

American labor on the defensive: A 1940's odyssey - Stan Weir



An article by Stan Weir surveying the effects World War II and the post-war years had on CIO unions and the American working class.

American Labor on the Defensive: A 1940's Odyssey 3 Stem Weir

It is impossible to discuss the condition of American labor in the 40's without brief mention of international working-class developments during the quarter century prior to the World War II decade and without some examination of the formative period of the CIO in the 30's.

The Russian Revolution of 1917, still the epochal event of this century, experienced totalitarian reversal by the time of the General Strikes in San Francisco and Minneapolis. In what had been the Soviet Union there were no free functioning workers' councils or unions. The valiant revolutionary attempts made in Germany, Finland, Poland, and Hungary right after World War I had been crushed. The British General Strike of 1926, the Chinese Revolution of 1927-1929, and the Spanish Revolution of 1931-1939 all ended in bitter tragedy. The near-revolutionary situations were checked in Germany during the years just before Hitler came to power, and in France and Austria historical moments later. These defeats in turn made the drift toward world war inexorable. The major factor in the ability of the U.S. to pull out of the Great Depression in the 30's was the expanding market for war products. The resulting growth in employment provided mass-production workers with the main part of their ability to organize. It is ironic that the more rapidly the condition developed that would allow five million workers to join CIO unions in three years (1937-1940), the nearer would come the war that so tremendously accelerated the elimination of rank-and-file power in the new unions.

The 1935 decision of John L. Lewis to form a Committee of Industrial Organizations inside the AFL was a response to the seemingly spontaneous formation of independent local industrial unions, a movement which appeared as early as 1932. Lewis was not a radical social visionary, but he had great ambition supported by just as great an administrative ability. The leader of the one major unions that was already industrial by nature, he recognized the power to be had from centralizing the new and mainly isolated Industrial unions that were beginning to organize. Technology and historical circumstance selected him to head the drive. A hardened bureaucrat, he was faced with the need to respond rapidly, before the workplace revolts centralized themselves independently of any established bureaucratic structure and ideology. He had organizers, but not enough to accomplish such a "Herculean" job. He was forced to seek an alliance with the Communists, the only grouping that could provide him with what he lacked. They had cadres of organizers trained in the handling of radical situations during the Third Period of the Communist International, when it was their policy to organize dual unions. They eagerly responded to the offer extended by Lewis.

It is a tragedy that the often heroic activity of Communist field organizers was used for bureaucratic ends by Lewis and the top Communist labor policy makers. Down "below" in the ranks of the workers there was indeed a form of revolution in progress. The mass introduction of assembly-line techniques, particularly during the first World War and the 20's, had finally created the basis for the Industrial unionism so long called for in various forms by the IWW, the Socialist Labor Party of Daniel De Leon, and the Socialist Party of Eugene Debs. However, the workers who began to organize their own unions right after the Depression passed its deepest period viewed the industrial union organizational model as a means, not an end. They had become witness to the calculated "de-skilling" of millions of jobs. They had seen their nation nearly come apart in the credibility crisis of the Herbert Hoover administration. It was apparent to all that there was no political-economic stability at the international level. The press reported the existence of workers' struggles in other lands. These factors merged to create a liberating effect. Mass production, transportation, and maritime workers would lead an attempt to make a fundamental change in the nature of contract and grievance bargaining.

As practiced by the AFL unions prior to the 30's, collective bargaining had degenerated into negotiation for demands that are marginal to the one that is central in the daily life of all who work—that is, the amount of work that is to be done each day to obtain a wage. AFL leaders bargained for more pay and economic benefits, but did nothing to negotiate restrictions that would keep employers from getting back wage increases via officially unrestrained productivity programs. The new unions that would create the foundation of the CIO very early forced demands onto bargaining tables that were openly designed to increase employment and to limit speed-ups or increased workloads. While the first demand of the new unions had to be for union recognition, the motivation was improvement of working conditions. These unions would seek higher wages, impose work rules to check productivity drives, and obtain steward systems to daily police the gains won at the tables.

By its very nature, the drive that brought the right to bargain individual grievances as well as collective contracts became more than a union organizational campaign. Now, each night in industrial centers across the land, as thousands of "semi-skilled" production workers returned to their neighborhoods, homes, and families, fewer came to supper tables with bellies already full from a day's experience with submission. The nature of American home life experienced some liberation as summary firings and foremen's abilities to play favorites diminished. The side effects of the improvement were many: they are of major importance, but they are seldom discussed. Black workers, for example, had participated in the building of the new unions and thereafter utilized the grievance procedures like other workers. While this was a routine expression of union progress, however, it demanded that the whites observing it jettison a whole set of old cultural beliefs on how blacks supposedly act toward bosses while on the job. While few blacks had illusions that the CIO would bring them full equality on the job, it provided some ways for them to demonstrate to themselves and others the vital role they were performing in American industry.

