

**"BE HIS PAYMENT HIGH OR LOW":
The American Working Class of the Sixties**

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1. One-Party Unions

One of the confidential management newsletters, of which American businessmen are so fond, predicted last autumn that 'The US labour movement is in for more and greater turbulence.'¹ The reason for this is assigned to 'a spreading rank-and-file revolt against union leaders.' This revolt goes deeper than gripes against union leaders and is 'rooted in the impersonality of the factory assembly lines, the facelessness of modern life, the fear for one's **individuality**.'

Two aspects of this forecast are of special interest. One is that it views the American working class as infinitely more radical than any wing of American socialism or radicalism believes. Socialism in the United States has so committed itself to varying concepts of the backwardness of the workers that it is unable any longer to grasp the reality. The second is that this management view is in fact more conservative than the actual situation.

'Most of the present generation of union chiefs are safe,' said this report. Yet David McDonald of the Steelworkers is already in deep trouble and seems on the way out of office.² That he was challenged by his second in command, Secretary-Treasurer I W Abel, is indicative of both the widespread opposition to the union leadership and the difficulty of this opposition finding expression. In 1958 Donald C Rarick, a local steelworkers leader, challenged McDonald for the presidency of the union. Although he seemed to have the overwhelming support of the big steel locals in the Pittsburgh area, he lost to McDonald by a vote of two to one. There was some doubt at the time whether Rarick had been voted down or counted down, since the elect-

ion, by membership ballot, is supervised by the International Union. There seems to be a certain pertinence to that doubt: the authority of the International Union in elections is exercised through the office of the Secretary-Treasurer and McDonald's confidence in that office was so slight (when the Secretary-Treasurer was running against him) that he introduced a motion to the Executive Board for an impartial outside agency to run the election. The Board voted against McDonald and there are those who are so cynical that they believe he lost his chance for re-election then and there.

The Steelworkers Union never had a strong democratic tradition. The United Auto Workers, however, is generally believed to be the most democratic and progressive of the large American unions. Yet even here the opposition is both general and distorted — distorted because the top union officers are practically untouchable by the rank and file (unless, as in the steel union, they fall out with each other). In 1961, in their hostility to the union's policies and contracts, the auto workers imposed the greatest turnover of local union officers in the history of the union. The significance of these local elections was not lost on those higher up. A top UAW official noted that 'The rank and file couldn't get at us, so they took it out on the local union guys.'³ In 1963, once again, one-third of UAW local presidents were voted out of office.

That Reuther himself is untouchable and that a McDonald can be challenged only by an Abel is one of the facts of union life in the US. The days of vigorous union factions and a democratic internal life ended in the forties. What now prevails is the one-party state. A conservative professor of labour relations, Clark Kerr (he is also the President of the University of California who fought the Free Speech Movement at the Berkeley Campus and has served on the UAW Public Review Board) notes, with out disapproval: 'Unions and corporations alike are, with very few exceptions, one-party governments.'⁴ The only exception in the US is the International Typographical Union.⁵ Does this description have the ring of Stalinist totalitarianism? The parallel is not at all superficial.

'... A study of seventy international union constitutions, the formal instruments that rule a membership of almost 16,000,000 workers, shows among other things that in most of those seventy unions power is generally concen-

trated in the hands of the international presidents, with few restraints placed upon them, that discipline may be enforced against union members with little regard for due process, and that opposition to the incumbent administrations is almost impossible.'⁶

This is, of course, not true of all unions. But where dictatorial powers are not granted by the constitution they are exercised anyway in crucial situations. Joe Curran was not averse to using the New York City Police Department to retain control of the National Maritime Union, nor the assistance of the US Coast Guard in keeping radicals off US merchant ships. And Walter Reuther did not hesitate to suspend the officers and place an administrator over the Chevrolet local in Flint, Michigan, for the crime of devoting a whole issue of the local union paper to listing all the grievances (and their outcome) that were not settled at the plant level and were sent to higher bodies of the union for further negotiations.

But the problem goes much deeper than the question of formal democracy alone. The hostility of American workers is directed not only at particular union leaders but at 'the impersonality of the factory assembly lines, the facelessness of modern life, the fear for one's individuality' which the unions have come to represent. Even among unorganised industrial workers where union shop elections, conducted by the federal government, used to mean automatic victory for the unions, attitudes have changed. In the aerospace industry not too long ago both the United Auto Workers and the International Association of Machinists were defeated in such elections.

A number of observers of the American labour movement have begun to recognise that the unions are incapable of solving the most crucial problems which workers face. One perceptive commentator, Paul Jacobs, notes that 'Automation and the particular unemployment it brings to a particular plant are problems obviously beyond the capabilities of union-management collective bargaining.'⁷ But that is only the smaller part of the problem. The heart of the matter is that the unions stand in the way of a solution to the workers' problems.

