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The Hospital Workers: "The Best Contract Anywhere"?

Inside the Hospital Workers' Union



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This article originally printed
as the second of two parts in
THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS,
Vol. XVI, No. 10, June 3, 1971

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New York, New York

Elinor Langer, during the winter and spring
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magazine. She has also authored an article on
the women of the telephone company reprinted from
THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS by N.E. Free Press.

Photographs: Olivia Henry

Printed by
New England Free Press
791 Tremont Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02118

I

Unions exist to negotiate contracts, to set out the terms under which workers will supply their services until the next negotiations. They are not designed to free Joan Bird, de-pollute the environment, elect John Lindsay, or end the war. Gestures made in these directions are peripheral, undertaken by the leadership of Local 1199, Drug and Hospital Union in New York—as well as by other unions—because the leaders can see as well as anyone else the connection between the security of their members and the state of the world, and because they feel responsible for directing leftover energies and resources to useful ends.

The heart of the union, however, is contract negotiations. The contract justifies the very existence of the union, justifies the building of buildings, the payment of salaries; it justifies the officers and is the excuse for, if not the source of, their power; it also justifies the dues the workers pay to support the structure. A good contract is what holds the union together, giving the blacks and whites, the Puerto Rican porters and the Jewish technicians a common interest. Most important, the contract is the spring of all real gain: it is the source of additional money, of dental insurance, of pensions, of vacations. You have only to be around a union at contract expiration time to feel what an emotional, as well as a political and practical, watershed it is.

During contract negotiation time all the chickens in a union's barnyard come home to roost. The union's history and character come together and are revealed as having a functional, not an arbitrary, source. This was certainly true of 1199. Patterns that seemed abstractly "authoritarian," rooted in power hunger, egotism, or sectarian conceptions of structure, seemed, while the contract was at stake, to make perfect sense. Factionalism or opposition to the leadership, however idealistically inspired, seems when it occurs at this stage to border on treachery: Will not disruption risk the unity needed to face down the bosses? As a result the settlement might be unfavorable, a matter not just of loss of credibility for the leadership

and the union, but of overwhelming practical consequence to the members: the workers won't get what in fact they desperately need. They won't get it this time, and the power of the union will be compromised in the future. Immediate interests are at stake.

These things are so because of the adversary nature of collective bargaining in America. Capitalism rewards workers not according to need but according to the power of their organizations to threaten or disrupt. There are lights, cameras, smoke-filled rooms, clustering reporters, political machinations, all-night waits, exhaustion. The leaders need endurance, oratorical skill, and technical understanding. They must be equally at home in the bureaucratic regions of the managers and in the field commanding their own troops. During 1199's talks with the hospitals the problems of negotiation were very much exaggerated because of the way hospital services are financed:

the dependence of hospitals on state and federal funds made them irresponsible negotiating partners. They never would or could say what resources were in fact available, or how far they might go in meeting the union's demands. Moreover, the tension and infrequency of contact during collective bargaining made it impossible for both sides to discuss real issues or grievances, real ways in which working conditions might be reformed.

Collective bargaining is a grueling, insane, time-consuming experience, full of truth and full of lies. It can also be exhilarating. As an instrument of achieving real progress, this proud invention of the American class struggle seemed to me absurd. But it is the world in which unions live, and in which they must prove themselves or fail.

There were essentially three elements in the 1970 talks between Local 1199 and the League of Voluntary Hospitals. The first was what was happening within the union: the formation of demands, the mobilization of support, the development of tactics. The second was the talks themselves: the interplay between workers and management, the dickering over what it was possible to achieve. The third was the hospitals' side: the strategy that the hospital

leadership had adopted and its relation to New York State politics, and specifically to Governor Rockefeller. People in the union sometimes felt, as one of them said, that the negotiations were being manipulated "by forces greater than Leon Davis." I don't know to what extent that is true; perhaps no one does. But certainly the demands on the union officials to provide mass leadership—to inspire, then control their troops—were inseparable from the demands on them for tactical judgment and political skill in dealing with the managers. It was the tension between these demands that defined the entire process.

Within the union, preparations were carefully arranged to reach a climax on July 1. Beginning in March, meetings were held in every hospital, with the Guild and Hospital Divisions meeting separately. The workers were asked what they wanted—a rare occurrence—and at least in the places I visited, there was a spontaneous outpouring of present grievances and visionary hopes for the future. For example, from the basement of a chronic disease hospital in the Bronx: Why can't we take our holidays when we want them? Make the bosses stop calling to check on us when we're home sick. Let's get paid for unused sick leave at the end of the year. We should get paid every week, not every two weeks. Why does my husband at another hospital make more money than I do when we do the same work? We need a locker room with a shower. They've taken away the chairs where we take our breaks. Make the hospitals pay for cleaning uniforms. We need: dental care, \$100 take home pay after taxes, \$50 a week raises; free meals; hour-long lunch breaks; more respect from the supervisors; differential pay for night and weekend work . . . and so on.

The organizer, the staff member chairing the meeting, takes it all down. We'll see, we'll see. The problem of negotiations exists from the beginning: to determine where there is real need and strong feeling, to mobilize support without making false promises. The organizer then supervises the election of a worker to sit on the negotiating committee. It is clear from the start who the representative will be. It will be the active union delegate, the worker who has already proved his or

her reliability to the organizer and the leadership. "I think you should elect Mrs. P. She was on the committee two years ago and she did a great job." Mrs. P. is elected. It was apparent that the process was roughly the same in every hospital because the composition of the negotiating committee was like a who's who of the 1199 rank and file. Dissension was unlikely to afflict its ranks.

