

A History of the Steelworkers Union

Staughton Lynd



Chicago steel workers, 1919. But now the right to strike has been compromised by steel union leaders.

Published By:

New England Free Press
60 Union Square
Somerville, Mass. 02143

How the USWA got organized

Trade unions have historically been organized, fought for and often died for by workers all over the world.

The purpose of trade unions is to improve the economic position and working conditions of workers on their jobs, that is to wage the class struggle but within the confines of the capitalist system in most cases.

Nearly all U.S. unions today are ruled by a small privileged group, a labor aristocracy, which is class collaborationist in its leadership of workers' struggles.

Steelworkers today are asking why this situation exists and how it has come about. They want to know why their union, the United Steelworkers of America, is so undemocratic, why local unions do not have the right to strike, why the rank and file is not allowed to ratify contracts, why full-time union staff members are allowed to be delegates to union conventions, why there are no black steelworkers on the executive board of the international union and why the union is helping the company to eliminate jobs.

These articles will try to answer those questions.

Democracy in the USWA

U.S. unions are generally much less democratic than unions in many other advanced capitalist countries and the USWA is less democratic than most U.S. unions. For instance, auto workers can vote their contracts up or down. Steelworkers can't. Auto workers can strike over working conditions and speed-up. Steelworkers can't.

What happened to make the USWA as it is today?

The best answer is that the United Steelworkers of America was built autocratically by staff men from the United Mine Workers. The UMW had an undemocratic constitution and was run in a high-handed way by its president, John L. Lewis. UMW organizers acted the same way in steel. The Steelworkers constitution was copied from the constitution of the UMW.

Ed Mann, who works at the Brier Hill mill of Youngstown Sheet and Tube in Youngstown, Ohio, sums up the effect of the UMW in this way:

"Our union was created from the top down. The steelworkers union came from the UMW. It was financed by the UMW and the hierarchy and staff all came out of the UMW. And they said: 'Here's a union. Now you get people to join it.' The autoworkers union was different. It came from the bottom. This is, I think, why we've been saddled with a 'Big Daddy will take care of you, we'll make the decisions, pie in the sky' sort of thing."

The United Mine Workers had a particular interest in the steel industry. The steel companies own many so-called "captive mines." In the early 1930s these captive mines were not organized. The low

wages they paid undercut wage rates established by the UMW elsewhere in the coal industry.

But Lewis wanted to be sure that the organization of steelworkers was under his control. He was not very friendly when in 1933, 1934 and 1935 rank-and-file steelworkers formed local unions in every center of the steel industry.

In 1933, coal miners in the captive mines of southwestern Pennsylvania struck for union recognition and were joined by steelworkers in Clairton and Ambridge, Pa. and in Weirton, W. Va.

Lewis and Philip Murray, a Lewis subordinate in the UMW, tried over and over to get the miners back to work. Finally they succeeded. Left without allies, the steelworkers had to go back too without winning anything.

In 1934, rank-and-file steelworkers captured the annual convention of the feeble AFL union in the industry. They threatened to stage a national steel strike in June 1934 if the companies refused to bargain with them. This was the year of successful general strikes in Minneapolis, Toledo and San Francisco. But again Lewis discouraged strike action.

In 1935, steelworkers in the Canton, Ohio area struck several plants belonging to Republic Steel. When they were forced back to work after bloody picket-line battles they announced that they would strike at the same time that coal miners walked out. Disregarding the steelworkers, Lewis repeatedly postponed a coal strike and the steelworkers' strike threat fizzled out.

But few steelworkers knew of Lewis' behind-the-scenes maneuvering. And in 1936, when Lewis offered \$500,000 and 200 full-time organizers to unionize steel, steelworkers jumped at the chance.

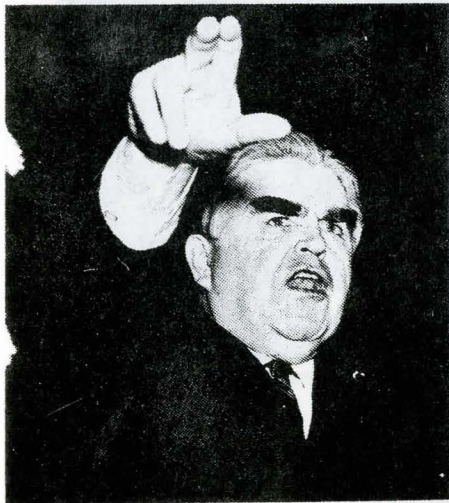
Need for CIO

George Patterson's experience makes it clear why rank-and-file steelworkers turned to John L. Lewis and the CIO.

Patterson was a roll turner at U. S. Steel's mill in South Chicago, Ill. Early in the 1930s he helped to organize a national union of roll turners. But he soon concluded that only a national union of all steelworkers would have the strength to win recognition from the steel companies. Patterson expressed this belief in a letter to the secretary of the national roll turners' union:

"Only in thorough organizing of all steelmen into one large union, and each steel plant merging itself into one large union with national headquarters and with national delegates at a national convention can we hope to beat the big steel trusts at their own game. Many groups of craft unions can never hope to accomplish this because they are always at variance."

Patterson next organized an independent industrial union of all steelworkers at the South Chicago mill where he worked. But a



John L. Lewis, late president of the United Mine Workers.

local industrial union had little more power than a national craft union. In June 1936 a committee of the union explained to the membership why it was necessary to affiliate with the CIO. The committee's letter stated:

"True collective bargaining can only take place between parties of equal bargaining power. Yet after two years of trying to get a raise in pay from the company what have we been able to accomplish? The answer is—nothing. And why? Because we have no power. We have no money, nor any method of raising any, no headquarters or headquarters' staff, no right to call mass meetings of the whole plant in the plant, or any other rights that would give us a chance of enforcing our demands."

When Patterson and his fellow-workers heard about John L. Lewis' campaign to organize the unorganized, they wrote him a letter and said they had an independent union and would like to join up.

It took more than writing a letter to get Lewis to begin an organizing campaign in steel. George Powers, then a steelworker in the Pittsburgh area, tells how rank and filers pressured Lewis himself:

"Spring, 1936 ushered in a great 'spring C. I. O. fever' that was sensed everywhere. Yet for the hard-pressed unionist in the steel mills, things were not moving fast enough. There was, according to him, still too much talk and too little real action in the union organizing campaign.

"One day in March, Pittsburgh papers printed a story that John L. Lewis was scheduled to address a public rally in Greensburg, Pa. on April 1. It was agreed to send a delegation of steel union leaders from as many locals as possible to meet with John L. Lewis in person and urge a speedy and massive union drive in the steel mills.