Clark Kerr, in his defence of unions, put it this way: 'The union is often viewed as a disturbing force in society; but it is also a disciplinary instrument. It sets rules of its own and joins with

the employer in setting others.⁸ Paul Jacobs, delicately weighing both sides of the question, says essentially the same thing:

'Once the resistance of employers to unionisation ceases at the level of principles, the union, through its contracts, becomes part of the plant government, not only a force for justice but also an integral part of the system of authority needed to operate the plant.'⁹

Daniel Bell states it more bluntly:

'Less realised is the fact that, in the evolution of the labor contract, the union becomes part of the "control system of management". He becomes, as C Wright Mills has put it, a "manager of discontent".'¹⁰

A committeeman at a General Motors plant in Detroit once told a foreman the same thing — to quit trying to discipline workers and to let the union representative do it for him. (He won his grievance with that argument!) With the statification of production impinging on his consciousness, Jacobs takes his point one step further.

'Since the war,' he says, 'the political and economic role of the unions has been one of continuous and unquestioning alignment with the national authority.'¹¹

A whole series of strikes and disputes had been interfering with production in the missile industry until Arthur Goldberg, the Steel Union attorney, became Secretary of Labour and was able to enforce a labour peace that the ordinary capitalist politician could not attain. (Perhaps it was for this service that he was elevated to the Supreme Court.)

2. 'Modernisation'

It should be clear that the problem does not lie in the inability of the unions to find a solution to such problems as automation. They have imposed a solution on the workers. The first to do it was John L Lewis in the dying industry of coal mining. He collaborated in the mechanisation of those mines amenable to it and ruthlessly cut off the majority of the union membership, not only from work but from the social benefits, such as hospitalisation, which they had earlier won.

'In the decisive coal negotiations of 1952 the Southern coal producers, owners mostly of smaller mines, offered to meet all the union demands if Lewis would order three-

day production in the industry. The larger mechanised mines opposed this move since it meant higher overhead costs for unutilised equipment. Lewis, reversing a previous course, chose to line up with the large mechanised mines and their desire for continuous output. The decision meant higher wages for the men but a permanent loss of jobs in the industry.'¹²

In the ten years from 1950 to 1960 the employment of coal miners fell by three-fifths to under 150,000. The bulk of those cut off from the mines make up much of what is known today as Appalachia. The union, however, gets richer because Lewis, with typical foresight, pegged the fringe and welfare benefits to productivity. Instead of the usual form of payment into welfare funds of so many cents per man-hour worked, he adopted the unique formula of basing company payments on the number of tons of coal mined.

The identical pattern was followed some years later by that other notorious militant, Harry Bridges of the West coast longshoremen. He signed an agreement with the dockside employers allowing unlimited automation and mechanisation in return for a large retirement fund and a guaranteed 35-hour week for so-called 'A' members of the union. The second class 'B' members were left to fend for themselves. (They used some of their idle time to picket the union.¹³) The East and Gulf coast dockers, not so fortunate as to have the militant Harry Bridges at their head and belonging to what had only recently been one of the most gangster-ridden unions in the US, rejected this year, at least temporarily, a contract that only went part way toward the total disciplining of the workers and struck their ports for over a month.

In auto and other manufacturing industries the transition was not quite so blatant and abrupt. But the tendency was the same. The unions collaborated in the wholesale reorganisation of production and imposed their own discipline of the grievance procedure. In the early fifties Emil Mazey, Secretary-Treasurer of the UAW (another well-known militant), threatened the Chrysler Corporation with the ending of all overtime work if they did not meet certain demands. In 1958 and 1959, however, with automation and a depression both hitting Detroit, when unemployed Chrysler workers picketed the plants and the union headquarters to end overtime while Chrysler workers were laid

off, the company was able to end the picketing with a court injunction based on the union contract and its no-strike pledge. Workers off the company payroll, some for over a year, were prohibited from picketing or interfering with production because they were held to be bound by the union contract. The union had voluntarily relinquished the right of the workers to refuse overtime work.

The whole problem of automation cannot be gone into. But most of what has been written, from the right as well as from the left, is based on ignorance and misunderstanding. It is concerned entirely with the question of unemployment and has given rise to all sorts of theories about the imminent disappearance of the industrial working class or to theories of a new type of class struggle between the employed and the unemployed. All of this assumes that capitalism can automate at will and can overcome the falling rate of profit and the shortage of capital. The actual decline in the size of the working class in the fifties was reversed in the sixties. The increase in productivity has been greatest in utilities and communications (with substantial automation) and agriculture (no automation at all but a great increase in mechanisation, chemical application and biological sciences) followed by mining (mechanisation rather than automation). The increase in productivity in manufacturing was slightly below the national average and even further below the increase in productivity that took place in manufacturing in the decade following World War I with the introduction of the assembly line and the endless-chain drive.¹⁴

The spokesmen for management argue that automation in the long run increases jobs. The spokesmen for labour argue that automation decreases jobs. And in this way both of them avoid any discussion of why capitalism, under any form of technological advance, produces, as Marx insisted, an ever-growing army of permanently unemployed. And what is more pertinent to this article, they avoid a discussion of what automation and other changes in the process of production do to those workers who remain employed. The workers take a much more practical view than the sophisticated engineers and sociologists. They do not assume that what is scientifically possible is therefore inevitable in the near future under capitalism. They have much less respect for the supposed technical efficiency of capitalism

than that. They are fully aware, however, that what has been taking place is a profound qualitative reorganisation of capitalist production, of which what is technically known as automation is only a part. Without the intellectuals' linguistic inhibitions, they call the whole process automation whether it involves computer operations, improvement in mechanical tools, transfer of work to other plants or simply speed-up. But the workers in the plants are as hostile to the process as a whole as the unemployed.

