turbulent Years lacks the vicious Red-baiting that characterized earlier liberal accounts, there is still a noticeable anti-Communist prejudice in the book. For example, in writing about the Minneapolis general strike of 1934, he says that Trotskyist union leaders "must have known" that the police set a trap for their mobile pickets on July 20, "Bloody Friday", when 67 workers were wounded, two fatally. "The Marxist doctrine of class war," Bernstein writes, "with its inversion of ordinary means and ends, presumably justified in their minds the decision to send unsuspecting pickets into the rain of police gunfire." "The union now had its slain martyrs." (21) He makes this seri-

ous charge, even though he says the evidence is "circumstantial". The leaders "must have known" about the ambush because an article in the union newspaper the day before revealed the preparations taking place at the site of the massacre. It is not clear why the strikers were "unsuspecting", since most of them read the papers too. Bernstein does not suppose that the workers, in the midst of what he calls a "class war", chose to take their chances in battle. It is much easier to blame Leftist leaders who were manipulating the workers. This view gives the union organizers credit for more influence than they had and makes the union members seem like a "crowd" being led to the slaughter.

When he is not attacking Leftists, Bernstein tends to pass over them without discussing their role at all. For example he mentions, but does not discuss or analyze, the role of A. J. Muste and the socialist American Workers Party in the crucial Toledo strike of 1934. He takes time to note, however, that after the struggle ended this party "was soon forgotten". (22) How does he know? A little oral history might have shown that there were some who remembered, even today. Similarly, Bernstein writes the Communists out of his narrative of the San Francisco General Strike of 1934, even though they played an active supportive role in organizing, picketing, and fighting. (23) He talks about the Reds only when he is discussing Harry Bridges's disputed membership in the Party. Fine says that "Left-wingers" played a big part in the Sit-Down Strike of 1937, but he does not discuss their part at any length. (24)

Similarly, Donald Grubbs is unwilling to give the Socialist Party credit for organizing the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. (25) Although the SP participated less directly in the affairs of this union than the CP did in the unions it organized, the Socialists were responsible for founding, funding, and defending the STFU. H. L. Mitchell, a Socialist who was co-founder of the STFU, admits that the primary cause of the croppers' protest was the "people's desire to get their share of the New Deal AAA benefits", but he also explains that the union grew up first in northeastern Ar-

kansas because of the SP's organizational activities in the early '30s, especially among blacks. (26)

There are plenty of reasons for criticizing the actions of the Left, especially the Communist Party, in the Popular Front period, as Lynd's article in this issue suggests. But there are no grounds for accepting the liberals' view that the Reds were usually manipulative and opportunistic by nature. In fact, they were the toughest, most committed organizers in the labor movement. As Theodore Draper writes of the CP's militant efforts during the Third Period in the early '30s: "It was more surprising that the Communist organizers were able to fight so hard for so long as they did than that they were unable to win." (27) Indeed, as Saul Alinsky showed, it was the "Left-wingers who zealously worked day and night" to fight against the "cynicism and disillusionment that swept the workers" after AFL bureaucrats "smashed the spirit of unionism" that surged up in 1933-34. It was the "Left-wingers" who kept organizing in these lean years, and so, when it came time to build the CIO, Lewis "had no choice but to accept the support of the Communists". (28)

The controversial role of the Communist Party in the labor movement has to be discussed in two parts. In the militant Third Period (1928-1934), the Party established dual unions and tried to organize unskilled workers ignored by the AFL in heavy industries like auto and steel and in extractive industries like coal mining and cotton production. They stressed radical politics and inter-racial tactics even in repressive states like Kentucky, Alabama, and California.

Draper's article on the Communists' National Miners Union in the Appalachians and Jim Dann's critical pamphlet on the CP's Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Union in California during the early '30s show how courageous and determined Party organizers were, even in the most dangerous circumstances. (29) They also show, however, how easily the Communists were smashed. Why did the CP's dual unions fail to advance beyond the first-strike stage?

Draper notes that the Communists who tried to organize

Communist Miners' Union Band in 1931



Southern coal miners in the early '30s later "blamed themselves" for the failure of their dual union. "They blamed their organizational methods, their sectarianism, their opportunism, their lack of trained forces..." and so on. They blamed everything, Draper writes, but the "Party line". It is odd that Draper, Bernstein, and other liberals assume that the CP's dual-union strategy was sectarian, because these same historians applaud the CIO for splitting from the corrupt AFL in 1935. (30) Dual unionism was, in fact, a correct "line" in the early '30s when the traditional trade unions were simply refusing to organize discontented workers. As Staughton Lynd points out in this issue, it was unfortunate that the CP did not maintain its independence from the AFL longer, because it might have given the rank-and-file movement among steelworkers some crucial assistance in 1934.

The ideological aspects of the CP "line" in the Third Period might have been too sectarian or ultra-left for Kentucky miners, Alabama sharecroppers, and California migrants, but many of these workers responded to the Communists' recruiting efforts, even though the recruited

worked through dual unions. CP unions failed in the Third Period not merely because their organizers were too sectarian, as the liberals suggest, but because they encountered severe repression and depended too much on outside leadership.

After a short transitional period in 1934-35, the Communist Party adopted a Popular Front strategy. It stopped criticizing the New Deal and joined forces with other political groups opposed to Fascism. Party membership increased from 30,000 in 1935 to 55,000 in 1938 and 80,000 in 1942, and changed from a strong proletarian majority with a wide geographical distribution to a membership in which workers were outnumbered by professionals, intellectuals, and white-collar workers concentrated mainly in New York State. During the early Popular Front period, the Communists gained a strong foothold in the labor movement, especially in the new CIO affiliates, because they were better organizers and trade unionists than anyone else. Mark Naison has shown that in the late '30s CP union leaders adopted the same bureaucratic approach to unionism that the labor bosses used. Ambitious trade unionists were attracted to the Party in these years because it offered advice on strategy and tactics, but, with the exception of a few ethnic and occupational groups, large numbers of rank-and-file workers were not attracted to the CP, partly because it tacitly supported Roosevelt after 1935. (31) After 1941 the CP consolidated its power in certain unions by accepting the undemocratic practices of other labor officials and by eagerly co-operating with the government in enforcing the wartime "no-strike pledge". When the Communists de-emphasized political education and agitation within the unions during the late '30s, they played into the hands of Murray, Hillman, Reuther, and other labor leaders who were able to purge the "Reds" more easily after the War because the CP failed to build up political support among the rank and file, even in the unions it "dominated".

Liberal historians have often ignored or discredited the role of the Left in the 1930s, but a more balanced picture

is beginning to emerge, because the Old Leftists are now telling their own stories.

OLD LEFTISTS TELL THEIR OWN STORIES

One of the problems with memoirs is that people have very selective memories. Take Wyndham Mortimer for example. He was an important organizer and official in the United Auto Workers Union. He was also a Communist. Mortimer knows a great deal about the CP's activities in the UAW on all levels. Unfortunately, his recently published autobiography Organize! gives us very few insights into the nature of these activities. (32) We follow Mortimer's career as trade unionist quite closely, but we learn very little about the Communist Party or about its effect on the author. Maybe people who poured their hearts and souls into a revolutionary party cannot be expected to give us heavy internal criticism, but we can expect them to write about what life and labor in the Party were like. Perhaps the awful memories of the anti-Communist hysteria after the War still hang too heavily on the memories of old-time Reds like Mortimer.

This is not the case, however, with Len DeCaux, a Red who was Publicity Director of the CIO from 1935 until the purge of 1947. In Labor Radical he tells us a little bit about Party life during the '30s and he gives us an important account of Communist activity within the CIO. DeCaux argues rather convincingly that the Reds were more militant, more democratic trade unionists than anyone else in the labor movement. He writes at one point:

Inter-union democracy was not one of the CIO's Ten Commandments. Lewis, who had fought long and hard to centralize control over his own union, cautioned new unions against rank-and-filism. Murray, in Steel, ran things from the top down. Hillman tried to do the same in Textile. The tumultuous democracy of the early Auto Workers horrified the CIO's big shots. They'd have liked a

top-controlled Organizing Committee, as in Steel and Textile. The boisterous auto workers jumped the gun on them. The "communists", the Left, did most to push rank-and-file democracy, and made many newly-organized workers think it one of the CIO's cardinal principles. The idea made a hit. It helped communists to get elected, and in office they were sharply watched for any breaches of this "CIO principle".

In addition to being "more democratic" than other CIO affiliates, DeCaux maintains that the "Left-led" unions were "less corrupt" and "more principled about their members' general labor interests". And the Communists, he writes, were "far ahead of the rest of the labor movement" in the '30s on the question of equal "rights and opportunities for black workers". (33)

These points are corroborated by James Prickett's article on the CP in the UAW. (34) But DeCaux hardly has the last word on Communist participation in the CIO unions. For one thing, DeCaux judges the Communists' record on democracy by the CIO yardstick which clearly makes them look good. Lynd's research, published in this issue, challenges the contention that the Communists pushed "rank-and-file democracy", especially in the years after 1935, when the CP advocated "boring from within". In fact, DeCaux does not discuss the impact of this party line fully; he only says that it was formulated to have the widest possible appeal.

DeCaux also fails to discuss what kind of socialist politics, if any, the CP tried to push in the unions during the Popular Front. Labor Radical does make a feeble effort to defend the "communists" against the charge that they constantly "switched" their "line due to outside influence" by saying that "this did not greatly differentiate them from other union leaders". DeCaux writes: "Most CIO leaders were highly political and made their unions switch line at the behest of the Washington Administration to adjust to changes in national and foreign policy, and, in some cases,

just to be sure they were on the opposite side to the communist line.” (Page 240) Now this is a nice slap at liberal partisans of the CIO bosses, like Professor Bernstein, who hypocritically attack the Reds for always hewing to the international Communist line, but it does not take us very far toward understanding the effects of CP policy on union organizing.

What do the autobiographies of Mortimer and DeCaux tell us about the tactics the Communist organizers used? Unfortunately, they don't give us much detail about the nuts and bolts of organizing, though both contain interesting accounts of the semi-military tactics used in the sit-down strikes. DeCaux mentions the importance of the CP's work in the Unemployed Councils during the early '30s. In 1934 Communists recruited members of the Councils to assist in the violent picketing at Toledo Auto-Lite and at San Francisco in the general strike. Later, members of the Councils got jobs in industry and formed the nuclei of the Communist-dominated unions. The Reds also formed “little social clubs” in the neighborhoods as a way of getting to



Clothing Workers Prepare for Battle

workers outside the plants. (35) Recent interviews with organizers of the United Electrical Workers Union have also shown that Communists in the Eastern states worked effectively through cultural societies among ethnic groups. (36)

One of the best discussions of tactics used by the Left in the '30s can be found in Farrell Dobbs's autobiographical account of the Minneapolis general strike of 1934. Teamster Rebellion is the remarkable story of how a few Trotskyists placed themselves in key positions of a big-city transportation system and then gave militant direction to a strike that erupted into an urban class war. Dobbs, who is still a leading member of the Socialist Workers' Party, puts his politics up front in Teamster Rebellion, insisting on the importance of the Trotskyists' "vanguard" role in the Minneapolis general strike. (37) Ironically, the Trotskyists, like their bitter opponents, the Stalinists, won more support from rank-and-filers who thought they were militant unionists than from those who thought they were revolutionists. Unfortunately, Dobbs does not carry his account of the Trotskyist role in the Minneapolis labor movement beyond the big strike in 1934; it would have been interesting to compare the Trotskyist efforts at political education to those of the Communists in the late '30s.

Another Trotskyist who participated in Depression struggles has written the best "Old Left" history of labor in the 1930s: Art Preis, a labor reporter and editor for the Militant, whose Labor's Giant Step was published in 1964. (38) His book recognized the importance of rank-and-file insurgency and effectively criticized the bureaucratic leadership of the AFL and the CIO. Unlike the three memoirs reviewed in this section, Preis's study is actually a history, not an impressionistic autobiographical account. Of course, Preis's writing on the Communists is more polemical than historical. He exaggerates the extent to which the "Stalinists" helped to bureaucratize the CIO after 1935, and he underestimates the contribution militant Communist organizers made, especially in battling racism.

The Old Leftists give us much more information on the role of the Left in the labor movement than the liberals, but they leave many questions unasked and unanswered. Brian Peterson's comment about the literature on American labor in the '30s still holds true: "There are no adequate histories of Communist trade union activities." (39)

"NEW LEFT" * REVISION AND RESEARCH

New Left history in the '60s contained two forms of emphasis. One involved writing "history from the bottom up". It meant identifying mass movements and other forms of resistance that challenged the capitalist class and broke out of the liberal consensus in American history. The second emphasis in New Left history focused attention on corporate liberalism and the rulers' ability to co-opt reform and labor movements. Some Marxist historians called for a total view of the past that brought both of these approaches together in a dialectical understanding of the class struggle. However, New Left historians of the US have not yet written that kind of total view of the past into their work.

Staughton Lynd's recent research on the CIO in the '30s is a good example of the first kind of emphasis — writing history from the bottom up. Lynd is especially concerned with the problem of elitism in historical research. He feels that a "top-down" view has biased the work of previous writers, especially the liberals. In his article on "guerrilla history" in Gary, Lynd seemed to be writing historians out of the picture entirely: He hoped that the people would write their own history. (40)

The striking story of Jess Hull that appears in this issue was recorded by Dale Rosen and Ted Rosengarten in that

*Although the historians mentioned in this section came out of the New Left of the 1960s, they have evolved a different kind of politics in the 1970s. The section is labeled New Left largely to distinguish it from the politics discussed in the previous two sections.

spirit. They say, quite rightly, that this "man is his own historian" and that "his testimony contains its own analysis". The discussion of Jess Hull's membership in the Alabama Sharecroppers' Union (ASU) presents a black perspective on radical organizing in the South during the '30s, while recently published interviews with H. L. Mitchell and Claude Williams of the Arkansas Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) offer white perspectives on the inter-racial organizing in the same decade. (41) These oral histories of ASU and STFU leaders are comparable to the "personal" histories" of local CIO militants that Lynd collected for a previous issue of Radical America. (42) They show that oral history is a valuable method because it reveals the stories of local organizers who are usually ignored in the "standard accounts".

It should be pointed out, however, that the oral histories thus far collected by radicals are largely those of militant leaders, people of the rank and file to be sure, but leaders nevertheless. Most of the people interviewed in Studs Terkel's popular oral history of the "great depression" are also leaders of a sort. (43) There are a few plain folks in Hard Times who pop up to tell their story, however, and their accounts are usually pretty depressing. They are important in underlining the fact that the organizing drives of the '30s succeeded in unionizing only 22% of the working population, and that millions of people remained unemployed and unorganized throughout the Depression.

However, in the years between 1931 and 1933 the "spontaneous" organization of the Bonus Army march on Washington and the militant city demonstrations organized by the Communist-led Unemployed Councils showed that many unemployed workers could organize themselves, despite their depressed condition. (44) Members of the Councils also helped wage the violent mass struggles launched by the electrical workers of Toledo and the dockworkers of San Francisco in 1934. Terkel's interviews reveal other forms of group action among the unemployed later in the '30s, and Woody Guthrie's recently republished autobiography shows how transients co-operated (even across race

lines) when they ran up against "railroad bulls" and the like while riding the rails. (45)

But whether oral histories are of the unemployed worker or of the organized worker, they are not enough in and of themselves. Lynd's article in this issue of *Radical America* shows how important oral history can be for explaining the class struggle from the rank and file's point of view. It also suggests that the historian's analysis is helpful, not because it "makes sense" out of the workers' experiences, but because it puts them into historical and political context and adds information (for example, about the machinations of management or government officials) that might not have been known to people who were in the thick of the struggle.

It is especially important that Marxist historians understand militant movements within the class context in which they struggled. It is not enough just to know that militancy existed; we have to know how much it really threatened bourgeois hegemony and how much it really altered the means of production and the social relations between classes. But the first step is to find out when and where militant resistance appeared and how it developed, because the full dimensions of working class struggle in the '30s (and in other decades as well) are unknown.

In fact, it is important to learn more about the nature of rank-and-file militancy in the '30s so that a new overview of the period can be constructed that does not contain the bias found in most liberal and many New Left accounts, a bias that emphasizes the importance of class collaboration and the total hegemony of corporate liberalism. Ronald Radosh is a New Left labor historian whose work is weakened by his "top-down" perspective. (46) Radosh's writing on the "corporate ideology of American labor leaders" emphasizes the thinking of a few men like Sidney Hillman who were actively trying to integrate unions into the corporate capitalist order; it fails to evaluate the actions of workers that forced recognition out of union and government bureaucrats as well as industrialists. In this New Left view of the '30s, the class struggle seems just as one-sided as

it does in Old Left accounts in which the workers always win unless they are cruelly deceived or violently repressed. Before we can write a real class analysis of the labor struggle in the '30s and '40s, we have to know what happened, at the bottom and at the top.