Due to the nature of work in a number of industries, it was possible for the new unions to directly negotiate limitations on production. One of the best examples of this development is provided by the West Coast longshoremen who, in the period right after the 1934 San Francisco General Strike, won and enforced the demand that no more than 2100 pounds of break-bulk cargo could be hoisted on any sling, board, or net. Previously there was no limit at all. Loads up to 5,000 pounds were not uncommon. The limitation was secondarily a safety factor; its first function was to break the production routine in half with more than twice as many of the pauses that are necessitated by landing in or hoisting out loads. The "make work" demands that came out of factory situations could seldom be so direct. The rubber workers obtained a six-hour day while imposing some checks on their employers' ability to increase individual productivity. In other "factoryized" industries, piece work was eliminated or modified and standard hourly rates of pay were established, while inroads were made toward relatively more liveable production quotas. The United Auto Workers, during the term of their first president, Homer Martin, sought contractual language that would give the union in each assembly plant a voice in the setting of line speeds throughout the life of the bargaining agreement. This was the first time, and only time thus far, that the top UAW leadership made anywhere near a sincere attempt to serve this first need of the ranks, but the attempt was made.

The most frequently used effort to check production by the new unions was one that attacked the problem on a piecemeal basis. The right to strike over unsettled workplace floor grievances was sometimes contractually protected to a degree, but far more often was informally asserted and taken. Shop-floor stewards elected at individual departmental levels took the time and freedom to move about in their territory. Many performed the role of

advocate rather than administrative agent. Grievants got immediate representation many more times than they would in later years.

By the end of the decade, when the independent CIO was still only three years old, its leadership in each industry was already consolidating its bureaucratic position. Having signed contracts that limited daily rank-and-file on-the-job initiatives, they were put in the impossible position of trying to lead the ranks while stripped of the one strength that could bring real success. They had little choice but to become isolated disciplinarians. For a time, however, out of the strengths of their recent victories, the ranks could check the bureaucratic drift here and there through the on-the-job bargaining by informal work groups, quickie strikes, slowdowns, and minor acts of sabotage. That local and even international officials of the new unions had only recently left the workplaces, meant that many among those who remained in the shops were personally acquainted with their higher officials and could use that familiarity to check bureaucratic drift to some degree. In both harsh and friendly ways, officials got reminders of their rank-and-file origins and sources of their new powers.

The ability of labor's ranks to sustain control over their leaders dwindled as warring European countries placed larger orders with American industrialists. New jobs were created. Increasing numbers of Americans left old jobs in plants they had helped organize and took higher-paying jobs elsewhere, sometimes in faraway cities. The focus of public attention began to move to military retreats and advances overseas. When France fell to Hitler's armies in 1940, the U.S. began open war preparations. The first peacetime draft army was about to be mobilized. The combination of conditions that in the 1930's had forced working-class and lower middle-class Americans to initiate actions for social change was gone. Enormous change was now being imposed on them by external forces, and there was a growing fascination with it. And, as a part of that change, the countless rank-and-file cadres that had built the unions at the point of production were already losing members to the armed forces and defense jobs. Educated militants who remained on the jobs they helped to organize found it difficult to sustain struggles against their employers and for internal union democracy. They had now to contend with the lower level of consciousness in the workers who were hired to replace the vanishing veterans of the organizing period. At the same time, those same rank-and-file organizers of the CIO who left to take war jobs found it difficult to mobilize the new defense workers on a militant basis: large numbers of those new heavy-industry workers were recruited from poor rural areas and so-called "marginal" jobs. Industrial employment at relatively high wages was for them an exciting new freedom

Moreover, the unions in wartime industry were for the most part set up without rank-and-file participation. The right to represent this newly-mobilized segment of the labor force was handed to the now-established officialdoms in return for their "full cooperation with the war effort", as arranged by the Roosevelt administration. The contracts they negotiated in this way contained a "sweetheart" quality. Worse still, these contracts and the manner of their administration created for the employers and government the model from which to mold industrial relations in the post-war period: unconditional no-strike pledges, arbitration, and the inability to support grievances via strike action.