"The meeting took place in a room in the Albert Hotel in Greensburg, Pa. on the morning of April 1. No prior attempt had been made to arrange it. We simply went there and informed John Brophy that a delegation of steelworkers had come to see John L. Lewis and hoped that he, Brophy, would arrange it. Brophy hesitated, but could not get himself to turn us away. All of us who participated felt the excitement and significance of this gathering. It was our first face to face meeting with the man about whom we had heard and read so much!

"Lewis strode into the room wearing his famous large 'cowboy' hat pushed low over his massive eyebrows. Clarence Irwin (leader of the rank-and-file movement among steelworkers before the CIO) was first to speak. He presented our urgent request for speed in launching a CIO supported steel organizing drive. He concluded by reporting that Lou Morris, a steel leader from Canton, Ohio had been unable to come, but sent a letter which he requested be read to Mr. Lewis.



Chicago cops minutes before attacking Republic Steel Corp. strikers, May 1937.

"The letter reaffirmed the urgency that had been expressed by Irwin and concluded with these startling words: 'Tell John L. Lewis to quit windbagging and get on with the job of organizing the steel workers.'

"Lewis was stung. His face flared red and he asked, 'Is that what steel workers think of me?'

"Visibly agitated he rose and asked the assembled group to name a committee of three to meet with him in Washington, D.C. the following Wednesday."

Powers goes on to explain that this led to the formation of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) in June 1936.

Lewis came through with the help requested. But the cost for the rank and file was high. They did not control SWOC. All SWOC officers were appointed by Lewis and there were few steelworkers among them. Philip Murray of the UMW became SWOC chairman and later first president of the Steelworkers. David J. McDonald of the UMW became SWOC secretary-treasurer and later second president of the Steelworkers.

Other UMW officers filled most of the regional and sub-regional staff positions. For instance, in the Chicago-Gary area the district director and two of his key aides were imported from the UMW. These men made policy for the steelworkers who joined the new union.

Outside financing

Outside control came with outside financing. SWOC's initial funding was \$500,000 from the UMW treasury. In addition, Murray, McDonald and other former UMW officers continued for years to draw all or part of their salaries from the UMW. SWOC finances were so centralized that

even telephone bills for local organizing were paid from the central office in Pittsburgh.

The power of UMW personnel was magnified because SWOC waited from 1936 until 1942 to transform itself from an organizing committee into a national union with elected officers.

The rank-and-file delegates to SWOC conventions demanded that SWOC be transformed into a union so that they could elect their officers. Year after year Murray delayed. This gave appointed district directors time to build personal machines.

Thus SWOC was even less democratic than the UMW. Len De Caux, at that time editor of The CIO News, has written that SWOC was "as totalitarian as any big business." When SWOC finally did become the United Steelworkers of America in 1942 its centralized structure was for the most part continued in the new union.

As in the UMW, so in the Steelworkers union, contracts are not ratified by the membership. The Steelworkers staff men are appointed and are permitted to serve as delegates to union conventions. Organizers put on the SWOC payroll could be fired when the union was recognized and militancy was no longer needed by union bureaucrats. Only organizers willing to do what the officers of the international union told them to do were permitted to remain.

A verse of "Solidarity Forever" speaks of the worker without whose brain and muscle not a single wheel would turn, yet who stands like an outcast amid the products his own hands have made. There could have been no SWOC, no United Steelworkers of America, without the rank and file. But within a few years many rank and filers were outcasts in the midst of the union they had helped to create.



Funeral for four victims of Republic massacre. About 100 were wounded.

How 'Little Steel' was won

U.S. Steel, or "Big Steel" as it was called, was organized autocratically from the top down. But "Little Steel"—Bethlehem Steel, Republic Steel, Youngstown Sheet and Tube, Inland Steel and others—was organized from the bottom up by rank-and-file workers.

U.S. Steel signed a contract with the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) in March 1937. The Little Steel companies did not sign contracts until the early 1940s. Steelworkers in Little Steel had to fight for the union in a way that workers in Big Steel did not. The result was that locals in Little Steel developed a tradition of militancy generally absent in U.S. Steel locals. The international union had to smash this militancy before its power over the rank and file was secure.

After SWOC was formed in June 1936, its progress in organizing steelworkers was slow at first. The best testimony to this effect comes from former Steelworkers president David J. McDonald, the man who collected SWOC dues.

"Contrary to union propaganda—some of which I helped to write—the steelworkers did not fall over themselves to sign a pledge card with the SWOC," McDonald states in his autobiography. "What we hoped would be a torrent turned out, instead, to be a trickle. Only Murray and I knew how thin the tally was, although Lewis would insist on the truth whenever I visited Washington, then would shake his head in wonderment at the lack of progress." According to McDonald, SWOC membership was a shaky 82,000 at the end of 1936.

Then came the big breakthrough. In March 1937 John L. Lewis, CIO president,

and Myron Taylor, chairman of the board of U.S. Steel, announced an agreement to sign a collective bargaining contract. U.S. Steel had led the fight against unionism in the steel industry. It had crushed the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers at its Homestead mill in 1892. It had led resistance to the steel strike of 1919, organized by William Z. Foster, later the chairman of the Communist party.

When the news came over the radio that U.S. Steel was going to sign a contract with SWOC, steelworkers at first could not believe their ears. It seemed too good to be true.

Sitdowns forced contract

There is no hard evidence as to why U.S. Steel decided to reverse its anti-union policy. Probably the most important reason was the victorious sitdown strike of General Motors workers in January and February 1937. The Morgan financial interests were represented on the boards of directors of both corporations. The contracts signed with the CIO by General Motors and U.S. Steel were almost identical. It seems likely that the men who ran both companies decided that a union was a lesser evil than a sitdown strike in the steel mills.

The U.S. Steel contract helps to explain why the company accepted collective bargaining. From its first press release, SWOC had promised that its purpose would be "to avoid industrial strife and the calling of strikes, if we are met in a reasonable spirit by the employers." In keeping with this pledge the contract signed in March 1937 with U.S. Steel contained a no-strike clause which stated:

"Should difference arise between the Corporation and the Union or its members employed by the Corporation as to the meaning and application of the provisions of this Agreement, or should any local trouble of any kind arise in any plant, there shall be no suspension of work."

The SWOC leadership enforced this clause with vigor. On July 24, 1937, SWOC chairman Philip Murray issued an "Official Circular To All Staff Members, Local Lodge Officers And Members" which declared:

"During this critical period it is particularly important that where our members are working under written contracts, the provisions of such contracts be carefully observed and respected.