The final demands, sifted by the leadership and the committee from these outpourings, seem now, months later, to be somewhat limp or trivial. Yet each one had a concrete meaning for thousands of workers. Each one would have made their lives just a little better: a greater accumulation of sick leave, differentials for weekend work, differentials for Licensed Practical Nurses who act as RNs, longer vacations after shorter periods of employment, payment of laundry costs for uniforms, dental care under the benefit plan. The demands reflected a certain amount of internal pork barreling: LPN differentials, for instance, or a demand to end inequities in reimbursement to social workers were clearly aimed at satisfying the more highly skilled workers in the division of the union known as the Guild. For itself, the union demanded that workers' savings at the Credit Union and contributions to the union's Brotherhood Fund be deducted by the hospitals from the payroll. Then there was Martin Luther King's birthday as a holiday: a little soul, something for everyone.

Money, however, was the critical demand. During the negotiations of 1968 the problem had been simpler: the \$100 minimum was plain, dramatic, a good magnet for community support. No one could argue that human beings supporting families should make less than \$100 a week. Now the money question was more complicated. The union feared that people would argue—and at one point the hospital managers actually did, incredibly in view of their \$75,000-a-year salaries—that the workers were no longer so poor. They would point to industries such as retailing where New York workers are still making only \$80 or \$90 a week.

The committee therefore decided to



tie its coattails to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which in the early summer of 1970 reported that the minimum needed to maintain a family of four in New York City was \$139.71 per week, or \$7,265. (Try it.) The union accepted this figure, though many of its members are supporting far larger families, and demanded a \$140 minimum: a 30 percent increase across the board or a \$40 increase, whichever would be higher. It also demanded a cost-of-living escalator clause.

One union demand was more than ameliorative and its fate is significant. This was a demand that appeared on the list simply as "Establishment of

Career Ladders Within Each Hospital." I believe this was meant to be an extension of a union-management program which was begun under the 1968 contract. Known as the Training and Upgrading Fund, it trains workers in lower job categories to be technicians or clerical workers. The program is extremely expensive to administer, because under it the hospitals must not only finance the worker's training, but also pay him or her a salary during training and, in addition, pay another employee filling the job the trainee has left. Because of its cost, the program has remained very small and will not become a major factor in

changing conditions for a significant number of workers.

The new "Career Ladders" proposal, as I understood it, would have—or more accurately could have—been more effective. It was designed to establish an *automatic* upgrading procedure open to all the workers in the hospitals: a maid would be trained as an aide, an aide as an LPN, a file clerk as a typist, a typist as a technician, a kitchen aide as a dietician, etc. The proposal might have abolished the worst and most notorious characteristic of hospital jobs: that they are dead ends. It was hardly a revolutionary proposal, unless increasing people's capacities and giving them more mobility are revolutionary. It did not, for example, change the distribution of power between workers and management. But it was a reform which would have made a difference, and that is why the union's inability to work it out is important.

That was how the Career Ladders proposal seemed to me; yet I sometimes felt that I was the only person around who had noticed it at all. It appeared on the list (by what process I do not know), but was never mentioned again. It was never central to the negotiations. No one mourned its passing. The reason for its extinction is not that the leaders of 1199 do not want to improve the lot of hospital workers; they do. But given the structure of collective bargaining—particularly the two-week period in this case in which there was no contact whatever between the antagonists—there was no possible time for the discussion, planning, and argument that would have been needed to consider and implement such a huge administrative program. The negotiations stayed deadlocked on money and were barely able to deal with anything beyond that.

Secondly, the union itself was unprepared to support its idea with the detailed staff work, administrative proposals, funding arrangements, and so forth that would have helped to make the demand real. Only one person on the union staff could conceivably have been assigned to such a job, and she was at work on another urgent task, an attempt to straighten out job classifications and wage rates and make them

uniform throughout the different hospitals. And so "Career Ladders" came and went without leaving a trace. It had no priority.

It is usually said of unions that their structure follows the structure of the industry whose workers they represent. Among New York hospitals the opposite occurred. The voluntary hospitals formed themselves into a unified assembly only after the union became a power. The sole visible function of the League of Voluntary Hospitals is to negotiate with the union. Not all voluntary metropolitan hospitals are members of the League, but most of the major ones are: Beth Israel, Mt. Sinai, Montefiore, Maimonides, and so forth. (Workers in city-financed hospitals belong to another union.) The non-League hospitals generally abide by terms identical to those set by the League, but for various reasons have decided against participation in it.

The men representing the hospitals during the spring and summer negotiations at the Roosevelt and the Biltmore Hotels were middle-aged, middle-class, white men from White Plains and Great Neck, professional, respectable, serious: clear in their hearts that they are not agents of medical empires (as radicals have charged) but agents of humanity. The union side was a different sight. Everything that was homogenous about the managers was diverse about the union: color, size, shape, sex, nationality, temperament, language.

In this setting—in which the very shapes of the bodies of the people, the difference in the way lines formed in their faces told of the reality of class in America—everything happened. The officers did not, except for one (crucial) moment at the end, have any private dealings with the bosses or the mediator. There were no private conferences, no secret meetings. There was not for one moment the possibility of a sellout or deal, the possibility that the leadership would accept a settlement which would be unacceptable to the workers. What occurred in the strike of the New York postal union, for instance, could not have occurred here. Whatever Davis and the other officers did or said, they did or said in front of the committee. What went on when the officers were alone I don't

know, but I never heard the president speak in a staff meeting, for instance, any differently from the way he spoke in front of the members. Because of the loyalty of the members and their faith in Davis there was no need for him to dissemble.

The committee acted chiefly as a chorus, assenting to whatever Davis decided. They were rarely consulted in advance, and never took the initiative in anything but social matters. There came a moment, for example, when it was the union's turn to trade. Davis unilaterally decided to abandon the demand for pay differentials, then turned and asked the committee if that was okay. They agreed that it was.

