

# Unionization in America

John Zerzan

1976

The struggle for unionization in the 1930s has always been shrouded in myth and revered by both the labor movement and the Left as a period of labor militancy. A closer look at the developments shows a much different picture than was generally thought to be the case and exposes what the real role of the unions was.

Trade unions in the 1920's were generally in a weak and worsening position. While union membership constituted 19.4% of non-agricultural workers in 1920, only 10.2% were organized by 1930. The employee representation plans, or company unions, of "welfare capitalism" were being instituted as substitutes for unionism, in an effort at stabilized, peaceful industrial relations.

## Far-sighted Labor Organizers and Businessmen

There were some, however, who even before the Crash realized that independent unions were essential for effective labor-management cooperation. In 1925, for example, Arthur Nash of the Golden Rule Clothing Company invited Sidney Hillman's Amalgamated Clothing Workers to organize his employees. Mr. Nash explained it in this way: "I had a job that I could not do, and I just passed the buck to Mr. Hillman." Gerard P. Swope, president of General Electric, tried as early as

1926 to persuade the AFL to organize a nation-wide union of electrical workers on an industrial basis. Swope believed that having an industrial union might well mean "the difference between an organization with which we could work on a business-like basis and one that would be a source of endless difficulties." In 1928 George Mead wrote *Why I Unionized My Plant*, describing in glowing terms his bringing the papermakers' union to his Wisconsin employees. Also in 1928, Secretary of Labor Davis asked that year's AFL convention to eliminate jurisdictional squabbling and get on with the kind of mass organizing that business desired. Another example of the pacifying, stabilizing possibilities of unionization followed the spontaneous strike movement of Southern textile workers in 1929. Commenting on AFL efforts to organize the unionless and uncontrolled mill workers, the *Chicago Tribune* in early 1930 expressed its support: "The effort of the Federation to organize the mill workers of the South deserves the endorsement of far-seeing businessmen throughout the country."



UAW workers engage in a sit-down strike against GM in Flint, Michigan, 1937

But with the onset of the Depression, the weakness of the A.F. of L. and its craft union approach became even more obvious. With the trend toward fewer skilled workers, the Federation's attempts to sell itself to industry as a frankly peace-keeping institution were increasingly out of touch with its capabilities. The Crash, moreover, did not awaken the craft union leaders to a new awareness of the changing industrial order. Noted businessman Edward Louis Sullivan classified the AFL as simply "reactionary."

In the early 1930s, some labor leaders became involved with a group of far-sighted businessmen who saw the need for mass unionization. John L. Lewis and Sidney Hillman, destined to play major roles in the formulation of the National Recovery Act of 1933 and the formation of the CIO, came to realize by 1932 that government and business might be enlisted in the cause of industrial unionism. Gerard Swope, the above-mentioned president of GE, unveiled his Swope Plan in 1931 with the help of employers like Chamber of Commerce president Henry I. Harriman. Self-government in industry, via extended trade associations which would operate outside anti-trust laws, was the basis of the plan. An essential facet was to be the unionization of the basic industries, with unions possessing the same kind of disciplinary power over the workers as the trade associations would exercise over individual firms.

In their enthusiasm for a controlled, rationalized corporate system, these labor and business leaders were as one. "Lewis and Hillman, in the end, differed little from Gerard Swope and Henry I Harriman," in the words of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. President Hoover labeled these plans "sheer fascism." By 1932, in fact, the government stood committed to labor's right to organize. Pre-dating the NRA by a year, the Norris-LaGuardia Act not only outlawed the "yellow-dog" contract and certain kinds of injunctions but fully sanctioned the right to collective bargaining.

