

Transcription of
Interview of
Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Billups
by
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Archives of Labor
History and Urban Affairs
Wayne State University
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B - Joseph Billups

Mrs. B - Rose Billups

M - Roberta McBride

M: This is September the ninth, nineteen sixty seven, at the home of Joseph and Rose Billups. I've wanted to come to see Mr. Billups because I believe he's one of the very first living members of Local 600. Since they're having a strike out at Ford Motor Co. now, I thought it would be interesting for us to hear about life in Local 600's early days. First, I'm going to ask Mr. Billups what Detroit was like in the thirties, especially 1932 and '33. One of the things that we've heard about many times is the Ford Hunger March. Could you tell us, Mr. Billups, what that was all about?

B: Yes, the Ford Hunger March was due to the fact that Ford would not give any relief and Ford workers could not get on the welfare or get any relief, because Ford said he was responsible for them and Ford would only give them a little patch of ground to work out at Inkster to raise a little. Ford workers were left out of the welfare department of the various cities, that is of the relief part.

M: Now the Ford Hunger March itself occurred about the middle of March in mid-1932? And what were you doing at this time? What was your connection with it?

B: My connection with the Ford March was because I had been let out of the plant and wasn't able to get back. At that time Ford workers could not get any relief because it was paid through the Ford. We organized a Hunger March and I was one of the members of the committee to lead the march. As to the march, we started from the bridge over the river and marched up towards Ford, but we were met by police with gas, guns and so on. Quite a few peoples were shot and injured and gased.

M: Were there any deaths from it?

B: Yes, how many deaths?

Mrs. B: Four or five-four young ones-the youngest was 16 years old-and one was about in his twenties. Four of them were killed instantly. And the fifth was the one who was in the hospital seven days and he died, he was gased.

M: I believe there's an interesting story about the death of that fifth worker and your connection with that, isn't there Mr. Billups?

B: Yes, I was in charge of the funeral.

M: Funeral of this fifth worker?

B: Fifth worker, and we couldn't find a cemetery that would accept him.

M: Why was that?

B: Well I guess the pressure from Ford in some way. We Just couldn't find a place, so we kept his body 10 or 15 days in Ferry Hall and finally we decided we were going to bury him if we had to bury him in Grand Circus Park. So Charlie Diggs and myself went to the Police Commissioner.

M: Emmons?

B: Emmons. Emmons said, "If you get on the street why we will meet you with our force," but we were able to mobilize people all the way from Ferry Hall down to Grand Circus Park on Woodward Avenue. They had to stop the street cars and every thing, because we had about 15,000 workers behind us. So we marched down; we were going to bury him in Grand Circus Park. We had shovels, picks, everything because the cemetery would not allow us to bury him. But before we got to Grand Circus Park they said we could take him to Woodland Cemetery and cremate him. So when we got to Grand Circus Park we used the hearse and carriages and got a funeral procession from there out to the park out to the cemetery. We estimated there were 15,000 people watching on Woodward Avenue and Grand Circus Park at the time.

M: Who were watching?

B: Watching. The police got out of sight; they got up on top of the buildings and around in plain clothes. They didn't want to inflame things because we had bought two loads of two by fours and trimmed them down at the end and had sticks on the shoulder, of about 1500 men and we marched and that's the way we marched. We said we were going to bury him in Grand Circus Park, if we couldn't get no other cemetery. So before we got there, the police told us that we could take him out there. We compromised by taking him out there and I said "yes" (I was chairman of the committee) "We could go there and cremate him". It would be better than burying him; we had our shovel and picks and were going to bury him there, we were going to have a big fight so that was the way it went.

M: And when you got out to the cemetery, they didn't allow people in when the cremation was going on?

B: No, just the committee, they had troops all around the fences and State Militia out all the way round, so they only let the committee in and my wife was on one of the committees.

M: It took a little courage to go in and watch?

Mrs. B: Well it did, I think. I was much younger at that time and it was a thing I had never seen before and it was very sad looking, that a man who was killed had no place to be buried. And they said any one who entered would be shot and the four of us took that chance. We entered, three men and myself. We were not shot, we were witness to the cremation.