Nevertheless, it is important to understand what was remarkable and positive about this "participatory collective bargaining." First, I think it put some kind of brake on at least the theoretically possible runaway development of "togetherness" between the top union officials and top management. In reality, of course, there is a good deal of mutual understanding and respect between them. The hospitals do not mind the union—in fact they like it—because it has simplified administration in general and because the resulting wage gains have created job stability where there used to be a tornado-like turnover. The hospitals appreciate the union's role in keeping up its end of the bargain, in contributing to order in the hospitals, in helping to ensure that a disciplined, dependable work force shows up to work every morning.

The union is proud of its contribution as well: this is precisely the symbiosis of non-militant "responsibility" which leads radicals to despair of unions. Nevertheless, the less good feeling at contract time, the less of that characteristic muddle of labor-management harmony, the better it is for the workers. In this sense the constant presence of the workers' committee helped to keep the union negotiators on the right (that is to say, the antagonistic) side of the class war. Davis could never forget that he was bargaining on behalf of workers whom he knew and loved; he could never forget that the items in question were very important to them, or that his strength and power depended ulti-

mately on satisfying them, and not on the esteem of the prestigious people on the other side of the table.

Furthermore, in a roomful of working people—and partly because of Davis's own bluntness and vulgarity—a lot of the pomp of the proceedings was deflated. Middle-class technicians in American institutions have developed the habit—or skill—of making things seem much more complicated than they are. Hospitals are no exception. League spokesmen entered the negotiations with a list of counter-demands that far outdistanced those of the union, a catalogue of simple threats to workers' privileges disguised as a set of managerial headaches and couched in complex bureaucratic terms. The members of the committee, however, always knew exactly what was going on and they understood the hidden implications of the various positions the hospitals took.

With the committee present the level of bullshit dropped considerably. Everyone knew that "efficiency" meant layoffs, that "contracting out" meant loss of jobs, that the hospitals were trying to use this time to enforce more rigid rules about coffee breaks and marriage leaves. The committee's presence meant that the corporate middle-class jargon of the hospital bureaucrats would not be allowed to triumph.

It quickly became apparent that there would be no substantial negotiations. The hospitals' position was that they were in a severe economic crisis and anticipating huge deficits. They were dependent on the state's reimbursement formula (under Medicaid) to underwrite the added costs of any new settlement with the workers. Unless the state would guarantee to underwrite such a settlement they could not negotiate one because they did not know where the money would come from. Their hands, they said, were tied.

Rockefeller's position remained mysterious. He sent the League a letter saying that the state would "consider" the results of any bona fide collective bargaining in fixing reimbursement rates, but the hospitals chose to interpret that as too ambiguous to satisfy their situation. Vincent McDonnell, the mild and reassuring state mediator who

was present during the last ten days of the talks—or, more properly, the non-talks—and who was viewed as Rockefeller's man, said at one point that the hospitals were not the only industry whose rates of return were fixed by the state. Taxis were regulated, he said, and utilities. The state could not put itself in the position of guaranteeing absolutely any outcome of collective bargaining, no matter what it was, which was what the hospitals seemed to want.

Whether that was the state's reasoning, I do not know. It seemed to me that the hospitals and Rockefeller were involved in an irresponsible game in which the union was only a pawn. Neither the League nor the politicians wanted to appear responsible for a strike (the worst outcome from the point of view of the public) and each side may have been jockeying to shift the blame to the other if a strike occurred. Or both sides may have had an unspoken pact to create sufficient fear of a strike to justify either the politicians' or the League's capitulating at the last minute and offering a decent settlement.

Amid this uncertainty, another deep limitation of the union became apparent. 1199 has never questioned the hospitals' version of their economic situation. Occasionally the union complains that the hospitals keep closed books. But it has never aligned itself with the critics of American medical care, either professional or radical, who contend that hospitals are inefficient, that they are incapable of providing adequate medical care, that they are interested mainly in competitive expansion, and that their practices are creating a deadly medical inflation. Wherever the quality and character of medical care are being challenged by community groups—such as in the case of the Gouverneur Clinic on the Lower East Side or at Lincoln Hospital—the union either overtly or tacitly supports the hospitals. Hovering in the background is the feeling in the union that someday a "policy" on medical care will have to be developed because it is plain from frequent news reports that medical care is in a crisis, and the crisis is of great significance to hospital workers.

So far, however, such a policy has

not emerged. The union has no experts in hospital economics or medical care and the instinct of the leadership, even in the heat of battle, is to support the hospitals' own analysis of their condition. As a result, the union was helpless to affect the maneuverings of the hospitals with the state. It had to say, "Look, you boys work things out however you have to. We don't care how you do it. We don't care who runs the hospitals. We are here simply to get what we need and if we don't get it we'll strike." The union had no influence whatever on the deal between the hospitals and the state, which would inevitably affect its members. It never attempted to have any. In that sense it could properly be accused by conservative enemies of contributing to an ultimately inflationary settlement.

The hospitals refused to talk about money without advance word from the state. The union said: "If we can't talk about money, we can't talk." For two weeks the hospital and the union negotiating teams sat around in separate suites at the Roosevelt Hotel, the leaders of each side meeting only in the glare of an occasional TV light.

For the union the situation was tense. The leaders did not want a strike. The union has grown large; it is the core of the staff of many major hospitals. It was one thing to strike in 1959 and 1962 when the union was small and represented only some of the workers in each institution. Now it represents many critically needed hospitals, and a large proportion of the workers in each one. The extent to which a strike would actually cripple those hospitals or seriously undermine hospital service in New York was never clear. Several important hospitals not in the union and municipal and proprietary institutions would still be functioning.