"Strikes, walkouts, sit-downs and other stoppages of work constitute a violation both of our contracts and of the policy of the SWOC. Under no circumstances should such acts take place. In the face of a written contract, providing a method for adjustment of disputes and grievances, such acts threaten and will ultimately destroy the integrity of this union.

"When members go out on strike or engage in any stoppage of work in violation of the contract, we shall have to insist upon their returning to work before any aid will be extended by the SWOC or any of its staff members."

'Unblemished record'

When SWOC held its first convention in December 1937 the officers' report boasted of the "unblemished record" of SWOC in observing contracts, alleging that there was not one instance of a SWOC officer who "authorized or fostered" a strike in a mill

under contract. The report also observed that SWOC had from the outset insisted "that local policies conform to the national plan of action upon which it decides." The "Rules And Methods Of Procedure For Lodges" adopted by the convention stated that "No strike shall be called without the approval of the SWOC."

This is the origin of Article 16 in the constitution of the United Steelworkers of America: "No strike shall be called without the approval of the International President."

In Little Steel it was different.

The Little Steel executives took a hard line. Their spokesman was Tom Girdler of Republic Steel who proclaimed that he would pick apples before he would sign a contract with the CIO. SWOC struck Little Steel on May 26, 1937. The result was probably the worst picket-line violence of the 1930s.

The strikers attempted to form mass picket lines to keep scabs, food and steel from entering or leaving the mills. Police and (in Ohio) National Guardsmen used guns and clubs to prevent them. The worst violence took place before the gates of the Republic Steel mill in South Chicago.

On May 26 and again on May 28, strikers were clubbed and arrested by the Chicago police when they attempted to picket the Republic Steel gates. So on May 30 a mass meeting was held near the mill, attended by steelworkers and sympathizers from all over the region. As the meeting came to an end a column formed to march down to the mill and once again attempt to set up a mass picket line.

The marchers carried an American flag. Since Mayor Kelly of Chicago had announced that picketing would be permitted, strikers had brought their families and the column included children eating ice creams. The marchers were unarmed.

George Patterson, captain of the picket line, tells what happened next:

"We met about 650 cops lined up. It was getting to be kind of familiar. I was always ill at ease; I didn't like it; don't ever think anybody's that brave. But I was an organizer in charge of the picket line, so I walked along and saw my familiar old friends Mooney, the commander of the police, and Kilroy. They stood about six feet, six inches tall; they're big fellows, and I'm not very big. And I looked up and said, 'Well, here we are. We'd like to go through. Would you escort us? We'd like to picket.'

"Well, he was standing there—Kilroy was the man—and he was reading a very official document asking us in the name of the people of Illinois to disperse; and as soon as he said that he put the paper down and hell broke loose. They began to shoot us, club us and gas us. Ten people died while 68 were wounded, and we don't know how many got hurt in all. It really was hell on that field. I ran back with the rest of them and I got mad. I could see the cops there shooting away

with their guns. At first I thought they were blanks—I really did. I could smell the gunpowder; I'll never forget it. And then I began to see people fall. I saw a boy run by and his foot was bleeding. Then it dawned on me: they were shooting real bullets. This was for keeps. They didn't stop shooting and killing till an hour and a half later."

Doctors who attended the dead and dying testified that all ten men who died had been shot in the back.

The Memorial Day Massacre, as it came to be called, broke the back of the Little Steel strike. Strikers went back to work under a variety of compromise agreements. In no case was SWOC recognized as an exclusive bargaining agent. Some active union members were in the courts for years before they got their jobs back. Yet in a strange way, the defeat became a victory for rank-and-file power.

Rank-and-file resistance

John Sargent, first president of the local at the huge Inland Steel mill in East Chicago, Ind., vividly describes the process:

"The enthusiasm of the people who were working in the mill made this settlement of the strike into a victory of great proportions. Without a contract, without any agreement with the company, without any regulations concerning hours of work, conditions of work or wages, a tremendous surge took place. We talk of a rank-and-file movement: the beginning of union organization was the best type of rank-and-file movement you could think of. John L. Lewis sent in a few organizers but there were no organizers at Inland Steel.

"The union organizers were essentially workers in the mill who were so disgusted with their conditions and so ready for a change that they took the union into their own hands. Without a contract we secured for ourselves agreements on working conditions and wages that we do not have today and that were better by far than what we do have today in the mill. For example, as a result of the enthusiasm of the people in the mill you had a series of strikes, wildcats, shut-downs, anything working people could think of to secure for themselves what they decided they had to have.

"If their wages were low there was no contract to prohibit them from striking and they struck for better wages. If their conditions were bad, if they didn't like what was going on, if they were being abused, the people in the mills themselves—without a contract or any agreement with the company involved—would shut down a department or even a group of departments to secure for themselves the things they found necessary."

The possibility of strike action which existed in Little Steel because there was no contract prohibiting unauthorized strikes also resulted in a more effective grievance procedure.

The U.S. Steel contract provided that the number of grievance committeemen who could leave their work on union business should be "not more than ten," no matter how large the mill. At Inland Steel, in contrast, there were more than 20 assistant grievors and hundreds of stewards who provided immediate access to a union representative for each group of workers on each shift.

Nick Migas was a grievance committeeman in the Inland Steel open hearth department. As he recalls:

"We organized departmental meetings. Every month the department would meet at the union hall and discuss their immediate problems, work things out and decide what to do about it.

"Now a man will file a grievance, the steward will take it up and that's the end of it. If it goes to the international, the member himself doesn't know what is happening. In those days, the man who had the grievance came right along with me. We discussed it right in front of the foreman. He went with me to the next step, the superintendent. We discussed it there. If we couldn't settle it there we went to the industrial relations department, the third step. He was always involved, he was always there, he knew exactly what his case was, he knew exactly what position the company was taking."

In the early 1940s lawsuits finally compelled Inland Steel and the other Little Steel companies to sign contracts with SWOC. Wildcat strikes continued for a few years but ended, both in the Chicago, Gary and Youngstown areas, after strikes in which the international union helped the companies to fire the strike leaders.

The trend toward industry-wide bargaining also helped the international to take over. At Inland which has only one steel mill, the local union leadership did its own negotiating until after World War 2. A contract would be read clause by clause at the local union meeting, and then voted on and adopted or rejected. After World War 2 the international union insisted on negotiating wage rates and other contractual items nationally. Even if the local union representatives to the negotiating committee refused to sign the contract it was put into effect anyway. Most important, no steelworker anywhere had the right to ratify the contract.

But it took more than contracts and constitutional changes to suppress the tradition of militancy which grew up, especially in Little Steel, during the organization of the CIO. Thugs and red-baiting were also required.

