

## THE GREAT UPSURGE – THE RISE OF INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM LESSONS LEARNED

(Southern Workers' Assembly, 2024)

During the period 1930-41 social turmoil resulted in mass working class organization and collective bargaining in major U.S. industries. But from the very start, the chances of success for the new unions were very fragile, uncertain, and fleeting. The new unions were a product of a historic moment that probably will not be duplicated. However, certain elements had to be present to turn social turmoil into union organization. In fact, similar parallel elements were also present in other successful social movements – abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and civil rights,

**Identifying these necessary elements can give guidance to our efforts today.**

**1. A *COMMITTED CORE* of experienced activist/organizers in major workplaces, linked by their political beliefs and with their communities, met with repeated organizing defeats but were able to apply the lessons learned to develop a breakthrough strategy of sit down occupations and mass picketing.**

- The *core* shared a common intent – to establish collective bargaining as a democratic necessity and thereby win a better life for the working class.
- The *core* totaled a surprisingly small number of dedicated men and women. For example, from first-person UAW accounts: in GM Flint a core of 6 backed up by 40 'key men'; in Kelsey Hayes a core of 9 backed by 200; in Chevy #4 a core of 7 with about 200 behind them.
- Try, fail, try again, fail again but learn. By 1935, 6 years into the Great Depression organizing efforts resulted in mostly lost strikes and the destruction of new unions. Through practical experience however *core* activists learned the value and use of sympathy strikes. of defying injunctions and of brief sit down stoppages to win grievances.
- The commitment of *core* activists was long-term and part of their daily working lives.

**2. A MILITANT MINORITY OF UNION ACTIVISTS LED FIGHTS THAT DIRECTLY CHALLENGED MANAGEMENT YEARS BEFORE WINNING COLLECTIVE**

**BARGAINING RIGHTS AND UNION CONTRACTS.** Extensive steward systems, job actions, direct rank and file involvement in grievance settlements were common to the organizing upsurges in all industries, allowing the new unions to maintain worker loyalty and weather significant corporate attacks.

- The **militant minority** were recruited to take action right then to address the pressing problems of the workday, not to take a passive act of 'joining' in hopes of a future union.
- The **militant minority** was almost always recruited on the strength of taking offensive action to improve wages and conditions, rather than as a defensive act.
- For example, independent grievance committees were active in the electrical industry by 1932, a successor to the defunct 1917-19 GE Union Conference. By 1935 Westinghouse South Philadelphia workers won grievance negotiating recognition but not full bargaining rights.
- By 1936 the **militant minority**, while growing, was still small compared to the total number of workers employed. For example: UE reported 30,000 members of whom 16,000 were paying dues in an industry of 350,000; UAW reported 25-30,000 members from a workforce of 500,000; SWOC (steel) showed only 3% in the union – 15,300 – in an industry of 505,000 workers.
- Prior to winning recognition and its first union contract, UE reported in-mid 1937 at GE's home plant in Schenectady N.Y. that 219 stewards were conducting department sit downs, holding 48 unit meetings with workers a month, and settling 5200 grievances a year.

**3. SHARPLY DEFINED CLASS POLITICS resulted in federal and state electoral successes which increased working class consciousness and confidence, emboldened union organizers' plans, and created a brief 5-month window**

***of political advantage during which sit downs and other strikes won union recognition and bargaining.***

- For example, during the 1936 elections the incumbent President Roosevelt and New Deal candidates ran on programs of economic rights and improved living conditions for the majority of Americans.
- For example, the new Labor Non-Partisan League, formed in 1936, mobilized workers to support FDR and state New Deal candidates on a pro-collective bargaining and working class program, and swept the elections in the industrial states.
- **Core** activists timed their organizing strategies to the 1936 elections counting on political support (or at least state neutrality) during the coming battle with the corporations. It is important to understand that the breakthrough was a result of workplace and political/community organizing and pre-dated the Wagner Act which was ruled constitution later in 1937.

**4. *WORKERS' RIGHTS WERE TRANSLATED INTO NEWLY ENACTED FEDERAL LAWS that forbid the use of federal court injunctions and troops to break strikes, encouraged workers to join unions and participate in collective bargaining, and aggressively enforced individual rights by reinstating thousands of workers fired by the corporations.***

- Norris-LaGuardia Anti-Injunction Act, 1932
- Section 7 (the right to self-organize and engage in concerted actions), National Industrial Recovery Act, 1933 which resulted in more than a million workers joining unions.
- Wagner Act and the National Labor Relations Board, 1935 but not in effect until April 1937. An aggressive NLRB (pre-Taft Hartley) was crucial to the second CIO upsurge from late 1937 to 1941, ordering elections, hauling violating corporations into federal court, reinstating thousands of fired workers and ordering the abandonment of company unions.

**5. *NATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND RESOURCES provided by a few top union leaders who broke politically and tactically with the AFL, refused to***

***compromise militancy where it developed, and gave local organizing efforts a national voice and support.***

- While leaders' motivations were mixed, a common interest was to achieve industrial and political power for the broader class rather than narrow sector interest.
- Conservative AFL leaders failed to take advantage of millions of new members who joined upon passage of the NIRA's Section 7. Opposing national leaders began to advocate and encourage militant actions including disobeying court injunctions.

**6. *ONCE A BREAKTHROUGH WAS MADE, ORGANIZATION SPREAD RAPIDLY GEOGRAPHICALLY AS WELL AS THROUGH WORKPLACES IN THE SAME CORPORATIONS AND IN THE SAME INDUSTRIES.***

- Once workers saw that victory was possible and how it could be achieved, organizing strikes sparked through many industries and cities. After the sitdown victory at GM Flint led to union recognition and a members-only contract for the new UAW, there followed during 1937: 477 sit down strikes involving over 500,000 workers and a total of 4700 strikes during the year. Militant strikes and sit downs continued through mid-1941.
- It is important to know that initial recognition and contract coverage applied in most cases to only the members of the union and covered only those locations where the union had membership. For example, the first UAW contract that resulted from the Flint sit down covered 17 GM plants. This same pattern was true for electrical (UE) and steel (SWOC).
- It is also important to know that similar widespread victories followed on the heels of breakthrough events. In the 10 weeks following the successful civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, 758 similar demonstrations broke out in 186 U.S. cities. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 followed. In the first 3 months of 1970 and following the first public workers illegal but successful strikes, public workers struck their agencies at a rate

of one every 36 hours! Over a 10 week period, strikes erupted in 24 cities and 28 school districts.

(Ed Bruno, [edmundbruno47@gmail.com](mailto:edmundbruno47@gmail.com) Prepared in 1998 for the Labor Party's campaign for workers' rights, revised for SWA's School for Southern Workers)