Staughton Lynd finds evidence of militant rank-and-file activity largely through oral history interviews, while Jeremy Brecher finds a similar sort of insurgency in traditional sources, such as the New York Times. In his recent book, Strike! The True History of Mass Insurgence in America from 1877 to the Present, Brecher includes a section on the Depression decade in which he argues that the most important actions of the '30s, the key strikes of 1934 and the sit-downs of 1936-37, were initiated by rank-and-filers without the help of organized parties, unions, or other vanguards. In fact, he says that organizations of this kind often opposed militant mass strikes or tried to channel them in directions their leaders could control. The Left-wing parties were "generally preoccupied with building their own organizations". To support this charge, the author cites the example of Communist and Socialist union leaders in the Flint sit-down strikes who failed to discuss the reopening of the plants under workers' management. (47) Unlike Lynd, Brecher does not think that a revolutionary party could have made a significant difference in the labor struggles of the '30s. He argues that the leaders of such parties have always responded to working-class protest in ways that were self-serving.

Strike! describes several struggles during the late '30s in which CIO officials and Communist leaders played an obstructionist role, but it does not prove that this was a universal phenomenon throughout the period. Furthermore, Brecher's argument fails to explain the role of the CP in the Third Period (before 1935) when Communists adopted a "revolutionary" line and led isolated but significant strikes. Liston Pope's book on the Gastonia, North Carolina textile strike of 1929 (Millhands and Preachers) and Theodore Draper's article on the Appalachian coal strikes of 1931 (cited earlier) show that Communist dual unions jumped in



Strikers at Gastonia, N.C., 1929

after wildcats had started. (48) However, Jim Dann's pamphlet on California migrant workers points out that the CP's Agricultural and Cannery Workers Union actually instigated and led several militant strikes in 1932-33. (49) And Farrell Dobbs's Teamster Rebellion indicates that Trotskyist Ray Dunne led the coal drivers' strike that precipitated the Minneapolis general strike of 1934. Dunne and his comrades also gave the larger struggle militant leadership. This is corroborated by Irving Bernstein, who is certainly no apologist for Trotskyism. (50) Brecher does not account for these and other strikes in the early '30s, when members of revolutionary parties instigated or accelerated mass insurgencies.

Even if we grant Brecher's debatable point that the Left always participated in mass strikes after they began, we still have to know who started them in the first place. Some people have to start strikes, even spontaneous ones. Brecher's book gives us the sense that there are rank-and-file militants down there acting as leaders (the kind of people Lynd's oral histories have identified), but we do not learn much about them.

In fact, Strike! presents a rather abstract picture of the workers, as a "mass" that strikes out "spontaneously" at various points in history for reasons that are not entirely clear. We are not told why some workers strike and others do not. We do not know who the local leaders were, if there were any. And we do not get a sense of the racial, ethnic and religious differences among workers that might help to answer these questions. Brecher offers new insights into the dynamics of working-class militancy in the 1930s, but his work leaves many important questions unanswered.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE MILITANCY OF THE EARLY '30s AND FORMATIVE YEARS OF THE CIO?

A very general answer to this question would run as follows: The mass strikes of the early Depression years, especially in 1934, forced labor leaders to form the CIO and organize industrial workers; rank-and-file militancy con-

tinued to run out of these leaders' control through the sit-down wave of 1937; the recession of 1937-38 increased unemployment and put workers on the defensive while CIO bosses consolidated their gains and extended their control more fully over the new unions; during the War, union membership increased, but militancy was checked by the no-strike pledge and other forms of coercion; and after the War, the greatest strike wave in American labor history erupted in 1946, only to be followed by the crippling Taft-Hartley Act and the purges of "Reds" from the unions. These events and those which followed in the McCarthy period paved the way for the CIO's increasing Cold War conservatism. (51) The general contours of this history are fairly well known. However, a more detailed explanation is necessary.

What happened to the labor militancy of the period after it peaked in the sit-down strike wave of 1936-37? Art Preis, the historian who has answered this question most directly, shows that the Roosevelt recession of 1937-38 put the workers on the defensive and allowed labor bosses to consolidate their control. For example, after the disastrous defeat in the Little Steel strikes in 1937, Phil Murray, Lewis's heir apparent, took nearly absolute control over SWOC. At the same time, the leaders of the CIO were beginning to retreat from the bold organizing forays of the early days. (52)

The effects of World War II on the labor movement can be seen even before Pearl Harbor. For example, consider the North American Aviation strike of 1941 in Southern California, described by Wyndham Mortimer in one of the few interesting sections of his autobiography. UAW organizers, including Mortimer and Richard Frankenstein, were working closely with the strikers and felt that the "entire aircraft industry on the West Coast was ready to fall into the lap of the CIO like a ripe plum", but at a crucial point in the struggle Frankenstein turned fink and denounced the strike as "communist-led and inspired". Then, for the first time in his administration, Roosevelt sent in US Army troops to break a strike. Mortimer, who blamed Sidney

Hillman for these events, wrote a stinging letter to the CIO's new president, Phil Murray, condemning this sellout, but it was to no avail. (53) Hillman and Roosevelt knew the US would enter the War, and they did not want anything to stop aircraft production. The permanent war economy was winding up.

Despite CIO victories at Ford and Bethlehem Steel in 1941, the labor movement lost momentum because most union leaders accepted the Government's wartime "no-strike pledge". John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers led a spirited resistance to the pledge. In 1942 they left the CIO in disgust, and in the following year they launched militant strikes in flagrant violation of the pledge. But most other labor leaders, including the Communists, refused to follow the UMW's example.

Of course, in Labor's Giant Step Preis attacks the reactionary role of the Communists in the unions after the Nazi attack on Russia in 1941. He summons special indignation when he compares the Communists' activities with those of his comrades in Minneapolis who led the most militant union in the country, Teamster Local 544. In 1941 the Trotskyist leaders of the local, including Farrell Dobbs, had to be imprisoned for "seditious conspiracy" under the new Smith Act in order to allow the AFL to regain control of the militant Minneapolis labor movement. Many of Preis's criticisms of the CP during the War are well-founded, but his Trotskyist politics lead him to exaggerate the degree to which the Communists contributed to the bureaucratization of the CIO in the 1940s. (54)

This process was really rooted, Stan Weir contends, in the "institutionalization of collective bargaining" that occurred under the worst possible terms at the start of World War II. "Compulsory arbitration of grievances became a general pattern through the initiatives of the War Labor Board" in which CIO leaders participated. According to Weir, this led to the degeneration of CIO leadership and to the cementing of the co-operative "tripartite arrangement" between government, labor, and management bureaucrats. (55)

After the amazing national strike wave of 1946 (which idled 4,600,000 workers, twice the number recorded in 1937, the year of the sit-downs), Preis shows how a ruthless anti-labor campaign culminated in the disastrous Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 and the Red Purges. Although strikes continued at a higher level in the late '40s and early '50s than they reached in the '30s, the early militancy of the CIO declined. Cynicism spread among the rank and file while gangsterism and bossism grew within the leadership. (56)

WHAT WERE THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE CIO?

Did the CIO at any time represent a model for "socially conscious unionism"? David Brody argues that many of the new unions continued in the traditional "job conscious" mold established in Gompers's time, but he also says that in the early years the CIO lacked much of the corrupt bossism that characterized the AFL unions. "The unionizing impulse came from the ranks," he writes, "and with it (came) a marked resistance to outside direction." The "recruitment of officers was likewise abnormal," Brody continues. "The rank-and-filers and Left-wingers catapulted into leadership were motivated more by calling than by ambition." (57)

In addition to leaving a tradition of militancy and clean unionism from its early years, the CIO seemed to change its members' attitudes toward capitalism. An interesting study published in 1941 found that 68% of the CIO rubber workers interviewed in Akron expressed little sympathy with the concept of corporate property (only 1% believed in it strongly), while just 33% of rubber workers not in the CIO disapproved of the concept and 15% defended corporate property rights strongly. (58)

The CIO also helped to break down ethnic tensions within the labor movement. In fact, the 1930s might be seen as the most crucial period in the making of a white working class

in the US. This decade witnessed the culmination of a painful series of experiences with industrialism that began with the Yankees and the Irish in the early 19th Century and continued with Italians, Slavs, and Southern "poor whites" in the early 20th Century. The first unified, militant responses to industrialism occurred during the Lawrence textile strike of 1912 and the national steel strike of 1919. During the struggles of the '30s white workers drew on their experiences and those of their fathers and grandfathers and embraced the new industrial unionism of the CIO because they knew it could help to break down many of the old nationalistic prejudices that employers had used to divide them.

Furthermore, the new unionism of the late '30s brought an unprecedented number of black workers into the labor movement and helped to undercut white racism. In their recently republished study, Black Workers and the New Unions (which originally appeared in 1939), Cayton and Mitchell conducted interviews with 900 workers of both races in steel, meatpacking, and railroad car shops, and found that participation in CIO unions had actually modified some of the race prejudices held by white workers. (59) The CIO recruited black workers (200,000 by 1940) because their labor power in some heavy industries was too powerful to be ignored; but in the process its organizers struck important blows at the racism that divided workers in key sectors of the economy. However in the late 1940s CIO leaders halted their Southern organizing efforts and purged the Communists who were the most outspoken advocates of inter-racial organizing; and in the 1950s these leaders moved steadily toward the exclusionary policies of the AFL. (60) The great efforts the labor movement made to achieve racial solidarity in the '30s did not permit a real integration of blacks with the emerging white working class.

Like blacks, women were recruited mainly in the large industries where their labor power could not be ignored. Women's participation in labor struggles increased during the War when they were hired to fill many assembly line

jobs. A few women who organized for the CIO in the '30s and '40s have left us some spirited accounts (61), but for the most part females have been written out of the labor history of these decades. For example, in all of the laudatory writing about David Dubinsky by Bernstein and others, the rank and file of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union is never mentioned. (62) It is as though Dubinsky organized the entire union by himself! Women played crucial strike-support roles at Minneapolis in '34 and at Flint in '37 as well as in other conflicts, and they participated in important organizing drives in the garment industry among others. (63) Now women are in the process of writing the history they made then.

The CIO's development as a class-conscious movement was limited also by its dependence on the Democratic Party. One of the reasons that so many young workers, including many militants, rushed into the New Deal coalition was that they thought their newly organized power would put them in a controlling position within the Democratic Party. Many workers liked Roosevelt simply because he "gave" jobs to the unemployed and "helped" unions organize. Others, who realized that FDR was not a consistent friend of labor, thought that they could force the President to serve their interests. Like John L. Lewis, they made the mistake of thinking they could withdraw the massive support they mustered for Roosevelt and the Democrats in 1936.

Most workers chose FDR and his party because the Democrats presented a "good", humanitarian, and at times pro-working-class image, while the Republicans presented a "bad" callous image because of their close relationship with big business. During the '30s there didn't seem to be any other real alternative. The factionalized Socialist Party lost its contact with the working class in the '20s, and the Communist Party, which had a strong position in the CIO, stopped criticizing Roosevelt and the New Deal during the Popular Front. Nevertheless, working-class discontent with the Democrats increased in the late '30s as a result of the Roosevelt recession, rising unemployment,

and repression of labor organizers. When Lewis attacked the Democrats and split with Roosevelt in 1940, there was a potential opening for the formation of a labor party, as Art Preis suggests. (64) But Lewis endorsed Wilkie and the AFL and CIO bosses lined up solidly behind FDR.

When the US entered the War, these same union officials, including many leaders of the new unions, gathered before Roosevelt like "feudal princes offering their services to a king", and, as the Government exercised more and more control over collective bargaining, labor bosses became more and more dependent upon the favors of the Democratic Party. Although thousands of workers, led by Lewis and the United Mine Workers, rebelled against the war-time restrictions, Roosevelt won more support by shedding his tarnished image as "Dr. New Deal" and adopting the more appealing identity of "Dr. Win-the-War". During all these years the Left, and especially the Communist Party, failed to offer a good critique of Roosevelt's Party or a viable alternative to it.

CONCLUSION

Why is the working-class history of the 1930s important to the Left today? First of all, it is necessary to understand the history of the working class in order to appreciate its accomplishments and to evaluate its defeats. After telling Studs Terkel about an extraordinary strike among the militant Cuban cigar makers in Tampa in the '30s, Jose Yglesias explained that the solidarity of his native community and the critical intelligence of his parents and relatives made it difficult for him to read political analysts, "even those of the New Left", who talked in a "derogatory way" about glorifying the workers. "The working class I knew," Yglesias concluded, "was just great." (65)

If historians of the Old Left protected the workers and their leaders too zealously, those of the New Left projected the failures of the post-World War II years too far back into the past. In focusing on the class collaboration of union leaders, they ignored the militancy of the rank and file.

Staughton Lynd's "personal histories" of the CIO show that this militancy had great political potential in the 1930s and suggest that it survived into the 1970s. Lynd's essay in this issue shows that the Left, and specifically the Communist Party, failed to respond to worker insurgency in one crucial industry, steel. It failed in other industries as well. Socialists of today have something of value to learn by studying the reasons for those failures. If there is a "lesson" in the labor history of the 1930s, it is this: The Left must be flexible enough to respond to the specific needs of local militants and to raise political demands that are relevant to those needs.



Victorious Sit-Down Strikers, 1937

FOOTNOTES

1. George Rawick: "Working Class Self-Activity", Radical America, Volume 3, Number 2 (1969), Page 27.
2. Ibid.
3. Guido Baldi: "Theses on Mass Worker and Social Capital", Radical America, Volume 6, Number 3 (1972), Page 16.
4. Irving Bernstein: Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941 (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1969).
5. Staughton Lynd: "Crowd, Rank and File, and Party in the Organization of the CIO", unpublished paper presented at Midwest Regional Conference of the Radical Historians' Caucus, Evanston, Illinois, October 14, 1972, Page 1.
6. Review in Labor History, Volume 12, Number 1 (1971), Page 167.
7. David Brody: "Labor and the Great Depression: Interpretive Prospects", Labor History, Volume 13, Number 2 (1972), Page 239.
8. Art Preis: Labor's Giant Step (New York, Pathfinder Press, 1964), Page 32.
9. Saul D. Alinsky: John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography (New York, Vintage, 1970, originally published in 1949), Page 72.
10. E. P. Thompson: The Making of the English Working Class (New York, Vintage, 1963), Pages 757-758.
11. Bernstein: Turbulent Years, Chapter 6.
12. Sidney Fine: Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-37 (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1969), Pages 123-124 and 127.
13. Ibid., Pages 142 and 369, Note 63, a quote by C. K. Beckman, one of the local leaders of the sit-down.
14. Ibid., Pages 144, 172, and 267.
15. Staughton Lynd: "What Is Radical History?": Remarks made at panel discussion during the Organization of American Historians meeting, Los Angeles, April 1970. The importance of Johnson's role is also emphasized by Preis in Labor's Giant Step, Page 57.

16. On the dangers of the inevitability fallacy see Brody: "Labor and the Great Depression", Page 244.

17. Alinsky: John L. Lewis, Page 87.

18. Donald H. Grubbs: Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the New Deal (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

19. Mark Naison: "The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the CIO", Radical America, Volume 2, Number 5 (1968), Pages 52-53.

20. Remarks made by Mitchell to a meeting of the Radical Historians Caucus in Cambridge, Massachusetts, October 5, 1972.

21. Bernstein: Turbulent Years, Page 243.

22. Ibid., Page 229.

23. See Charles P. Larrowe: "The Great Maritime Strike of '34", Labor History, Volume 11, Number 4 (1970), Part I, Page 417.

24. Bernstein: Turbulent Years, Page 259, and Fine: Sit-Down, Page 171.

25. Grubbs: Cry From the Cotton, Pages 63 and 75.

26. Mitchell interview, October 5, 1972. The co-founder of the STFU also noted that the Union took over several of Huey Long's "Share Our Wealth" clubs in northeast Arkansas.

27. Theodore Draper: "Communists and Miners, 1928-1933", Dissent (Spring 1972), Pages 379-380.

28. Alinsky: John L. Lewis, Pages 152-153.

29. Draper, previously cited, and Jim Dann: "Communists Organize the Factories in the Fields", New England Free Press pamphlet (Boston, 1970).

30. Ibid., Page 392. See also Irving Bernstein: Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1919-1933 (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1960), Pages 20-22, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.: The Politics of Upheaval, Volume III of The Age of Roosevelt (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1960), Pages 190-195.