That story and the story of resistance to the international union's arbitrary power, will be the subject of the next article.

Dues protests shook Steel union

Rank-and-file protest against the policies of the international leadership of the United Steelworkers of America (USA) began at the union's first convention in 1942.

The union's draft constitution submitted for ratification at this convention called for appointment of union staff men by the president of the international union. Delegate after delegate protested. Delegate Strassfurth of Local 2287 in Cleveland said "that the delegates were responsible to the rank and file, and he felt that representatives should be elected every year, along with the local officers." Delegate McHugh of Local 1305 in Pittsburgh said "that in his opinion the section under discussion provided more or less for a dictatorship."

Philip Murray, then chairman of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), declared that he would not become president of the United Steelworkers of America unless he had this power. He got it. Article 4, Section 7 reads: "The International President shall have the authority to appoint, direct, suspend, or remove, such organizers, representatives, agents and employees as he may deem necessary."

The right to elect staff men was raised convention after convention. In 1946 there were 46 resolutions which favored electing staff representatives in local union elections or by district conventions.

Judging from the number of resolutions sent to the conventions by local unions, the reform most strongly desired by the rank and file was a change in the dues system.

When the union was being organized, a steward had to collect dues and members had a chance to gripe before they paid. The international union and the companies replaced this during World War 2 with a dues check-off. Now the company took the dues from the worker's paycheck and sent the money to international union headquarters in Pittsburgh, after which a portion was returned to the treasurer of the local union.

This system of dues check-off made it easier for union officials to ignore the rank and file.

Eleven pages of resolutions were submitted to the 1944 convention. Almost all the resolutions said that high dues for the international were justified in the period of organizing, but with the organizing of the industry for the most part complete, the day-to-day responsibility for running the union belonged to the locals. Local 1330 in Youngstown, Ohio stated that if the local received a larger part of the dues dollar it would make possible a more vigorous

educational and political program at the local level, a point made by several other locals.

Many other changes were demanded at the 1946, 1948 and 1950 conventions. The fight for these changes was led by steelworkers who belonged to the Communist party.

Communist party members played a leading part in organizing many CIO unions but they were especially strong in steel. The party had prestige among steelworkers because William Z. Foster, a party spokesman and later chairman of the party, had organized the 1919 steel strike. Also, many party members were immigrants from Eastern Europe, as were many steelworkers. In the late 1920s and 1930s there were ethnic organizations in every steel town influenced by the party. Often the halls of these fraternal associations were used as headquarters for organizations of the unemployed.

John L. Lewis and Murray, seeking help wherever they could find it, hired about 60 Communists as organizers for the SWOC drive. After the organizing drive they were fired. But it was not so easy to get rid of radicals who were democratically elected by their fellow-workers to local union office. Around Pittsburgh and in East Chicago, Ind., many local union presidents were Communist party members.

Until the end of World War 2, Communist party policy loyally supported Murray. Many rank and filers demanded that local unions should have the right to strike. But while the war was on the Communists defended the no-strike policy of the union.

After the war Murray along with other CIO bureaucrats moved right and the Communist party moved left. As bona fide delegates to postwar Steelworker conventions, Communists rallied other rank and filers behind a program for:

—A national referendum on dues increases.

—Advance Negroes into leadership in proportion to their numbers in the union.

—Election of staff representatives.

—The right of every member and officer to support and work for any candidates for public office they choose.

—No compliance with Taft-Hartley law; fight the Mundt bill; no little Taft-Hartley clauses or Mundt bills inside our union; no second-class citizens in our union.

—A fighting policy on the shop floor through direct action if necessary.

Some of these demands had majority support. Some did not but there was enough support for enough of these demands to add

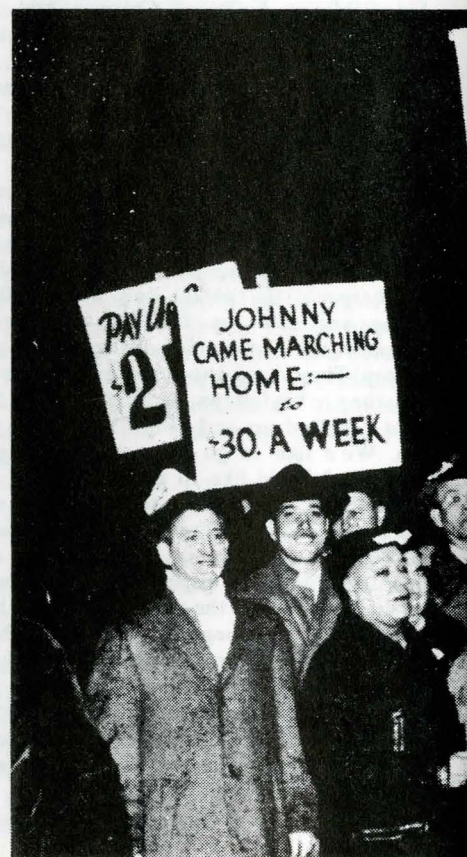
up to the biggest challenge yet to Murray's administration.

The showdown came at the 1948 convention in Boston. The international was especially vulnerable that year because it did not advocate a substantial wage increase in forthcoming contract negotiations.

David McDonald, who later succeeded Murray as Steelworkers president, writes in his autobiography:

"The convention was kept in an uproar most of the time with a handful of left-wing radicals who were angry with Murray for deserting Henry Wallace (Progressive party candidate for president). A delegate named Nick Migas made a vicious attack on the union leadership and as his language became steadily more violent, a group of angry members formed spontaneously on the floor. Several ushers removed Migas for his own protection. The next morning I read in the newspapers that he had been beaten up a few blocks from the convention hall. Feelings were running high among the steelworkers."

Migas, a delegate from Inland Steel in East Chicago, remembers it differently. All that morning he had tried to get recognized



to present the demands his local had instructed him to raise at the convention. Murray refused to give him the mike. So during the lunch break Migas mimeographed a leaflet which every delegate found on his seat when he returned for the afternoon session. The leaflet said that rising prices made an immediate 25-cents-an-hour wage increase necessary. It accused Murray of a no-fight policy and of working with the company.

"Because of the leaflet Murray had to call on me. When I got up to the mike I felt, as I was talking, that the people were listening. I could have swayed the people. But the damn staff representatives wouldn't let you. They started hooting. They were there for a purpose: they wouldn't let you talk. And half of the delegates were staff representatives."

Migas was thrown out of the convention and beaten up. When he got back to Indiana his local union endorsed his actions at the convention and soon after he was reelected as grievance committeeman. The international declared that as an open Communist Migas was ineligible for union office and demanded that the local void the election. The local union refused. Finally, the international executive board itself voided the election.