The favoured 'A' workers on the West coast docks have found that their newly automated work 'was converted into a continuous, almost oppressive stream.'¹⁵ In the Buick engine plant in Flint the workers had established sensible production schedules which the management had been unable to touch for years. That went by the board when Buick redesigned its engine from a straight-8 to a V-8 and built a new engine plant in 1952 (not yet automation but using more up-to-date machinery and techniques and retiming all the jobs). In plants where automation has been introduced the effect has been two-fold. The automated jobs are lighter physically but a much greater strain mentally. The un-automated jobs have been speeded up to pre-union levels to accommodate the increased flow of work. The great industrial concentrations, such as the Ford Rouge plant, have been reduced or broken up with new plants built on a decentralised basis. Rouge is down from a war-time peak of 100,000 workers and a peace-time peak of 65,000 to under 35,000 but there are a whole series of new Ford plants built during the last ten years (and General Motors and Chrysler) within a 100-mile radius of Detroit and others in other parts of the country, south, east and west.

What is involved in industry after industry is not simply the replacing of men by automated machines but the discarding of men, the moving of others and the bringing of still others into the industrial working class and the reorganisation of the work process. Huge masses of capital have been destroyed. In the auto industry Packard, Hudson, Murray Body, large corporations by any standard, have gone under because they did not have sufficient capital to stay in the race. Whole areas of clerical work have become proletarianised. Stenographers, clerks, bookkeepers in larger offices and in banking and insurance have been

turned into machine operators. It is a common sight to see rows of typists at their desks, with head-sets fastened to one ear, typing letters, reports, etc from dictaphone machines. They no longer see the executives who do the dictating — only the forelady who sees that their breaks are not too frequent or too long and that they don't dawdle at their work. Except for being cleaner and better lit it is indistinguishable from factory work.

3. New Forms of Struggle

Automation or mechanisation, any change in the process of production is carried out at the expense of the workers. The resistance to this process is indicated negatively by the increasing proportion of supervisors in American industry and by the increased disciplinary weight of the union, its contracts and its grievance procedure. And the resistance is to the process as a whole and therefore does not take the traditional forms of union factions or changes in union administration.

The first evidence of this came in 1955 when Walter Reuther won his precedent-setting demand of supplemental unemployment benefits (SUB) in which workers were compensated by the companies in addition to their governmental unemployment compensation when they were laid off. Like all of Reuther's great victories it was granted by the auto corporations in exchange for labour peace, that is, union cooperation in keeping the workers quiet in the face of automation, speed-up and reorganisation of production. But the workers were having none of this. An unprecedented wave of wildcat strikes broke out from coast to coast precisely when the contract was signed. All of them were directed at what was called 'local grievances', that is, the assertion of workers' power in the plants, in the process of production. Reports in the press at that time (as well as reports during the 1964 strikes) indicated thousands of unresolved local grievances. That implies a total collapse of the union as representative of the workers in the day-to-day life in the plants. If the grievance procedure, in which the worker is represented by his union steward or committeeman, cannot settle grievances then what can it do, other than assist in disciplining workers? In these strikes the workers moved to settle the matter directly without the intervention of the union.

Reuther learned his lesson. In the following contract negotiations in 1958, 1961 and 1964 he tried to incorporate the 'local

issues' into the national bargaining. The technique is simple. A national agreement is reached and announced but it is not signed until the locals reach their own agreements. Instead of having the national power of the union behind them, each local is on its own. A number of widely scattered, small, weak locals sign quickly. Then the International Union brings pressure to bear on the more recalcitrant locals which find themselves more and more isolated. They are, after all, holding up the national agreement and keeping many thousands of workers out on strike. The technique works with only moderate success. And that could very well be why Reuther, the great negotiator, won practically nothing in 1958 and 1961 — he could no longer guarantee labour peace to the capitalists. Reuther pretends that the settlement of local grievances during national negotiations is a traditional policy of the UAW, ignoring the fact that it was imposed on him by the workers.

Now the Steel Workers' Union announces a similar policy for the 1965 negotiations. They apparently learned something from the great steel strike of 1959. The union had put forward its traditional demands of higher wages and fringe benefits. All reporters noted a widespread apathy toward these demands by the workers. The steel corporations mistook this apathy for weakness and counterattacked with demands to weaken the long-established work rules under which the workers set the minimum size of crews, safety standards and work pace. The result was a long and bitter strike in which the workers defended their right to impose a minimum of control over the process of production.