The change in all aspects of American life created by four years of total war mobilization were so great and came so fast that the population could not assimilate them. Veterans of the period, whether they served in the Pacific, Detroit, North Africa, San Francisco, Europe, Bayonne, India, or Peoria, would not be able for some time to comprehend the society to which they returned in 1946. This is not to say that Americans fully understood the currents of their world during the 30's; but for seven years, from 1932 to 1939—from just this side of the depth of the depression until just before U.S. entry into the war that brought full employment—there was a sense of social progress. Each victory over an employer, landlord,

or governmental employment agency allowed the participants a sense of participation in a national movement. Part of each victory was the increased understanding of power relationships existing in the overall society. Feelings of being adrift decreased as large numbers discovered a role that allowed them to determine in part their own destinies. The coming of war did not strike dumb the people who built the new unionism of the 30's, but it did remove them from the work places and the social combinations inside the shops that were the basis of the organizing drives. Also, it geometrically accelerated the bureaucratization of their unions. They thereby lost a major facility through which they could assimilate their experience with change and in which they had previously been able to bank growing class consciousness. The employers and government were quick in taking advantage of the condition. Improvements in working conditions won in the 30's which had survived the war were increasingly "bought back" by the employers with wage and fringe-benefit increases. With only rare exceptions, the labor officialdoms, including the leaders of "Communist-led" unions, cooperated in the "sale". In its totality, the leadership of the mass movement of the 30's folded. The problems at work and in every aspect of American life signaled the need for leadership. That leadership was either unwilling, unavailable, or incapable. Social unionism was a war casualty. Not even independent or individual analyses of the post-war condition were forthcoming. Most of the well-known radical intellectuals and social critics, who had been so vocally anti-war until Hitler's attack on Russia or the "sneak" attack on Pearl Harbor, had become silent. For all union reformers, militants, and revolutionaries developed out of the experiences and ideologies of the 30's, World War II swept in a long period whose major characteristic has been isolation.

What follows are some of the 40's experiences of one who entered the labor force as that decade opened.

SHIPPING OUT

In the early summer of 1940, a friend and I were walking from one factory to another in East Los Angeles trying to find employers who would accept job applications. We were both five months out of high school. Unrelated to anything we had been discussing, one of us suddenly broke in with: "When in the hell is this war going to end? It's been going for years now, and it's still growing." In 1939 Franklin Roosevelt had announced that "...no American mother's son will die on a foreign battlefield." For that lie he was the more beloved—even worshipped. We needed that assurance to jump to in moments of quiet panic. As editor of the senior class book I had tried to get Roosevelt to write the forward and had failed. Still I had made the dedication to him and had written "The world is now closer to peace than at any time in the last decade."

France fell less than a year later. There were some few in America who were not so naive, but my attitudes were unfortunately far closer to the national norm.

I attended UCLA in 1941 and joined an eating cooperative: five days of meals for six dollars. There and in associated co-ops were a considerable number of young Communists. Through them I had my first contact of any kind with organized labor struggles. Representatives from the Vultee Aircraft and other strikes visited to make speeches and collect money. We listened and made modest donations. On occasion we were also visited by Norman Thomas,

On the Monday morning after "Pearl Harbor" (December 8), the atmosphere was taut. Students moved from class to class with a jumpiness. Every male knew he would have to go. But each one had dreamed up a deal that might keep him out of the armed forces - or at least out of range of actual battle. I met no one who wanted to fight. The same was true of my friends across town working in factories. They too had individual schemes to avert the risk of death. The only youths of my acquaintance on either side of town who volunteered for duty

were those whose civilian lives were in deep crisis; that is, they had serious personal problems or they were in the process of rebellion against university or industrial worklife. That there was no sentiment for the war should cause no consternation. Well Into 1940 the media were popularizing anti-war views. I recall a particular monologue done by a well-known actor on coast-to-coast radio. Portraying a fictional Pittsburgh steelworker, the dramatically accented voice delivered lines close to the following: 'My name George Danovlc. I came from the Old Country. I get job in mill. I love steel. I make wheels for railroad trains Then there is a war. I make things now to kill people I hate steel.' Repeatedly, messages like this one from the media gave expression to our disgust with the coming war —to our growing uneasiness and sense of future appointment with some kind of guilt.

I was one of those in rebellion against the university system prior to the war. I didn't understand it. No one in my family or acquaintance had ever gone to college. I didn't know how to play the game. A philosophy course began a process that made me an atheist in a vacuum. The professor was one of those who at the Chancellor's request visited men's living groups to urge support for the war. I junked my books before finals and walked away. A week later I was in a merchant seamen's training school. I never completed the training. I learned that one could get a regular berth on a ship without it.