31. For important statistics on shifting social and ethnic base of CP membership, see Nathan Glazer: The Social Basis of American Communism (New York, Praeger, 1959), Pages 92, 114, and 116. For criticism of the CP's role in

the CIO, see Naison: "The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the CIO", previously cited.

32. Wyndham Mortimer: Organize! (Boston, Beacon Press, 1972).

33. Len DeCaux: Labor Radical: From the Wobblies to the CIO (Boston, Beacon Press, 1970), Pages 239-240.

34. James R. Prickett: "Communism and Factionalism in the UAW, 1939-1947", Science and Society, Volume 32, Number 3 (1968), Pages 257-277.

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36. Don Tormey: Remarks made at the Radical Historians' Regional Conference, MIT, April 15, 1972. See also Julius Emspack's narrative from the Columbia Oral History Project, recently published by the New York Times.

37. Farrell Dobbs: Teamster Rebellion (New York, Pathfinder Press, 1972), Pages 41-52.

38. For the Communists' view of the period, see Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais: Labor's Untold Story (New York, United Electrical Workers, 1955), Chapters 9 and 10.

39. Brian Peterson: "Working Class Communism", Radical America, Volume 5, Number 1 (1971), Pages 39-44.

40. Staughton Lynd: "Guerrilla History in Gary", Liberation (October 1969).

41. H. L. Mitchell interview from Columbia Oral History Collection, published on microcard by the New York Times (1972), and Claude Williams interview in Studs Terkel: Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression (New York, Avon, 1971), Pages 328-332.

42. Staughton Lynd (editor): "Personal Histories of the CIO", Radical America, Volume 5, Number 3 (1971), Pages 49-76.

43. Terkel: Hard Times.

44. See Roger Daniels: Bonus Army (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood, 1972), and Daniel J. Leab: "'United We Eat': The Creation and Organization of the Unemployed Councils in 1930", Labor History, Volume 8, Number 4 (1967), Pages 300-315.

45. Woody Guthrie : Bound for Glory (New York, Avon, 1971).

46. See Ronald Radosh : "The Corporate Ideology of American Labor Leaders from Gompers to Hillman", in James Weinstein and David Eakins (editors): For A New America : Essays in History and Politics from 'Studies on the Left', 1959-1967 (New York, Vintage, 1970), Pages 125-151.

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48. Liston Pope : Millhands and Preachers : A Study of Gastonia (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967), and Draper : "Communists and Miners".

49. Dann : "Communists Organize the Factories in the Fields", Pages 79-88.

50. Dobbs : Teamster Rebellion, Pages 49-60, and Bernstein : Turbulent Years, Pages 232-252. The Trotskyist leadership role is also documented by interviews in Red Buffalo, Numbers 2 and 3 (1972), Pages 84-86.

51. For developments in the '50s see Ronald Radosh : American Labor and US Foreign Policy : The Cold War in the Unions from Gompers to Lovestone (New York, Vintage, 1970), Pages 304-452.

52. Preis : Labor's Giant Step, Chapter 9.

53. Mortimer to Murray, June 18, 1941, in an appendix of Organize!

54. Ibid., Part II.

55. Stan Weir : "Class Forces in the Seventies", Radical America, Volume 6, Number 3 (1972), Pages 41-43.

56. Preis : Labor's Giant Step, Parts III to VIII.

57. David Brody : "Career Leadership and American Trade Unionism", in F. C. Jaher (editor): The Age of Industrialism (New York, Free Press, 1968), Page 299.

58. Alfred Winslow Jones : Life, Liberty, and Property (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1941), Pages 378-379.

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60. See Sumner Rosen: "Black Workers in the CIO Era, 1935-1955", in Julius Jacobson (editor): The Negro and the American Labor Movement (New York, Anchor, 1968), Pages 188-208.

61. See Rose Pesotta: Bread Upon the Waters (edited by J. N. Beffell, New York, 1944), the biography of a CIO organizer who took part in the Goodyear and Flint strikes. Interviews with women organizers of the '30s can be found in Studs Terkel: Division Street America (New York, Pantheon, 1961), Pages 57-71, and in "Mass Strike in Minneapolis", Red Buffalo, Numbers 2 and 3 (1972), Pages 73-83.

62. See, for example, "David Dubinsky, The ILGWU, and the Labor Movement", Labor History, Volume 9, Special Supplement (1968), and Bernstein: Turbulent Years, Pages 84-89 and 708-712.

63. See Dobbs: Teamster Rebellion, Pages 81-82 and 86, and Fine: Sit-Down, Pages 200-201 and 269-270. On the direct role of women strikers at Gastonia, see Pope: Millhands and Preachers, Page 258.

64. Preis: Labor's Giant Step, Chapter 9.

65. Yglesias interview in Terkel: Hard Times, Page 112.

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

James O'Brien, Co-editor

NEW FALL PAMPHLETS INCLUDE

Italy After Mussolini, by John Hewetson: narrative account of the little known role of the Italian working class in mass actions which overthrew Fascism, and the counter-revolutionary activities of the Allies in re-establishing bourgeois control, reprinted from 1945 Freedom Press edition (40 pages, 50¢)

RA Reprints

Pictures From My Life, by Marcia Salo Rizzi: striking graphics illustrate a personal record of the conflicts and struggles of a woman's life; printed as a special supplement to the July-August 1972 issue of Radical America (24 pages, 40¢)

The Rise and Fall of the Unions, by James Boggs: reprint of Chapter 1 of The American Revolution: Pages from a Worker's Notebook, written in 1963; an insightful sketch and interpretation of the CIO decline, the emergence of automation, and the changing struggles of workers (New England Free Press, 20 pages, 15¢)

Works from Other Publishers

Prolegomena on the Return of the Repressed in History: gorgeous text of words and pictures of revolutionary struggles and personal defiance against oppressors of all kinds, collected and designed in the best traditions of the IWW (Solidarity Book Shop, 64 pages, \$1.75)

Manual for Revolutionary Leaders, by M. Velli: elaborate critique of the estrangement and personification of powers, and the function of the "revolutionary leader" in maintaining this division by stifling the uncontrolled initiatives of the masses; compiled, edited, and illustrated by Lorraine and Fredy Perlman in an astonishing array of colors and patterns, exceeding the design of The Incoherence of the Intellectual (Black & Red Press, 261 pages, \$2.50)

Punching Out, by Martin Glaberman: reprint of 1952 pamphlet containing a personal, forceful description of workers' struggles to gain control over production (Sojourner Truth Organization, 32 pages, 10¢)

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Rana Mozelle, by Paul Garon: Number Four of the Series, a delirious text by the noted writer on American Blues music (16 pages, illustrated by drawings of frogs, 50¢)

The Possibility of Radicalism in the Early 1930's:

The Case of Steel

By Staughton Lynd

Recent historians associated with the Left have found industrial union organizing in the 1930s puzzling. We have declined to join in the liberal celebration of its results, pointing to "the partial integration of company and union bureaucracies" in administering CIO contracts (C. Wright Mills) (1) and the CIO's "definition of union organizing that made it impossible . . . to concentrate on political organization that challenged capitalist institutions" (Mark Naison) (2). We have dwelt on happenings which for liberal historians are merely preliminary or transitory, such as the mass strikes in Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco in 1934 (3), the improvisation from below of local industrial unions and rank-and-file action committees (4), or the many indications of interest in a Labor Party or Farmer-Labor Party (5).

Note: This essay brings together material some of which was initially presented in "Guerrilla History in Gary", Liberation (October 1969); "What Happened to the Militancy of the CIO? Some Rank-and-File Views", a paper read at the American Historical Association meeting (December 1970); and "Personal Histories of the Early CIO", Radical America (May-June 1971), reprinted as a pamphlet by the New England Free Press. A collection of the interviews which are the basis of this work will be published by Beacon Press

But this is not enough. In the 1890s, the drive for industrial unionism under Eugene Debs led to a confrontation with a Democratic President, recognition of the need for independent labor politics, and the formation of the Socialist Party. There was a step-by-step transition, first to economic organization on a broader scale, then to political organization, very much in the manner outlined in *The Communist Manifesto*. This did not happen in the 1930s (or at first glance appears not to have happened), and we must ask why. I believe that there is a connection between the difficulty experienced by New Left historians in answering this question, and the difficulty experienced by New Left working-class organizers. If we had a better idea how radicals should have acted while unions were being organized, we might better understand how they should act today.

This essay considers the case of steel.

I

When the National Recovery Administration came into existence in June 1933, the feeble AFL union in the steel industry — the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and

in 1973 under the title Rank and File: Personal Accounts of Working-Class Organizing, edited by Alice and Staughton Lynd. I should like to thank Professor Carroll Moody of Northern Illinois University for his remarkable scholarly generosity during my work on rank-and-file movements in steel. He permitted me to examine not only a first draft of a study on the rank-and-file movement in the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers, but the notes on which that study is based. I have made clear in the footnotes those few cases in which a statement in the present essay is made on the authority of Professor Moody's research. In general, however, his research makes it possible for me to advance more confidently conclusions which I had reached independently on the basis of personal recollections of steelworkers and of documents they had saved.

Tin Workers — reported less than 5,000 members. By the time of the Amalgamated's annual convention in April 1934 its membership had increased to a number variously estimated at 50,000 to 200,000. (6) Harvey O'Connor, then a labor reporter living in Pittsburgh, remembers it this way :

Along came the New Deal, and then came the NRA, and the effect was electric all up and down those valleys. The mills began reopening somewhat, and the steelworkers read in the newspapers about this NRA Section 7A that guaranteed you the right to organize. All over the steel country union locals sprang up spontaneously. Not by virtue of the Amalgamated Association; they couldn't have cared less. But these locals sprang up at Duquesne, Homestead, and Braddock. You name the mill town and there was a local there, carrying a name like the "Blue Eagle" or the "New Deal" local. These people had never had any experience in unionism. All they knew was that, by golly, the time had come when they could organize and the Government guaranteed them the right to organize ! (7)

This remarkable organizing drive was carried out by rank-and-file steelworkers with little help from full-time organizers of the Amalgamated. At the US Steel Edgar Thompson Works in Braddock, for example, an Amalgamated organizer provided membership cards and volunteer organizers from the mill returned in a week with 500 of them signed. (8) Walter Galenson wrongly terms the Amalgamated organizing campaign of 1933 "unsuccessful". (9) As a matter of fact, the Amalgamated drive between June 1933 and April 1934 signed up about the same number of steelworkers that the Steel Workers Organizing Committee, using 200 full-time organizers, signed up in a comparable period of time, from June 1936 to March 1937.

The self-organization of the rank and file was at least as effective as the top-down professionalism of the CIO, which had far greater resources at its disposal. Galenson himself

quotes Lee Pressman as saying that as of the spring of '37 SWOC could not have won an NLRB election "on the basis of our own membership or the results of the organizing campaign to date" in either Big or Little Steel. (10) The best testimony to this effect comes from the man who collected SWOC dues, David J. McDonald, later president of the United Steelworkers of America. "Contrary to union propaganda — some of which I helped to write — the steelworkers did not fall all over themselves to sign a pledge card with the SWOC," McDonald states in his autobiography.

What we hoped would be a torrent turned out, instead, to be a trickle. Under our arrangement with the Amalgamated, it would charter a local union as soon as we had enough men signed up in a plant to form the nucleus of an effective organization. Oftentimes the locals consisted of the half-dozen men daring enough to sign the charter application. When these skeleton requests straggled in, we assigned impressively high lodge numbers in the hope that outsiders would think we had that many locals. Only Murray and I knew how thin the tally was, although Lewis would insist on the truth whenever I visited Washington, then would shake his head in wonderment at the lack of progress. (11)

According to McDonald, SWOC membership was a "shaky 82,000" at the end of 1936, and when US Steel signed a contract in March 1937 SWOC had signed up only 7% of its employees.

McDonald offers a hatful of explanations for steelworkers' absence of response to SWOC: a 50-year tradition of non-unionism, the fear of losing jobs, and the fact that some workers "were as apprehensive about dictatorship from an international union as they were of arm-twisting from their employer". Only the last of these makes any sense when one recalls that just three years before the same steelworkers had enthusiastically organized local unions. The question presents itself: Why did the organizing drive of

1933-34, strongly supported by the rank and file, fail to achieve the union recognition accomplished by the SWOC drive of 1936-37 with weaker rank-and-file backing?

The rank and file sought to achieve union recognition through the Amalgamated in 1933, 1934, and 1935. The 1933 effort was the by-product of a spontaneous strike by coal miners in the "captive mines" of western Pennsylvania owned by the steel companies. (12) These miners joined the United Mine Workers after the passage of the NIRA just as steelworkers were joining the Amalgamated. Late in July, miners at the H. C. Frick mines owned by US Steel struck for recognition of their new UMW locals and the right to elect checkweighmen. UMW president John L. Lewis agreed with President Roosevelt that the men would go back to work and that their grievances would be referred to a special government board. The men refused, their representatives voting 123 to 4 against returning to work for the present. A 44-year-old Irish immigrant named Martin Ryan emerged as their spokesman. By the end of September 1933 70,000 miners were on strike.

Then the strike spread to steelworkers. On September 26 miners marched into Clairton, Pennsylvania, where the largest coke plant in the United States made fuel for US Steel mills throughout the Monongahela Valley. Hundreds of coal miners and an estimated half of the work force at Clairton "circled the gates of the Clairton steel and by-products works in an endless march, day and night". Meanwhile at Weirton, West Virginia, 50 miles away, 12,000 more steelworkers went out demanding recognition of their new lodges of the Amalgamated. The national president of the Amalgamated, Michael Tighe, declared both the Clairton and the Weirton strike "outlaw".

John L. Lewis and Philip Murray, leaders of the UMW and future leaders of the SWOC and CIO, persisted in attempting to get the miners back to work. O'Connor describes the part played by Murray:

Vice President Murray of the United Mine Workers summoned the rank-and-file leaders to Pitts-

burgh. "Today," he warned them, "you are fighting the coal companies; but tonight, if you remain on strike, you will be fighting the Government of the United States. Today you are conducting a strike; tonight you will be conducting a rebellion. Today we may say we are going to defy the greatest friend we've ever had in the history of this nation (President Roosevelt). But I tell you, friends, he can turn against you as strong as he's been for you. He can call out the Army and Navy."

Martin Ryan, leader of the striking miners, answered Murray: "Why do you ask 75,000 men to go back to work instead of telling one man (President Moses of the Frick Company) to sign the contract?" The rank-and-file delegates returned to Fayette County and called 20,000 miners together to consider Murray's back-to-work order. The miners voted to continue their strike until the Frick Company signed a contract.

Finally, on October 30, 1933, Lewis and Murray signed a contract on behalf of Frick's miners with none other than Myron Taylor, the same man who would sign a contract with them in March 1937 concerning steelworkers employed by US Steel. Historians differ as to how much this contract achieved for the miners, but whatever it achieved was thanks to the pressure from below of men who struck without authorization and who refused Lewis's and Murray's orders to go back to work. The striking steelworkers achieved nothing. At Weirton, the strikers returned to work with a promise that an election for union representation would be held on December 15. The election turned out to be an election for company-union representatives. In the words of O'Connor: "The grand tactical plan for the united front of steel's mine and mill workers, conceived on the spur of the moment by local rank-and-file leaders in both industries, had been scuttled by a stronger united front, that of Washington, the union leaders, and the steel companies."

The leaders of the Weirton strike, Billy Long and Mel Moore, now joined with other presidents of new Amalgamated lodges to launch a second effort to unionize steel. On March 25, 1934, 257 delegates from 50 of the newly-formed lodges met in Pittsburgh to plan strategy for the Amalgamated convention the following month. (13) First among equals was Clarence Irwin, president of the Amalgamated lodge at the Brier Hill works of Youngstown Sheet and Tube, Youngstown, Ohio, and of the Sixth District of the Amalgamated, which included Youngstown, Canton-Masillon-Mansfield, and Cleveland.

Irwin is dead now, but Robert R. R. Brooks of Yale University interviewed him in the late 1930s, and further information can be gleaned from a scrapbook in the possession of his wife. Irwin was the antithesis of the demagogue usually placed at the head of crowds by historians. 42 years old in 1934, he had worked at steel mills in the Mahoning Valley since 1906, and had belonged to the Amalgamated since 1910. He was chairman of the strike committee in his mill during the 1919 steel strike. He was married and had three children. He was a skilled roller and had voted Democratic all his life, except in 1932, when he voted for Norman Thomas.

Irwin describes the other rank-and-file leaders as very much like himself:

Almost all of us were middle-aged family men, well paid, and of Anglo-Saxon origin. Most of us were far better off than the average steelworker and didn't have much to gain from taking part in the movement except a certain amount of personal prestige. Almost all of us could have done better for ourselves if we had stuck with the companies and not bothered about the rest of the men. But for various reasons we didn't.