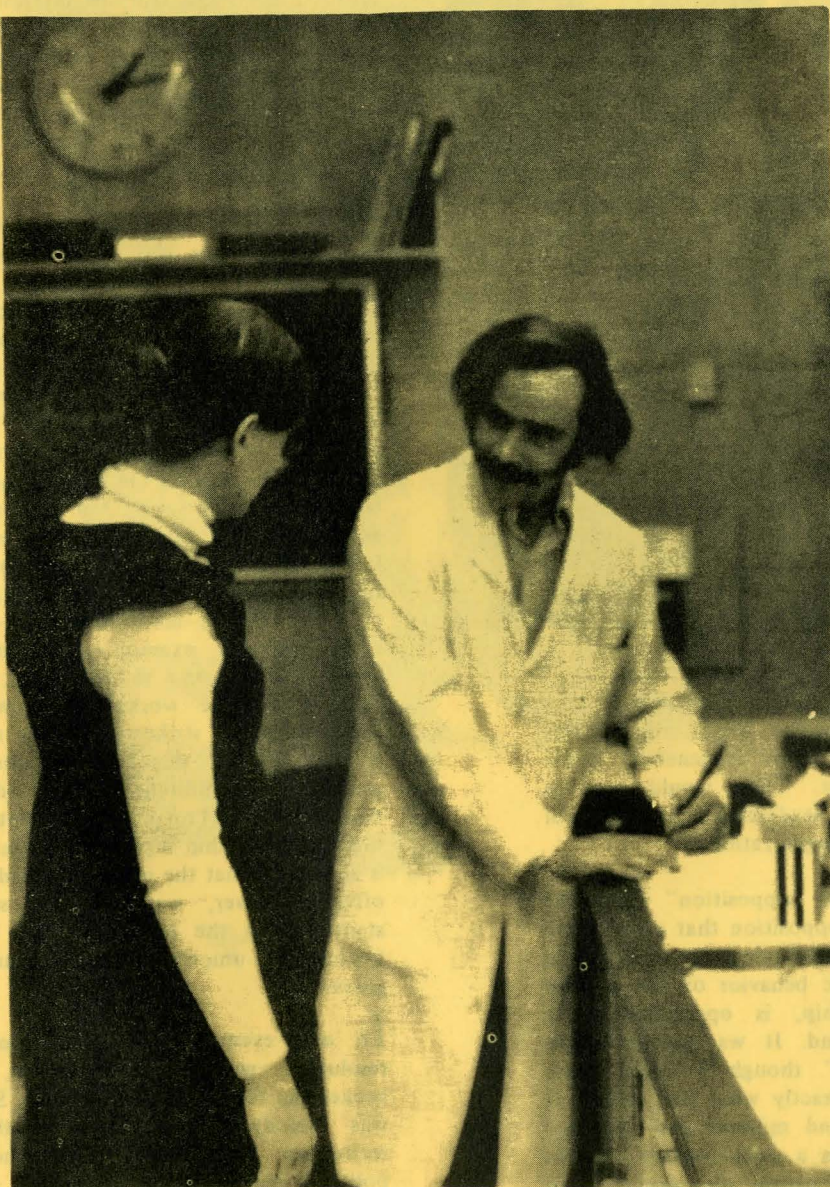
Nevertheless it was a frightening prospect. Davis had had a recent heart attack; another officer had recently been hospitalized with pneumonia. Everyone had close personal experience with the need for dependable hospital care and was scared about the responsibility of tampering with it. A former radical employee of the union, who certainly favors the *idea* of strikes, had a wife whose baby was due about the time the strike would have begun.

"Don't let them strike," he said one day, only half-joking. Everyone felt that way. A strike in the hospitals is not something it is easy even for militants to feel good about.

But there were other factors. The union is growing rapidly in cities outside New York. From the point of view of the national union, the most desirable outcome was a favorable settlement without a strike. The leaders were worried as well about community support. During the 1968 campaign for a \$100 minimum wage, the "community"—the media, and liberal and civil rights organizations—had supported the union heavily. It was not clear that they would endorse closing

the hospitals over a demand for \$140, which has a way of seeming like a lot of money for a "service" worker.

There was as well a contrary fear. It was July. The members were black. A strike could unleash a riot in the black community—too much support, rather than too little—and, apart from intrinsic losses, 1199's image as the instrument of peaceful progress would be badly tarnished. Thus among the leadership there was little enthusiasm for a strike, only a determination to do it if necessary. I believe that they were genuinely uncertain whether the battle between the state and the hospitals would be resolved without one.



II

The union began to mobilize in the middle of June. The first event was a mass meeting of the membership. This was a delicate affair for the leadership because at contract expiration time members come to a meeting who never participate in other union functions and who are not as disciplined or experienced in the ways of the union as the regular delegates are, nor as responsive to the leaders. The chief business of the meeting was for the members to adopt the leaders' policy and vote authorization to the negotiating committee to "take any action it saw fit" on July 1, if an acceptable settlement were not yet reached.

The leadership's tactic of postponing until the last minute the announcement of what tactics would in fact be employed was reasonable and sound. It was the only way the union had of maintaining its flexibility and its credibility with management. It pretty much fit the facts as the union had seen them from the beginning (and which had never been concealed): that the \$140 minimum as well as the other demands were negotiating positions, and that it did not want a strike if an offer were made that came close to meeting those demands.

The plan was adopted, as the leadership intended: it is in firm control of the union. But at one moment it seemed as if the opposition could sway the undisciplined members. At this meeting the leadership's attitude toward the opposition—which on minor matters had seemed to me throughout the spring to be irrational—revealed itself to have a logical base. The leadership needed the commitment of the members to its flexible tactics if it was to accomplish its ends.

The "opposition" in 1199 is of two kinds. One form of opposition comes from the Young Lords. Some Lords work in hospitals, and they have organized a Health Revolutionary Unity Movement around a few hospitals. When they oppose the union it is on the grounds that the union does not take an interest in the quality of health care or its availability in the ghettos. They believe that the union focuses on the narrowly defined interests of its members in their role as



workers, but ignores the interests of the larger community of which they are also members. The Lords' opposition to the union is generally extra-parliamentary. They would like to change the leadership's policies, not control the organization.