I sailed on deck. The AFL Sailor's Union of the Pacific (SUP) had contracts covering all deck seamen on all organized West Coast ships. Andrew Furuseth was its top official starting in 1886, and the influence of the IWW that opposed him was still visible in the ranks. It would become a mid-World War II casualty. Secretary-treasurer was the highest office. There was no president. The SUP had been rejuvenated by the maritime strikes in 1934 and 1936-1937, when it won total control of hiring. Its main membership bases were the largely Scandinavian and Finnish steam-schooner men of the coastal lumber trade and the multi-racial Hawaiians of the sugar and pineapple 'Island run'. They had a healthy antagonism to all official authority. Even late in the war when these older men were many times outnumbered in the union by newer hands, no SUP members dared to buy themselves the phoney naval-type uniforms easily purchased along the waterfronts. The reverse was true in the National Maritime Union (NMU), based on the East Coast, which went along with the militarization at a time when the government was trying to destroy the civilian (union) status of merchant seamen.

My experience on my first ship was a liberation. The deck crew would not work if the chief mate put a foot on the main deck between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. I had never before seen on-the-job authority defied with immunity from retaliation. I felt I had found a channel through which to express all the resentments I carried from previous jobs and schools. Within a year I was sailing as a deck-crew union representative. Fights for better food, mattresses, showers, and draws against wages in foreign ports were made successfully, sometimes by lining up on the dock or going to a nearby bar at sailing time. By mid-1943 it was becoming impossible to sustain this sort of fight to protect conditions. The Coast Guard had recently taken over the issuance of seamen's papers from the Department of Commerce. Later in that year I came off a wheel watch (helm duty) just as the ship was about to cross the bar outside the Golden Gate, coming into San Francisco. On deck, the Chief Mate, a retired naval officer, had ordered the very-green crew to break out the cargo booms—dangerous work at any time, but deadly on a rolling deck. I shut off the steam to the machinery and notified the Mate that no gear would be broken out until we tied up alongside the dock. He accused me of trying to 'take over the running of the ship' and left the deck. Nothing more was said. Two days later, when the entire crew went into the officers' messroom to sign off the ship and collect the voyage pay, the company informed me I would have to go to the Coast Guard in the Federal

Building to get my money. I went there, but I had to give them my seamen's papers to get paid and was informed that I might get them back only after my "hearing" three days hence.

Two Coast Guard Lieutenant Commanders were already seated behind a large oak table when I entered the hearing room. They made no accusations. Instead they questioned me about my union activity and political beliefs. And, "did I ever carry my union activity beyond union activity ? " Several ships earlier I had met a member of the Workers Party. Like all the Marxist groupings it had members in the armed forces and war industries, but it alone refused political support to any war establishment or bureaucracy. Because of my experiences and resulting ideas it was the only socialist group that I could have joined. I did and was vulnerable before this Coast Guard tribunal. I asked if they were judging me for anything I had done or for what I thought. They double-talked. Finally, and as if begrudgingly, they returned my papers. Without them I would have been drafted into the army within weeks 'under special circumstances". In every port this scene was being repeated daily on an assembly-line basis by this intelligence branch of the Coast Guard. NMU members I met waiting their turn at those hearings told me that their officials had given the Coast Guard office space in the New York hiring hall.

I had two more of these hearings before the war ended. One for refusing to bring a Second Mate on watch a second cup of coffee. I had brought him the first traditional cup as I had relieved my watch partner at the helm. He wanted another as I was in turn relieved, but couldn't find it within himself to ask rather than order. He was recently out of an officer's school. The next hearing came after I refused to call the Norfolk shipping commissioners agent "Sir" while he was signing on our crew. Both hearings followed the same pattern as the first. During the last hearing the head officer finally said that they were, "going to let me go this time, but if I came back again it would look funny." His companion officer looked at him and said, "Yes, you'd laugh like hell." I followed up the opening with a question: "Does the sum of a collection of innocent verdicts equal a guilty one ? " They indicated the hearing was over and shoved my papers at me, and I left with a motivation that remains. At no time did any of the maritime unions provide the defendants with representation. In time the Coast Guard would provide union officials with an effective way of dealing with oppositionists.

Shoreside employers used the same basic methods to intimidate defense workers, but couldn't do it as bluntly. Nevertheless, all militants experienced paranoia. "The slip of the lip may sink a ship" and "the enemy is always listening" said posters with block-letter slogans superimposed on a large ear. Yet it was clear that the word "enemy" had a double meaning . . . "subversive" supposedly meant "Hitler agent", but one only saw investigators looking for radicals. The Communists, however, were "on our side", one hundred and fifty percent patriots who branded all their critics, "Hitler agents", "red baiters", and "Trotskyite Fifth Columnists". Those who were not members or friends of radical sects could make little sense of this area of their war-time experience. Always readily available around the NMU halls at that time, for example, were books like Sayer's and Kahn's THE GREAT CONSPIRACY, and pamphlets like George Morris' THE TROTSKYITE 5TH COLUMN IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT.

