

Book Review: *Wartime Strikes*

Wartime Wildcats Took On Union, Government

Tommy Therion (Peter Werbe)

1980

a review of

Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II by Martin Glaberman, 1980, Bewick Editions, Detroit, 158 pp., \$6 (Available from Fifth Estate Books).

Marty Glaberman's account of auto worker militancy during the war years from the perspective of both an observer and a participant is essentially a tale of resistance to the orders of bosses—both union and government—to participate in the war mobilization under terms unfavorable to the workers.

The cover of the book itself announces its contents: pictured are hundreds of cheering, waving, smiling workers running out of the Detroit Chevrolet Gear and Axle plant at the beginning of a 1943 wildcat strike. The elation on their faces makes one almost forget that the U.S. was at a

crucial juncture in a war and that almost all of the workers involved considered a victory over the Axis powers to be of utmost importance.

Glaberman shows that the overwhelming patriotism of the workers and the fact that each war year set new strike records for the century was not the contradiction it seemed. All of organized labor had been locked into a "voluntary" no-strike pledge since the opening of the war, but it became obvious immediately that there was not an "equality of sacrifice" on the part of the corporations. Workers faced bad working conditions, wage freezes and inflation while their employers were profiting handily in a manner not enjoyed since before the Depression.

Wartime Strikes describes both the resistance and organization against the pledge and links it to the whole range of shop floor conditions and grievances that had been at the center of working class discontent during the period of unionization. Unlike the 1930s, however, the unions were unable to even give the appearance of embodying those concerns and functioned along with the companies and government in repressing the strikes and harassing militants.

The outlawed wildcats that flared during the war years were the rekindling of the spontaneous rebellious actions that typified the early 1930s, but had been largely extinguished as a result of the successful union recognition struggles. Immediately upon signing the first labor contract, the union apparatus appropriated the weapon of the strike from the workers and established itself as its sole legal possessor. Having disarmed a militant working class, the unions strove to create an era of social peace in which not only did they mediate the sale of labor to the corporations and function as arbiters of all labor strife, they became an integral and important part of capitalism's ruling mechanism.

This transformation from the radical image union organizers had during the 1930s to their perception as "responsible labor statesmen" in just a period of a few years, became nowhere as evident as when war was declared in 1941 and the unions began an almost delirious voluntary pledging not to strike for the duration of the conflict. Led by the "militant" CIO unions, these pledges were made without even the slightest consultation with any union membership and the reward was swiftly forthcoming.

Union leaders were absorbed onto a variety of government war production boards, joint labor-management committees, etc. that completed the sequence which began with class war at the beginning of the previous decade and ended ten years later with workers marching off to the front in an inter-imperialist war, and to work stripped of their right to strike. The integration of the representatives of labor into the government structure further strengthened the unions' drive to take all power from the hands of the workers themselves and to be recognized as friends, not opponents, of capitalism.

Glaberman describes all of this in devastating terms and then proceeds to document the wide-spread wildcats that continued throughout the war with violations of the no-strike pledge being almost a daily occurrence. The companies, seeing a working class formally restricted from objecting to speed-ups, arbitrary work-rules and management, etc., wanted to use the war years as an opportunity to regain profits lost during the previous decade of low profitability. *Wartime Strikes*, however, demonstrates the unwillingness of workers to allow even the smallest grievance to pass without an organized walkout taking place.

Most of the action is set forth in the Detroit area, the "Arsenal of Democracy," with often times crucial war production being at issue. Glaberman observes, "The wildcat strikes were, in fact, political strikes because they were directed against the government." (p. 128) And although the military was used in several instances to end large-scale wildcats, the attempted suppression of day-to-day job actions were, in the main, left to the efforts of the unions. Glaberman cites the account of former-UAW president Leonard Woodcock, then an international representative of the union, bragging about his ability to squelch a series of strikes in Muskegon, Michigan as typifying the activity of the national UAW leadership in suppressing the growing wave of wildcats (pp. 37-39). Local after local which supported the actions of its members on strike were put in receivership by the International or had their officials suspended.

Even with all the efforts of the unions, the opposition to the no-strike pledge was so great that the UAW leadership finally submitted a referendum to the membership late in the war to determine whether to continue to support it. When the votes were in, fewer than 25% of the eligible workers even bothered to cast a ballot, but the majority of those responded to the patriotic wording of the proposal and it was re-affirmed as UAW policy. But the same year, 1944, over half of the union membership went on wildcat strike at one time or another. Glaberman cites this, again not as being representative of an unresolvable contradiction, but rather as a compartmentalization of needs—those of national patriotism on one hand and that of class on the other. A worker could by vote or by voice, give support for the pledge as necessary for the war effort but walk out of a defense plant ten minutes later over the actions of a foreman charging (correctly) that it was the latter's actions which caused the work stoppage.

Glaberman presents the story of the wartime strikes as not just interesting events in working class history, but as representing a potential always present. He cites Hungary in 1956 and France in 1968, along with the wartime experiences, as periods when no one expected the outbreak of class struggle. The moment of greatest social quiet may be the harbinger of a revolutionary upsurge right around the corner.

The only real failing of the book comes in the author's unflagging allegiance to Marxism which, when presented, is immediately forced into a polemic with reality. Glaberman's recitation of the Marxist litany in his conclusion rates as barely a distraction but when he attempts to impose it on the events of a world he has just so vividly described, he fails miserably, condemned by his own narrative.

In an important footnote, Glaberman cites the famous passage from *Capital* where Marx asserts that the more humans are forced into the proletariat, the greater becomes the potential for revolution. The quote reads, "(As) grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; ...with this grows the revolt of the working class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organised by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself." (p. 145) Standard Marxist fare to be sure, but contradicted by Glaberman's own account throughout the book.

On the next page following the above quoted footnote, Glaberman states, "It is likely that those sections of the working class who were relatively new to the factories, such as the southerners and women, were least likely to accept the discipline of factory work and the discipline of the union." (p. 126) And, earlier in the book, "There was also the element, for many southern whites, of lack of union experience. As with women, while union leaders and management complained that this led to inefficiency and indiscipline, it nevertheless tended toward greater militancy (p. 136 emphasis added).

It can't be both ways; it is either a newly proletarianized peasantry from the mir of Russia, from the villages of southern Italy, from the American south or the English lowlands that have historically fought against being "disciplined, united and organized" by the factory system upon their entrance to it or one has to accept the Holy Writ of Marxism no matter how much it confounds reality. It is always the new workers unacculturated to the world of alarm clocks and time clocks that lead the struggles and contrary to Marx, the world of factories leads only to "a steadily more robotized, powerless, de-individualized proletariat" ("The Practical Marx: Life Against Theory," FE #299, October 22, 1979).

However, this last question, though interesting and important, barely manages to mar Glaberman's otherwise excellent account of working class struggle and imagination.

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