Section 7a of the NRA became the focus of attention after its enactment in June, 1933, however, and the reason seems two-fold. 7a's guarantee of labor's right to collective bargaining had the weight of a strong resurgence of labor unrest in 1933, as compared to the relative quiescence of 1932. Fully 812,000 workers struck in 1933, whereas only 243,000 had struck in 1932:

The second reason for the utilization of Section 7a was that it was part of a whole stabilization program, which embodied the Swope Plan-type thinking on the need for a near-cartelization of business and the curtailment of much competition. Swope, not surprisingly, was one of the NRA's main architects—along with John L. Lewis.

With the NRA, the full integration of labor into the business system came a step closer to fruition. In the context of a continuing depression and increasing worker hostility, the need for industrial unionism became more and more apparent to government leaders. Donald Richberg, an author of both Norris-LaGuardia and NRA, decried craft unionism's failure to organize more than a small minority, and saw industrial unions as the key to industrial stability. As labor writer Benjamin Stolberg put it, in his *A Government in Search of a Labor Movement*, "The old-fashioned craft leader is through, for he is helpless to express the increasing restlessness of American labor." And Stolberg knew that President Roosevelt saw the need for unions, in order to safely contain that restlessness: "NRA was wholly an administrative measure...It shows that Mr. Roosevelt believes that what American industry needs desperately is the recognition and extension of the trade union movement."

Concerning FDR, there is ample evidence that Stolberg is correct and that Roosevelt consistently held to a basic belief in collective bargaining. As Assistant Secretary of the Navy, he sat on the Executive Board of the National Civic Federation, that early and important organization of heads of business and labor formed to promote amity through contracts and close communications. As Governor of New York, Roosevelt had been impressed by Swope's arguments and "had talked to John Sullivan of the State Federation of Labor in New York about the possibility of industrial unions being organized in plants like General Electric," according to Francis Perkins.

Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor, recounted the President's advice to a group of businessmen:

"You don't need to be afraid about unions ... You shouldn't be afraid to have them organize in your factory. They don't want to run the business. You will probably get a lot better production and a lot more peace and happiness if you have a good union organization and a good contract."

It was not surprising that Roosevelt's choice to head the NRA, Gen. Hugh Johnson, "appreciates that industry cannot function without organized labor," in the judgment of Stolberg. Nor is the opinion of *Fortune*, that most prestigious of big business periodicals, surprising as regards the NRA as a vehicle for unionization. In December

1933, *Fortune* implied disapproval of the Ford Motor Company as being “ruled primarily by fear,” while noting that firms unionized under NRA’s 7a have the joint strength of both NRA and union officials to limit strikes. The phony, staged strike became a safer bet at this time, owing to the NRA presence. In August 1933 for example, the I LGWU staged a strike of New York dressmakers, carefully arranged by union and NRA officials to last exactly four days and bring the unorganized dressmakers into the union and under an NRA code.

Where the AFL did not attempt stage-managed strikes, it worked to defeat legitimate walk-outs. Louis Adamic concluded that “The Federation as a whole... sabotaged or suppressed all important rank-and-file or spontaneous movements in 1933 and 1934, especially those in steel and rubber. The one exception was the Bridges movement on the coast.” It is far from clear, however, that even one exception occurred.

## The Longshoremen

Under the leadership of Harry Bridges, the organizing of West Coast longshoremen had culminated in the famous San Francisco general strike of July 1934. Charles Larrowe, the maritime labor historian, concludes that the only “benefit” obtained by the workers has been their being brought under union contract: “The terms under which the prolonged, violent strike was settled were similar, to be sure, to some of the proposals for settlement made before the strike began. Looked at in this perspective it might seem that the strike served no purpose. But looked at in the larger context of collective bargaining, the strike was both unavoidable and necessary.”

The settlement of the 1934 strike marked the beginning of a change in consciousness for San Francisco employers; though waterfront strife continued sporadically until 1937, the employers had begun to see that all that union officialdom really wanted was the closed shop, with the dues and power over the membership it entails. And for this, union discipline could then be put to the service of guaranteeing an absence of trouble from the longshoremen. Roosevelt, as indicated above, learned this lesson rather earlier; his Secretary of Labor, noting the lack of White House alarm over the SF general strike, commented on the power of union officials over union members: “Sensible labor leaders advised the men to get back to work, that this was no time for an unconsidered sympathetic strike.”