American workers today have seen the great industrial unions of the thirties become the one-party states of today. They have seen the seniority that was won to protect them against discriminatory firing and promotion become the means to keep the young and the Negroes out and to keep the semi-skilled from working their way up to the skilled trades. They have seen the union dues check-off¹⁶ change from a means of organising all the workers in a plant to a means of removing the union from dependence on the workers. They have seen full-time status for union steward or committeeman change from freeing the union representative from the pressures of management to freeing him from the pressures of the workers.¹⁷ They have seen the union contract and grievance procedure change from

the instruments which recorded the gains of the workers to the instruments under which workers were disciplined. They have, in short, seen the unions turned into their opposite, from representatives of the workers to an independent power that imposes its discipline over the workers in the period of state capitalism.

The result has been that the workers have rejected the unions as the means of any further social advance and have gone their own way. The 1964 auto contract negotiations and strikes are an indication of this. Reuther was aware that he finally had to make some gesture toward solving the problem of local working conditions, that is, workers' control. He hit upon the question of relief time for its headline-catching appeal. The union demanded 54 minutes of relief time in an eight-hour shift and settled for 36 minutes, a gain of 12 minutes over the previously established 24. The workers weren't sold. Relief time is only one of many aspects of working conditions. Even within the framework of relief time, the number of minutes allowed is relatively minor. Equally important is whether the company can make up the time by increasing the speed of the line. As important as how much is the question of when: the relief men begin making the rounds early in the shift. If a worker's turn for relief comes near the first or last hour of the shift or close to the lunch break it is of little use and still does not give him the time or the right to get a drink of water or relieve himself when he needs to.

There was general hostility to the contract — but it was considered 'their' contract and the workers showed little interest. Among skilled tradesmen at the Ford Rouge plant and at the Dodge plant in Hamtramck (in the Detroit metropolitan area) there were wildcat strikes. Dodge Local 3 rejected the contract. At the Ford Wixom plant (about 20 miles from Detroit) the local agreement was voted down. A little democracy, someone has said, is a dangerous thing, the cure being more democracy. So the union held another vote. Obviously two votes are twice as democratic as one. But the workers again rejected the agreement. Well, the UAW is nothing if it is not democratic — so a third vote was held and this time the agreement was accepted by 150 members out of a total union membership of 4000. The workers had roasted the union over the spit long enough to give notice that it was 'their' contract, let 'them' live with it. The atti-

tude was spelled out in a handbill distributed at the plant which concluded with the following in question and answer form:

'Q: Do we have to accept this Local Agreement that we have voted down twice?

'A: 1. With four members of the Bargaining Committee having already signed our Local Agreements
2. With our International servicing rep, Jimmy Watts, having signed our Local Agreements
3. With the company saying they already have a signed Local Agreement and they are not going to plus it
4. With the International UAW Solidarity House requesting their money back for the financial assistance
5. With the majority of the Bargaining Committee saying, A) You have the best local agreement in the country; B) They don't know what they are going in to ask for; C) They will not waste their time. Could you see yourself walking the street with people like that bargaining for you?

'WHAT DO YOU THINK?'

At American Motors Corporation the last three contracts (1958, 1961, 1964) have seen at least one key local rejecting the agreement and holding it up until successive votes were held to secure final ratification. The workers have no use for the contract and no illusions that contracts can be improved. They have turned to doing their own 'negotiating' on the shop floor. If Reuther's 12 minutes of relief time do not mean much, the workers have found ways of making their own relief time. Assembly lines have a way of breaking down — and who is to say that the bolt which jammed the line was not dropped accidentally? Who is to know that the warning lights which signal the stoppage of the line were not burned out but merely unscrewed to add a few minutes to the time it takes to repair the line?

More and more, workers deal directly with supervision, either singly or in small groups, to settle specific problems without involving the union. To the extent possible, they determine their own production pace and force the foremen to go along. In a smaller plant in Detroit (not an auto plant) the management was aware of the fact that they did not really know how long it took to run any particular operation and they did not trust their foremen to tell them. So they introduced a system of IBM

cards and time clocks for the workers to punch out at the completion of each operation. The company designated time for each job is set by time-study engineers (the workers call it the dart game — they ridicule the gross inaccuracy of the times set by claiming that it can only be done by throwing darts at a haphazard chart of numbers on the wall). In the past the bad times were averaged out by the good times and the company got a reasonable amount of work. Now, however, no one will cut short on the favourable time estimates (since that would inform the company) and so management knows less than it did before. Even the foremen play this game by taking cards for operations that are skipped (unknown to the engineers) and using them to cover up their mistakes on other jobs.