The same scene was repeated in local after local. Unable to win support for its policies democratically, the international took recalcitrant locals into trusteeship, slandered and strongarmed candidates it

opposed, refused to seat democratically-elected delegates at union conventions.

In the Cold War climate of the time these tactics won out. The peace of the disfranchised settled over the Steelworkers union.

Dues protest movement

But not for long. In 1953 Murray died and was succeeded by McDonald. McDonald never enjoyed the genuine affection which Murray commanded from many steelworkers. He was an immensely vain man, who soon earned the phrases "tuxedo leadership" for his high living his hobnobbing with celebrities, his disdain for working people.

McDonald proposed to the 1956 convention an increase in his own salary from \$40,000 to \$50,000 and an increase from \$3 to \$5 in monthly membership dues. Once again rank and file rebellion broke out on the convention floor.

The leader was Donald Rarick, then a grievance committeeman from Local 2227, McKeesport, Pa. Rarick was politically conservative. He indignantly rejected the charge that his demands were the old Communist demands. But they were.

McDonald gavelled the dues increase through the 1956 convention amid a storm of booing and calls for a roll-call vote. But this was not the end of it. Rarick and others used the long train ride home from the Los Angeles site of the convention to good advantage. On Oct. 19, 1956 the Dues Protest Committee (DPC) was organized at a

meeting of some 50 representatives of locals in the Pittsburgh-McKeesport area.

The DPC's first move was to circulate a petition calling for a special convention to reconsider the dues increase. The petition was widely supported. John Barbero of Local 1462 in Youngstown recalls:

"We signed them up like hotcakes. They just came in looking for you to sign this thing. The thing that impressed me was that the dues increase was insignificant. It was the straw that tied everything together. Dishonest elections, no on-the-job representation, no voice—everything that everybody felt."

Although about 100 locals submitted petitions, the number fell far short of the approximately 685 required by the union constitution. The DPC then decided to try the electoral route. Rarick put himself forward as a candidate for international union president.

At that time a candidate for international office required nominations from only 40 locals. Rarick was endorsed by 91 locals. The McDonald administration tried desperately to head off the challenge. According to labor reporter John Herling, Rarick was offered up to \$250,000 by an emissary of McDonald's to withdraw. He refused.

In the election, despite widespread fraud by the McDonald forces, Rarick received 36 percent of the vote. He received 223,516 votes against 404,172 for McDonald. It was an astonishing showing for a grievance committeeman unknown six months before.

Again the international moved to crush its opponents. At the 1958 convention it attempted to expel the DPC leaders on the charge of dual unionism. The 1962 convention drastically increased the number of nominations required to run for district and international union office. This helps to explain why an I.W. Abel (a member of the international union executive board) rather than a rank and filer like Rarick finally beat McDonald in 1965. Rarick himself died in 1968.

What did the dues protest accomplish? It put the case for union democracy in passionate and traditional American language. In 1960 Rarick published a leaflet entitled "Democracy For Our Union" which said in part:

"The McDonald administration seems determined to protect their entrenched status at the expense of democracy in the USW.

"They have stated that the opposition divides the union and makes it weak in the face of the concerted attacks of the employers. We reject this approach completely. Democracy, the right of opposition, and free elections do not make us weak—it makes us strong. The combination of democracy in the organization and unity in action is a fundamental trade union principle."



Workers picket the Bethlehem Steel company in 1946 Buffalo, N.Y., strike.



Kansas city steel workers back on job after 1956 strike.

Steel union buttresses racism

I.W. Abel, the present president of the Steelworkers union, defeated David McDonald in 1965 partly because he was supported by black members of the union. Once elected Abel would not even grant black spokesmen an interview.

The incident was part of an historical pattern: first, of management deliberately setting blacks, Latins and whites against one another; second, of white union politicians making election-time promises to members of minority groups which they 'orget after election day.

Blacks and Latins entered the steel industry in large numbers during and just after World War 1. Previously the industry had recruited its workmen from American whites and from Eastern European immigrants. As one supervisor put it, the two groups were combined in a "judicious mixture" to prevent effective group action.

The outbreak of World War 1 stopped immigration from Europe. Blacks from the American South, and later Mexicans, were solicited in their place. By the mid-1920s blacks and Latins together made up about 25 percent of the steel labor force.

The steel companies fostered race hatred among these new workers just as they had

among the old. The city of Gary, Ind. is an example.

When U.S. Steel laid out the city of Gary in the early 1900s, it built homes only for its skilled, white, American-born workers. Unskilled laborers, both Eastern European and black, had to fend for themselves. There was a severe housing shortage for all poor people. As a result, they lived not only crowded but also very mixed. White and black rented rooms from each other in the same houses. One early resident recalls:

"If you had a house with an apartment on the street and an apartment in the back, in a lot of cases you and your family took the apartment in the back and rented the front out to black people, because the front apartment paid a little bit more. During the hot weather you and your tenants and their family would share in the front porch and the front yard."

BLACKS STAYED BELOW

In this early period, immigrants and blacks had pretty much the same jobs. Later the immigrants moved up the ladder and the blacks were held in the hardest, dirtiest jobs. After World War 1 the immigrant population of Gary slowly began to

move out of the poor area. U.S. Steel's man on the Realty Board did everything he could to discourage residential integration.

The steel strike of 1919 hastened the emerging racial antagonism. Blacks had little reason to support the strike because 20 of the 24 craft unions involved excluded blacks. Whites were offended when the company imported Mexicans and (nation-wide) 30-40,000 blacks as strikebreakers. In Gary, it is remembered:

"The mills brought black people in here from deep parts of the South in box cars. They promised the black workers promotions and good jobs. Some of them did work on some of those jobs, until the stike was broken, and then they went back to work at the end of the line."

The incident made use of by the Gary authorities to bring in federal troops to crush the strike began when white strikers tried to pull a black scab off a streetcar carrying him to the mill. The CIO organizing drive in the 1930s overcame to some extent the division among blacks, Latins and whites. A black worker says:

"Black workers rushed in in large numbers because they were like drowning men. The white workers kind of hung out.

Some of the white workers said, 'Well, I don't want to be part of something that is going to give a black worker as much right as I have.' But all people don't think alike no matter what race they are. If you are going to elect some officers, and some folks are active, that's who you are going to elect. The first election in the Tin Mill we had a black worker for recording secretary. We had a black worker vice president. We had a black worker grievance committeeman. The foreman called a meeting one day of all the white workers. His remarks were, 'Men, the union might be all right. But why in the hell do you have to have a Negro to represent you?' One of those men spoke up and said, 'You might call him a Negro but we call him a brother union member and we are sure that we trust him in all that he has done.' "

After the union was organized, according to this man, "blacks and whites alternated at jobs so that everyone could take a coffee break, pitched in for anyone who didn't have lunch money, played softball together at Roosevelt Park and brought their families."