*Fortune* viewed Bridges as one of the “gifted, temperamental, power-wielding leaders of American maritime labor without whose compliance no decrees of the Maritime Commission are likely to keep the peace.” The pro-Bridges article praised him and other labor leaders for their introduction of stable, regularized labor relations in shipping and other industries.

San Francisco employers had come, by 1937, to fully appreciate the necessity of unionization as the key to a dependable work force. Irving Bernstein, in his authoritative history of Depression labor, tells us that in 1937 “the town’s leading businessmen formed the Committee of Forty-Three hoping to persuade the unions to join in a program to stabilize labor relations. The labor people declined.” The union chiefs declined, it should be added, because they feared membership reaction to institutionalized labor-management collusion of this kind. Bernstein continues: “But the Committee served a purpose—to commit San Francisco’s employers to collective bargaining. And it was those with experience with Bridges and the ILWU, notably the two leading owners of steamship lines, Roger Lapham and Almon Roth, who led the way, forming the SF Employers Council which had as its purpose “the recognition and exercise of the right of the employers to bargain collectively.”

Given the effective control over workers that only unions can manage, it was not at all out of place that San Francisco employers should have striven for collective bargaining, nor that the promotion and coordination of contracts quickly spread up and down the Pacific Coast.

Meanwhile 1934 and 1935 saw a deepening trend toward labor militancy and violence. The bloody Electric Auto-Lite strike in Toledo and the street warfare of the striking Minneapolis truck drivers were among the most spectacular of 1934, a year in which 40 strikers were killed. In less than eighteen months, between the summer of 1933 and the winter of 1934, troops were called out in sixteen states. The important point is that the AFL could not control this activism; though it might stall and sell out the workers, it could not provide the kind of organization that could enroll all of a firm’s workers into a single, industry-wide union and bring peace under collective bargaining. Workers resisted the conservative craft form of organization and the constant jurisdictional bickering that accompanied

it and began to experiment with new organizational forms. For example, union locals in Hudson and Oldsmobile plants seceded from the A.F. of L. in August 1934, to elect representatives from their own ranks and negotiate democratically. *The Wall Street Journal* discussed speculation as to the radicalism of the independents for several days, in articles such as “More on the Secession,” and “Disaffection Spreads.” Labor partisan Art Preis provides some revealing figures: “By 1935, the membership of the AFL federal auto locals had dwindled from 100,000 to 20,000. When the Wolman Board of the NRA took a poll in 1935 to determine ‘proportional representation’ in a number of plants in Michigan, of the 163,150 votes cast, 88.7% were for unaffiliated representatives; 8.6% for leaders of AFL federal locals.”

If the NRA and its Section 7a was intended to fix labor “into a semi-public unionism whose organization was part of a government plan,” in Stolberg’s words, Washington in 1935 yet hoped to make good on the 1933 beginning. From the point of view of industrial peace, the impetus, as we have seen, was certainly stronger by 1935, when the Wagner bill was being considered. Supporters of the measure, like Lloyd Garrison and Harry Millis, put forth the “safety measure” theory, arguing the importance of assisting unionism and portraying the state as friend of the worker, in order to combat worker radicalism. Leon Keyserling, legislative assistant to Senator Wagner, feared an uncontrolled labor movement, and saw a goal of government-sponsored labor relations which could reduce conflict and induce labor and business to work together in concert with government.

## **Government Guarantees Unionism**

The pressing need for a government guarantee to unionism was readily appreciated and the Wagner bill breezed through the Senate in May by a 62 to 11 margin. Nonetheless, all of the standard accounts continue to assert business’ steadfast opposition to the bill in spite of the evidence. The eminent business historian Thomas Cochran, for example, re-affirms the old thesis, only to admit that “the struggle in Congress appears very mild ...All of this is hard to explain.”