M: Then the body was cremated and what happened next? What was done with the remains?

B: Well we kept the ashes until things quieted down, then we sprinkled them over the plant. We notified the fellows inside the plant that

we were going to fly a plane over them and sprinkle the ashes, so Ford kept ~~one or two~~ planes in the air all the time around.

M: To prevent you coming in?

B: Yes

M: With your plane?

B: But finally we got a chance, we got a break and we put the ashes out and we notified the people in the plant; a lot of them went outside; we told them what time we were going to fly over.

M: Mr. Billups, I understand that conditions were pretty bad in Detroit in the early 30's with people being evicted from their homes. Was there anything you could do to help out in that situation?

B: In that situation I mobilized the Unemployed Council and we set the people back in the house if they were evicted. We left the guard there to take care to notify us if the sheriff or deputy sheriff would come back again; but if we put the furniture back they wouldn't bother them ~~unless~~ the landlord paid them again. So very few landlords would pay it again because the same thing would happen over and over.

M: You mean they would be evicted; you help them back in -

B: Yes.

M: On it would go, I see.

B: And the dupty sheriff said, "Just let us set them out and you can set 'em back." Then they are going to pay us to set them back out, so the landlords got to the place they just let them stay there. Because they didn't want to keep paying the deputy sheriff to set them out and then we set them back in, they would have to pay them again to set them out. And it got to the place where after they were in, the deputy sheriff would say, "you have no court eviction, I mean you have to go through court again", and that way stay in there.

I remember one time on Macomb street they went two blocks just every house, setting it out in the street, so we set them back in; we mobilized the people and told them to put the stuff back in. We would leave somebody there to take care of the sheriff if they came around. They wouldn't bother around long as they didn't want to come in contact with them or the Council because they would take us down in front of the judge, and the judge would turn us loose. And then we used to have demonstrations and go into the Mayor's office and take over, and police didn't dare to club the people.

M: Because you represented such strength that-

B: Yes, so we had meetings on the city hall steps practically every night and the city hall yard would be overflowing—we would have a couple thousand people there every night.

M: Those would be unemployed people-

B: Unemployed people.

B: Mayor Murphy used to cry and say, "There's nothing I can do; nothing I can do" so we told him we would get someone; so we got Maurice Sugar to draw up an Unemployment Council, I mean unemployment thing.

M: A plan for the city?

B: Yes

B: And a welfare department; see, they didn't have no welfare department.

M: Oh, there was no city welfare department?

B: No.

B: So we drew up plans and went before the Councils, and had the Councils to draw up a plan to establish a welfare department, and in that way we got relief for the people.

M: Well until you got a welfare program going what happened to the

people who were hungry? What about them? What did you do for food?

B: Well we had a house down on Macomb Street where we would send the people out to gather food.

M: You mean ask for contributions?

B: Yes, and we would let them cook there and we established two or three places and our next place was Ferry Hall and then over on 14th Street the Finnish Hall and on Marston Street. We had these halls in different places.

M: These would be like soup kitchens?

B: Soup Kitchens.

M: I see.

B: We had actual food because the merchants would give us food.

M: What kinds of merchants were those?

B: Over on 12th Street, Jewish people over there were merchants.

M: You found the Jewish people real good in helping out in this type of situation?

B: Yes, especially the store keeper who would save meat and bones, and so on. You know that we could always make soup and have some beans. One farmer gave us six sacks of beans; we had beans-

M: Beans every kind of way you could have them, I suspect.

B: Yes, you remember that?

Mrs. B: You explain it.

B: We had beans stacked up in the basement and every day we took beans. Now the guys would go out and get meat to go in the beans and would get bread from the bakery shop and my wife would cook. We had a great big ten gallon pot, you know; she would cook beans; she didn't know much about cooking at that time, but she managed to cook the beans so they all would come in, you know, for beans. We had a

lot of Greek people and little children used to come there to eat; the children didn't have nothing to eat so we would get the Greek children, wife and children to come there; we would tell them they were welcome to come there.