They helped create a lynch atmosphere. I do not use the term entirely in a figurative sense. Morris urged that those from the "cesspool" were enemies and should be "treated as such". He hailed the imprisonment of the "18 Trotskyites" who led the 1934 Minneapolis General Strike, and twice quoted a collaborative Teamster vice-president to make his own point : "If Trotsky had taken over at the time, Russia would probably today be a part of the 3rd Reich Fortunately, too many of his followers are not." (p. 13 and pp. 29-30)

American workers in this period faced many riddles, but none more bewildering than the one posed by the Stalinists. All that most unionists had ever heard about the Communists, whether in the labor or daily press, told them that the C.P. represented "revolution", but during the war they were such postured patriots that it would have been comic if they had not had so much official power over unionists' lives. The education program of the NMU was officially advertised as "Reading, Writing and No Striking". Both black and white seamen were told to forget their grievances for the "duration". The presence of Afro-Americans in the Communist-led unions were the Party's one cover for its ultra-conservatism.

The conflict between the NMU and the Sailor's Union and its affiliates became more dramaturgy than feud. It came to constitute a way of life in shoreside as well as maritime unions, between the United Electrical Workers (UE) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), between the UAW and the International Association of Machinists (IAM), between the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) and the Teamsters, and between more but smaller unions. Still, war industry continued to grow and the arrangement between the Democratic Party and the top labor leaders paid off in numerical growth of dues payers. In this way the war was very good to most of the high union officials.

THE UAW AND THE '46 STRIKE

In the mid-1930's two of the three Reuther brothers, Walter and Victor, went to Russia. They toured and even worked in factories. They returned as the organizing drive in auto got into full swing. They were back in Detroit only a few weeks when they visited a friend of mine who was the newspaper editor for a newly self-organized auto local. They asked him to forget all the "class struggle stuff" and work with them. For them, an American form of the Social-Democratic approach was now the "only thing that would work". They saw "the old" or more radical approach as "dead" and "off the agenda". Walter Reuther was early a UAW vice-president in charge of the GM department. During the war the three Reuther brothers (Roy plus Walter and Victor) carefully watched the growth of the Rank-and-File Caucus in the UAW. Led by anti-war radicals and militants, it stood as the only formally-organized force against the Conservative-Communist bloc that dominated the top offices. The Caucus opposed the Communist proposals for a return to piecework in auto and other giveaway programs. It was for rescinding the wartime no-strike pledge in order to stop the takeover of working conditions being conducted by the employers who were using the war as an excuse to weaken the union and increase their government guaranteed profits. In 1945, with the war still on, the Caucus forced a referendum in which 40% voted to take back the right to strike.

As the war ended, Walter Reuther was freed to move against the coalition leadership in control of the UAW represented by the conservative President R. J. Thomas and the Communist-oriented Secretary-Treasurer George Addes. The Thomas-Addes program for the union contained no more than the usual call for "substantial" wage increases—increases of the sort that would easily be wiped out in the growing post-war inflation. The ranks had just endured four years of wage freeze. The Thomas-Addes program did not provide a way to end the four-year lag. Further, the UAW leaders' overly eager wartime collaboration with the employers had made the Thomas-Addes leadership unpopular with the ranks. Also, the one reason for Reuther's inability to work with the Rank-and-File Caucus during the war—its opposition to the wartime no-strike pledge—was gone. With a peacetime popularization of the R&F Caucus' program, he was able to take over the caucus. "Wage Increases and No Price Increases", "Open Industries Books", "Public Negotiations", "For a Sliding Scale Cost of Living Clause in the Next Contract" . . . with these slogans Reuther mobilized for the 1946 strike against General Motors. That strike became the keystone of the Strike Wave. It was an enthusiastic strike. Expectations were high. Wages but not profits had been frozen throughout

the war. There was big catching up to do. After many weeks of striking the UAW strike was coming to a climax, and just hours before it did the Communist-led United Electrical Workers betrayed agreed-upon CIO strategy. It had been agreed earlier that the CIO mass production unions in electric, rubber, and steel would hang back and let the settlement in the key industry, auto, be the pattern setter. The UE broke ranks, jumped in, and accepted an offer of 18¢ an hour. That became the reward to most mass production workers for the weeks, even months, spent on the picket line. There was no real sense of victory. An opportunity to establish a current of movement in post-war labor struggles was missed. There were no movement ideas available. The Communists were in disrepute. Reuther could therefore turn to radical sounding Social-Democratic rhetoric to build a cover for a standard labor bureaucracy. And, the vacuum of ideology would enable him to win over large numbers of former radicals with excellent reputations in the ranks.