By this time, of course, leading elements of business and government saw collective bargaining as imperative for the steadying of the industrial order. Secretary Perkins is worth quoting at some length:

“It may be surprising to some people to realize that men looked upon as the conservative branch of the Roosevelt administration were cooperative in bringing about a new, more modern and more reasonable attitude on the part of employers toward collective bargaining agreements. Averell Harriman of the Union Pacific Railroad, Carl Gray of the same railroad, Daniel Willard of the Baltimore and Ohio, Walter Teagle of the Standard Oil Company, Thomas Lamont of J. P. Morgan & Company, Myron Taylor of U. S. Steel, Gerard Swope of General Electric, and Robert Armory, a textile manufacturer, were among those whom I asked for help from time to time in difficult situations, where the problem was to start collective bargaining negotiations. Roosevelt knew that these people had helped and was always very grateful to them.”

Nor was this “more reasonable attitude” merely a privately expressed one. Of many instances which could be cited, is the speech of Henry Heimann, head of the National Association of Credit Men (*Wall Street Journal*, August 21, 1934), which called for the abandonment of the company union idea and the control of labor in strong, national bodies. By the time of the 1935 AFL Convention, the stage was set: workers in auto, rubber, radio, textiles, and steel were furious over the inaction, bad faith, and collusion with management that they saw in the AFL. The vast majority of General Motors workers, for example, regarded continued membership in an AFL auto local as proof of being a paid agent of GM, according to Wyndham Mortimer. Craft-style unionism stood in dire need of replacement by newer forms if unions were to contain the nation’s workers. John L. Lewis, the conservative and ruthless head of the United Mine Workers, was to lead the move toward industrial unionism. A Republican up to and during the 1932 presidential campaign, he ruled the often resistant miners by dictatorial methods. The servility and corruption of the union begat constant revolts from the ranks against Lewis. A miner interviewed by Studs Terkel testified to this state of affairs when he spoke of a UMW field representative being tarred and feathered “for tryin’ to edge in with management,” and declared that the “chairman of the local was thick with the superintendent of

the mine.” In October, 1933, *Fortune* related the miners’ hatred of Lewis during the 1920s and the “Lewis Must Go” campaign of 1932. Generally quite pro-Lewis, “his repressive tactics in the union” were mentioned, and the article concluded with the judgment that the prospect of organizing 30,000,000 workers did not frighten Lewis—nor, by very strong implication, should it frighten business. With Lewis’ famous—and no doubt calculated—punch to the jaw of Bill Hutcheson, boss of the Carpenters Union and a major craft unionism spokesman, a split from the AFL was signaled. The blow, at the 1935 AFL Convention, enabled Lewis to represent himself to the bitter and distrustful industrial workers as a new kind of leader. “By attacking Hutcheson, he was attacking the trade unionism these workers so bitterly hated... Hutcheson symbolized to millions of frustrated workers that craft-unionism policy that had defeated their spontaneous organizations,” in the words of Saul Alinsky.

## **The CIO is Born**

Within a month of the October convention, the Committee for Industrial Organization was formed by Lewis and a few others in the Federation who headed industrial-type unions. By early 1937, locals of those unions affiliated with the new CIO were expelled from all city and state AFL councils, making the break final and official.

The CIO began with a feudal structure in which all officers were appointed by Lewis, giving it an important advantage over its AFL predecessors. Whereas the AFL officials needed decades to emasculate the fairly autonomous city and state central councils and establish centralized national power, the CIO chiefs established complete control over collective bargaining and strike sanction almost from the outset. Leaders of both the AFL and CIO were “agreed on the necessity for circumscribing the increasing militancy in the basic industries... No one in the AFL or in the CIO was under any illusions that Lewis, Murray, Hillman, and Dubinsky were out to build a radically new kind of movement,” as Sidney Lens put it.