M: So that was how people got along when there was no welfare department?

B: Yes, no welfare department, so we established those places all over- Ferry Hall, Magnolia Hall and several other places. We had those places, the Unemployed Council.

M: Now I've heard about the Nat Turner Clubs. What were they?

B: The Nat Turner Club was a colored organization of so-called progressive people, people that were sympathetic and, you know what I mean, they had been able to help with their food and everything; this club was supposed to be a progressive club-The Nat Turner Club.

Mrs. B: For Civil Rights?

B: Yes, it was organized around the Scottsboro case and so on.

M: Well I think you told me one time when I was here that you believed that the plan for unemployment insurance really came about through some of the thinking of the Nat Turner Club.

B: Yes

M: How was that?

B: Well the Nat Turner Club was a progressive group.

M: Yes, a group of you people who wanted to take care of the fellow who wasn't quite as well off as you?

B: Right.

M: And was that when Mr. Sugar, the Attorney, helped you devise a plan?

B: Yes

M: And are you the group that helped out also in this bonus Army that marched on Washington?

B: Yes

M: And out of all of that grew unemployment insurance? And maybe that's why-

B: Yes, we started that in Grand Circus Park.

M: So right here in Detroit is where the idea for that began?

B: Yes, I used to get up in the mornings and go to Grand Circus Park and be there all day, and just talk and organize people.

M: Well, now, what about your own finances then, how did you get along? Were you working? Were you employed?

B: No, I was fired out of Ford's; I couldn't get a job in no other shop.

M: I see

B: Well we lived like the rest of the people.

M: Everybody was pretty close to the starvation line?

B: But, we had a place down on Maccomb Street at that time,-there is no Maccomb Street now-^a big house. An Italian progressive fellow went back to the old country and gave this place to the organization and she and I stayed there.

M: To the organization-the League of struggle for Negro Rights?

B: Our progressive group it didn't make no difference how it was called.

M: I see

B: We got in there and we were taking charge, and the farmers would bring in, I had, sometime eight sacks of beans and of course she cooked beans day in and day out; we had a great big pot. And of course the fellows would go out and get some meat to go in the beans but we had beans-

M: Mr. Billups, you told me how you helped feed people and you gave

them places to live and you restored their houses to them.

How about when the utilities were cut off?

B: Well we would help: we had a man who understood that work and was equipped to go up the pole and connect the wires again. The lights came from the line up on the pole, so they would cut them. They wouldn't cut the lights off at the house on the outside, but they cut them off at the pole, so we would have to have a man who understood electricity, who would climb up there and cut it back on.

M: So you could really get them back their house, by putting them back where they had been evicted, feed them from all this food you collected from out of the neighborhood?

B: Yes

M: And restore their utilities too.

B: Yes

M: Mr. Billups, you've been telling us what conditions were like in the early's 30's and you were always a man to believe in Unions. Were you a member of a union at that time?

B: Yes, I was member of the old auto worker union.

M: And you were telling me that you led one of the first strikes at the Lackey Foundry, was it?

B: Yes, in Muskegon

M: Did you ever have any physical suffering as a result of these strikes?

B: Yes, so much so I can't recall all of them, but-

M: There are so many that you can't remember them all?

B: I had to stay on the ground all of the time up in Muskegon, Flint, around Saginaw-

M: Now were you working at the Rouge Plant, some of this time?

B: Yes, I got fired from the Rouge Plant for union activity and every time I got hired under different names some way they would find out and put me out of the plant.

M: Oh, because the old name would be a black-balled name?

B: Yes

M: Now if a Ford man at that time wanted to belong to a union, how did he do it?

B: Well he had to use some other name and then the next thing, he had to be careful because they always sent somebody to meetings and if the guy was able to single you out why then you'd lose the job, so to get rid of that we joined in other locals.

M: And Murray Body had a local that you joined with?

B: Yes, I was, I joined in Murray Body and 174.