Workers, immersed in the cooperative labor process in the factories, form the groups and organisations, usually informal, to correspond to their needs. The radical reorganisation of production over the past decade has resulted in adjustments by the workers. New workers are taught the realities of life in production by their workmates. New groupings of workers are formed. Workers find more sophisticated techniques to exercise a measure of control over the more sophisticated instruments of production. The wildcat strike remains one of the basic weapons in the struggle, a weapon that rejects the union by its very nature. In industries such as public utilities workers were faced with a substantial degree of automation. The telephone monopoly (American Telephone and Telegraph Co) boasted that automation had made it strike-proof, that telephone service could be continued indefinitely with only a handful of supervisory personnel. The nature of the work and the job security tend to make utility workers among the most conservative. Yet, in response to the needs of the situation, recent strikes among telephone and gas company workers in the midwest have been attended by the destruction of company property — telephone lines cut, gas company installations dynamited. Utility workers still have in reserve that old weapon of the sit-down strike (against which no company is strike-proof) which has been expanded and developed by the struggles of Negro Americans. Miners in eastern Kentucky conducted a long violent war against scab mines. They were opposed by the mine operators, the government and the union and they went down to defeat.

But violence has been a recurring element in certain kinds of strikes.

The workers are engaged today in a process of reorganisation, corresponding to the capitalist reorganisation of production, in a search for new forms of organisation that are adequate for their needs. It is a process that bursts out regularly in wildcat strikes such as those at Chrysler and Ford plants which accompanied the 1964 contract settlement. It is a process which takes advantage of every weakness that appears in the union structure, such as splits within the leadership or the vulnerability of local union officers. It is a process in which workers are learning and testing themselves and their workmates in new conditions and new factories. Most of it, like the proverbial iceberg, is buried deep in the day-to-day life in the plants and mills and offices and mines and is not visible to any outside observer or even fully conscious to the participants themselves.

It would be simple to deduce from the nature of the workers' activity and demands that they are no longer seeking to reform the unions. As only one example: the mass turning out of office of local officials of the UAW was not directed at Reuther supporters but at all incumbents, pro-Reuther and anti-Reuther alike. But such deductions are not necessary. One has only to listen to workers' discussions in the large shops to hear of the need for new types of organisation, to hear the union rejected *in toto*. It should not be necessary to note that what is being discussed by the workers is not a retreat to pre-union forms but an advance to something new.

To place this process in a fundamental and international context it is only necessary to point out that it bears a marked resemblance to the activity of Hungarian workers in the summer of 1956, activity that proved to be the preparation for the revolution in October. The testing of workmates in short sharp struggles against local managers, the elimination of spies and provocateurs from particular factories, the struggle to determine more reasonable rates of production (much of it underground, some of it in the open) laid the groundwork for what became the Workers' Councils.

The impression is not intended that American workers are moving from victory to ever greater victory. Whether workers win a particular struggle or are forced to retreat or manage to

hold their own varies considerably with time and place and the particular relationship of forces in each factory. What remains constant throughout, however, is the struggle itself and the search for new social forms.

The time the process will take and the form of the explosions to come cannot, in the nature of things, be predicted. Only its general outline can be seen from the nature of the workers' demands and the vast gulf that separates them from the union structure and leadership. It can only lead to the class as a whole imposing its own will on production and on society and casting off entirely the bureaucracy that stands in its way.

American workers are the highest paid in the world. They are also among the most exploited. They have built unions that are among the most cohesive and powerful in the world. In their industrial structure and in their industry-wide powers American unions have set a pattern that unions in other countries seek to emulate. But it is their very all-embracing nature that has sharpened the conflict between the unions and the rank-and-file workers. In their struggle to assert themselves directly and to remove what has become a burden perhaps the American working class will provide for the world a sign of its future.

1. *Research Institute Report*, 9 October 1964 (emphasis in original).

2. Since this was written the election in the United Steelworkers of America was held. Abel is generally assumed to have won but irregularities and charges and counter-charges of fraud have delayed the announcement of the result which is expected by 1 May. The final decision may be further delayed if either contestant challenges the results in the courts.

At the same time the re-election of James B Carey as president of the International Union of Electrical Workers was shown to have been fraudulent after an investigation by the federal government. Carey was replaced as president by the opposing candidate, Paul L Jennings, a member of the union's executive board. Carey had been president since the formation of the union in 1949 and is a vice-president of the AFL-CIO.

3. B J Widick, *Labor Today*, Houghton Mifflin, 1964, p 91.

4. Clark Kerr, *Labor and Management in Industrial Society*, Anchor Books, 1964, p. 93.

5. See Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow and James Coleman, *Union Democracy*, Anchor Books, 1962, for a study of the internal politics of the International Typographical Union. An interesting little periodical, *Union Democracy in Action*, published in New York by Herman Benson, devotes itself entirely to the exposure of undemocratic union practices and the defense of workers subjected to bureaucratic attack.

6. Paul Jacobs, *Old Before Its Time: Collective Bargaining at 28*, Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, 1963, pp 17-18.

7. *Ibid*, pp 9-10. (Emphasis in original.)

8. Clark Kerr, *Op cit*, p 261.

9. Paul Jacobs, *Op cit*, p 14.

10. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology*, Collier Books, 1962, pp 214-215.