The presence of Communists and other leftists within the CIO does not alter the picture, and not a few business leaders understood the anti-radical character of the new organization. For example, “when the CIO was organized and the left-led United Electrical Workers began to organize GE, Gerard Swope rejoiced,” noted Ronald Radosh. Swope, the NRA architect, informed one of his GE vice-presidents that “if you can’t get along with these fellows and settle matters, there’s something wrong with you.” The UEW was praised by Swope as “well-led, the discipline good.” Radosh, in fact, concludes that “it was the more politically radical unions that led the integration of labor into the corporate structure.”

## **Independent Resistance**

Worker action continued to develop, however, in the relative absence of unions throughout 1935 and 1936. New forms of struggle and organization were adopted which deeply frightened business, government, and union superiors alike. Employee-run independent unions sprang up, often employing radical tactics which challenged the traditional rights of management to define the nature of the job. The “skippy,” for instance, was a very effective form of defiance that was spontaneously adopted by the man on the assembly line. Workers might quietly agree to skip every fifth fender or leave untightened every sixth bolt to protest intolerable job conditions. Rapidly the line would come to a halt in complete confusion, with enraged but helpless foremen at a loss to single out the participants. The most threatening device and the one to become very widely utilized was, of course, the sit-down strike. Like the skippy it more often than not was employed by the “unorganized”; in fact, the sit-down reflects worker suspicion of union structure and control. As Louis Adamic put it so well:

“Most workers distrust—if not consciously, then unconsciously—union officials and strike leaders and committees, even when they have elected them themselves... The beauty of the sit-down or stay-in is that there are no leaders or officials to distrust. There can be no sell-out. Such standard procedure as strike sanction is hopelessly obsolete when workers drop their tools, stop their machines, and sit down beside them. The initiative, conduct, and control come directly from the men involved.”

The sit-down seems to have first become an established tactic in the rubber factories of Akron. Between 1933 and 1936 it became a tradition in Akron, developed largely because the union had failed to resist the speed-up. The speed-up appears to have been the chief single cause of discontent throughout mass production. A 1934 study of the auto industry revealed that the grievance “mentioned most frequently... and uppermost in the minds of those who testified is the speedup.” Tactics like the sit-down were taken up when workers felt they had to challenge the employer’s absolute right to control the work process, in the absence of union interest in questioning management prerogatives. The challenge to the speed-up came not only out of the sheer fatigue felt over the absolute rate of production, then, but also because the production worker was not free to set the pace of his work and to determine the manner in which it was to be performed. In the factories was joined the battle over who was to control the worker’s life on the job: This was the real issue: as Mary Vorse put it, “the auto workers’ discontent came in about equal parts from the speed-up and the absolute autocracy of the industry.”

The struggle was waged not only by the auto workers, of course, but it was GM workers who waged one of the most important fights. And the role of the union as conservator of the existing relationships, rather than as challenger of them, may be clearly seen in the context of the great GM sit-down strike.

Actually the sit-down movement that was beginning to spread rapidly by late 1936 was anything but a part of CIO tactics. It “sprang spontaneously from an angered mass of workers. All American labor leaders would have been shocked, scared and instinctively opposed to the initiation or approval of this disorderly revolutionary upheaval,” according to Saul Alinsky.

The 44-day GM sit-down began on December 28, 1936, when some 7,000 at Cleveland’s Fisher Body plant struck. Two days later workers in Fisher Body No. 2 in Flint sat down and the spontaneous movement quickly spread throughout the GM system, bringing it to a standstill.

The former Harvard economist J. Raymond Walsh stated flatly that the CIO had certainly not called the strike: “The CIO high command... tried in vain to prevent the strike.” As Wellington Roe wrote: “To the public, at least, Lewis was its originator. Actually Lewis had no more to do with the sit-down strike than some native of Patagonia.” Although, as James Wechsler, Lewis’ biographer, recorded, He gave a superb imitation of a man who had worked everything out in advance.”