We were sure, he goes on,

that the mass of steelworkers wanted industrial unionism, and so did we. But it wasn't clear to us until we set out to get it that we would have to fight not only the companies but our own international officers and even the Government. The process of learning was slow and painful, and a lot of us dropped by the way. (14)

Contrary to John L. Lewis's subsequent allegations, "All these fellows had a union inheritance of one kind or another." Long's father had been a militant in the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers, and Earl Forbeck's father had been a Knight of Labor. (15) Moreover, the rank-and-file presidents of the new lodges developed the practice of calling together lodge representatives in district conferences. These district meetings had no constitutional standing. They had been used years before for the purpose of informal discussion of common organizational problems, and in the course of time had died out. Now they were revived, at first with the sanction of the national officers, who attended and spoke at many of the conferences. In time more or less permanent officers were chosen for each district. (16)

The March 25 gathering brought together delegates from lodges all over the country. A general strike was in progress in Toledo; the very day the steelworkers met a national strike in auto had been averted; general strikes in Minneapolis and San Francisco were little more than a month in the future. Steelworkers, too, turned to the strike weapon. Delegates decided to take back to their lodges, for proposed presentation to the Amalgamated convention on April 17, the following strategy: All lodges should request recognition from management at the same time; if recognition is denied, a strike date should be set; the Auto Workers, the Mine Workers, and the Railroad Workers should be approached with the idea that these three groups, together with steelworkers, should act together if necessary to gain collective bargaining for any one group. What was envisioned was a national strike, and if need be a national general strike, for union recognition.

The Amalgamated convention adopted this strategy. The convention also adopted resolutions to the effect that the Committee of Ten rank-and-file leaders which had drawn up the strike program should be included in all negotiations arising from it, that no lodge should sign an agreement until all could sign at once, that full-time Amalgamated organizers should be elected rather than appointed, and that the national union should no longer have the power to declare locally-initiated strikes unauthorized. (17) The new members of the union appeared to have taken it over from the incumbent leadership.

The rank-and-file leaders understandably found this historic opportunity frightening. "Most of us were capable local or district leaders," Irwin recalls, "but we had very little idea what the national picture was like.... We were completely unprepared for a strike. We had no funds, no central leadership, no national organization except the Amalgamated's officers, and they were opposed to strike action." Irwin and his co-workers began to look for help.

They turned first to a group of four intellectuals: Heber Blankenhorn, Harold Ruttenberg, Harvey O'Connor, and Stephen Raushenbush. Blankenhorn had edited the Interchurch World Commission report on the 1919 steel strike. He was close to John L. Lewis and Senator Wagner, and later helped to create the LaFollette Civil Liberties Committee. Ruttenberg was a student at the University of Pittsburgh doing research on the steel industry, O'Connor a labor journalist who during this period published Mellon's Millions, and Raushenbush an investigator for the Nye Committee.

Appearing at the 1934 Amalgamated convention with a typewriter, Ruttenberg (and O'Connor) assisted the rank-and-file delegates in "putting together the resolutions they wanted the way they wanted them and getting things going". (18) Thereafter they functioned as a behind-the-scenes leadership group cryptically known (because Blankenhorn in particular was concerned lest his association with the rank and file become public) as "The Big Four". "Although they had no money and had to work on the q.t.," remembers

Irwin, "(they) gave us something like national leadership. In a way, they were a forerunner of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee."

I believe it is fair to characterize the Big Four (with the partial exception of O'Connor) as Social Democratic intellectuals, in the sense that they had a tendency to rely on publicity and government intervention rather than on the collective power of the workers, and to avoid co-operation with the Communist Party.

But four men with typewriters and connections could not really be the functional equivalent of a SWOC. According to the decisions of the Amalgamated convention, all lodges were to ask for recognition on May 21, and if recognition was refused a strike date was to be set for the middle of June. On May 7 Irwin wrote to Ruttenberg asking if Ruttenberg could get him the addresses of the men who had led the 1933 strike in the captive mines, and of the leaders of the Steel and Metal Workers Industrial Union (SMWIU).

The SMWIU was one of the dual unions sponsored by the Communist Party during the so-called Third Period of international Communist strategy. (19) It was founded in August 1932 and claimed a membership of 10,000 to 15,000. The SMWIU justly denounced the NRA. It called on working people to rely on their own power rather than on Presidential promises, government boards, and so-called labor leaders. By May 1934 it had led local strikes, for instance in Warren, Ohio; East Chicago, Indiana; and Ambridge, Pennsylvania. These had often ended in violent defeat.

After the Warren strike, which resulted in the discharge of many strikers and the departure from the city of an entire community of Finnish steelworkers, the local Communist Party "was convinced of the impossibility to organize independent labor unions in opposition to the old AFL" (20) and sought to persuade William Z. Foster and other national Party leaders to abandon dual unionism in steel. The rank-and-file movement in the Amalgamated offered the SMWIU an opportunity to overcome its isolation from the mass of steelworkers. And the SMWIU offered the rank-and-file movement, which had lost its own local strikes at

Clairton and Weirton, the national structure and resources so badly needed if a national steel strike were to become a reality.

The difficulty was that in May 1934 the SMWIU had not abandoned the dual unionist line. SMWIU literature urged its members and sympathizers simultaneously to "take the lead in the organization of united committees" to implement the decisions of the convention and to prepare for a strike — and "to build the SMWIU into a powerful organization in their mill". (21) This was a tactic which looked two ways at once. It never has worked, it never will work, and it did not work in the spring of 1934.

Irwin and Ruttenberg arranged a meeting with the SMWIU leadership for May 20. They urged all members of the Committee of Ten and of the Big Four to be there so as "to determine (in Irwin's words) a central plan of attack, set up a central office with a secretary, determine a uniform method of demanding recognition, find out what help the SMWIU could give us, and discover what the national officers were going to do to bust up our plans". Three days before the meeting, Irwin wrote to Ruttenberg that the only alliance which should be sought with the SMWIU was cooperation on the conduct of the strike. That co-operation should be basically through local joint committees which would work in unison even against the orders of the Amalgamated national office, Irwin believed. (22)

Tragically, Irwin was unable to attend the meeting because his wife was seriously ill. He was represented by Ruttenberg, subsequently research director for SWOC, co-author with Clinton Golden of *The Dynamics of Industrial Democracy*, and steel-company executive. Blankenhorn was apparently not at the meeting, but his taped reminiscences make it clear that he was part of the discussion.

There were telegrams to me, and as a matter of fact I was in Pittsburgh when that meeting was held, and talked with Pat Cush (one of the SMWIU leaders) and the SMWIU boys, and tried to get the brass tacks on it, and in front of them I advised

the rank-and-filers: "If these boys won't walk out of here and keep their mouths shut instead of making public pronouncements, you have no choice but simply to say that they came and saw you but you had nothing to do with them. If they have any paid members to deliver, let them deliver them quietly."

Blankenhorn and Ruttenberg persuaded the rank-and-file leaders not to work with the SMWIU. (23)

Yet responsibility for the failure of the May 20 meeting falls equally on the SMWIU. In contrast to Irwin's proposals for co-operation visible at a local level but behind-the-scenes nationally, "They (the SMWIU) wanted the rank-and-file group and the SMWIU to issue a joint statement from this meeting, a joint call for a joint convention to focus public attention on the issues, and local organizations to issue joint statements and call joint mass meetings. It was perfectly clear that they wanted to formalize the whole affair, and to be sure that the SMWIU was in the limelight as an organization. As soon as they had withdrawn (from the meeting), the rank-and-file group voted thumbs down on the whole proposition. We'd have been smeared immediately as Communists if we had accepted."

These words from Irwin's interview with Brooks are perhaps more those of Ruttenberg than those of Irwin, who was not at the meeting. (24) But the fact remains that the SMWIU approach counterposed a Left dual union not only to the national structure of the Amalgamated, but also to the independent local lodges that the steelworkers had built for themselves. Then and later the rank-and-filers showed themselves quite able to stand up to Red-baiting, and had the SMWIU not placed so much emphasis on its own organization, I believe united action might have been possible. The fact that (to look ahead) the rank-and-file leaders and the former SMWIU leaders easily established a working relationship the next November, after the SMWIU finally abandoned dual unionism, is strong evidence to this effect.

In May and June, after the failure of the May 20 meeting, things went from bad to worse. On May 22 five of the rank-

and-file leaders went to the national office of the Amalgamated and demanded \$100,000 from the union to help run the strike, the use of the union's printing press, and rooms in the union's building for strike headquarters. They were contemptuously refused. Irwin then proposed to the rest of the Committee of Ten "that we would take over the running of the strike altogether, call upon the lodges for money (my lodge had already put up a hundred dollars), and select a secretary from our own group". Only two other members of the Committee supported this leap into the unknown. "I was never so disgusted in my life," Irwin remembers.

At this point the four intellectuals stepped back onto center stage, urging the rank-and-filers to take their campaign to Washington, where they could attract national press attention and hopefully embarrass the President into intervening on their behalf. Desperate, the rank-and-file leaders agreed. They got the publicity, but killed the possibility of a successful strike. As one of them commented after it was all over, "They spent most of their time in Washington in a futile attempt to 'see Roosevelt'. This running around after Roosevelt created the impression among the steelworkers that a strike was unnecessary, that Roosevelt would step in at the last minute and help them" (25) The precious weeks which might have been used for local strike preparation were squandered, as the national secretary of the SMWIU rightly observed. (26) In the First District of the Amalgamated near Pittsburgh, where more than a thousand steelworkers gathered to support the strike movement on May 27, a meeting a month later, after the strike had collapsed, attracted only 53. (27)

It now appears that in directing the rank-and-file leaders to Washington, Ruttenberg, Blankenhorn, and Raushenbush acted as agents for John L. Lewis. In interviews conducted by the Pennsylvania State Oral History Project in 1968 and 1969, Ruttenberg stated that a steel strike "did not come off because of the intervention of John Lewis and Philip Murray, who counseled against it for fear that an abortive strike would thwart their contemplated plans to move in and really organize the steel industry". The UMW had no con-

tact with rank-and-file steelworkers until spring of 1934, Ruttenberg went on. "At that point they began to exercise influence through myself, and they assigned John Brophy from the UMW to be the liaison man." "Blankenhorn was the one who kept telling John Lewis and Philip Murray that they should get control of the rank-and-file committee and



use them as a basis for their unionizing work." "And so the counsel that I got from Blankenhorn, which I in turn passed on to the steelworkers, was not to strike now because John Lewis was going to come here and have a big organizing campaign that would stand a chance of being successful." Raushenbush, for his part, "said that we have to show strength among the rank-and-file steelworkers in order to encourage John Lewis to take the risk.... And so you had the whole threatened strike and activity to influence John Lewis to come in as well as to influence Congress to pass a National Labor Relations Act."

Through Ruttenberg, Blankenhorn, and Raushenbush the rank-and-file leaders were brought before Senator Wagner, the sponsor of that act, who "gave them a lecture about not engaging in a premature strike and gave them a lecture that John Lewis was 'going to come in here and do this job right and don't you fellows mess it up'". (28) Putting this evidence together with Lewis's role during the coal and steel strikes of 1933, the hypothesis suggests itself that if Lewis

succeeded in 1937 where the rank and file failed in 1934, it was partly because Lewis did his best to make sure that industrial unionism would come to steel only if he controlled it.

Meantime the steel companies had disdainfully refused to recognize the Amalgamated lodges, and the strike date approached. The companies placed large orders for the purchase of arms and, at least in Gary, arranged to house strike breakers in the mills should a strike occur. (29) As tension mounted the Amalgamated leadership called a special convention in Pittsburgh for mid-June, the time at which, according to the mandate of the convention, a strike date was to be set if recognition had been refused. Reporters, government mediators, delegates, and a confused group of rank-and-file leaders assembled for the convention.

The strategy of President Roosevelt, of the Amalgamated leadership, and apparently of Ruttenberg and associates and of John L. Lewis, was to have William Green, AFL president, come to the convention and propose yet another government labor board as an alternative to a walkout. Ruttenberg reports on the mood of labor officials and government representatives at the convention: "Social revolution was on hand. Bill Green was their only hope." Clinton Golden was one of three people who met Green at the train and "coached him as to what to say. He said it." (30) The strike was called off. As the news came over the radio in the bars in Braddock, steelworkers tore up their union cards. (31) Ruttenberg also tells us that Irwin got dead drunk and lost the confidence of many delegates, a situation for which Ruttenberg appears to feel he had no responsibility.

There was to be one more effort at unionization by the rank and file, in 1935. During the summer of 1934, Irwin "tried to keep the rank-and-file movement together by supporting the rank-and-file slate of officers that was running in the Amalgamated's fall referendum". In the October 1934 convention of the AFL a resolution was passed urging the AFL executive council to take action in organizing steel. Meanwhile the government board created in June to head off the threatened walkout had done nothing. "Production was

picking up," Irwin remembers, "and the steelworkers were stirring again."

More important than any of these events was the fact that — six months too late — the Communist Party abandoned dual unionism. SMWIU chapters dissolved so that their members could join the Amalgamated. According to Irwin, in November 1934 rank-and-filers and SMWIU finally got together. Money became available for steelworkers to travel to conferences (32), and a series of meetings began to heat up the idea of a national strike again. But whereas in the spring of 1934 the Communist Party wanted a steel strike only if the SMWIU could publicly help to lead it, in the spring of 1935 the Communist Party wanted a strike only if expulsion from the Amalgamated could be avoided. Remaining part of the organization they had previously scorned became the primary goal of Party members in steel.

These forces came to a head at a meeting of 400 rank-and-file steelworkers and 100 rank-and-file miners in Pittsburgh February 3, 1935. Our four intellectual friends played their by-now-familiar role. Ruttenberg wrote to Irwin before the conference warning him of Communist influence, and O'Connor wrote to Irwin after the conference, acting as an intermediary for an unnamed third party in Washington, to urge the rank and file not to act by itself but to consider co-operation with a committee of the AFL executive council to organize steel. (33)

Lewis, too, played a predictable part. Just as Michael Tighe, president of the Amalgamated, threatened to expel from the Amalgamated any steelworkers who attended the February 3 meeting, so Pat Fagan, district director of the UMW, issued similar warnings to dissident miners. After the meeting both men carried out their threats, Fagan stating: "You can't be a member of the UMW and be affiliated with a Red group. That meeting was absolutely Red. Those fellows don't believe in authority or law and order or anything else. They're an asinine crowd of parlor bolshevists!" (34) This is the same Pat Fagan who in April 1936 led a delegation of the Pennsylvania AFL state convention to the national Amalgamated convention nearby, and proposed that

the Amalgamated accept \$500,000 from John L. Lewis and work with him to organize steel.

Ruttenberg, Tighe, and Fagan notwithstanding, the gathering of rank-and-file steelworkers and miners took place as scheduled. It was an extraordinary occasion. Mr. and Mrs. Irwin, Bill Spang, Mel Moore, Roy Hallas, Cecil Allen, and Lew Morris represented the rank-and-file leadership in the Amalgamated. Present on behalf of the rank-and-file miners was Martin Ryan, leader of the 1933 strike in the captive mines. The lesson of 1933-34 had been learned. A resolution was adopted that "The steelworkers know from their own experience that they can secure no help in their struggles from the labor boards or other Federal agencies, but that their only defense...is the power of their own organization, exercised by the calling of strikes if and when necessary."

This time, organization was not left to afterthought. A committee was named to open headquarters in Pittsburgh. Local finance committees were to be pressed into service at once. Most remarkable, in view of subsequent history, were speeches by Martin Ryan and (according to the press) numerous other speakers equally denouncing Michael Tighe and John L. Lewis. The one had betrayed the steelworkers and the other had betrayed the miners, according to the prevailing sentiment at this meeting. "Lewis and Tighe have crucified you for years," declared Ryan, "and will continue to do so until you demand and get their resignation and removal." (35)

Why did these rank-and-file steelworkers and miners fail to press on toward a national organizing campaign? This time around, the Amalgamated leadership were not going to permit their national convention to be captured and used to legitimize a rebel movement. Within days of the February 3 meeting Tighe expelled the lodges represented there. What was critical was the rank and file's response to the expulsions. Here the Communist Party, with its new-found concern for labor unity, and John L. Lewis, jockeying in Washington for passage of the Wagner Act and Guffey Act, again had determining influence.