But the blame for the routine settlement of the 1946 strike wave cannot be put mainly on the UE; the rank-and-file groupings that had built the CIO in each workplace had been atomized in the previous six-year period and the bureaucracies had hardened. CIO President Phillip Murray was not interested in seeing Walter Reuther become a full-blown labor hero and competitor. None of the top CIO leaders led their strikes with real enthusiasm, Reuther included. He had tried for a substantial wage increase and had obtained a cost-of-living clause for auto workers, but he had only halfheartedly presented GM with the demand for "wage increases without raising the cost of care", "open the books", or "public negotiations".

OAKLAND GENERAL STRIKE

The Oakland (California) General Strike was an extension of the national strike wave. It was not a 'called' strike. Shortly before 5 a.m., Monday, December 3, 1946, the hundreds of workers passing through downtown Oakland on their way to work became witness to the police herding a fleet of scab trucks through the downtown area. The trucks contained commodities to fill the shelves of two major department stores whose clerks (mostly women) had long been on strike. The witnesses, that is, truck drivers, bus and streetcar operators and passengers, got off their vehicles and did not return. The city filled with workers, they milled about in the city's core for several hours and then organised themselves.

By nightfall the strikers had instructed all stores except pharmacies and food markets to shut down, Bars were allowed to stay open, but they could serve only beer and had to put their juke boxes out on the sidewalk to play at full volume and no charge. 'Pistol Packin' Mama, Lay That Pistol Down', the number one hit, echoed off all the buildings. That first 24-hour period of the 54-hour strike had a carnival spirit. A mass of couples danced in the streets. The participants were making history, knew it, and were having fun. By Tuesday morning they had cordoned off the central city and were directing traffic. Anyone could leave, but only those with passports (union cards) could get in. The comment made by a prominent national network newscaster, that 'Oakland is a ghost town tonight,' was a contribution to ignorance. Never before or since had Oakland been so alive and happy for the majority of the population. It was a town of law and order. In that city of over a quarter million, strangers passed each other on the street and did not have fear, but the opposite.

Before the second day of the strike was half over a large group of war veterans among the strikers formed their own squads and went through close-order drills. They then marched on the Tribune Tower, offices of the anti-labour OAKLAND TRIBUNE, and from there marched on City Hall demanding the resignation of the mayor and city council. Sailor's Union of the Pacific (SUP) crews walked off the three ships at the Oakland Army base loaded with military supplies for troops in Japan. By that night the strikers closed some grocery stores in order to conserve dwindling food supplies. In all general strikes the participants are

very soon forced by the very nature of events to themselves run the society they have just stopped. The process in the Oakland experiment was beginning to deepen. There was as yet little evidence of official union leadership in the streets. The top local Teamster officials, except one, were not to be found; the exception would be fired five months later for his strike activity. International Teamster President Dave Beck wired orders 'to break the strike' because it was a revolutionary attempt 'to overthrow the government'. He ordered all Teamsters who had left their jobs to return to work. (OAKLAND TRIBUNE, December 5, 1946)

A number of the secondary Oakland and Alameda County union leaders did what they could to create a semblance of straight trade-union organisation. The ranks, unused to leading themselves and having no precedent for this sort of strike in their own experience, wanted the well-known labour leaders in the Bay Area to step forward with expertise, aid, and public legitimisation. The man who was always billed as leader of the 1934 San Francisco General Strike, ILWU President Harry Bridges, who was then also State CIO President, refused to become involved,, just as he did 18 years later during the Berkeley Free Speech Movement struggles. The rank-and-file longshoremen and warehouse- men who had been drawn to the street strike were out there on their own. No organised contingents from the hundreds available in the warehouse and longshore hiring halls were sent to help, No CIO shops were given the nod to walk out or 'sick-out'. Only through CIO participation could significant numbers of blacks have been drawn into this mainly white strike. The ILWU and other CIO unions would honour picket lines like those around the Tribune Tower or at the Oakland Army Base, but otherwise they minded their own business. Bridges had recently committed himself to a nine-year extension of the wartime no-strike pledge.