But the real "opposition" within the union, the opposition that called forth the most self-serving, hysterical, and undemocratic behavior on the part of the leadership, is opposition of a different kind. It was always called "Trotskyist," though I could never figure out exactly what that meant. It was small and militant and appeared principally in a parliamentary form as a handful of people who would try to sway the direction of meetings. In the

spring its spokesmen proposed to strike over an alleged job freeze in the hospitals. At the time of the negotiations their position was "\$140 or strike." They wanted that position clearly stated in advance as non-negotiable as had been the \$100 demand in 1968.

I am not sure what the actual motives of the opposition were. The leadership believed that their strategy was simply to create dissension between the leaders and the members on the theory that the leaders were suppressing the workers' innate militance. The leaders believed that the "Trots" would use any issue they could to create unrest and had no interest in the \$140 minimum in itself. That analysis appeared to me to be essentially correct. The Trots' specific moves seemed to rest on a sectarian conviction that workers' strikes will naturally have revolutionary implications.

On the other hand, the opposition to the opposition was itself fed by a sectarianism left over from the Thirties: if something is identified as "Trotskyist" it *has* to be seen as a dangerous deviation even if what it is deviating from has little connection to what the issues had once been. The leadership believed that it was not in the best interests of the union's members to go out on strike. And it is true, as one member said more eloquently than I can paraphrase, that the opposition's spokesmen were white, middle-class technicians—laboratory or x-ray specialists, for example—with much more mobility and money than the majority of the workers they were encouraging to strike. But it is also true that the members responded warmly to the militant position and in that sense the Trotskyists' perception that the leadership suppresses militance is accurate. What the opposition had to offer, however, was far less substantial than the real gains that following the union's strategy virtually guaranteed.

In any event, when the union's resolution was being explained, a spokesman for the opposition rose. She was Melody Phillips, a wan, thin technician from Beth Israel whose political determination seems to see her through situations in which the



hostility would intimidate someone less resolute. She argued that the workers needed \$140 and not a penny less and that it should be made clear that failure to obtain it would mean a strike. The toughness of her exposition made the union's position seem wishy-washy. The members—remember, these are the inexperienced members—gave her a genuinely enthusiastic response. A staff member rose to say that Melody's proposal had been voted down in her own unit at Beth Israel. Other people began to rise, shouting and waving their arms. Davis screamed into the microphone: "This isn't a display of discipline or unity, it's a disgrace. This union is going to be democratic and no one is going to destroy it by shouting everyone down." So he shouted everyone down.

He seemed to see that he needed help from the ranks, and introduced Hilda Joquin, a Bermuda-born black woman from the Beth Israel kitchen who went on strike with the union when it began and has been loyal to it ever since. She spoke for about ten minutes. These excerpts do little justice to her fiery spirit, eloquence, and passion.

Listen. I been in this union since 1959. A lot of them was just crawlin' around. They don't know what the hospitals was, they don't know what the union was, is. They sittin' around in big jobs gettin' more money than I am and I've been around for twenty years. It took me eighteen years to get \$100. You don't know nothin' about labor. It took the rank and file, the unskilled, to bring them around. We respect everyone's opinion but we don't like these young whippersnappers comin' around here. Who are they? (Chorus: Workers.) They never sat across from those bosses, they don't know nothin'. These are our leaders. What other union has built up from nothin' to be 40,000 members?

Everything she said was true, and the members knew it. There were more shrieks and shouts. Then Davis spoke again, in his customary Russian-Brooklyn oratory, petulant and powerful at the same time. The speech itself captures both his self-serving quality

and the logic behind it better than a paraphrase could explain.

I've put my life into this union. I won't permit company stooges, liars, spies, this display by a small, insignificant group to show we're divided. [Growing more passionate.] When people had to go to jail, I was there, where were they? I was there in Charleston, I stand to go again on July 1. [Hospital strikes are illegal, though that never bothered anyone.] No sonuvabitch is going to accuse me of being soft on management. I'd never betray the trust these members place in me. This is the finest union God ever created—it was created by all of us. We're powerful but if we don't know how to use our power we'll be destroyed. We must love each other, defend each other, be concerned with each other.

The bosses would enjoy you trying to destroy the leadership. If you don't want me I'll get out, but don't destroy the union. When we make the decision to strike we'll strike goddamn hard but we'll make goddamn sure it's good for our members. Not because some people would like to strike for the summer. We're proposing to keep management on pins and needles, to decide about each hospital on July 1. If they take us on, it'll be the last time. This country spends billions to kill; we just want millions to live. We're never going to go down on our knees again.

The passage of the resolution was something of an anticlimax.

The next mass meeting posed a similar problem although it was confined to delegates. Its official business was also delicate. The leaders and the committee had decided that the best way to put pressure on the hospitals was to arrange for a series of demonstrations before the contract expired. The contract expired at midnight on a Tuesday. The preceding Friday, the delegates at each hospital were to go en masse to the hospital administrators and demand that they return to the bargaining table. On Monday, all the workers were to stage a one-hour, noontime walk out. The problem was to prepare the members to do exactly what they were supposed to do. That

is, they had to be willing both to walk out *and* to go back to work: militant and angry but not too militant or angry.

Both maneuvers were executed with extraordinary skill and effectiveness. In many places they were directed entirely by the workers. They were as precise and as exciting a demonstration of the disciplined use of political power as any demonstrations I have ever seen. Anomie was overcome, collective power was very much in the air. The demonstrations carried an unmistakable message that hospital workers would no longer be pushed around. The members' ability to convey that message rested wholly on the union.

The meeting at which these tactics were to be described was stormy. The Rank and File Committee, the "Trot" organization, was distributing a leaflet outside asserting that Davis was afraid to face the bosses. He was upset, seemed upset, or acted upset in order to handle the situation:

This is the most serious business that we ever have to deal with: how we are going to manage to live for the next two years. Some people think it's the opportunity for acts of irresponsibility, acts of division when we need unity, acts of cowardice when we need courage, acts of lies when we need the truth. My whole life has been devoted to the struggle of working people. Now I find that I don't want to fight.