The expelled lodges represented the overwhelming majority of the Amalgamated membership. (36) They might simply have declared that they were the Amalgamated, or reorganized as federal unions directly affiliated with the AFL, and in either case proceeded to organize steel. It appears that many members of the rank-and-file movement — the rank and file of the rank and file, so to speak — wanted to do this. O'Connor reports that at the February 3 meeting "some difficulty was experienced in stemming the apparently powerful sentiment of many delegates . . . that an independent union should be started now". (37)

An independent union was exactly what the Communist Party had been trying to build the year before, but now no longer desired. The resources which might have financed an organizing drive were used instead to campaign for reinstatement in the Amalgamated. The National Organizing Committee set up by the February 3 meeting distributed 50,000 leaflets in April calling for "Unity For All Steel Workers". "Our program," the leaflet stated, "is the restoration of unity in the union and the organization of the unorganized steel workers". (38) Lawsuits followed to compel Tighe to reinstate the expelled lodges. These were successful, and on August 1, 1935 it was announced that unity had been restored. In the meantime, however, another strike threat had swelled up and been dissipated, with the result that the Amalgamated, to which the expellees won reinstatement in mid-summer 1935, had by then been reduced to the empty shell it was two years before.

In dissipating the strike threat of 1935, Lewis's misleadership augmented the misleadership of the Communist Party. Early in March a meeting to implement the February 3 decisions was held in Weirton, attended by steelworkers from Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. Conference speeches, the Federated Press reported, showed great sentiment for a strike in steel. Clarence Irwin declared that "The kind of union we are going to have will not depend on courts, but on organization and the picket line."

Later that month William Spang, president of District 1 of the Amalgamated, tied a steel strike to a strike of

400,000 soft-coal miners threatened for April 1. "Rank-and-file committees of steel workers and coal miners have been meeting to set up plans to strike April 1. If the United Mine Workers of America does not get a new contract, both unions will join in united strike action," Spang said. He added: "We have decided to disregard all arbitration boards. . . . There is only one way we can win our demands — by an industry-wide strike. That's just what we're building up for now." (39)

But there was no coal strike April 1. On the eve of the miners' walkout, John L. Lewis postponed action till June 16 "out of consideration of the President of the United States and the National Industrial Recovery Board". (40) On Memorial Day 1935, just two years before the Memorial Day strike sacred in CIO annals, the steel strike almost happened from below.

What at first seemed to the Federated Press "the long-expected clash in the steel industry" began in Canton, Ohio. "Rank-and-file leaders led it; not one union-paid official had a directing hand in it," Ruttenberg wrote. The strike began at the Berger Manufacturing Company, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Republic Steel employing 450 persons. An AFL federal union at the plant struck to enforce a government finding that the company was refusing to bargain collectively. 250 thugs attacked the strikers with tear gas and lead pipes. One striker, Charles Minor, had the side of his face torn off, and in all 14 persons were hospitalized. As so often in those years, this picket-line brutality triggered a general strike. Within 24 hours 4,000 Republic Steel employees in the Canton area had walked out in protest, led by Lewis Morris, one of the Committee of Ten of 1934.

Two other members of the Committee from nearby communities, Mel Moore from Weirton and Clarence Irwin from Youngstown, apparently tried to call a national strike. On May 29 they asked "all Republic mills to send delegates to Canton to formulate plans for spreading the strike nationally". On May 31 "The Central Strike Committee (in Canton) issued a call for support from all lodges of the Amalgamated." The only response, or parallel action, which has

come to light was by Bill Spang's Fort Dukane Lodge in Duquesne, Pennsylvania. There a strike at the US Steel mill was called for 3 pm May 31, but short-circuited when Spang and other officers of the lodge were arrested for parading without a permit. Meanwhile in Canton an attempt to spread the strike to neighboring Masillon collapsed when non-union employees flooded the Amalgamated lodge meeting and voted not to go out. County and city police broke up the Canton picket lines, and the men started back to the mills. (41)

Once more the rank and file looked to the UMW. "Following Spang's release, the Fort Dukane Lodge decided at a mass meeting to issue a call to other lodges to 'strike all Carnegie Steel Company (US Steel) mills June 16', the date set by the United Mine Workers of America for its strike in the bituminous fields." But Lewis postponed this strike too. On June 14 he promised President Roosevelt not to strike till June 30 so that Congress could act on the Guffey bill. On July 1 the coal strike was postponed for a third time, and on July 29 for a fourth. Meanwhile on July 5 the Wagner Act became law, and late in August the Guffey Act, setting up NRA-like machinery for the coal industry, finally made it through both houses of Congress. (42)

Two philosophies of industrial union organization expressed themselves in these events. Lewis's approach stressed governmental intervention so as to make possible a "responsible" unionism which would avoid strikes. As Len DeCaux summarized it at the time, Lewis and a number of other union officials told the Senate Education and Labor Committee considering the Wagner Act: "Allow the workers to organize, establish strong governmental machinery for dealing with labor questions, and industrial peace will result." DeCaux noted that some employers favored this approach, and that the expectation in Washington of international war made its adoption more likely. (43)

The second approach relied on strike action, and insisted on writing the right to strike into any labor-management contract which resulted. No one can prove that a national steel strike in 1934 or 1935 would have been any more successful than the defeated national steel strike of 1919. Yet

it was Blankenhorn's retrospective judgment that "without even the pretense of Amalgamated leadership" the rank-and-file movement would have involved 75,000 to 150,000 steelworkers in a national strike; and O'Connor argued at the time that any strike in steel was likely to reach a climax within a few weeks, because the Government could not allow it to continue "in view of the restiveness of workers in the auto industry and other industries". (44)

Seeking proof in the experience of SWOC, one can argue that the Little Steel strike of 1937 shows what would have happened had steelworkers struck in 1934 or 1935. One can also argue that SWOC would never have gotten its contract with US Steel in March 1937 had auto workers for General Motors not been willing to strike and occupy their plants just previously.

The trade-union line of the Communist Party after mid-1934 dovetailed neatly with the approach of John L. Lewis. The Party maneuvered brilliantly within the skeleton Amalgamated to have Lewis offer \$500,000 to the Amalgamated for a steel drive, with the understanding that the money would be administered by Lewis, and to have the Amalgamated accept that offer. (45) When SWOC was formed, the Party made available 60 organizers. (46) The rank-and-file dream passed into the hands of Lewis in the bastardized form of an organizing committee none of whose national or regional officers were steelworkers, an organizing committee so centralized that it paid even local phone bills from a national office, an organizing committee, in DeCaux's words, "as totalitarian as any big business". (47)

It could have been otherwise. The critical weakness of the rank and file was its inability to organize on a national scale. Had the Communist Party thrown its organizers, its connections, and its access to media, lawyers, and money in a different direction, there might have come about an industrial unionism not only more militant and more internally democratic, but also more independent politically.

Coming about as it did, industrial unionism in steel lacked any thrust toward independent political action. By 1935 the rank-and-file leaders had lost confidence in the "National Run Around" and, to a considerable degree, in President Roosevelt. Experience daily brought more and more workers to the position that "we are through forever with Washington" (Mel Moore), "we're through with weak-kneed appeals to government boards" (Clarence Irwin). (48) They were prepared to defy the national government through strike action and to seek parallel strike action from workers in other industries. In effect they wanted to duplicate Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco on a national scale. And despite Roosevelt's genius in letting local Democrats take the onus of state action against striking workers, a national steel strike might have brought steelworkers into collision with Roosevelt just as a national rail strike had brought Debs into collision with Cleveland in 1894.

Even as it was, there were indications of support among steelworkers for independent political action. In 1935, along with many other unions in that extraordinary year, the Fort Dukane and South Chicago lodges of the Amalgamated passed resolutions for (in the South Chicago wording) an "anti-capitalist Labor Party". (49) In 1936, Clarence Irwin stated that "I am in favor of a real Labor Party with no connection with any of the existing parties." The last clipping in his scrapbook describes a 1939 regional SWOC meeting which passed a motion stating: "Whereas labor's experience in the political field has been anything but satisfactory, therefore be it resolved that our ultimate goal be the fostering of a third party called the Labor Party." (50) Given the existence of this sentiment, at the very least it should have been possible to organize local labor parties which, after the death of Roosevelt in 1945, could have joined to form a deeply-rooted national third party.

But industrial unionism came to steel and to the CIO generally under the auspices of a longtime Republican who at no point favored a third party, and of a national radical

party which, by mid-1936, was uncritically supporting the incumbent Democratic President. The new industrial unions lost little time espousing the political company unionism of the two-party system.

FOOTNOTES

1. C. Wright Mills: The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders (Harcourt Brace and Company, New York, 1948), Page 224.

2. Mark Naison: "The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the CIO", Radical America (September-October 1968), Page 53. The present essay attempts to carry a step further the argument of Naison's splendid article.

3. Art Preis: Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO (Pathfinder Press paperback, New York, 1972), Chapter 4.

4. Jeremy Brecher: Strike! (Straight Arrow Books, San Francisco, 1972), Chapter 5 et passim.

5. Staughton Lynd: "Prospects for the New Left", Liberation (Winter 1971), Page 20.

6. Carroll Daugherty, Melvin de Chazeau, and Samuel Stratton, after stating "What the actual membership strength of the Association was at different times under the Steel Code — how much the total number of fully paid-up and partially paid-up members came to — apparently no one knows," estimate the total membership in February 1934 at 50,000: The Economics of the Iron and Steel Industry (McGraw-Hill, New York and London, 1937), II, Page 947 n. Vincent D. Sweeney, a Pittsburgh reporter in the early '30s and later public-relations director for SWOC (which would have had no reason to exaggerate the achievements of the Amalgamated), states: "No official figure of the growth of the union in that campaign has ever been made public. The peak was probably around 200,000": The United Steelworkers of America Twenty Years Later, 1936-1956 (no place, no date, but obviously 1956), Page 7. The rank-and-file leaders claimed 150,000 signed up as of April 1934 (Harvey

O'Connor: Federated Press dispatch April 30, 1934, Columbia University).

7. Harvey O'Connor: "Personal Histories of the Early CIO".

8. My authority for this statement is a novel written by a steelworker which very closely follows the events of the 1930s and includes extracts from the minutes of the company union at the Edgar Thompson Works: Thomas Bell: Out of This Furnace (Liberty Book Club, New York, 1950), Page 290.

9. Walter Galenson: The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement, 1935-1941 (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1960), Page 75.

10. Ibid., Page 94.

11. David J. McDonald: Union Man (E. P. Dutton, New York, 1969), Page 93 ff.

12. This account of the captive mine strike of 1933 is based on: almost-daily dispatches of reporters for the Federated Press, July-December 1933; Harvey O'Connor: Steel — Dictator (John Day, New York, 1935), Chapter 14; Irving Bernstein: Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941 (Houghton Mifflin paperback, Boston, 1971), Pages 49-61; and Muriel Sheppard: Cloud By Day: The Story of Coal and Coke and People (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1947), Chapter 10. Bernstein appears in error both in saying that "the UMW struck the Frick mines" (Page 50) and in giving the impression that the settlement was a solid victory (Pages 60-61). As to the latter point, see not only O'Connor: Steel — Dictator, Pages 162 and 192-195, where the strike is termed a "defeat" for the Frick miners, but also Daugherty and associates, previously cited: II, Page 1008 n: "...the recognition of the United Mine Workers by certain steel companies in their Illinois captive mines, where recognition has existed for decades and where recognition, unlike the diluted sort given under the Recovery Act to the union in the captive coal mines of Pennsylvania, is real and complete."

13. Harold Ruttenberg: "Steel Labor, the NIRA, and the Amalgamated Association", a detailed narrative of the rank-

and-file movement of 1934 (Ruttenberg Papers, Pennsylvania State University). Unless otherwise indicated, statements about the 1934 movement are based on this source.

14. Robert R. R. Brooks : As Steel Goes . . . : Unionism in a Basic Industry (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1940), Chapter 3. This is an extraordinary interview, but must be used with care. Brooks interviewed Clarence Irwin, for Mrs. Irwin remembers the occasion. But the text of the so-called interview as published in As Steel Goes . . . draws on several sources, including Ruttenberg's narrative, as Brooks explicitly acknowledges. (See his footnote on Page 262.)

15. Interview with Heber Blankenhorn, Columbia University Oral History Project, Pages 437 a and 438 a. According to the minutes of the AFL executive council meeting of February 12, 1935, Lewis told this body : "You have to utilize the services of these young men in the steel industry. They have no training, no background in trade unionism, no experience in the labor movement." Professor Carroll Moody kindly called this statement to my attention.

16. Daugherty and associates, previously cited : II, Page 959 n.

17. The rank and file in the United Steelworkers of America, AFL-CIO, have repeatedly attempted to modify the USWA constitution in these same three ways — referendum vote on new contracts, election of staff men, local right to strike — and repeatedly failed.

18. O'Connor : "Personal Histories of the Early CIO".

19. This account of the SMWIU is based on Horace B. Davis : Labor and Steel (International Publishers, New York, 1933), especially Pages 257-258 and 264, and on interviews with three SMWIU organizers.

20. Address by Leon Callow, former SMWIU organizer in Youngstown, at Youngstown State University, April 14, 1972.

21. SMWIU "Steel Workers! Organize and Prepare to Strike!" leaflet (O'Connor Papers, Wayne State University, no date, but obviously May or early June 1934). Professor Carroll Moody kindly made this document available to me.

22. Clarence Irwin to Harold Ruttenberg, May 17, 1934, Exhibit 10 attached to Ruttenberg's narrative.

23. Interview with Heber Blankenhorn, Columbia University Oral History Project, Page 444 a. In Daugherty and associates, previously cited: II, Page 1059, the statement is made that one or more of the Big Four persuaded the rank-and-file leaders to "turn down united-front offer from Left-wing Steel and Metal Workers" on May 20. Since Ruttenberg was a student of Daugherty's and did research for this study, we can be sure that this statement reflects Ruttenberg's views.

24. The quoted words are identical to words which Ruttenberg, in his narrative, has himself saying to Forbeck: "Number 3 (Ruttenberg) told Forbeck that they wanted to institutionalize the whole affair," and so forth.

25. Cecil Allen: Open Letter to "Fellow Steel Workers" (undated, but around July 1, 1934), Exhibit 34 attached to Ruttenberg's narrative. The Weirton leaders had been to Washington prior to May 1934 to testify in their own behalf before the National Labor Board. As early as April, Bill Spang stated: "We're tired of sending delegations to Washington and of the endless run-around we get there." (Federated Press dispatch, April 18, 1934)

26. Statement by James Egan to Harold Ruttenberg on June 5, 1934, Ruttenberg narrative, Page 23. On the same day an SMWIU delegation in Washington stated this criticism to the press. (Federated Press dispatch, June 5, 1934)

27. Harold Ruttenberg to George Soule, July 6, 1934, Ruttenberg Papers.

28. Arthur S. Weinberg interview with Ruttenberg, May 12, 1968, and Don Kennedy interview with Ruttenberg, April 24, 1969, Pennsylvania State Oral History Project.

29. The statement about strike breakers is made on the basis of an interview with John Morris, March 30, 1972. He was hired by the Calumet Protective Association at its office on the fifth floor of the Hotel Gary, issued a uniform and a gun, and housed in the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Mill in East Chicago, Indiana for three days before the Amalgamated special convention in mid-June 1934.

30. Harold Rутtenberg: "The Special Convention...". Professor Carroll Moody kindly made this document available to me.

31. Bell, previously cited, Pages 323-324.

32. Clarence Irwin to "Dear Brother", November 19, 1934, NSLRB files. This was an invitation to the secret meeting of representatives from several districts of the Amalgamated with SMWIU representatives in Cleveland on November 25. Professor Carroll Moody kindly made this document available to me.

33. Clarence Irwin to Harold Rутtenberg, January 23, 1935, Rутtenberg Papers, and Harvey O'Connor to Clarence Irwin, February 12, 1935, O'Connor Papers. Professor Carroll Moody kindly made the latter document available to me.

34. Youngstown Vindicator, February 8, 1935, Irwin scrapbook.

35. Pittsburgh Post Gazette, February 4, 1935, Rутtenberg Papers.

36. Prior to the Amalgamated convention of 1935, the rank and file asserted that they represented between 75,000 and 90,000 expelled members. At the convention a careful check was made and the figure scaled down to 50,000. Bill Spang claimed that of the 150,000 steelworkers in District 1 of the Amalgamated, the Pittsburgh area, a majority belonged to the union. He offered the following figures for membership in the Amalgamated at particular large mills: 3800 of 4200 in Duquesne, 3300 at the US Steel mill in Braddock, 2200 at the US Steel mill in Homestead, almost 6,000 at the Jones and Laughlin mill in Aliquippa. Large mills such as these can be assumed to have supported the rank-and-file movement. (Federated Press dispatches, March 28 and April 2, 29, and 30, 1935)

37. Federated Press dispatch, February 5, 1935.

38. Daily Worker, April 15, 1935. Professor Carroll Moody kindly made this document available to me.

39. Federated Press dispatch, March 28, 1935.

40. Federated Press dispatches, April 1 and 2, 1935.

41. Harold Rутtenberg: "A Rank-and-File Strike", Rутtenberg Papers; Federated Press dispatches, May 29 and 31 and June 3, 4, and 5, 1935. Clarence Irwin was fired as

a result of this strike and thenceforth worked full-time, first for the rank-and-file movement and then for SWOC (Brooks, previously cited, Page 70).