Again, it was the lack of control over the assembly line that produced the sit-down among auto workers, Henry Kraus’ book on the GM strike expressed it this way: “It was the speed-up that organized Flint, as it was the one element in the life of all the workers that found a common basis of resentment.”

## Moves to Control Resistance

Though union officialdom feared the undisciplined sit-down movement, Lewis and the CIO realized that they must move fast if they hoped to keep up with and establish control over it. Hence Lewis declared on December 31, very early in the strike, that “The CIO stands squarely behind these sit-downs.”

This tactic was essential at the time, though approval of sit-downs was revoked just as soon as the CIO could get away with it. Len DeCaux, editor of the CIO’s Union News Service, stated that “as a matter of fact, the first experience of the CIO with sit-downs was in discouraging them.”

When the GM strike began, very few employees belonged to the CIO-affiliated United Auto Workers; in Flint only one in 400 belonged to the UAW. It was not, apparently, an easy matter for the CIO to achieve control over the strike. Kraus’ account contains several instances of the difficulties encountered, including, “The strike committee had not yet completely established its authority and there were accordingly some resistance and friction at first with a certain tendency to anarchy of action.” Wyndham Mortimer, another very pro-union source, admitted that “A very disturbing factor on the union side was that several members of our negotiating committee were convinced that no one in the leadership could be trusted, from John L. Lewis down.”

Before centralized authority was effected, many radical possibilities remained open. Sidney Fine’s authoritative *Sit-down* recognized the sit-downers’ resistance to hierarchical procedures, commenting on the “fierce independence” displayed by the workers. The situation prompted Thomas Brooks to assay that “for a brief time, the

CIO teetered on the brink of the revolutionary industrial unionism of the Wobblies.” Alinsky states similarly that “the General Motors strike bordered on revolution.”

The sit-downs in rubber, which had occurred, from Louis Adamic’s observations, “without encouragement from any rank-and-file organizer,” much less from any union, and which were almost invariably successful, reached a very important climax at GM. And inasmuch as the GM sit-downers were so vitally concerned with controlling the assembly line as the key issue, basic antagonism between workers and the union was implied from the start. The CIO had to attach itself to the sit-down phenomenon and, at least initially, make a show of supporting the workers’ actions, but there existed a vast chasm between the attitudes of that movement and the CIO’s respect for the rights of management.

## **CIO Opposes Occupations**

CIO leaders tried from the beginning to find a way to squelch the occupation of GM property. In a revealing passage; Secretary of Labor Perkins tells us:

The CIO came to the support of the automobile workers, although I know for a fact that John Lewis and Sidney Hillman and Lee Pressman, CIO counsel, made great efforts to get the men to leave the plant... But they would not publicly desert them.”

CIO officials had no interest in taking up the issue of speed-up. Regulation of the speed of the line was listed as eighth of eight demands submitted by the UAW to GM on January 4. Predictably, the February 11<sup>th</sup> settlement dealt almost exclusively with union recognition and not at all with speed-up. The union had been granted sole-bargaining-agent status for six months in the 17 struck plants and looked forward to consolidating its position in the enforced absence of any rivals.

When Bud Simons, head of the strike committee in Fisher Body No. 1, was awakened and told the terms of the settlement, he said, “That won’t do for the men to hear. That’s not what we’ve been striking for.” And when the union presented the settlement to the strikers, distrust mounted in relation to the unanswered questions as to speed of the line, authority on the shop floor, and working conditions.

The workers’ forebodings were borne out by the negotiations which followed the evacuation of the plants. GM’s policy was “above all, to preserve managerial discretion in the productive process, particularly over the speed of the line.” The fundamental demand of the strike-to the strikers-had been “mutual determination” of the speed of production, but under the contract signed March 12 local management was ensured “full authority” in these matters. Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., GM president, became satisfied that the union was not out to challenge management’s rights, and reported “we have retained all the basic powers to manage.”