M: You were telling me bout planning a strike at Murray Body.

B: It seems the police came and got ninty patrol loads of people out of there, put them in jail.

M: You mean men who were meeting

B: Men and women who were meeting there for the purpose of getting ready for the strike the next day or two. They were going to set the strike and they were all organizing for the strike.

M: How long would they hold you down at police headquarters?

B: Well they kept them down two days. They didn't get me; I went up on the stage and got up and among the curtains, up in the drapes.

M: I see, and they didn't find you then?

B: No, I was on the ropes up there and of course it was dark up in there and they couldn't see but they cleaned the hall out. They got ~~ninty~~ patrol loads.

M: Did that stop the strike?

B: No, it didn't stop the strike.

M: It just delayed it a day or two, did it?

B: Yes, it delayed it a day or two and they went out.

M: Now I guess it was company tactics at this time to have spies around, was it?

B: Yes, that's always been

M: You were telling me a story, I believe this would be in a later period of your experiences, of a spy who got you to his house on false claims?

B: Yes, he said that he had people there to be signed up in the union, his name was John Henry, and I went there.

M: Did you guess what he was up to at the time?

B: I thought what he was up to, but in the mean time I had notified an F.B.I. man that I was going there, and so I went.

M: To the home of the spy, was that it?

B: Yes, I went there and he told me he had 17 men, he said "I got 17 men to sign up in the union", and I went there and I wasn't expecting the 17 because I had this man along for protection. I can't call his name but he was an F.B.I. man.

M: The friend who was an F.B.I. agent?

B: Yes, so he went with me, because the spy told me to bring a white worker with me and when we went there he called the police; we were standing inside the lobby, first thing we knew a police car rode up and came right in and grabbed us both and took us down to the Bethune station and he got to the station and went up before the captain, head of the station and the captain says "Well," he says "You workers are threathening-you Ford guys are getting so brave you threaten a man's life", The fellow said "Who's threatening

a life?" That was the lieutenant, you know. The spy said "He threatened John Henry's life", and up there meddling with John Henry and so on. He says "I haven't threatened John Henry." He had told me to let him do the talking so he said-

M: This is the F.B.I. man who hadn't revealed himself?

B: Yes, so he said "I want to use the phone" he says. The police said "When you guys get here, you always want to call Maurice Sugar", "I want to call my office." The police said "Your office, what is your office?" My friend pulled his coat back and there was his gold badge. The police says, "Yes sir, yes sir" and he called the F.B.I. office and told them where we was. Well, they were waiting in their office to see what was going to happen, because they expected this to happen, so they called in and wanted to talk to him so the police said, "they're free to go". He said, "No, we want you to bring him down, bring him down here." So he didn't like that, but he had to take us down there and when we got there, we went in the commissioner's office and they were all sitting around there. Then they asked him, "Where was John Henry? (the spy)" He said John Henry was at home. The FBI said, "Well you get him". And they made him get John Henry. When John Henry got there, John Henry told that Mr. Bennett and this man had told him what to do and so on, like that and naturally Ford representatives were there and that's the day that they recognized the union because they had them dead right, see here was a National Labor Relation Board, one of the men who was a government man was arrested and they had the evidence. John Henry just told everything.

M: And this, when they uncovered John Henry, led directly to Ford having to recognize the union?

B: Yes

M: I didn't know that. I heard stories about Walter Hardin; he was a friend of yours wasn't he?

B: Yes

M: And I think he suffered a great deal as a result of the union activities, too, didn't he?

B: Oh yes, they beat him up.

M: Who's they?

B: The Black Legion

M: Black Legion?

B: They carried him way out in the country, and they tied him to a tree and took his shoes, pants, beat him up and left him tied there. It was cold too, but he happened to work loose and got back home.

M: In the middle of the night, I suppose?

B: Yes

M: In the morning he came walking in on these poor bleeding feet, I expect?

B: Yes

M: Mr. Billups, we were saying that we thought maybe the idea of unemployment insurance started here in Detroit. Did you have any hand in that?