11. Paul Jacobs, *Op cit*, p 13.

12. Daniel Bell, *Op cit*, p 214.

13. See Harvey Swados, 'West-Coast Waterfront — the End of an Era', *Dissent*, Autumn 1961.

14. '... Productivity has been growing a bit more slowly in manufacturing than in the economy as a whole ... In the entire postwar period manufacturing productivity has increased by 2.8 per cent a year, vs 3.2 per cent for the private economy. There has been an acceleration in the last four years, to be sure, but the manufacturing productivity gains are still below those for the whole economy — ie, 3.5 vs 3.6 per cent a year. Furthermore, these recent gains in manufacturing are smaller than the gains realised in the decade following World War I, when technology was being revolutionised by the assembly line and the endless-chain drive. Between 1919 and 1929, output per man-hour in manufacturing increased by 5.6 per cent a year. The acceleration in over-all productivity growth since the 1920s has come about because mechanisation and rationalisation have been applied elsewhere in the economy — eg, in finance, insurance, retail and wholesale trade.' Charles E Silberman, 'The Real News About Automation', *Fortune*, January 1965, p 222.

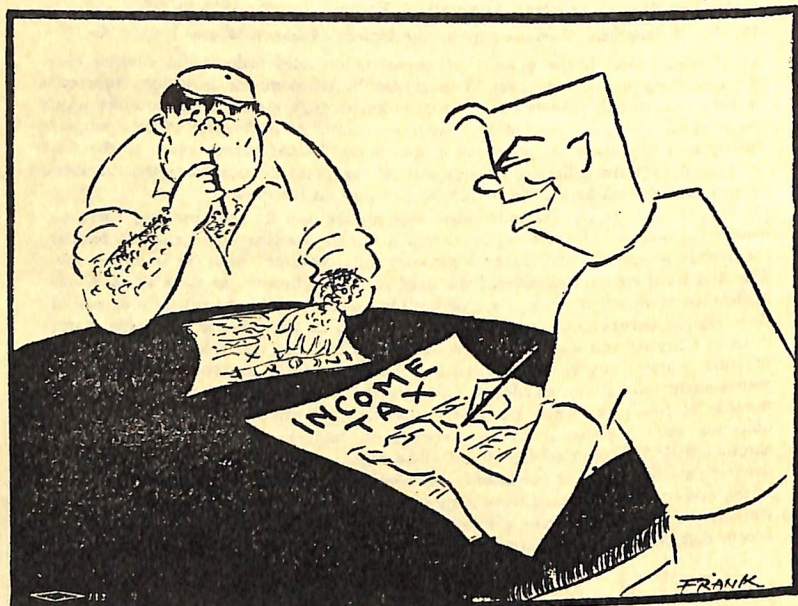
15. Ben B Seligman, 'Automation and the Unions', *Dissent*, Winter 1965, p 40.

16. The check-off is the practice of having union dues deducted in advance from the pay check and turned over to the union by the company in a lump sum each month. It is usually associated with the 'union shop', a clause in the contract which requires all new employees to join the union within 30 or 90 days of their employment, as a condition of continued employment. In the earlier years of the CIO unions, dues were collected by stewards in the plant directly from the members, which gave the workers a direct form of pressure on the union.

17. Union stewards and committeemen were always paid for the time they spent on handling grievances. Grievances are handled during working hours and the regular hourly pay of the steward, paid by the company, continues while he is off his job. The first Ford contract eliminated the need for committeemen to work at all. Committeemen were given office space in the plant and received the full rate of pay of their regular occupation, plus all overtime worked in their district. In some plants (such as Chrysler and the old Hudson Motor Co) full-time was won by rank-and-file pressure without any contract provisions. In others (such as General Motors) the management have never acceded to full-time and contract clauses set the maximum number of hours per week available to stewards for grievance work. The original objective was to prevent the companies from putting pressure on the stewards through their jobs and to free them to be able to move around their districts or departments to check on conditions and contract violations. The practice has gone in the other direction. Freed from their regular jobs and from direct contact with the workers, stewards have become indistinguishable from foremen in their appearance, except that they are much harder to find when needed.

THE NEEDLE

By Frank



I'm putting down Reuther as a dependent. Which pork-chopper are you taking?

UAW Strongman: Reuther in Retrospect

I just finished listening to the eulogies delivered at the funeral of Walter P. Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers, and his wife. The most interesting eulogy was not delivered at the funeral. A few days ago Virgil Boyd, vice chairman of the Chrysler Corporation, said: "It's taken a strong man to keep the situation under control. I hope that whoever his successor may be he can exercise equal internal discipline."

This has been a recurrent theme in the career of Walter Reuther. In 1967, after he had ended a wildcat strike at a General Motors stamping plant in Ohio, the Detroit News, invariably hostile to union demands, raised the question: "What will happen when Reuther is no longer at the helm? ... We hope Reuther will be around a long time as head of the international, but we are concerned about the future of union-industry relationships when Reuther's special talents are no longer available." Their basic concern was that a successor to Reuther would not have his authority and would have to make concessions to local autonomy.

That is making the industry nervous today, on the eve of new contract negotiations. If there is any struggle for power in the UAW it will offer to the rank-and-file membership of the union the opportunity to influence decisions from which they have been long excluded. And once you start giving rights to members... who knows where that process ends?