In addition, the union became the effective agency for suppressing workers’ direct action against speed-up or other grievances, pledging that “There shall be no suspensions or stoppages of work until every effort has been exhausted to adjust them through the regular grievance procedure, and in no case without the approval of the international officers of the union.”

Workers were plainly dissatisfied with the outcome of their sit-down, a fact usually ignored in the many accounts of the victorious CIO breakthrough of the GM occupation. William Knudsen, GM vice-President said that there were 170 sit-downs in GM plants between March and June, 1937, as workers who had become conscious of their great power did not automatically submit to union-management hegemony. Union officials scurried from place to place to quell these stoppages, which they considered a very serious threat to union authority. A *New York Times* article called “Unauthorized Sit-Downs Fought by CIO Unions,” described the drastic efforts used to end the sit-downs, including the dismissal of any union representative sympathetic to them. The same April 12, 1937 article ascribed the sit-downs to “dissatisfaction on the part of the workers with the union itself,” and reported that “they are as willing in some cases to defy their own leaders as their bosses.”

Interestingly, the Communists were just as concerned with restoring proper order via traditional union structures as anyone else in the CIO. Even Eugene Lyons’ hysterical book *The Red Decade*, which found almost everything in the 1930’s to be Party-controlled, did not try to say that the sit-down movement was Red-inspired or dominated.

A sit-down wave moved with amazing rapidity to all types of industry and business in the spring of 1937. New Masses of May 4 noted, that “the strikes of the Woolworth and Grand girls gave a stunning surprise both to their employers and to the working-class movement.” Everlyn Finn, a seamstress interviewed by Studs Terkel, told of the sit-down she was involved in: “The boss was goin’ crazy. The union officials came down. They went crazy too. It was a hilarious day.”

The ending of the movement could be effectively and lastingly engineered only from the inside. Before business and government could formulate a solution the union leaders themselves had put the lid on sit-downs. An industrial relations expert on the subject: “the sit-down is too easy a tactic for good discipline... because workers can secure grievance settlement by interrupting production through a sit-down, they may eventually think, what’s the use of joining a union and paying dues if we can get what we want this way?”

The sit-downs were ended with the unions cooperating with management in the ouster of the workers, for of course, the CIO had no intention of helping employees take power over their own jobs. As CIO official Mike Widman put it, “My union experience taught me that the direction of the working force is vested in management. The union shall not abridge that right, so long as there is no discrimination or unfairness.”

## Discipline in Steel

Walter Lippmann, in the spring of 1937, warned recalcitrant businessmen “that the more they treat Mr. Lewis and the CIO as public enemies to be resisted at all costs, the more impossible they make it for Mr. Lewis to develop discipline and a sense of responsibility in the ranks...” By this time, however, many more employers were peacefully signed up with the CIO.

In March (1937), after three months of secret negotiations, US Steel’s Myron Taylor signed a recognition agreement with Lewis, typifying the many industrialists impressed with CIO usefulness. The *New York World Telegram* reported that “two financiers closely identified with Morgan interests said they had only praise and admiration for Mr. Lewis...apparently thoroughly in accord on the main theme that complete industrial organization was inevitable, they hinted that other industrial leaders may be just as receptive to unionization of their plants as is Myron C. Taylor, chief of Big Steel.”

The critical CIO role in quelling or preventing sit-downs was certainly not lost on employers. In the steel industry, the CIO’s Steel Workers’ Organizing Committee found many willing customers, due to management’s inability to control its employees unassisted. Charles Haines, producer of steel-making equipment and a member of one of the pioneering steel families of America, was representative of this management awareness. Stability was desired and hence the employers “were asking the SWOC to straighten out their labor difficulties,” in Mary Vorse’s words.