RACIST UNION

The spirit of brotherhood evident during the organizing drive has faded, along with the democracy and militancy of that period. The international union itself is demonstrably racist. Today blacks are about a third of the Steelworkers' membership and in some plants they are a majority. Yet there has never been a black member of the international union executive board. The same is true of the union's appointed personnel.

According to the Ad Hoc Committee of Concerned Steelworkers, a caucus of black steelworkers formed in 1964:

"Of more than 1000 employees of the in-

ternational (in 1968), less than 100 are Negroes. Of 14 departments of the international, only two have Negro personnel. One of these two departments is the Civil Rights Department (obviously). Blacks were in the forefront during the formation of this union 25 years ago. Through the acceptance of crumbs down through the years instead of our just deserts, we now find ourselves hindmost."

More significant than the exclusion of blacks from leadership positions in the union is their concentration in dirty, unhealthy, poorly paying jobs in the mills. True, blacks now work in areas of the mills from which they were previously barred. But departments like the coke plant, sintering plant and blast furnace continue to be all-black in most mills and the black worker's ability to move into better jobs continues to be less than the white's.

A study made in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1964 concluded that "given the same seniority and education, the white employee's chances for advancement are substantially greater than are the Negro's and that is true at all levels of seniority, at all levels of education, and at all job levels." A study of black employment in the basic steel industry of Pittsburgh made for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1968 observed that "Negroes comprise 12.27 percent of the laborers, 12.93 percent of the service workers and 10.86 of the semi-skilled operatives, but only 3.21 percent of the craftsmen."

The union has a direct responsibility for this situation because of its failure to insist on plant-wide, rather than departmental, seniority. Placed in traditionally all-black departments by the hiring practices of the companies, black workers hesitate to try to

transfer to other departments because they must give up their accumulated seniority in (say) the coke plant and start all over again.

Also, in every economic recession blacks who had found their way into a previously all-white department tend to be squeezed out. A white worker in the open hearth in a mill in Youngstown, Ohio, who has worked for years to integrate his department, puts it this way:

"Our department was desegregated and blacks moved into all the jobs. I didn't hear any complaints at all. But now, with the recession again, it is an all-white department for all practical purposes. People are getting bumped according to seniority. How does a black person break through and become a machinist when the youngest machinist has 30 years in the plant?"

Discrimination in job assignment can literally be a death sentence. It has recently been established that a person who works on top of the coke ovens for more than five years is 10 times more likely to get lung cancer than are other steelworkers. Coke oven workers are almost all black.

A good indication of the Steelworkers' leadership attitude toward the union's black members came this past fall. Sam Stokes, a black staff representative in the Canton, Ohio area, performed the somewhat remarkable feat of winning nomination in 400 locals (120 are required) as a candidate for international union vice president, to succeed the retiring Joseph Molony. Stokes' nomination was invalidated on the ground that he had fallen behind in his dues in 1968 while in the hospital! "Black and white together" is phony rhetoric for a union which has institutionalized racism on the job and in the union hall.

Behind the steel no-strike pact

Every president of the Steelworkers union—Murray, McDonald, and now Abel—has made a big point of cooperating with the steel companies rather than fighting them.

This is true of most CIO union leaders to some extent. Murray began to crack down on wildcat strikes as soon as the first contract was signed with U.S. Steel. Walter Reuther did the same thing in the auto unions. Abel is now helping the steel companies to take away jobs from union members in order to increase "productivity." John L. Lewis did the same thing in the mine workers union.

Where the Steelworkers bureaucrats differ from Reuther or Lewis is that they have made a philosophy out of getting into bed with the boss.

There have been different names. Murray talked about "partnership." McDonald's pet phrases were "mutual trusteeship" and "human relations." Abel is talking about "productivity." Underneath all these phrases is the same idea: that management and labor have common interests rather than being in fundamental conflict.

An early expression of this outlook during Murray's administration was a pamphlet published by the Steelworkers union in the late 1930s called "Production Problems."

The pamphlet described how the union could help steel companies produce more efficiently. It was written by Harold Ruttenberg, then research director for the Steelworkers union. Logically enough Ruttenberg later became the top executive

of a steel company, Portsmouth Steel.

When McDonald became Steelworkers president one of the first things he did was to tour the nation's steel mills together with U.S. Steel president Benjamin Fairless.

McDonald himself says in his autobiography, *Union Guy*:

"We made some early mistakes. One was using chauffeur-driven limousines. Vin Sweeney, our publicity director, told me that this was leaving a bad impression among the workers and he was right. So we made all our group excursions after that in a bus."

That same year McDonald explained the philosophy that underlay the Fairless tour in a speech to the 1954 Steelworkers convention:

"We are engaged in the operation of an economy that is based on mutual trusteeship. U.S. Steel has almost as many stockholders as employees. These stockholders through a voting system employ a group of managers. The managers are simply employees of the corporation. There is another group of employees known as the working force. Together, these two groups have a mutual trusteeship to operate the steel company."

In his address to the next convention in 1956, at which the Dues Protest began, McDonald called "mutual trusteeship" by a new name, "people's capitalism." He said, "This is the sort of capitalism of which we can be proud, which we can advance to the world as the real way of economic and political life for all mankind."

In fairness to McDonald, it should be recalled that Abel has never struck the steel industry whereas McDonald led the 116-day strike of 1959. This was the last national steel strike and the longest in the history of the Steelworkers union.

The main issue in the 1959 strike was the companies' desire for a freer hand in changing local working conditions. Section 2B of the basic steel contract, adopted in 1947, limited the ability of the company to change written or oral agreements about such matters as crew sizes and job descriptions. This was what the management sought to undermine in 1959.

In making its case to the public during the four-month strike, the steel industry used the same arguments it uses today. According to the company the union was strike happy. The president of Republic Steel claimed that despite the no-strike clause in the basic steel contract there had been 173 wildcat strikes at Republic mills during the previous three years.

Management also argued that the union's wage demands were the cause of inflation and that the American steel industry needed to lower its costs to meet foreign competition.

The Steelworkers leadership answered these arguments. In a joint letter "To The Members and Families of the United Steelworkers of America," dated June 20, 1959, McDonald, Howard Hague and I.W. Abel (president, vice president and secretary treasurer of the international union) denounced "the 'inflation' monster and the 'foreign competition' hoax." The three top officers of the union stated: "While your attention and the eyes of the public have been fixed on the alleged effect of 'inflation' and 'foreign competition' the steel corporations mapped their plan to atomize and completely undermine your job rights."