The disciplining of the membership has been one of the keystones of Reuther's policy, but it would be most deceptive to think of Reuther as simply a company man. He is a type of union leader formed in the Thirties, the type that came to head most of the industrial unions, and he is not simply a sophisticated version of George Meany or the typical old-line AFL leader.

Early life

Reuther was, in his early years, a socialist of a sort. It is hard to pin down solid facts about Reuther's early jobs in industry because facts tend to get obscured by the twin mythologies (pro- and anti-Reuther) that have been formed. He apparently worked as a tool-and-die worker and as a foreman. He also lost some jobs — whether as the result of union organizing or not is not clear. But there is agreement that at one point in the Thirties he left Detroit to tour the world with his brothers, and that he spent some time working in the Soviet Union. There was a time, in the late Forties and early Fifties, when reactionaries tried to use that trip against Reuther and the UAW played it all down. With the thaw in the cold war there was no longer that concern to doctor the past.

But the trip to the Soviet Union remains an intriguing element in Reuther's career. He worked as a tool-and-die man in Soviet auto factories. He praised the Soviets in his letters home and to friends when he got back. What is interesting about this (apart from the fact that he would have gotten favored treatment as a visiting foreign worker with special skills) is that he became enthusiastic about Russian developments in the years of the purge trials, the slave-labor camps, and the draconian labor laws designed to rapidly transform a peasant population into disciplined industrial workers.

In the years that followed, the formative years of the UAW, Reuther was a member of the Socialist Party. Within the labor fraction of the SP at that time, Reuther was basically viewed as a Communist Party sympathizer. There was never any assurance that Reuther would accept decisions of the SP caucus in the union. It was not, of course,

at all a matter of political principle. It was pure opportunism. As soon as the CP (and the SP) became a handicap in his rise to power in the union, he severed all connections with American radical movements and became, when necessary, a rabid red-baiter.

The nature of his opportunism is indicated by an incident during the great General Motors sit-down strike in 1937. During the winter of 1936-37 the GM strike had developed into a deadlock. One of the problems the union faced was that all of the Flint, Michigan Chevrolet plant had not been shut down. Still operating was Chevy Plant 4, the motor plant, turning out Chevy motors which were being used to assemble Chevrolets in other parts of the country. It became clear that Plant 4 had to be shut down, but it was most heavily guarded by company goons. There are as many stories of how the strategy to take Plant 4 was devised as there are political factions claiming credit for the strategy. I was told what happened by Kermit Johnson, a Chevy worker, first president of the Chevy local and a member, with Reuther, of the Socialist Party. I think this story is true, not simply because I believed Kermit when he told it to me, but because it has the ring of truth. It is the way things happen in workers' struggles.

Social unionism

The strategy to take Plant 4 was clear to all of the union members in the plant. It was inherent in the situation and didn't take any special knowledge or skill. A diversionary move had to be planned to draw protection away from Plant 4. The key was execution. Only a handful of people could be informed of the strategy, and there could be no leaks. This strategy was proposed by the SP fraction and was opposed by Reuther as unworkable. The fraction adopted it, however, and the SP people took it to the UAW. Reuther indignantly denounced the strategy and proclaimed that if it failed he would disclaim any connection with it. If it succeeded, of course, Reuther took credit — if not for inventing it, at least for pressing for it.

The UAW has a reputation for "social unionism", and it is important to trace that in Reuther's career. In 1940

(abandoning his earlier political allies) Reuther endorsed Roosevelt's foreign policy and moved toward war. He came up with the first of his famous plans. It was a plan for the auto industry to produce 500 planes a day. It was at first bitterly attacked by the industry and ignored by the government (although, later, elements were adopted as the government organized for total war). In June of 1945, as the war was coming to a close, Reuther published a pamphlet, "The Challenge of Peace", which proposed converting aircraft factories to mass-produced prefabricated housing.

Whether the particular plans were workable or not is purely incidental. What emerges, and remains a consistent feature of Reuther's leadership, is Reuther the social planner. Restrained by the limits of American politics and the American labor movement, he nevertheless clearly parts company with the business unionists of the AFL. He is the statist, the planner, ready to nationalize but not ready to relinquish control. It is all for the good of the workers, of course, but it has to be done for them, not by them. In the Soviet Union he would have been a functionary of the unions or a plant manager. In France he would have been at home as a leader of the CGT. In England he would have been head of a trade union or a member of Wilson's cabinet. His patriotism had no principle connected with it. It was simply the need to attach himself to a particular national capital and to act as its spokesman.

It is this which explains the peculiar combination of conservatism and militancy which seemed to characterize Reuther and which confused his radical opposition. The radicals assumed that Reuther was simply a sophisticated version of the company man and campaigned against him on the basis that they could have gotten more from the corporation in negotiations or in struggle. On the whole, that was nonsense and the auto workers knew that it was nonsense. If you grant the framework of collective bargaining, that is, the maintenance and continued existence of corporate capitalism, then it is not very likely that any other spokesman for the union could have gotten significantly more than Reuther did. He was a shrewd negotiator, and if, at times, someone else could have gotten a penny an hour more, it was just as likely to be a penny an hour less.