For them to make this accusation at this time... I represent you. I have to have support and unity. Anybody that sticks a knife in my back is sticking it in yours.

Frankly, it would be no great loss if I fell by the wayside, but let it be after the negotiations and not before. This is no time to divide and destroy, because of some youngsters that are sick mentally, sick physically. Our members are getting *sick* of it. No union in the country elects a negotiating committee from the rank and file. They are authorized and no one else to decide to bring the contract before the members of our union. What they say is *law* to myself and everybody else.

There will be no division because we are facing a crucial time. We will not permit anyone to create the impression outside that

this union is weak, divided. We can't afford it because we're too damn strong and united.

Again, in a Davis performance the concrete necessity of unity and leadership is inseparable from its self-serving quality; the rational calculation from the overreactive, sectarian fear; the real from the histrionic; the truth from the falsehoods.

The rest of the meeting was filled with parliamentary manipulation. Staff members, acting out a new tactic previously decided on, paraded to the microphone to help channel the members' thoughts in the direction the leadership needed. But Davis had already succeeded in making the Trotskyist faction appear to be a deadly enemy. His animosity to them had been transferred to the members. Thus when Melody bravely rose to the microphone she was shouted down even before she began to speak. Loud boos erupted and in the chaos Davis stepped grandly to the microphone: "No. Quiet. Let's be democratic. Let's listen to the sister. In this union everyone's going to have the chance to speak." Defense of the right to dissent never rested in more disingenuous hands. Nonetheless, that was the state of the union as the July 1 deadline drew near.

Twice during the few days before the contract expired management came back into the talks with offers: once for a 6 percent increase in each year of a three-year contract, once for an 8 percent, two-year arrangement. Both times Davis threw them out. Once he threw a microphone at the chief hospital negotiator. Another time he reached new heights—or depths—of earthiness: "You know what you can do with your forty-two demands? Shove one up each of you so there'll be fair and equal distribution. And we have a committee here that's ready to help." Both displays were carefully calculated and of excellent theatrical value. They were designed to bring the talks to an unceremonious close while there was still time for them to be reopened. They permitted both sides to greet the waiting reporters with doleful prophecies meant to intensify the political struggle. "It will be a miracle if a strike can be avoided" was the line of both sides

On Tuesday evening the delegates assembled at the New Yorker Hotel to begin the long wait to a countdown. The negotiators came over from the Roosevelt to open the meeting. Davis urged discipline, preparation for midnight action. Melody got up to speak and chaos erupted. Davis returned to the negotiations. A group of Young Lords made an unusual mass appearance distributing copies of their paper stating their case against 1199 and listing their demands. They tried to

argue that money gains unaccompanied by long-range plans for upgrading the workers did not offer genuine security in an inflationary period; that hospitals affect their surrounding communities as much in their role of land buyers as in their role as providers of medical services; and that workers needed a stronger role in running the union.

No one would, or could, listen. The Lords got caught up in the general disruption provoked by Melody. Staff members, exhausted, all their energies

directed toward protecting the unity they believed the union would need in the hours ahead, became enraged. Screaming matches began. Fistfights were started and barely stopped. By that time all the concentration of the members present was focused on the single issue with which America, and the structure of labor, makes them deal: money. By that time they were totally dependent on the union. It was the only instrument that existed through which they could get not just what they'd been told they needed but what they needed in fact. The vision of the Lords seemed too general and, therefore, irrelevant. The Lords were talking what seemed like rhetoric. The members needed the machinery, the system, the pre-established processes through which gains, however small, could be realized. The Lords were thrown out.

In the New Yorker Hotel people sat playing cards, eating and drinking, sharing their food and drink. Some made tactical plans for shutting down their buildings. A middle-aged white member from Albert Einstein Hospital tried to revive memories of another time, leading the crowd in a lusty version of "We're gonna roll the union on." It fell flat. He was the only one who knew the words. Some of the younger members and staff clustered in a stair well to sing black music. Older people sang "We Shall Overcome." The spirit was good.

The midnight deadline came and went. Leaders and troops, stationed in different hotels, were in sporadic telephone contact. They kept telling the members to wait. At 5 AM union and management were still in separate rooms. A staff member was sent over, a tall, proud black man once described to me as a leading theoretical Marxist in another time. He was gentle, but capable of great anger. He said the talks were "hopelessly deadlocked"; the battle was on. Members from the hospitals where the contract had actually expired should go to the hospitals and set up picket lines. The day shift should be kept from entering. But the members should first check in at the Roosevelt for last minute news before their strike action actually began. The delegates, exhausted from the



nearly twelve hours of waiting at the New Yorker, cheered at the news of a strike. They gathered themselves together and set out for the long treks back to their hospitals in Brooklyn, Flushing, Queens.

At 5:25 AM a settlement was reached. As workers called in from the faraway posts they had reached through the early morning vagaries of the New York subway and bus systems, they were given the news: it's over, come on back. What happened? One view among the staff (whose information, like mine, was for the most part incomplete) was that the strike threat had had to become more real before management would come to heel. According to this theory, in spite of the certainty within the union that we would in fact strike, the bureaucrats doubted that the union would carry out the threat.

The official view, expressed privately later, was that the settlement was "our package." "We virtually dictated the terms of the settlement," one official commented to me. Others believed that the terms of the settlement were dictated by Rockefeller. Whatever the case, the circumstances made pawns of the exhausted members, who had to drag themselves back to their hospitals and then return to the city at dawn. If a deal could be made at 5:25 AM, why could it not have been made at 4:55 before the trek began? More important, if a deal were going to be made anyway, why could it not have been made days or weeks before, leaving union and management with free time before the deadline to discuss substantial issues other than money?