The union argued that the basic cause of the American steel industry's vulnerability to foreign competition was its high rate of profit. McDonald wrote to James P. Mitchell, Secretary of Labor, on Aug. 3, 1959, that the rate of profit in the industry had been about 5 percent in 1939 but was about 10

percent in 1959. (Japanese companies, in contrast, operate at a 2-3 percent rate of profit and invest the surplus in new technology.)

As for being strike happy, the union leadership was only too truthful when it told the membership: "Union contracts already contain iron-clad guarantees which are far tougher than those in other industries and which have been rigorously enforced by the international union."

HUMAN RELATIONS COMMITTEE

The 1959 strike ended inconclusively because the federal government stepped in and forced a settlement. Industry did not get a change in 2B. It did get a so-called Human Relations Committee, made up of top union and management personnel, which industry hoped would bring about the desired liberalization of work rules over a period of years.

The idea behind the Human Relations Committee was mutual trusteeship renamed. McDonald told the 1962 Steelworkers convention that the Committee would pave the way "to a new era of understanding with the American steel industry." President Lyndon Johnson told the 1965 Steelworkers convention:

"Your Human Relations Committee has established a fruitful pattern of day-in, day-out relations between employer and union. You have moved steel toward an era of creative, constructive bargaining, recognizing that labor and management have a common stake in each other's welfare."

And the New York Times editorialized: "The establishment of a Human Relations Committee representing the union and 11 major companies has taken the crisis element out of bargaining in steel. Top leaders on both sides have met on a year-round basis to discuss the complex problems of changing technology, foreign competition and worker needs. Agreements have been made without the pressure of strike deadlines at levels well within the administration's guideposts for curbing wage-price inflation."

The Human Relations approach produced bad contracts and was one of the major reasons Abel beat McDonald in 1965.

The 1962 contract was made up of a package of fringe benefits worth about 2.5 percent of the industry's employment costs and no wage increase. The cost-of-living clause was dropped from the basic steel contract.

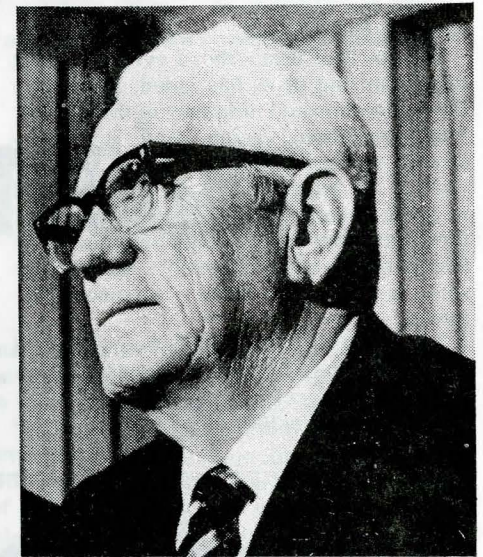
The tendency developed to use the Human Relations Committee as a substitute for the union's regular procedures. Lacking even the right to ratify, the membership was even further removed from decision-making because the Wage Policy Committee allegedly representing them was called in only after a deal was made in secret Human Relations Committee sessions. At a meeting of top union officers in October 1964

McDonald announced that he was not going to reopen the basic steel contract before the 1965 contract expiration date, that is, he did not intend even to threaten a steel strike. Opposition erupted. Abel, Burke and Molony met that evening and decided to run.

In their campaign against McDonald, the Abel-Burke-Molony slate attacked the idea of mutual trusteeship and the Human Relations Committee. Their basic leaflet entitled "Where They Stand" asserted:

"The Abel-Burke-Molony team stands for 'Union trusteeship'—not, 'Mutual trusteeship'! The union can't serve two masters—the companies can well take care of themselves—the union's leadership must look after the interests of the membership!"

This rhetoric lasted only as long as the election campaign. Assuming office early in 1965, Abel turned at once to negotiating a new three-year contract. The resulting contract included an agreement to hold informal discussions on issues not resolved at the time, such as apprenticeship, testing, training and job classifications.



Steel union head I.W. Abel.

The winter of 1967-1968 was the eve of the next contract negotiations. At a meeting of the international executive board Abel floated a trial balloon, the concept of "arbitrating any issue which could not be resolved in the forthcoming negotiations." A written proposal presented by the international officers and union counsel Bernard Kleiman stressed that "no agreement of this type could possibly be reached, under any circumstances, without prior approval from all policy-making bodies within our union, including the international Wage Policy Committee, the newly established Basic Steel Industry Conference of local unions and a poll of the membership involved."

This is the pledge Abel broke when in the last week of March 1973 it was announced that the Steelworkers union would give up the right to strike in the 1974 contract negotiations.

Steel no-strike pact a sell-out

I.W. Abel's first big step toward giving up the right to strike was the agreement to submit the incentive issue to arbitration in 1968.

It seems almost too much of a coincidence that, while management wins most arbitration decisions, this time the union won. The result made it easier for Abel and the industry to propose arbitration of other issues.

The next step was the productivity clause in the 1971 contract. As the 1971 contract negotiations approached, Abel once again floated the idea, in interviews with business periodicals, of promising not to strike and arbitrating all unresolved issues. It was dropped for the time being. The productivity clause, however, became part of Section 1 of the basic steel contract.

The productivity clause begins with the concepts which the union rejected in 1959: that the future of the industry "will rest heavily upon the ability of the parties to work cooperatively to achieve significantly higher productivity trends" and that labor and management must join "in seeking relief from the problem of massive importation of foreign steel manufactured in low-wage countries."

The productivity clause also states that a joint Committee on Productivity shall be established in every mill; that the president and chairman of the grievance committee in each local union shall be among the union representatives; that the committee shall meet monthly, and that:

"The function of the Committee shall be to advise with plant management concerning ways and means of improving productivity and developing recommendations for stimulating its growth so as to promote... orderly and peaceful relations with the employees, to achieve uninterrupted operations in the plants, to promote the use of domestic steel and to achieve the desired prosperity and progress of the company and its employees."

At the time the productivity clause was adopted, some union members thought it was just public relations. What has the productivity clause amounted to in practice?

First, the productivity push has accelerated a trend to make steel mills more dangerous. Contrary to widespread impression, steelmaking has become more not less dangerous in recent years. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, disabling injuries per million man hours worked almost doubled from 1961 to 1969. The productivity clause makes things worse because it encourages crew reduction and

work outside a man's training and job description. The American Iron and Steel Institute announced last year that the rate of disabling injuries for the first quarter of 1972 was 25 percent higher than for 1971.