42. Federated Press dispatches, June 3 and 14; July 1, 5, and 29; and August 22, 1935.

43. Federated Press dispatch, April 2, 1935.

44. Interview with Heber Blankenhorn, Columbia University Oral History Project, Page 475 a; Federated Press dispatches, April 19 and May 4, 1934.

45. A group of rank-and-file steelworkers confronted Lewis when he spoke at Greensburg, Pennsylvania April 1, 1936 and demanded that he make good on his rhetoric about organizing steel. Lewis invited a committee of three to meet with himself and the CIO executive committee in Washington the next week. The result was the decision to offer \$500,000 to the Amalgamated convention meeting in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania on April 28. There are three accounts of the April 1 encounter: by Irwin, in Brooks, previously cited, Pages 71-72; by Albert Atallah, in an interview with Alice Hoffman, September 20, 1967, Pennsylvania State Oral History Project; and by George Powers, in Monongahela Valley: Cradle of Steel Unionism (Figueroa Press, East Chicago, Indiana, 1972). My statement about the connection of the Communist Party with this event is based on an interview with a participant.

46. "Foster, who should know, wrote later that 60 of the first organizers hired by SWOC were members of the Communist Party": Len DeCaux: Labor Radical; From the Wobblies to CIO (Beacon Press paperback, Boston, 1971), Page 279.

47. Brooks, previously cited, Pages 157 and 177, and DeCaux, previously cited, Page 280.

48. Statements made to Harvey O'Connor at the February 3, 1935 meeting (Federated Press dispatch, February 5, 1935).

49. Daily Worker, March 2 and July 24, 1935. Professor Carroll Moody kindly made these documents available to me.

50. Press clippings, March 31, 1936 and May 21, 1939, Irwin scrapbook.

Shoot-Out at Reeltown: The Narrative of Jess Hull, Alabama Tenant Farmer

By Dale Rosen and Theodore Rosengarten

This article focuses on Jess Hull's * experience in the Alabama Sharecroppers Union (SCU). Hull began sharecropping in 1907, and advanced through tenant farming and an abortive tenure as a small landowner until 1932, when he was expropriated and imprisoned for his part in a shoot-out between union members and county sheriffs. A mule-plow farmer reared among former slaves, he returned to the land after 12 years and found himself isolated in his militancy and obsolete in a new world of consolidated tractor farms.

We met Jess Hull in January 1969. We had been combing through Talapoosa County court records and local newspapers for accounts of SCU activities, and in two weeks we had acquired a comprehensive white man's version of the events of 1931-33. Intimidated more by our preconceptions of hostility than by our actual reception, we were ready to flee the country and satisfy ourselves with what was, after all, the written account of what happened in the shoot-out. But we learned that the "villain" of that account was still living in the county, and so on our last day in the field we went to his house to hear what he had to say.

We sat with Jess Hull for nine hours around a fire in the house of his half-brother and sister-in-law. It seemed to be as cold a day as we had ever known in the North. We learned that Alabama freezes in winter and that wind will

* All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

blow under a house and come up through the floor as well as through the spaces in the walls. Jess had just fed his mule when Emlin, his half-brother, called him to say he had visitors. He walked in and introduced himself and told us he recognized us as "his people" and knew why we had come. The story of the union was his story. He had been the main man, singled out for his resolution by union organizers and landlord police alike.

When the Great Depression threatened to destroy the already crumbling cotton system, various radical organizations began mobilizing farmers to retain their meager subsistence and fight for a larger share of the dwindling surplus. The Socialist Party organized black and white farmers, mainly in Arkansas, into the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU). The Communist Party went into the Alabama countryside to organize what it called "the black peasantry" on a territorial basis. The Party envisioned an alliance of organized farmers with the Birmingham proletariat — mostly steelworkers in new industrial unions.

Party position papers on "the Negro question" defined the Black Belt as a nation in which black farmers held the strategic positions in the struggle for "national liberation". The Party's three-point rural program called for: confiscation of land from big landowners for redistribution among the landless; unification of the Black Belt across state lines; and self-determination — the right to an independent political system for the black majorities of the Black Belt. The Party encouraged struggles for partial rights in pursuit of the goal of self-determination. Even the smallest claim of black tenants and croppers, a Party spokesman declared, "brings them in direct clash with the white landowners and credit class and necessarily raises the question of who shall own the land and the agricultural means of production." But to farmers who regard a mere return to pre-Depression economic conditions as a marked advance, "self-determination" was pie in the sky.

We asked Hull why he joined the union. He answered with a day of stories detailing his transactions with landlords,

bankers, fertilizer dealers, mule traders, gin operators, sheriffs, and judges: stories of white men's violence and deceit and of his own cunning. His narrative grew more and more complex, revealing in every incident the effect of systematic exploitation. It didn't make any more sense to talk about a "good landlord" than it would have made to talk about a "good master" — the poor black farmer was still a poor black farmer, indebted for his crop before it was planted, just as the slave was still a slave. And if one black man could shake one white man off his back, there was another waiting to jump on. The "system" produced the oppressor with the same regularity with which it produced the oppressed; and the oppressors colluded with each other while the oppressed were divided. Well, when would they get together? And what could they do when they got together?

Hull's eloquence and the vigor of his analysis shook us up. Here was a man who had organized his life experiences into brilliant stories capable of releasing their power long after the fact, stories unexhausted by many tellings. We had encountered a storyteller, an old, impoverished, militant black man, immovable in his political conviction and confident he is transmitting history.

The man is his own historian, and his testimony contains its own analysis. We had intended to collect data from him and use it, say, as we would use statistics from a demographic study or the indictment on a court dossier: We would organize the material, analyze it, mediate between it and the reader. In some ways this was still possible. For example, the county newspaper told us who attended Hull's trial. Hull told us who was barred from the courtroom — white people openly sympathetic to the black farmers. The state of Alabama, he concludes, tried to suppress the fact that some whites aided blacks on the run and others risked their lives to protect black neighbors from vigilantes. So, Hull gives us a piece of information and an analysis of it that we could not get from any other source. We could use the information in a history of the union. But these unexpected white-black alliances had an effect on Hull's con-

sciousness that is lost when the fact is separated from his telling of it. They confirmed that all white people weren't his enemies and that among them he might find some friends.

The narrative, then, puts flesh on the dry bones of fact. But how reliable is the memory it derives from? Aside from its habits of selection and suppression — no less a problem in using the written accounts of Hull's enemies — memory reconstructs events to meet current needs. It appears to us, for example, that Hull miscalculated his support at the crucial moment of the shoot-out. He insists that he took a principled stand, that he always knew he couldn't count on his black friends to the last. He won't admit that he made a mistake: Perhaps he didn't. But as listeners we can't always distinguish what he thought at the time from conclusions he reached in later years.

In effect, Hull insists that he made a choice — to stand alone if he had to. "They could only kill me," he says, implying that "they" could do worse if he let them treat him as "they" pleased. Why was he ready to stop them? What prepared him to resist?

His father and uncles were "bad niggers", but they had struck out as often against their own families as against their real oppressors. He had his father's example to follow and improve on, but that model doesn't explain him. Indeed, his brother Peter, who grew up close with him in the same house and worked under the same father, has a docile history. He shunned the union entirely. Today Peter is critical of Jess's aggressiveness.

Jess Hull advanced from one tenure to the next, acquired automobiles and a blacksmith shop, and forbade his wife to wash clothes for white folks. Blacks and whites despised his success. By 1931 he was nearly self-sufficient and very proud. At every step along the way he had fought to keep what he had while he was acquiring more, and he learned that he could beat the white man at his own game. Long after his neighbors had sold their cotton, he still held on to some of his to take advantage of price increases; he spent nearly all his "free" time at second jobs, usually hauling lumber; and he employed his sons and daughters in his house rather

than lose the benefit of their labor : He had learned the advantage of that under his father's administration. His father had hired him out around the settlement for a few dollars a month, and Jess realized he was producing more wealth than the wages the white men paid him.

When the cotton market collapsed at the onset of the Depression, the rules of the game changed. Landlords, merchants, and bankers refused to furnish tenants on six-cent cotton. Their strategic retreat didn't hurt Hull, who caught onto a federal farm program and secured a loan for his crop. Local creditors, indebted themselves to moneyed men in the cities, began calling in their debts, foreclosing and evicting in cases in which they would previously have extended the debt-payment time. Again, Hull wasn't hurt because he had no outstanding notes. But his landlord laid a false claim against him, and suddenly he was faced with expropriation. He had to act to save himself, and when a secret organization of poor black farmers committed to collective action appeared in the Reeltown area that year, Hull eagerly joined.

He'd first heard about the organization following a ruckus at Camp Hill, some 20 miles from Reeltown, the year before. He didn't know much about it, but we had an account from other sources.

In the spring of 1931, the Communist Party sent an organizer to Camp Hill in response to black farmers who, the Southern Worker claimed, had written for help. They had reported that local landlords had met that May and set wages for day labor at 50¢ a day for men, 25¢ for women; and that croppers at Camp Hill were being forced to work off their landlords' taxes on the roads. After planting, landlords and merchants decided to cut all food advances to sharecroppers and tenants from July 1 through August 15. Farmers would be forced to work at the sawmills for 50¢ a day.

The CP organizer called meetings to form a union and formulate a program. By the second week in July about 80 people were attending. The new local advanced minimal demands : food advances through settlement time; the farmers'

right to sell their own time; small gardens for home use; day wages paid in cash; a three-hour mid-day rest; a nine-month school year for black children; and a free school bus. The local also protested the frame-up of the nine Scottsboro boys. Though most members were familiar with the facts of the case, they looked upon it as landlord oppression.

On July 15, Sheriff Carl Platt and seven deputies broke up a union meeting at a farmhouse and seized about 20 Southern Workers and, they claimed, a membership list. But the organizer escaped. The following night, the chief deputy was "informed" of another meeting near a black church southwest of Camp Hill. The high sheriff, the chief deputy, and a third man set out for the presumed meeting place. About a quarter of a mile from it they met Ralph Gray, a local black leader acting as a "picket". In the fight that followed both Gray and Platt were wounded. A union member carried Gray to his house, where several farmers and the organizer had gathered with their guns. Meanwhile three other deputies rounded up a posse of 15 to 20 men, some recruited at a revival meeting, and they too went to the presumed meeting place. Finding nobody there, they approached Gray's house. The organizer fled at the insistence of the farmers, but Gray stayed with the others. The posse rushed the house, and in the ensuing battle several whites and blacks were wounded. By Friday morning more than 30 croppers had been arrested. Gray was dead, and his house had been burned to the ground. The case against the farmers languished in the local courts, and within three months all had been released for lack of evidence. Union activity went underground, but Camp Hill remained a communications center for other union organizers.

In the fall of 1932 a union organizer emerged in the Reel-town area. Some 12 to 15 black farmers joined the organization at once, including Jess Hull. He recalls:

"It approached my mind, it very well approached my mind, that this organization was goin' to do the colored folks more good than they had ever got done for themselves. First I heard of it was when they had that ruckus at Camp Hill.

They had a shootin' frolic, and a sheriff from the state of Alabama got shot up there — that was Mr. Carl Platt — they had a run-in up there and a shootin' frolic and Mr. Carl Platt got shot. I heard that niggers was holdin' a meetin' up there, niggers was holdin' a meetin' — and if you believe me, niggers is scared of it now, some of 'em — and after that, that was in '31, the teachers began to drive through this country, but they couldn't let what they was doin' be known. The teacher I met was a colored fellow, a colored fellow — I disremember his name. He wanted us to organize and he was with us a whole lot of time, talkin' and holdin' the meetin's. All of us neighbors would meet and hear him and hear each other out — it was just like any other meetin'. It was said, didn't want no bad men in it at all, no weak-hearted fellows that was the least liable to give this thing away. It was to be a secret to them all that joined it. They knowed to keep their mouths shut. And the teacher said, 'I call them stool pigeons if they tell the news about what happens at our meetin's, stool pigeons.' We said if a nigger went out from the meetin' and let out any secrets about it, the word was, 'Do away with him.' 'If he runs and tells the white folks anything, we'll do away with him.'

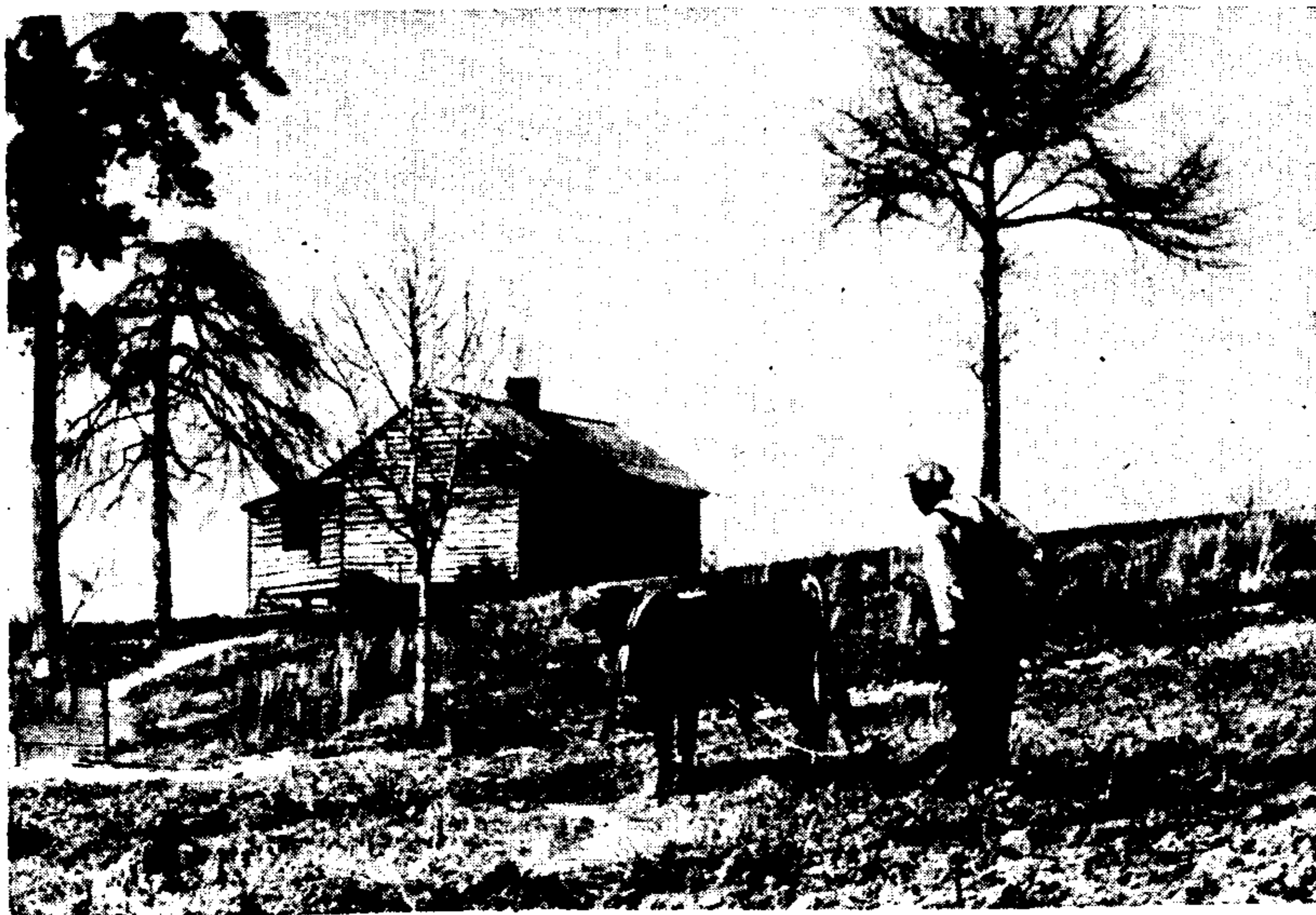
"We held the meetin's at our houses or anywhere we could hold 'em that we could keep on the look and a watch out that nobody come in there and harm us. Just small meetin's — mighty few women would come. Sometimes there'd be a dozen men, sometimes there'd be more, some few times there'd be less — niggers was scared, niggers was scared, that's tellin' you the truth. White folks in this country didn't allow niggers to have no organization, no secret meetin's. They kept up with you and watched you. No niggers could have secret meetin's in this country. If they did and had a bad man in there that run back and tell the white folks what was goin' on, God, they'd paint their butts red. But we met our meetin's anyway, and we was taught certain things 'bout takin' care of ourselves when the trouble come. That was the principle of it: I would defend myself by all of us defendin' ourselves. And they had literatures, they'd send out literatures, too. Sometimes these literatures would get

around in the colored folks' boxes, and they went so far as to put them into some white folks' boxes. I couldn't definitely say what was in them literatures, but it was enough that the big white folks didn't like it at all. The organization was too much for the betterment of the colored race; it was goin' to allow the colored more privilege and take 'em out from under the slave ways.