B: Yes, we started in Grand Circus Park to talk of unemployment insurance, work or bread, that was what we first said then, we concretized it to unemployment insurance but it was groups there of all political faiths in Grand Circus Park. We used to have speaking in there from early in the morning till 12 or 1:00 at night. All day and all night long sometimes and that's where the unemployed would group, would come together, so that's where we started from and organized the Unemployed Council, and we first

gave the demand to Mayor Jeffries. We worked out a program there. Then finally we had a hunger march to Washington and raised the question of unemployment insurance. And then it began to catch fire and went all over the country.

Mrs. B: It really started in Detroit.

M: I'm curious about this talking in Grand Circus Park. How would you get a crowd?

B: Well you didn't have no trouble in getting a crowd.

M: Did you just climb up some place?

B: Yes

M: And then you started to talking and then they start gathering around?

B: Yes, all night and all day, it was people in Grand Circus Park sleeping there, had no place to stay. We just take a newspaper, spread it out and sleep and it was always somebody talking on something there in Grand Circus Park-something, it didn't make no difference what.

M: Did you have to be a pretty good sharp talker to draw crowds away from the other speakers, I mean there would be several of you going at once, would there?

B: Well we used the same platform.

M: Oh, and just one could get on at a time?

B: One at a time, sometimes it would be one across Woodward Avenue on the other side.

B: Two in there, on different sides, one on each side. But they used the side on the left hand side going downtown-that's the side of Grand Circus Park because people slept in there all night long, you could see people coming with their papers instead of beds, spread it down, go to sleep, pull their coat over their heads. It was

hundreds of people sleeping there had no place else.

M: How long a time would you talk?

B: Talk as long as you want, some time talk an hour, sometime thirty minutes.

M: Were there more people that wanted to talk than there was time for?

B: Yes, oh yes there was, you see at that time there were several different political groups in there. There was the Trotskyites and what is that other group? They are all about washed out now.

Mrs. B: It was four or five groups. Political groups, Socialist Labor Party

B: Well we permitted this one to get up and talk and the other one to get up and talk, not two of the same kind. And then the people out there asked questions. We used to have an audience there anytime of night, any time of day in Grand Circus Park.

M: Mr. Billups, were you always interested in Unions? When did you start thinking about the union?

B: Well in traveling around through the west I came in contact with the I.W.W. and from our conversation with them, contact with them, and so on, I began to believe in unionism.

M: But you had a hard time persuading other Negroes to join the Union?

B: Yes I had a hard time because they didn't believe that the union would do justice by them.

M: They thought unions were for the white workers.

B: Yes, I got mine back from traveling round west and coming in contact with the I.W.W. and so on and I met Bill Shadduck, he's dead now. Bill Shadduck went to Russia, Bill built two thousand miles of railroad over there for them. Bill Shadduck used to be in Detroit in the Summertime, and there was a restaurant on the corner of Hastings and Gratiot where he ate and a bunch of I.W.W. were

in that place. I used to eat there and we would go down on the river dock, down on the river and work, they used to pay you whenever you finished the boat. So we would go there and help unload the boats and load the boat and make five or six dollars then we were set, maybe we do it three or four days a week and nights, and that's where I came in contact with the I.W.W.

M: And began thinking about Unions? And you read a great deal too?

B: Yes

M: During the Ford Strike I understand that some of the Negro workers stayed in the Ford plant.

B: Yes

M: They were afraid to come out? How did you gradually convert them to unionism?

B: Well after the strike was over and they got back in the shop, it was an easy matter when they saw committeemen make very good union people.

B: I began to read upon it. The whole thing about it was they had been, I call it jipped so many times in joining the union they would be the last taken care of in unions their grievances wouldn't be take care of. So that had spread among Negroes so they didn't have any confidence.

M: But it was different the way it really operated at 600?

B: Yes, was different from the way they operate now in the unions, the old way of doing it was that the Negro would be last and be the same as the manufacturer wanted it. They would work longer.

M: Thank you very much, Mr. and Mrs. Billups, for your interesting interview.