Second, the union-management drive for productivity has cost about 40,000 jobs in two years. The number of production and maintenance employees in the steel industry declined from 530,000 in the first half of 1971 to 490,000 in the first half of 1973.

The third and most important effect of the productivity clause was psychological. It softened up the union for surrendering the no-strike clause. An industry spokesman put it this way to the Wall Street Journal, July 24, 1972:

"This is a very subtle thing. It's a forum of communication we've never had before. If union members through these committees learn to appreciate some of our problems so that we may be able to end our crisis bargaining every three years, it would mean a hell of a lot more to us than a couple extra percentage points in productivity."

As it has become obvious that the productivity clause is more than public relations, rank-and-file protest has begun to gather steam.

One of the first rank-and-file groups to criticize the productivity clause was the Rank And File Team (RAFT), a national caucus based in Youngstown, Ohio. A RAFT leaflet stated:

"Since August (1971) many plants have been closed and thousands of jobs have been combined or left unfilled in the plants. Is this what productivity really means?"

Does productivity to the steel industry mean more steel will be produced to meet the great needs of our nation? If so, all the industry needs to do is to put more unused facilities to work again. Or does productivity really mean profitability? Has the steel industry, like the coal industry before it, decided to create a new Appalachia, throwing away towns and putting thousands of steelworkers onto the streets and unemployment and welfare lines?"

In Aliquippa, Pa., Local 1211 resolved to boycott this productivity committee and passed the following resolutions on productivity and the right to strike:

Whereas: For years the company has eliminated jobs through automation and technical change, and

Whereas: Since the signing of the basic agreement, the company has initiated an extensive program of job elimination and or combining of jobs, and

Whereas: The best contract ever negotiated is of no value if one doesn't have

a job, and

Whereas: Increased productivity means greater output for the same number of employees or the same output for fewer employees, and

Whereas: The productivity section is being used by the company to eliminate jobs where present contract language does not protect it, therefore be it

Resolved: That job security be of primary importance for all future negotiations and that the entire section on productivity be stricken from the basic agreement and replaced with a job security section protecting crew sizes.

The local also passed a resolution on the right to strike.

Whereas: Many times, large segments of the membership find their backs to the wall over issues such as safety or health conditions, outside contractors, elimination of jobs, overlapping of jobs, etc. and

Whereas: Many steelworkers are forced to use an illegal strike as the only way left to protect their interest in an impossible situation, and

Whereas: The right to strike is the only real muscle the company understands, therefore be it

Resolved: That the no-strike clause be removed from our contract, and be it further

Resolved: That the executive board and grievance committee of a local union shall have the right to call a strike over major issues such as unsafe conditions, job elimination, job overlapping, etc.

Another example of rank-and-file protest is the March 1973 issue of the Voice of the Rank and File published by members of Local 1010, East Chicago, Ind. A letter from steelworker James Robinson commented:

"I just thought you would be interested to hear that with all the talk about imported steel, that new, multi-million dollar slab caster was all imported from Germany. And you'd better believe that caster cost more than all the Volkswagens in the Inland Steel parking lots."

Another letter from "Some angry men in the Spike Shop" complained:

"The pressure has been getting heavier in here. In the Spike Department productivity means being treated like a slave, so Inland can make a bigger profit off our backs."

Such is the growing sentiment of the rank and file. But Abel decided he was strong enough to make the move in 1973 which he had backed away from in 1968 and 1971.

On Dec. 14, 1972 the Steelworkers held a special conference on the productivity drive in Washington, D.C. It was reported that out

of 800 locals only 230 had functioning committees. The majority of locals had either refused to set up the committees or had only met once or twice.

Meanwhile, Abel and the steel industry's chief negotiator, R. Heath Larry of U.S. Steel, were planning a jointly-sponsored educational campaign to be kicked off after the union elections Feb. 13. In those elections Abel ran unopposed and an international union executive board made up of men endorsed by him was also returned.

The major vehicle of the educational campaign is a movie entitled "Where's Joe?" The message of the movie is that the threat of a steel strike causes "hedge buying" (stockpiling) before each contract expiration date. The inevitable result is a slump in steel production after the signing of the contract, as during the second half of 1971. It is during this slack period, the movie warns, that domestic buyers place orders with foreign steel companies. Accordingly "Joe's" job may be lost to German or Japanese steelmakers unless hedge buying can be prevented. So says the movie, which is being shown in mills throughout the nation as well as on commercial television.

In addition, according to the Feb. 16 issue of the Wall Street Journal, "the message is to be carried into Steelworkers' homes by

way of comic books, a comic strip, educational television and possibly even a game, tentatively called 'Hedge,' after the practice of 'hedge buying' of steel in anticipation of a strike."

Abel had no time to wait for the educational process, however. Local union elections are coming up in June and unless the no-strike plan could be consummated well before then, the elections might have served as a referendum.

NO-STRIKE PACT

Abel therefore proceeded as if he were obtaining union approval for a triennial contract. The executive board was convened right after the Feb. 13 election for international officers and district directors. Abel laid before them a plan of which the essentials are:

- A wage increase of at least 3 percent a year plus cost-of-living improvements for each of the three years beginning Aug. 1, 1974 is guaranteed.

- All other negotiable issues, including wage increases above the 3 percent level and fringes, will be submitted to arbitration if collective bargaining can't resolve them by April 15, 1974.

- Individual plant strikes on local issues will be allowed if bargaining fails and if Abel

approves.

—Each covered employee in the basic steel industry will receive a bonus of \$150 "in exchange for the no-strike clause."

The executive board gave its approval. So did 300 presidents of locals at the ten largest steel producers. And the membership? If all follows Abel's plan they will have nothing to say.

What can the rank and file do? A way to begin would be to put up resolutions at local union meetings demanding a special convention of the international union to consider this issue. Article VI, Section 16 of the Steelworkers constitution provides that 25 percent of the local unions may convene such a meeting.

Better yet would be a strike against the no-strike clause.

Unless the right to strike is preserved and extended, rank-and-file electoral campaigns to place new men in office will lose much of whatever meaning they have had. The officer of a union that is not free to strike will be an officer doomed to frustration.

The rest of American labor and industry will be standing by to see if steel management can take the right to strike away from steelworkers for \$150 a head.



End of an era? Pennsylvania steelworkers walk picket line during 1952 walkout.

This pamphlet originally appeared as a series of six articles in The Guardian, a radical newsweekly published at 32 W. 22nd St., New York, NY 10010, between February and May of 1973.