"Niggers weren't allowed no privileges at all. They'd pay a white man more than they'd pay a nigger, and for the same work; but mostly there was work the white folks didn't like to touch around here, like pickin' cotton. Now there were some — I had a white gentlemen or two, their wives would work in the field for me. Well, they didn't like that a bit. And then, what happened to me? Mr. Taylor, a man that I had taken a note with, had soured on me to a farewell. I went to Notusulga one morning, had some business down at the depot, at the express office. So I decided I'd drive out to Notusulga that mornin' and see about it. That was in the year of '32. '31 I had carried Mr. Taylor cotton down there — he ordered me to bring it to him, then he didn't give me no settlement. He jumped down and made a fool of me. I gived him enough cotton to pay him more than what I owed him, and he wouldn't give me no settlement, just pullin' to get his hands on me like he wanted, that's what he was pullin' for. Well, I went to Notusulga one mornin' — I'm goin' to lead you in the lights of that now — and when I got there, one of Mr. Taylor's colored farmers was on the street, right there in front of the bank on the street, on the walkway talkin'.

"I knowed at the time that Mr. Taylor was fully determined to get his hands on what I had and do me like he wanted to — I'm tellin' you straight, and if this isn't true, God ain't a Christian — he wanted to get me under his hand and have a mortgage on everything I had, and if I crooked my finger and wanted to leave I'd lose everything, leave it right there; that's what his method was, just as sure as you born. There's a white gentleman wanted to trade with me and me move, move my family — I'm cuttin' off, I'm goin' to come right back to it — wanted me to move down there

Black Sharecropper in Alabama, 1937



on his place close to the railroad, place they called Elrod, between here and Tuskegee. Well, he come to my house two or three times and he begged me to move onto his place, but I didn't give him any answer, just didn't want to deal with him then. And I told some parties about it afterwards that there was this white gentleman from Tuskegee wanted me to move on his place at Elrod. And it was somebody down there in that settlement, somebody I told about it, a colored fellow, he said, 'It's a good thing you didn't let him trade with you. That man, all you got to do is move onto his place regardless of what you got — he don't want you less'n you have a whole lot of stock and good tools — if you'd a moved onto his place, everything you had would've been his then.' Well, I smelled a mouse in that, so I never would move down there. Now Mr. Taylor just appeared to be that kind of man too. Oh God, if a colored man in them days didn't have a hard way to go, nobody weren't havin' a hard way to go.

"So, I was on Mr. Taylor's place then, that he had a half interest in the place and the federal land bank in New Or-

leans held the other part. Listen, catch the idea — he was rulin' me and geehawsin' me; he was goin' to take everything I had if he could have first got a mortgage on all my stock in conjunction with that place. God, if he'd a got that mortgage, I'd a been payin' for all of that again, see? And if I moved, I'd a been stripped. So I wouldn't agree to that at all, I bucked him, wouldn't give him a mortgage on nothin'. I asked him — right there in that same bank, Mr. Grace's bank, the year before — 'Ain't that place sufficient to stand for itself? You don't have to take no mortgage on my mules, cows, and hogs and things even with that place. Good God, I'll move before I do that, move right off.' Well, I lingered along, lingered along, lingered along; and so, he told me that last year I dealt with him, 'Bring me the cotton.' I carried it to him, he wouldn't give me no settlement.

"And the next time, 'bout the time for folks to begin to run around and get their business shaped up for the new year, I went down to Notusulga one day and saw him standin' out there on the street, on the walkway, talkin' to a colored fellow. And this colored fellow, one of his farmers, was named Dink Brown. And I got there and saw Dink talkin' with Mr. Taylor. Now the white man considered me to be one of his Negroes too, and that gave me encouragement to stop, see and sidle around, listen at the conversation. I heard Mr. Taylor tell Dink — I was listenin', wasn't sayin' a word, didn't add nary a word to the conversation because it weren't any of my business, my business was to look out for myself. And he didn't need me in his and Dink Brown's business, and I knowed it. And their conversation went like this: Dink was standin' there and it looked like he was on the beg, tryin' to beg Taylor to do somethin', and here's what Taylor told Dink, right in my presence, I was catchin' it, listenin' — I was aimin' to go to Dadeville that mornin', same day, to see if I could get furnished by the federal government, branch line, you know. The government had people out makin' deals for 'em, government people, and I was aimin' to go see 'em that day — I heard Mr. Taylor tell Dink Brown, 'No —' Dink standin' there with his head down — 'I ain't puttin' out a dollar this time, not one

dollar am I goin' to put out. My men has all got their own stock, and they got corn enough to feed 'em on, and they got land to work, and I ain't puttin' out nothin'.'

"See, cotton was way down then, wavin' about just only above six cents. All right. 'I ain't puttin' out a dollar,' tellin' Dink. I was listenin', wasn't askin' for nothin' myself because I was aimin' to change my business, I was goin' to take my affairs to the federal loan people in Dadeville, I knowed I had given Mr. Taylor that fall more than I owed him and he wouldn't give me no settlement. So I just set my mind to movin' my business. Oh, he went down that mornin', told Dink what he was goin' to do and what he wasn't. I said to myself when he said that, 'That's bad — a man can't get no furnishin' at all out of you. It's strange that you ain't goin' to help the man, if you been helpin' him at all. I know what you goin' to do — you goin' to look for what all your men make this fall. You goin' to do it, I knows. You goin' to look to take it, and you not furnishin' them nothin'. Just goin' to take it and sling out some words about them owin' you for a settlement which they probably already have made.' And just as sure as you born in the world, if he made a claim against them, they couldn't take their business to nobody else. They was his niggers and he'd do 'em like he wanted to, and nobody else would touch 'em. Well, I just eventually walked off and went on to the depot where I had some business to look after of my own."

Hull took a carload of farmers to Dadeville, where they all negotiated federal loans for the coming crop year. Several weeks later, a rumor spread through the settlement that Taylor planned to clean out Clint Webster, then Jess Hull.

Taylor had a mortgage on Webster's place; in addition he claimed notes on Webster's stock and for crop advances. They disputed the debt figure, and Webster refused to pay. Webster was a marginal farmer being pushed over the wrong side of the margin. He needed an adjustment of the debt and more time to pay. Getting neither from Taylor, he relied on his friends to plead for him and defend him.

Without this backing he might have followed the usual course and allowed himself to be cleaned out. Taylor, sensing organized resistance, may have refused to compromise with Webster in order to make an example out of a troublemaker. "The reaction among Webster and several other Negroes, who had before shown a spirit of co-operation to the mentioning of foreclosures," declared Taylor, "seemed to point conclusively that there was some sort of sinister influence at work among them."

Hull describes the threatened expropriation and the farmers' response :

"In a few weeks, it come off just like the word said. I happened to be at Clint Webster's house one mornin' when Mr. Taylor sent the deputy sheriff over to attach everything the man had and bring it away from there. Clint Webster was in the organization; He was solid in bein' with us. But when the showdown come, Clint run like the rest of 'em did. He was a friend to me, a good man, but he was scared like the rest of 'em. He was rentin' — he weren't buyin' his land and he weren't rentin' it from Mr. Taylor; Mr. Taylor didn't own that place, but he had a note on Clint, he was dealin' with him, furnishin' him — that's what I understood. And he claimed that Clint owed him; I don't know how much Clint owed him or how long he owed him, but Taylor was tryin' to handle him just like he wanted to handle me.

"So I walked up there that mornin' and seen a crowd — it was on a Monday and I seen a crowd there. So I said, 'What's the matter here? What's all this about?' And the deputy sheriff said, 'I'm goin' to take all Clint Webster's got this mornin'.' Well, I knowed I had to take a stand right there because accordin' to the quotation I was goin' to be next. Here he was startin' on Clint Webster first. Well, that mornin' — my daddy-in-law had a little plantation near there and his baby daughter was livin' on it, her and her husband, and I went over by their house and went on out across the road to Clint Webster's place. And I asked the deputy sheriff, Mr. Woods, I knowed him, I asked him to tell me again what this was all about. And he told me again, 'I'm goin' to

take all Clint Webster's got this mornin'.' I stretched out my arms and said, 'Mr. Woods, please, sir, don't take what he's got. He's got a wife and children and if you take all his stock and everything else, you'll leave his folks hungry. He ain't got a dime left to support 'em if you take what he's got. So please, sir, don't take it.' I said it just that way, 'Please, sir, don't take it. Go to the ones that authorized you to take his stuff, if you please, sir, and tell them to give him a chance. He'll work to pay what he owes 'em.' He told me, he says, 'I got orders to take it, and I'll be damned if I don't.' Now I asked him humble and begged him, 'Go back to the ones that gived you the orders to do this and tell 'em the circumstances: He ain't able to feed and support his family noway; he ain't got a dime to support his family.' And he said to me, 'I got orders to take it, and I'll be damned if I ain't goin' to take it.' Well, that brought up a whole lot of hard words. So I just politely told him that he weren't goin' to do it. He weren't goin' to do it.

"We stood around there and I forbid him to take Clint's stuff. I asked him kindly to go to Mr. Taylor or to whoever gave him orders to take it. And he got hot about it. After a while I seen Cecil Carter — that was a nigger who come along with Mr. Woods to do the job, must've drove right up to that place in the deputy's automobile — I seen Cecil Carter walk into the lot to catch Clint Webster's mules. Now that was a colored fellow that had no sense: The white folk could get him to do anything they wanted him to do. I looked at Cece when he went in there — I never paid no attention to him until he done unfastened the chain on the gate and walked in. I said, 'What you goin' in there for?' Mr. Woods answered, 'He's goin' to catch them mules. That's what he's goin' to do.' And I said, 'Well, you're just as well to come out. You'll catch no mules there this mornin' till there's a further investigation.' He kept a walkin' after I spoke to him. So I said, 'Go ahead and catch 'em; you can catch 'em, but you won't be able to bring 'em out of that lot. Go catch 'em, go on.'

Well, he stopped and he looked at me and he looked at Mr. Woods, looked at me and looked at Mr. Woods — I'll

say this, stop and say this: Somebody's got to stand up; if we don't we niggers in this country are easy prey. Anything a white man wanted from us, he took it. Made no difference how the cut might have come, he took it — Mr. Woods seen I meant it and he told Cece, 'Come out, Cece, come out.' So Carter let them mules alone like Mr. Woods give him orders himself to do — 'Come out, Cece, let 'em alone, come out.' — And Cece come out of there too, because it would have been the Devil to pay sure enough if he hadn't. Then the deputy raised sand with me about it. He jumped up and told me, 'I'm goin' to Dadeville to get Carl Platt and bring him down here. He'll come down here and kill the last damn one of you, shoot you in a bunch.'

"Now, a organization is a organization, and if I don't mean nothin' by what I say and do, I ought to keep my ass out of it; but if I'm sworn to stand up for myself and stand up for all the poor class of farmers, I have to do it. Weren't no use under God's sun to treat colored folks like we been treated here in the state of Alabama, weren't no sense in it. Work hard and look what's done to you. Look what Mr. Taylor done to me. Dug at me, dug at me but couldn't manage me, then he put me right where I had to bring him my cotton — I carried him the cotton, didn't carry him all of it, but I carried him more than enough to pay him what I owed him, then he dug at me still.

"So from one word to another Mr. Woods got red hot. He said, 'You done said enough for me to kill you.' I said, 'Well, if you want to kill me, I'm right before you. There ain't nothin' between us but the air. Kill me. Kill me.' And he said, 'I'm goin' to get Carl Platt. He's goin' to come down here and kill the last damn one of you. You know how he is — when he comes in he comes in shootin'.'

"So Mr. Woods and Cecil Carter turned around from there and went back to Dadeville, where they delivered the message to the High Sheriff, Carl Platt. And Sheriff Platt wouldn't come down there. And since then, after all, a white man shot Sheriff Platt down and killed him. There's somethin' happened there above Dadeville between a man and his wife and he sent the deputies up there to cool the water, but

they couldn't do nothin'. So he decided he would go up there and do it. And they tells it, and there's plenty of evidence to back it, soon as they got there the white man killed him. Shot him. I didn't know Mr. Platt, I didn't know what kind of man he was. He never did arrest me for nothin'. I didn't intend to when I went over there that mornin', but I found a crowd there and the deputy sheriff fixin' to walk out with Clint Webster's stuff. And I knowed my time was next because the threat was out.

"Mr. Woods come back that same day. He went up to Dadeville and by 11 he was back with four sheriffs, four of 'em: himself, and another deputy out of Dadeville, Alva Meade; Mr. Grant; and Billy Goodspeed from Alex City — that was the crowd. They came back in a hurry too. There were several men in Clint Webster's house when that bunch of sheriffs arrived, five or six of 'em. But when the sheriffs walked up in the yard, I was standin' outside. I weren't in no house, I was standin' outside. I told Mr. Woods when he went to get Carl Platt, I said, 'Go ahead and get him, I'll be here when you get back.' He done threatened me, but I stayed to see what was goin' to be the outcome. And I looked down the road and seen the car come up the road in a hurry, and I knowed that same car had left there.

"I called the boys — Clint Webster was inside and several more that I knew; I counted Tom McAndrew among 'em — I said, 'Fellas, here they come, here come the officers.' God Almighty, they jumped up and run out of that house, goin' out the back way into the field and the forest, clean out of there. They didn't show up when I told them to come on out of the house and stand up for theirselves. They didn't come out the front; they come out the back way, runnin' away from there. Then Mr. Woods and Billy Goodspeed went on around the house, they surrounded the house. And Grant came right straight to me; he looked at me and he wouldn't say a word noway, just lookin' at me. Stood there for the longest. Mr. Meade, he went on to the doorsteps and got down almost on his knees, tryin' to peep and see who was in the house. And Mr. Billy Goodspeed and Mr. Woods was around the house on the other side. And Mr. Grant, he

standin' in front of me holdin' a shotgun straight on me; wouldn't budge, just standin' there lookin' at me, wouldn't say nothin'. After a while, I decided — stood there I 'spect all of five minutes or more, that's the truth and God knows it — he wouldn't part his lips, just lookin' at me and holdin' that gun, the muzzle part of it: the barrel, I only seen a few inches of it. He had on a big brown weather coat and I seen four inches of that barrel stickin' out, and the stock and one hand drawed back under that coat.

“And bless your soul, I got tired standin' there and him lookin' over me as he was, just lookin' from my head to my feet. So I walked off. I just decided I'd go on in the house. And when I started up the doorstep, Mr. Meade was there tryin' to peep in the house, and when I started up them doorsteps, he grabbed me by my right arm and just pressured it, but I just absolutely flung him off like you would fling off a leech. Flung him off of my arm, and when I done that I just started straight on in that house. I never offered to hit him or nothin', I just flung him off of my arm. Nobody hadn't said nothin' to me, not a word. All right. When I flung him loose I just commenced a steppin' right on in the house. And Mr. Grant shot me three times, in the back. He filled my hind end up from the bend of my legs, both of 'em, to the belt of my pants with shot. When I flung this'n off and tried to keep walkin', this other one shot me. Boom! Looked to me like he'd burn me down; never had nothin' to fire me up in that way in all the days of my life. But I didn't stop walkin' when he shot me. Shot me twice more, right quick before I could get in the house. Boom! Boom! Same place, every time he shot me. I just still kept walkin', never did weaken.

“Now the door to the north room of that house was open comin' off a hallway. I just walked in that door to the north room and looked back. Mr. Grant still had that gun on me, and I started workin' out with him. He jumped behind a big oak tree and I just kept workin' out with my .32 Smith and Weston. I had that gun on me when I come there that mornin', and they didn't know it. I didn't go there actin' a fool, less'n a person will call me a fool for what I said. My fin-

ger was on that trigger all the time and the gun was in my hand. I had on a pair of big overalls, brand new, and the pockets was deep and my hand was in the pockets. And I had on a white cowboy hat — that's the way I was dressed and my jumper and a pair of Red Wing boots, about knee-high. I was beginnin' to get prepared for the winter. And when Mr. Grant shot me — shot me three times, in the same place — my blood came near to fillin' them boots, knee-high boots. I was just sloshin' in my blood every step I took.