The bloody “Little Steel” strike was clearly an exception to the quickening trend of employer acceptance of unionism. Concerning the Little Steel strike, by the way, the CIO could have been successful, at least could have avoided the score of dead, had it not been so opposed to the use of the sit-down. Labor commentators Preis, Levinson, Lens and others agree that the killing of pickets and demonstrators would have been obviated by the use of the sit-down. And more than one writer has wondered if the whole Memorial Day Massacre march of unarmed strikers—and the likelihood of their being shot—was not planned by union leaders to produce union martyrs.

A contract with SWOC was a safeguard against work actions, and employers were appreciative. For example: Major officials of the U.S. Steel Company have repeatedly and publicly attested to the satisfactory character of their contractual relations with the unions,” reported Robert Brooks. John L. Lewis was to the point when he said in 1937, “A CIO contract is adequate protection against sit-downs, lie-downs, or any other kind of strike.”

Professor of Labor Relations Benjamin Selekman observed that “union leaders have sought to calm down the new members with their seemingly insatiable demands.” Likewise, Carroll Dougherty judged that “The induction of large numbers of raw recruits untrained in unionism made guidance from the top necessary,” adding, almost as an afterthought, “Yet there was danger that such guidance would develop into permanent dictatorship.”

It didn’t prove easy for the unions to impose discipline on the many new members. As we have seen, their “seemingly insatiable demands” were never uppermost in the minds of the union leaders; labor leaders must appear to support worker demands, if they are to initially interest them in union representation. “Only later does the union



seek to instruct the individual member in his responsibilities, and such education is a slow process... Individual members must come to realize that they cannot take matters into their own hands," wrote John Dunlop.

Exclusive-bargaining-agent status, or the closed shop, is the primary institution by which the union enforces control of the workers. Golden and Ruttenberg, two SWOC officials, candidly argue in *The Dynamics of Industrial Democracy* that unions need power and responsibility to maintain discipline. With the closed shop, the union acquires, in effect, the power to fire unruly members; if a member is dropped from the union, he is dropped from his job. Golden and Ruttenberg, as so many other union spokesmen, point out that the union is likely to make noise until it gains the closed shop arrangement, and that management rapidly comes to see the need for a strong (closed shop) union, in the interest of a contained work force. The price of cooperation is thus the closed shop, and it satisfies both union and management.

By 1938, according to Brooks, only a "small minority" of employers opposed collective bargaining as guaranteed by the Wagner Act. It becomes easy to see why.

Union leaders were "anxious to demonstrate to the management their responsibility, and their willingness to accept the burden of 'selling' the contract to the rank-and-file and keeping the dissidents in line," according to consultants Sayles and Straus. In many cases, unions simply replaced personnel departments.

## **Workers Tricked Again**

As business came increasingly to the awareness of unions as indispensable to the maintenance of a relatively stable and docile labor supply, the ranks of labor exhibited more and more dissatisfaction with "their" new organizations. The 1945 *Trends in Collective Bargaining* study noted that "by around 1940" the labor leader had joined the business leader as an object of "wide spread cynicism" to the American worker. Similarly, Daugherty reported that workers were chafing under the lack of structural democracy in the unions: "There was evidence, by the end of 1940, that the rank and file were growing restive under such conditions."

Workers, after the initial enthusiasm and hopefulness regarding the CIO were starting to feel the 'closed system' nature of compulsory unions. In discussing union-management cooperation in the steel industry, CIO officials Golden and Ruttenberg admitted, for example, that "to some workers" the cooperation only added up in practice to "a vicious speed-up."

Thus we return to the issue uppermost in the minds of industrial workers in the 1930s struggles. And Richard Lester seems to be quite correct in concluding that "the industrial government jointly established" possesses "disciplinary arrangements advantageous to management, rendering worker rebellions more and more difficult."

# fifth Estate

John Zerzan  
Unionization in America  
1976

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/275-august-1976/unionization-in-america>  
Fifth Estate #275, August, 1976

**[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)**