Between 5 AM when the strike was ordered and 5:25 when it was called off, Davis had what I believe was his only private conference with McDonnell, the mediator. My guess (and it is only that) is that Davis must have clearly stated the union's rock-bottom demands: a \$130 minimum, a dental insurance plan, Martin Luther King's birthday as a holiday, and a few others. McDonnell probably decided that these were reasonable, and then urged the hospitals to accept them. The hospitals may then have interpreted McDonnell's recommendation as a veiled promise of reimbursement from Rockefeller. So far as I know, the negotiating committee was not

consulted about the reduction of the minimum demands.

"Whose" settlement it was is less important than the fact that no one at the top of either pyramid knew all the moves of the game. Neither side fully understood the political calculations the other was making. The economic questions were not openly faced. No one ever knew what the available resources either were or ought to have been. Throughout the negotiations shrewd guesses were made but they were only guesses. It seemed to me that nothing substantial—nothing, that is, beyond money, nothing that would open up new options—could come out of this pudding of concealment, competition, lies, and personal and political egotism. The negotiations were capable of producing only a once-over-lightly amelioration. Furthermore, the effect of such a process on the internal workings of an organization which ought to be democratic is devastating. It creates the demand for strong leadership—for hierarchical machinery shaped like 1199's—and will succeed only in so far as that demand is supplied.

The grand finale to the settlement, the triumphal return of the leaders to the reassembled body of delegates, unfolded like a pageant. Davis strolled up to the podium, the hero who is also a man of the people, stopping along the way for hugs and kisses. He made a solemn, rambling speech about good feeling on the bargaining committee, then introduced Doris Turner, "our wonderful executive vice-president."

... the person who personifies hospital workers more than anyone, herself a hospital worker. You can see yourselves in her more than in me for she is one of you in every way, she'll be with you for many more years than I will. It's wonderful to have leadership coming from the ranks because that's the leadership in the long run that counts. I don't intend to retire tomorrow but it's our responsibility to get new leadership, and you should show them your loyalty and appreciation as she does for you every day.

It's a great distinction for her to bring you word of this contract,

the best contract in the country for any group of workers anywhere—the best contract for any group of workers anywhere. [Applause. Remember: the workers don't know what it is yet.] She has a distinction because this will go down in history as the \$100 did two years ago. This is a new milestone. There'll be millions of workers, not only you, who won't become rich or wealthy but who'll take a step forward. Many workers will look to you for your intelligence, your understanding, your good will, your building a fine union.

Thus were the union's old positions reiterated—this is how you are to think about your union, your lives, America—and thus was the union's position on the new contract defined.

Doris Turner read the terms of the settlement, for which there was no great immediate enthusiasm. People were tired (it was 8 AM), the terms were complex, not easily understood. It was too fast, too soon. The union's propaganda machinery had not yet had time to do its work, to define the victory, express the jubilation. Then Doris Turner made a personal speech of her own, ending with a tribute to Davis which was both accurate and revealing.

I want to tell you about our president, and think the delegates will agree, about our president and the kind of job he does for us. On behalf of hospital workers I don't think there's anything in the world he couldn't do. In these terrible and lengthy negotiations, with all the discomforts and all the abuse and mistreatment that we all received, he took the brunt of it. He stood up like the president of 1199 should in my opinion, he answered for us, he spoke for us, he fought for us, and he won for us. We are all, or at least we should all, be very proud of our president and if he does nothing else in the next two years all he has to do in my opinion is come around at negotiation time and bring us home these kinds of settlements.

"He answered for us, he spoke for us, he fought for us, and he won for us." That is the good and bad truth about 1199.

III

1199's contract with the hospitals was not a sellout as the opposition within the union charged. Whether it was "the best contract in the country for any group of workers anywhere" only a

labor statistician could say. But for the group of workers it involved, and given the history of the industry from which it came, the contract was, as we said in the magazine in enormous type, a "TERRIFIC VICTORY."

Nonetheless, the question remains what it was in the beginning. Is the union making a substantial contribution to change? The leadership's con-

viction that it rests chiefly on a trickle-down theory of wage gains. They believe that gains won in the New York hospitals will influence the wage structure of other industries employing unskilled, non-white laborers. But this measure, even if correct, is insufficient. It does no good for wages to rise if inflation makes the increments useless, if the skies are so black it is dangerous to breathe, if housing deteriorates and the subways on which the workers ride to work collide, if one son of a worker dies in Vietnam and another of an overdose in Harlem. It does no good to hitch your wagon to a star that is burning itself out.

The answer is not simply, therefore, that the workers should take to the streets. Members of 1199 are not like middle-class radicals who have far greater freedom and other resources stuffed into innumerable hidden crevices of their lives. The workers have lives to lead which they do not have the mobility to change. They have families to sustain. In getting money to support themselves they have made real progress. The problem of evaluation is therefore difficult. Apart from a few propagandists (who fall into every political camp) no one is certain how change will come. No one knows exactly how an institution committed to change should behave. No one can be certain what is real and important or what is "part of the problem." With this uncertainty judgments about effectiveness and relevance should be made with some humility.

One criterion is clear. It makes no difference whether 1199's Executive Council passes resolutions condemning repression, Julius Hoffman, the use of the National Guard in the postal strike, or the murdering of children at Kent State. It makes relatively little difference even that the union gives money for the legal defense of the Panthers. These flourishes so little affect political reality that it is a wonder that people bother to do them at all. The union does them for the reason countless other organizations do: because people feel less trapped if they have devised some vehicle, however inadequate, to express their moral outrage.

But not only do these pronounce-



ments and contributions fail to affect political reality, they are done in a way that cannot serve even to educate the union's members. To the members they appear as resolutions composed in a board room, designed to be echoed. They are occasional statements; short paragraphs in the magazine that convey an attitude without illuminating causes. They float down out of nowhere; they are not connected with any sustained effort of communication or education on the part of the staff.