Strike Leader

This combination of opportunistic militancy and conservative adherence to the status quo is the basic feature of Reuther's career (and it typified other former CIO leaders such as Bridges and John L. Lewis), and it takes concrete form in the rise to power of Reuther and his management of the union as president.

At the end of the war, with most of the union leadership timid about embarking on a major struggle in the face of reconversion to peacetime production, Reuther, as head of the GM Department of the UAW, led a militant 113-day strike against GM in which he raised the kinds of public demands (such as no price rises) for which he became noted. He didn't win much, at least in part because his demands were undercut by settlements in steel and in the electrical industry. But it also established Reuther's reputation in the UAW as a whole as a militant and competent strike leader. This was made quite easy because it broke with four years of patriotism, strike-breaking, and collaboration with the government of the Addes-Thomas-CP administration of the union. At the 1946 convention of the UAW Reuther's defeat of Thomas for the presidency marked the emergence of the union from the total class collaboration of the war years. And without support on the International Executive Board, that is, without any power, Reuther was free to spend the next year campaigning, combining militancy with vicious red-baiting as the cold war began to take shape, and in 1947 was swept back into office with an overwhelming majority on the board.

He then began to set the pattern of bargaining in the auto industry which has remained to this day: militant struggle for wage increases and fringe benefits, including all sorts of precedent-setting demands such as pensions, health insurance, cost-of-living clauses, and the like, combined with the erosion of democratic rights within the union and the maintenance of discipline over the workers in production. That was the combination, and it goes back a long way before Reuther — to Ford's five dollars a day of the 1920s, the highest pay and the worst speedup in American history.

Interesting was Reuther's incorporation of the Trotskyist demand for an escalator clause, gearing wage scales to cost-of-living increases. He had consistently opposed it when it was raised within his union. Presumably he had accepted Trotsky's claim that it was a transitional demand, that is, that it seemed reasonable to workers in the existing context but was in reality incompatible with capitalism so that it would move workers to struggle against the system as a whole. But, lo and behold, he found the proposal put forward by General Motors in contract negotiations. That naturally made him a quick convert, and he easily took credit for another precedent-shattering victory. C. E. Wilson, GM head, praised that settlement as the purchase of five years of labor peace.

New Militancies

That was the quid pro quo. High wages, pensions, cost-of-living allowance, et cetera, in exchange for an absolute no-strike pledge, absolute discipline of the workers in production, bureaucratization of the grievance procedure, erosion of the working conditions that had been won during the Thirties and early Forties. And with Reuther's one-party state in iron control of the union machinery, the workers turned elsewhere to seek redress of their grievances.

In 1955, the year that Reuther won the first breakthrough on the guaranteed annual wage (supplemental unemployment benefits), the contract victory was greeted by a wave of wildcat strikes in auto factories from coast to coast. The issues were "specific local grievances". The union and the grievance procedure were no longer able to deal with the problems that faced the workers directly. The separation between union and membership became almost complete, and it imposed certain problems on Reuther. In the following two contracts he won nothing at all, basically because he could not offer anything in return. If the union's discipline could not prevent major wildcats from breaking out, there was no longer any reason for the auto corporations to sweeten the pot.

In the Sixties he was confronted with a new problem: the emergence of the black auto workers. They are in a major-

ity in the Detroit metropolitan area, and can therefore dominate the auto industry. The International Union has viciously attacked the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and pretends that it has always been ahead of its membership in fighting for equal rights for black workers. That the white membership of the UAW is more backward than its leadership on the race question is pure mythology. While there is not the blatant rhetoric of the building trades, and while overt discrimination in union locals is disciplined by the International, one need only look around the auto plants and see the small numbers of black workers in tool and die, machine repair, and the cleaner and better jobs to be aware of the willingness of the union leadership in contract negotiations to accept the patterns of racial discrimination. Reuther's march with Martin Luther King was his way of campaigning for black votes where it was safe. The situation in the shops was quite different. One has only to compare the viciousness with which the union disciplined workers who violated the no-strike pledge with the moderation with which the union treated workers who discriminated against black workers to be aware of what Reuther's priorities were.

It was the growing separation of rank-and-file workers from the union and the militancy of the young auto workers, especially the blacks, that led Reuther to abandon the AFL for independent unionism. Once his ambitions to head the AFL had to be abandoned, it became clear that continued sharing of leadership in the AFL would considerably restrict Reuther's freedom of movement in relation to his own rank and file. He also had plans to incorporate the new militancy of the young in some kind of neo-leftist co-opted political movement.

All this is now left to his successor, but with much less chance of success. The fears of the Detroit News and the auto industry are real. The power vacuum caused by Reuther's death raises the spectre of the self-activity of the rank-and-file auto worker.



REVOLUTIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS

He lost his hand in a bright new
automated punch press.

Five digits now none
Taken by a digital computer
Witch

Lo and behold
Makes mistakes just like human beans

Humanized computer
Computerized human
Its all the same
But it can't hold hands.

Neither can he.
He took his other five digits
and melted them down into a
Fist.

Mr. Toad