The one major leader of the San Francisco General Strike who would come to Oakland was the SUP's Secretary Treasurer, Harry Lundeberg. On the second night of the strike he was the principal speaker at the mass meeting in the overflowing Oakland Auditorium. He had been alerted when the strike was less than three hours old via a call from an old-time member at a pay phone on an Oakland street. By noon there were contingents composed mainly of Hawaiians acting as 'flying squads', patrolling to find any evidence of strike-breaking activity. They enlarged Upon their number by issuing large white buttons to all seamen or persons on the Street that they knew. The buttons contained the words ' Brotherhood of the Sea', They represented the first officially-organised activity on the street, They did not attempt to run the entire strike or take over. It takes a time for seamen to get over the idea that they are somehow outsiders, The feeling is all the stronger among Hawaiian seamen ashore or residing in the States. They limited their activity to trouble-shooting. They won gratitude and respect. When Lundeberg spoke at the meeting, he had no program of action beyond that of the Oakland AFL leaders. But he got a wild response. He did not approach the microphone reluctantly. His demeanour reflected no hesitancy. Unlike the other speakers, he bellowed with outrage against the city council on behalf of the strikers. In a heavy Norwegian accent he accused: 'These finky gazonies who call themselves city fathers have been taking les sons from Hitler and Stalin. They don't believe in the kind of unions that are free to strike.' All true, but whether he knew it or not, by focusing on the City Council and no more, he was contributing to the undercutting of the strike, Instead of dealing with the anti-labour employers and city officials through the medium of the strike, plans were already being formulated to deal with the crisis in the post-strike period by attacking the City Council through use of the ballot box. The top Alameda County CIO officials were making hourly statements for the record that they could later use to cover up their disloyalty, The AFL officials couldn't get them to come near the strike, but they could be expected to participate in post-strike electoral action.

The strike ended 54 hours old at 11 a.m. on December 5. The people on the street learned of the decision from a sound truck put on the Street by the AFL Central Labour Council. It was the officials' first really decisive act of leadership. They had consulted among themselves and decided to end the strike on the basis of the Oakland City Manager's promise that police would not again be used to bring in scabs. No concessions were gained for the women retail clerks at Kahn's and Hastings Department Stores whose strikes had triggered the General Strike; they were left free to negotiate any settlement they could get on their own. Those women and many other strikers heard the sound truck's message with the form of anger that was close to heartbreak. Numbers of truckers and other workers continued to picket with the women, yelling protests at the truck and appealing to all who could hear that they should stay out. But all strikers other than the clerks had been ordered back to work and no longer had any protection against the disciplinary actions that might be brought against them for strike-caused absences. By noon only a few score of workers were left, wandering disconsolately around the now-barren city. The CIO mass meeting that had been called for that night to discuss strike 'unity' was never held.

In the strike's aftermath every incumbent official in the major Oakland Teamsters Local 70 was voted out of office. A United AFL-CIO Political Action Committee was formed to run candidates in the race for the five open seats on the nine-person City Council. Four of them won, the ballot listed the names of the first four labour challengers on top of each of the incumbents, but reversed the order for the fifth open office. It was felt that the loss was due to this trick and anti-Semitism. The fifth labour candidate's name was Ben Goldfarb. Labour's city councilmen were regularly outvoted by the five incumbents; however, the four winners were by no means outspoken champions of labour. They did not utilise their offices as a tribune for a progressive labour-civic program. They served out their time routinely, and the strike faded to become the nation's major unknown general strike.

The Oakland General Strike was related to the 1946 Strike Wave in time and spirit, and revealed an aspect of the temper of the nation's industrial-working-class mood at war's end. Labour historians of the immediate post-war period have failed to examine the Oakland Strike, and thus have failed to consider a major event of the period and what it reveals about the mood of that time. In developing their analyses they have focused almost entirely on the economic demands made by the unions that participated in the Strike Wave. These demands were not unimportant. But economic oppression was not the primary wound that had been experienced daily during the war years.

The 'spontaneous' Oakland General Strike was a massive event in a major urban area with a population similar to that of all major World War II defence-industry centres. Thousands had come to the Bay Area from all corners of the nation-rural and urban-in the early war years, and had stayed. Every theatre of war was represented among armed-forces veterans returning to or settling in this largest of Northern California's central city cores. The Oakland General Strike revealed fundamental characteristics of a national and not simply a regional mood. Its events combined to make a statement of working-class awareness that World War II had not been fought for democracy. Or, more pointedly, it was a retaliation for the absence of democracy that the people in industry and the armed forces had experienced while 'fighting to save democracy in a war to end all wars'. The focus of people's lives was still on the war. They hadn't fought what they believed to be 'a war against fascism' to return home and have their strikes broken and unions housebroken.