It does not tell us much, therefore, to leaf through the annals of 1199 and conclude that its stands are progressive, its record honorable. That alone does not make it part of the solution. At the same time, however, conventional radical critiques of the union—including ones which I myself shared and argued about with people when I was there—also seem to me faulty. An example: On the issue of the war, I—and other radicals—condemned the union for failing to make the most of an opportunity presented by the Kent-Cambodia spring to solidify an alliance with New York's striking students into a permanent labor-student coalition. We saw that such a coalition would be difficult because of the different histories, different styles, different needs, and mutual prejudices of the members of each group—differences in kinds of *apparent* radicalism—and we thought that to overcome the differences by concerted effort and mutual understanding would be a genuine breakthrough, the keystone of an alliance which transcended class and would be in fact . . . what? Make the revolution.

I now think I was mistaken in my criticism that the union leaders were too pressed or too indifferent to develop the alliance when matters became tense (as they did), that I was led by my own susceptibility to rhetoric into ignoring the fact that the student uprising was tame and ephemeral, that it produced no lasting organization with which the leaders on the union side could come to terms. The hard fact is that a year later the union still exists, following its own path toward incremental gains for the workers, and that the students, as students, are hardly in sight.

Much the same point could be made about another tender spot for radicals,



the union's difficulties with the Young Lords. It is true that the union resists, persecutes, and tries to destroy the power of its members who are Lords in a relentless, narrow-minded, and overreactive way. While I was there, for instance, the union refused to support a group of Lords and others from the Gouverneur Health Clinic of Beth Israel Hospital, who, organized as the Health Revolutionary Unity Movement (H-RUM), had staged a demonstration inside the hospital and been fired. 1199 was refusing to petition for their reinstatement. H-RUM members found a little noticed clause in the 1199 constitution which entitled them to present their case against the Executive Council's decision to an appeals board made up of union members. The result was an arduous and prolonged semi-trial worthy of the elders of Salem.

I think I felt most bitter when a union vice-president, who denounced the illegality of the H-RUM demonstration, arguing that "you can't do that" in the hospitals, later came up to me glowing with some remembered spirit of his own radical days. He pointed to a member of the appeals board (who has since joined the staff) and said, with amazing unself-consciousness, "See that guy? We used to break windows together on the picket lines in the Thirties."

Nevertheless, whatever the hypocrisy of the union's language, its disagreeable tactics, and its unconscionable zealotry, its incompatibility with the Lords makes sense. There is no way, given the structure of the union's relations with the hospitals, the omnipresence of the contract which trades off discipline for money to pay a carefully defined number of workers doing specific jobs; that the union could share the Lords' vision of a revolution based in the community. That is simply not a way in which this union, or any other union, can contribute to change in America.

What this suggests is that, in a peculiar way, Samuel Gompers was right. Unions are not political organizations, cannot be, and were in fact shaped by developing corporate America precisely *not* to be. This is why there has continued to be such a gap between the "left" in general and the "labor left": why Walter Reuther, for

all his efforts, was never instrumental in the larger left political movement. Because of their many other functions, because of the limitations of their independence, because of their need for stability (which implies a relation to electoral politics), labor unions can have only a marginal effect on conventionally defined left political issues.

Where they could have an effect, it seems to me, is on the fundamental texture of the industrial system itself. There will probably always be work, and for the foreseeable future at least there are bound to be workers. The job of a radical union should be to reduce the gulf between labor and the managers, between the owning class and the workers. It should not substitute another more genial or benign layer of management between the workers and the power that controls them.

To do this the hospital workers' union would first have to discover (indeed, admit: the cat is already out of the bag) the truth about the organization of medicine in America, the economics of hospitals, the workings of medical administration. Second, it would require a fundamental look at the whole notion of skills and training in this society, since in the hospitals it is the rigid classification of skills and jobs which plays a key role in keeping the workers down. If skills could be demystified and training programs initiated which were realistic (instead of, as at present, immensely costly because they help to reinforce the divisions in the system they are trying to reform), then, finally, there would be a realistic basis on which to begin talking about sharing power, about giving the workers the right, the technical as well as moral capacity, to control their lives and futures. If this were possible collective bargaining, as it functioned in this case, for example, would be a dead process.

The question of what workers would do with their power is the question that links the possibility of larger political change with the importance of industry-based action. But radicalism must begin at home, and the great failure of the 1199 leadership is that it has not told the truth to the workers about the oppression in their working lives or about the union itself. This failure makes the union finally a

supporter and not an antagonist of the status quo.

A friend of mine who is close to the union once commented, "There is criticism in the name of an abstraction and criticism which tries to make things better." I kept hearing her words as I thought about this article: about not writing it, and, having written it, about not publishing it. It seems unrealistic to criticize an institution that works when the options are unclear or difficult. In any event it is nearly impossible to have an effect. To criticize from the inside is structurally impossible; to criticize from the outside is to be regarded as a fink. In either case, why cause trouble for decent people with decent goals? I was free to leave the union after a short time and move to the country. I was free to stop trying to effect an institution which couldn't be changed, to stop working on behalf of goals I couldn't persuade myself were good enough and in an atmosphere of intimidation I disliked in practice and opposed on principle.

I exercised the privilege of my class. But the members of 1199 can't move to Vermont. I feel glad my friends are there on 43rd Street, making things a little better every day, trying to figure out ways to beat the bosses next time round. I think that most people who work at 1199 would agree that much that I've written is true though they will be angry at me for having said it in public. The optimists think that what is wrong with 1199 is accidental, a side effect of sudden expansion which consumes energy. I think that the problems are structural and inexorable, that they result not from human failings but from the inevitable way a trade union must function in capitalist America.

If a dropout can ask anything of the people who are continuing to dedicate their lives to that institution, it is that they stop trying to persuade themselves and others that what they are doing is good enough, and that they think with more complexity about what changes would make life livable instead of barely worth the struggle, and begin to put them into practice. If I knew whether that were asking too much, I would know the answer to the riddle of 1199. But the fact is, I am still not sure. □