“Well, I shot six times, and when I got done shootin' all of them deputies done cleared out from that house, every one of 'em run away from there. Them two around the house, from in back of the house, they pulled up and tore out across the cornfield goin' back to the car. And the one that shot me and Mr. Meade who had grabbed my arm, they took off before I could reload. But it wasn't only me doin' the shootin'. Some of the fellas had come back by the house and some of 'em was shootin' from the field. And when the shootin' was over and I walked out the door, Tom McAndrew was layin' at the doorsteps bleedin' at the mouth. I couldn't tell you to save my life where Tom come from. There's some of 'em told it that that nigger shot him — Cece Carter. But I never seen Cece Carter come back there with them that mornin'. And Clint Webster, they killed him after they caught me. When I heard about the death of Clint, Mr. Carl Platt come around the jailhouse that mornin' and told the crowd in there, ‘Tell Jesse that old Booker Webster’ — he called him Booker Webster — ‘tell Jesse old Booker Webster is dead. Tell Jesse old Booker Webster is dead.’”

After the shoot-out, Hull walked a mile to his home. His wife and second oldest son drove him to the Tuskegee Institute Hospital, where he was treated and asked to leave. Officials there were afraid to keep him longer than was necessary to dress his wounds. So his wife carried him to her cousin's place, just outside Tuskegee in Macon County. He was found and arrested the next day. His wife's youngest brother, James Craig, who had come to protect him, was

shot and killed as he ran from the cabin firing a breech-loader at the sheriffs.

Five months after the shoot-out, Hull was tried for attempted murder along with all the other black farmers suspected of having been at Clint Webster's house that morning. He was convicted and sentenced to 12 years in the state penitentiary, the harshest sentence meted out. He served out his time first as a hoe hand at a prison farm, then as a water toter at a road camp, and finally (the bulk of his sentence) as an occasional field worker, water toter, and overseer of the state's property at the women's prison at Wetumpka, Alabama. Three times he refused paroles which stipulated that he had to leave his native county and re-settle elsewhere in the state. The price of the right to return home was a full sentence. Hull was the only man in his crowd to serve all his years; the others, that he knows of, made deals with their former landlords to spring them in return for their property and labor on the outside. Hull considers them turncoats and talks bitterly about them today.

Hull led an easy life in prison. He reckons he didn't do one year's labor in twelve, and he was never whipped or beaten, a remarkable record he attributes to his backing — International Labor Defense people who monitored his treatment in prison. As Hull grew older — he was 47 when he began his sentence — he confronted his enemies less and manipulated them against each other more. His prison stories reflect his changing method: He moves behind the scenes, observes more, and talks less as a character.

For Hull, in prison, the SCU was an unseen presence acting to restrain prison officials. In the field, meanwhile, the union continued to organize. Party goals consistently took a back seat to farmers' needs. The union was an anti-landlord device, and its tactics were adjusted to the resources of its members in light of the power of the landlord-police. At Reeltown and Camp Hill, the police attacked before the union had even planned its economic offensive. Following these costly armed conflicts, organizing activity shifted away from marginal tenants and croppers to day laborers; from eastern hill counties to the Black Belt. There uniform

work conditions approximated a factory situation, and the union responded in Lowndes County with wage strikes and relief lobbies. Two of Jess Hull's nephews, now factory workers in Detroit, commend the educational and practical value of taking direct economic action against the landlord rather than fighting it out against the landlord's police.

Before the Lowndes County Strike, the SCU had called for unity and had formed an uneasy alliance with the STFU. This appeal coincided with the new CP policy of "united front" announced at the Seventh International Congress in the summer of 1935. The SCU increasingly became a liaison organization between its members and New Deal agencies, and a lobby for more radical federal programs. Finally, the SCU merged its membership with several national agricultural unions, each representing a specific tenure of farmer.

Home, finally, in 1945, Hull couldn't pick up where he'd left off. His children resented his intrusion into the business affairs of the family which they had taken over, but his return relieved them of the responsibility which had bound them to home. They married in rapid succession and moved out of the house. They lingered around the country while they worked at local mills or at odd jobs, then five of them packed up and left the state. Two of Hull's daughters wound up in Chattanooga, one son in Philadelphia, another son in Middletown, Ohio, and another daughter in Brooklyn. Three sons and a daughter stayed in Alabama, but only one son continued to farm. Hull's first wife died in 1950, and he remarried in 1953.

Deprived of the labor of his children, advancing in age, and poor, Hull barely managed a one-horse farm. But the one-horse farm was disappearing, and he was functionally unprepared for the new agriculture. So he gave up cotton and planted only corn. For several years he made a living at it until the work wore him down. Today he still plants a small patch of peas and corn and raises his meat. But he spends most of his time making fine white-oak baskets — a trade his father taught him. What he sells — and he cannot work fast enough to meet the demand — brings him a very small income, and he lives mainly on an old-age pension and infrequent gifts from his children.

We have been working for two years now on an oral history of the Hull family, and have spent hundreds of hours recording Jess's autobiography and the partial autobiographies of his brothers and all their children. We don't pretend to be neutral participants: Jess Hull identifies us with the "movement" that he says began with Emancipation, continued with the union, and erupted again in the 1960s. Our solidarity with his struggle disposes him to tell us things he has told nobody else. In the context of a family history, this is especially risky for him.

His children, by and large, do not support his stand at Reeltown. Hull has caught his sons "caucusin', figurin' how they can stop their daddy from talkin' about it." He calls them "weak-kneed" and says it isn't "that they care so much for me; they don't want to be chased around themselves." His children tell us, in defense of their position, that as a result of the union they lost their father for 12 years, lost their land, and suffered recriminations in the community — and do to this day. They say the union pushed their father into more than he could handle. Hull, on the other hand, insists that he did what he had to do, union or no union. "I don't call for nobody to run their heads up under a gun, but if you don't rise up in defense of your portion, what good are you? Every nigger in this country that's ever heard about this organization, they oughta wake up and speak out for it, for their sake. Any business that's transacted for the benefit of you, you ought to risk somethin', you got to risk."



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Black Prisoners' Poetry

INTRODUCTION

The poems which follow were written at Bordentown Reformatory. The poets are both in their late 20s and have completed their high-school equivalences within the New Jersey penal system. I came into contact with them when I conducted creative-writing seminars at Bordentown in the summer of 1972. James Beatty had been interested in writing for a long time and was well acquainted with the work of such black contemporaries as Nikki Giovanni, Don Lee, and Sonia Sanchez. Danny Holloway had much less formal knowledge of poetry and only began writing in response to being in an English class. Neither is a "political prisoner" in the sense of Martin Sostre or H. Rap Brown. They drifted into crime because of the usual social situation confronting ghetto blacks. They are aware of the class nature of the process which took them to prison, but they are not politically active.

Beatty and Holloway are close friends. During their time at Bordentown, they read and evaluated each other's work daily. They took the same classes in writing, drama, and English. Their completely independent styles indicate how well they managed to retain their individual voices in spite of their common assumptions about most things and their constant interchange. Their reading styles are even more divergent. Holloway reads in a droll, sometimes mumbling, gravel voice full of sarcasm and restrained anger. He often gives the impression of a junkie speaking out a last poem as he goes on the nod. In contrast, Beatty reads at a rapid pace with clear and precise accents and pauses.

We worked very hard on trying to find written forms that would capture the actual sound and spirit of the spoken po-

ems. Holloway is still not overly concerned with technical questions. He concentrates on getting his experiences and emotions out as clearly and rapidly as he can. Beatty is the opposite, a stylist very much involved with the topography and spacing of his poems. He is an enthusiastic experimenter and will often redo the same poem in different forms. In trying to write of his experiences as a pimp, Beatty uses two different approaches. Sometimes he will depend on realistic street slang and subjective references. Other times he utilizes surrealistic methods to render some of the theatrical and hallucinatory aspects of an otherwise brutal set of relationships.

Both men continue to write. They see themselves not as prisoners who write, but as writers who happen to be prisoners. Beatty has been in the Newark Rebellion, the Tombs Revolt, and a thousand street dramas of which he would like to give an account in future prose and poetry. Holloway is more concerned with rendering his own everyday experiences and the more typical experiences of black people in America. Beatty is serving a 15-year bank-robbery term at Trenton State Prison, and Holloway is an escapee from Bordentown. The publication here is the first time their work has appeared outside of prison-related newspapers and magazines.

Dan Georgakas

James Beatty

i
i saw the sun today june 25
4 the first time
in 18 months 14 days
18 hours & 1 solitary minute
it was beautiful
seen through
the wire-mesh dome
up on the roof
of the tombs
i realize even though
i am an inhabitant
of this tomb
that i am
very much alive
when i return
2 the inner recesses
of this tomb
tired from this
game
of basketball
i'll make sure
2 remember
man
i'm still black
strong
& in prison
so what
right on
SUN SUN SUN SUN SUN SUN SUN

h
ow do I describe being lonely
 seeing the world as womans'
 flesh-presence making me
& sometimes wanting 2 yell
 I'm lonely
 I'm lonely
 I'm lonely
2 instead choke the words
 with my larnyxs' hands forcing them
 back down past my
 non-participant heart . . .
until they feel like bile
 rejected by my liver settling
 in my stomach
Strange; there are no more pains
 sitting & watching
 I avert my eyes for fear
the words have appeared written in them
 with jaundice-ink
a swallow tightens the grip
 and . . . LY almost escapes
a heartbeat washes it down
 to join its drowning LONE . . .
 she spoke!
 she spoke!
the words have gone down
 the third time . . .
so I can only smile
 & hope she's still there
when the tide returns them 2 the shores
 of my lips

i
i promised my grandma when i was young
to give her all the dollars
and keep the pennies
when i got big.
now that i am 6 feet 10 inches tall
over twenty-one
robbed a big bank
& didn't get her no dollar bills
all i can truthfully say is,
sorry grandma
we're preparing for revolution.
if i gave you dollars
it would be like newark july '67 again.
you couldn't find no place to spend them
& we're not going shopping.
so would you accept a little freedom!

t
this is to you, my lost beautiful black sister
unaware, misguided, steered by your emotions
for one black brother
into the arms of many others
finding now in that direction of
at first novel infatuation, fascination
a path like no where
the brother brags, he IS proud
of U
late at night
while he counts
your invaded body
lays blame 2 feelings

that keep U walking
a serpentine road
U recognize the bends
& dont want 2 look down
keep your chin
up high
gazing for
the end
U are exposed now
because of unexposure
then
the turning
your disadvantage
victimized by
a myriad of temptations
oppression is guilty
of your rape
seeking materialistic things
whatever they be
never able 2 enjoy
the extreme essence of
tell the truth
that world is alien 2 U
isn't it
U called it a period
going in search
of yourself & a him
but U found
after finding him
that U are still alone
and haven't yet
found your own blackself

When U know
how it feels
& forget
how the sun
looks
when U wonder
what today's
today looks &
feels like
when U worry
how it would
feel & touch
& see blackwoman
or woman at all
when U think
about spending
not money
but many desired
tomorrow's alone
U will know &
that there is
something wrong
surrounding us.

•
I know i can die
i have
shed tears of sorrows
as i watched
yawning wounds
exhale
black blood
my brother's
his body
a question
mine one solution
as i saw me die with he
with both
our eyes closing
i held out
holding on to him
wishing
my life
into his body
as his sweat/my coldness
my sweat/his coldness
mingled
he killed
he killed
a bullet
with
his body
hatred made me
immune
& that bullet that found we.

Danny Holloway

Walking through Macy's on 34th St.,
I stepped into the men's room.
Like walking through Grand Central Station
at 12:00 noon.
All the spots were being used,
and people were waiting.
I got behind this white guy
since he seemed in a hurry.
Damn, thought he'd never finish pissing.
Almost pissed on myself standing there.
First time I ever noticed how long
it takes white folks to piss.
What the hell do they be doing?
I felt kind of funny finishing so fast,
figured I'd take a little extra time.
Thought I'd shake it a little longer
this particular time.
And there I went
splashing the guy next to me.
Looked at me like I was crazy.
Felt stupid saying excuse me,
mentioned something about the plumbing.
And I was still the first one to finish.

12 Years Old

being young makes things hard to understand.

I can remember the projects,
three rooms

that mom had to clean up.

she argued and hollared while cleaning,
never did she joke about it.

she cursed when she cooked,
talked about the delipated pots and pans.

the curtains never looked good.

she went about killing roaches
like a warrior.

there were always clothes to take
to the laundry-mat.

she never seemed to finish ironing.

never had time for anything but housework.

but look at her now,

in a house with 8 rooms

and a basement.

you'd think she'd be angry now for sure,

but she hums when she cleans
through all 8 rooms.

she smiled when I disturbed her
for movie money.

she sings now when she cooks,
and the food is good.

she jumps if she sees a roach.

I think she's scared of them.

she washes clothes for two days
and doesn't complain.

now the market is over a mile away,

and she likes going.
she still never finishes ironing,
but she enjoys it.
she likes raking leaves and sweeping
the walk way.
she cleans windows and likes crawling
in the garden to help a rose grow
and I still can't understand it.

Stopped to look at a black man once.
He was shinning white folks' shoes.
Looked at me like a stranger
like black folks don't get shoe shines.
Made me feel out of place in a shine parlor.
Looked at my shoe box,
real important shoe store name
(on the box)
worth putting a shine on 'em.
Question on his face now though.
Guess he was wondering where my chair was?
Really puzzled when I got in his chair.
I don't know why.
He was the best shoe black they had.
Did a fine job
but hesitated with the whisk broom
like black folks don't like getting the dust
whisked off 'em.
Figured I'd tip him good.
Gave him 50¢.
More than the shine.

The white folks give him 10 or 20¢.
Thought he'd appreciate this.
Looked at me real nasty
like he was insulted.
Was he thinking I was trying to be a
big shot?
Or didn't I give him enough?
Like I walk around passing out 50¢ pieces
for a hobby.
Shook his head and
put it in his pocket.
If it don't be for the White Folks
that were there,
I'd have told the nigger something.
Believe me,
I'd have told my brother something.

Grandma told me bout slaves once,
sat me down
and made me listen.
I looked in her eyes,
still hard from the sights she saw.
wet around the edges.
must have been a sad sight,
cause her hand was in a fist.
her fist wasn't soft and delicate.
didn't like for her to touch me too much.
sort of hurt when she grabbed me.
didn't like to hear her stories either.
she'd never tell a lie.

always told me just what happened.
truth would make me sorry
and the rest of the day would be sad
cause I couldn't avenge her.
said when she had her daughter,
white folks called it a pup
(wanted her to have a litter
but try and have male pups).
tobacco got to be cropped.
I asked grandma was it a man
that said that?
she wouldn't answer.
just mentioned that if it had been a man,
my grandpa would have done something
cause he was a man.
I looked at my mama
and told grandma,
even though I stuttered,
didn't want to scare her
didn't want to make her mad,
that I'd have killed a lady for her
that said that.
all she did was smile
and opened up her fist.

PAMPHLET SUBSCRIPTION

Radical America's pamphlet-subscription has been designed to suit several purposes ; first and foremost, to make available to a limited number of readers a broad range of publications from the small press in the US and abroad — creative political pamphlets, politically-oriented poetry books, new magazines, journals, and so on; second, to provide a means for distributing RA pamphlet publications directly to readers; and third, to afford a substantial means of regular support for RA's existence and growth unobtainable any other way.

Pamphlet subscribers have, over the last two years, received all the "RA Pamphlets" (including several now out of print), "RA Reprints", and a number of the "Works from Other Publishers", including R. Gregoire and F. Perlman: "Worker-Student Action Committees"; F. Perlman: "The Incoherence of the Intellectual"; Michael Velli: "Generation of Revolutionaries"; Paul Romano: "Life in the Factory"; Raoul Vaneigem: "traite de savoir vivre a l'usage des jeunes generations" (first section), "Poverty of Student Life", "The Anti-Mass"; Antonio Gramsci: "Turin, 1920"; and M. Velli: "Manual for Revolutionary Leaders". And finally, a scattering of additional materials, including three numbers of TELOS, ARSENAL #1, a surrealist wall-poster, and two issues of PM.

Fall pamphlets already sent out include: "Parable of the Water-Tower", by Edward Bellamy; "The Rise and Fall of the Union", by James Boggs; "Rana Mozelle", by Paul Garon; and "Italy After Mussolini", by John Hewetson. Winter pamphlets to be published shortly include: four labor history pamphlets, 48 to 72 pages, succeeding and updating the widely-used Labor Studies Summaries; an anthology of Prison Poets, edited by Dan Georgakas; an expanded edition of Martin Glaberman's "Be His Payment High or Low", and several more pamphlets from other publishers.

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