Emotionally, their war experiences were still very real, and yet they were just far enough away from those experiences to begin playbacks of memory tapes. The post-war period had not yet achieved an experiential identity. The Oakland Key System bus drivers, streetcar conductors, and motormen who played a leading role in the strike wore their Eisenhower

jackets as work uniforms, but the overseas bars were still on their sleeves. Like most, they had lost four years of their youth; and while they would never complain about that loss in those terms, there were other related grievances over which resentment could be expressed.

THE CIO IN THE LATE 40'S

In the Fall of 1947, the Communist-oriented State CIO of California held its convention in Santa Cruz. I took the floor as an elected delegate from a UAW local and moved to censure the leadership for its failure to bring any real support to the Oakland General Strike. Paul Schlipf, who was Secretary of the Alameda County CIO Council, took the floor to oppose the motion: "It was **not** a general strike, we weren't in it" With that bit of arrogant doublethink still puzzling the minds of some of the innocent, the bureaucracy's floor whip gave the signal, the gavel was brought down hard, and the next order of business was moved amid ecstatic cheers and stomping by the misled. It was enough to make one retch.

The same 1947 State CIO Convention was the scene of yet another major labor scandal. In the months after the war CIO President Phillip Murray felt pressured by the alliances he had made with the Communists throughout the war period. He counseled with the heads of three international unions. One was an open Communist, one an anti-Communist, and the other a 'neutral'. Murray assigned them to draft a resolution against Communism (that both he and the Communists could live with) to put before the National Convention. If this was done and it passed the convention "for the record", then Murray would not be forced to move against "Communist influence" in the CIO. The resolution was drafted and passed. It carried a statement to the effect that Communism could not be "tolerated" within the CIO. Following the National Convention, every State Convention had to fall in line by passing the same resolution, The leadership of the California convention put the resolution on the floor.

A young worker from the Long Beach Ford plant went to a floor microphone. He attacked the anti-CP resolution as 'redbaiting and the basis for what will become a major witch hunt in American labor". The booing drowned out most of the rest of what he said. Dave Jenkins of the Marlene Cooks and Stewards provided the answer. He accused the delegate from Ford and those of us who had risen to second his ideas of being "Trotskyites, the people who had opposed Roosevelt even during the war". Tremendous cheers followed this offering. Jenkins closed with the idea that it was sometimes necessary for progress that labor take stands that strengthened its position with the public. One more speaker was recognized, a longshoreman from the prestigious San Francisco ILWU Local 110. A tall, thin, unsmiling man who made eye contact with no one, he went to the "mike" and delivered one sentence: "I'm a Communist and a longshoreman and the resolution is okay with me." Wild cheering ensued as the tragic figure hurried to his seat. The question was called, and the "ayes" were overwhelming. More stomping and cheering, The next order of business was moved. The countenances of the majority leaders beamed with looks that come with victory.

No records of this discussion appears in the published proceedings of the convention. Instead there is a resolution praising Phillip Murray for his courageous stands on civil liberties. Nor is there mention in the proceedings of the convention-floor confrontation on the Oakland General Strike. In fact there is no mention of the strike in any context. The proceedings reported that the joint efforts of the AFL and CIO in Alameda County which elected four union members to the Oakland City Council were indication of the tremendous potential the Independent Progressive Party (later led by Henry Wallace) would have in the 1948 elections. Opportunistic capers (like the 1947 CIO resolutions against the CP) caused many to be wrongly silent when the civil liberties of Communists came under full attack in the years that followed immediately.

The 'Communist-dominated' unions were expelled from the CIO in 1949. Free and open debate within the CIO unions withered, and opposition was silenced. It was never again a healthy organization. It crawled into its merger with the AFL in 1955, and what little was left of the old CIO attitudes all but disappeared.

CONCLUSION

Not until the mid—1960's was the rank and file of American labor able to begin to break the bureaucratic deadlock which still binds it. The ongoing fight is quite different from that which began in the early 1930's when the Communists were able to take the lead of almost every major rank-and-file struggle. For this we are in part indebted to the East Berlin Uprisings of 1951, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and the Polish and Czechoslovakian Uprisings of the 1960s. At the same time, there are few if any illusions that any segment of the top labor officialdom has ideas or perspectives that can find a way out of the present crisis within the unions, industry, or society. In fact, the individuals in even the secondary stratum of top union leadership who are pushing for a break with old approaches probably constitute no more than a handful. While many of the old illusions have withered, there is as yet no formulation of an independent set of alternative ideas to guide the struggle of the ranks. As long as this ideological vacuum continues to exist, American workers will have to remain on the defensive.

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