

HENRY MCCUSKER INTERVIEW

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Q: I guess first I would like to know, can you describe the type of work that you did at Ford's?

M: Yes, I hired on in 1925 in Highland Park. I hired on as an ID grinder.

Q: Is that a skilled position?

M: No, that was a production job. And I transferred from Highland Park in 1927 to the Rouge plant when the Ford Motor Company started to build the A model.

Q: And what kind of work did you do there?

M: The same thing. I was a job setter on the ID grinding.

Q: Which building unit is this?

M: That was the building that was called the Spring and Upset building at that time.

Q: And how did you get involved with the organizing?

M: I got involved in the organizing the same as everybody else did, undercover a long long time during the drives between 1936 after the-- and a little prior to that before General Motors was organized. Then, of course, it was not until 1941 we were able to organize the Ford workers into the UAW, and this in all probability was the largest complex in the United States. It was during the NRLB election that was conducted here over 70,000 workers in the Rouge plant were eligible to vote in that election. And in 1941 I was transferred from the Spring and Upset building to the new Aircraft building that the Ford Motor Company was building.

Q: This is in '41?

M: Yeah, the latter part of 1941 and that was after the union had won the election. And I became a committeeman, financial secretary, and president of that unit until it closed down in 1946 after the war.

Q: And what happened after the war?

M: After the war then I became a member of the--what's known as the Parts Depot here in this--the Local 600. That's the National Parts Depot. They turned the Aircraft building then into what they called the Parts and Accessories building. That's where all of the dealers' supplies were sent from, where they supply the dealers with parts. Later on that was closed down and they built two new parts depots here in the environment. They built one on Telegraph Road and that's in Dearborn Heights and they built one out on Meadow Belt(?) and that's in Livonia and they put the parts into there.

Q: Did you become an officer in the Parts Depot?

M: No, I went to the International Union and worked on the staff in the National Ford Department. Of course I serviced all of the plants on the West Coast in Ford's under the umpire setup: Long Beach before it shut down, _____ after it had opened and replaced Long Beach and Richmond, California, when the plant was in Richmond and San Jose after that replaced the Richmond plant. I handled the umpire cases that came out of those units and worked in the National Ford Department as a servicing rep. until 1965 when I retired.

Q: So working in all of these different buildings at the Ford River Rouge plant, did you notice much difference between the different building units that you worked at in terms of the workers that worked there?

- M: No, the workers--were generally the same no matter what building you worked in; no matter what building you went to the workers generally were the same--all anxious to get the union in there prior to 1941.
- Q: Can you think of anything that distinguishes the units from each other?
- M: No, I couldn't distinguish because each president of each of the units that comprises the Ford complex out here are automatically members of the local union Executive Board. They all become members of the Executive Board.
- M: That's your, to the fact that you are the president of a unit.
- Q: Okay. Was there much interaction between the different men in the different units in Ford? Did they talk among each other and socialize together and--
- M: Of course, sure they talked amongst--they talked more when they were allowed to talk after the union gave them that freedom, sure.
- Q: And even if the people were in different buildings, and they socialized together?
- M: Well, they socialized together to some extent. You see each of the-- then the union, the local union then managed what they call a General Council that meets every month and that's--the membership in that is delegates from each of the units in the plant. The amount of delegates they are entitled is based on the population of the building. That's the highest governing body outside of the membership. You have the Executive Board of the local union, you have the General Council of the local union and you have the membership.
- Q: How about when workers went home? Did they normally hang around together in the evenings?

M: Well, some of them did, some of them didn't. The union got the blame for a lot of that, spending their time in the bar rather than going home--some of them. Of course that happened all over the country.

Q: Uh-huh.

M: But it wasn't the union that made them do that. It was the--well, they get together and talk things over. There used to be a bar across the street there. That was called Local 601 where a lot of them congregated from time to time.

Q: Where did the majority of the Ford workers live?

M: All over, all over. The plant was located in Dearborn and many many of the workers are out of Dearborn, they are out of every community that you can think about around here. They are out of Detroit, sure.

Q: Do you think most of them lived fairly close to the plant?

M: Well, the most of them lived within a public transportation district, most of them. Because they used to have the streetcars running here all the time during that period of time, come from all over. The streetcars used to go into Miller Road at Gate 4 and load their passengers and pick up their passengers there.

Q: Then most workers lived fairly close to the plant?

M: Yeah, reasonable close, yeah. And then when decentralization took place that didn't happen any more because the companies built the plants where there was no public transportation to and from. So then most of the people who had to go to those new facilities that were opened had to use their own transportation.

Q: Well, I know that in Local 600 there was pretty much controversy over the left- vs. the right-wing in the local elections. Can you tell us a little bit about those?

M: Not any more there isn't not much but--

Q: No, back in the forties and fifties.

M: There was then, sure. There is no doubt about it that the people that were in the left-wing contributed much to the organization in the plant. But after that it become a question of rule or ruin. They weren't satisfied to be organized and that they wanted to rule and if they couldn't rule they wanted to ruin. You see the big changes took place in this International Union of ours in 1946, starting in 1946. In 1946, Walter Reuther was elected President of this International Union but the Executive Board was still under the control of R. J. Thomas and the other people in the head of the union. Although none of those people were communists or real left-wingers, the left-wingers had a lot of influence on those people at that time. Then in 1947 that was changed when they cleaned practically all of these people out so far as regional directorships was concerned in the UAW. And then the Reuther administration then had a majority so far as the Executive Board of the International Union was concerned, and that's when the old saying come out that "With unity at the top and solidarity in the ranks we are going to move forward." They had a lot of influence on some people that were officers of the International Union, and that was all changed starting in 1946 and then climaxed in 1947 when the members of the Executive Board of the International Union changed. It still remains generally the same. I don't think

there was any officer at this International Union even under the Thomas administration were card-carrying communists. I don't think so. Not to my knowledge they weren't. But they wielded outside influence, wielded a lot of power amongst some of the officers of the International Union and the Regional Directors in the International Union.

Q: What does that mean for their policies in the union? What did it mean to be influenced by the communists?

M: Huh?

Q: What did it mean to be influenced by the communists? What would it--

M: Well, when the party line changed, the communists they never knew what they were going to do. The party line changed for them in Moscow and it changed three or four times a day. So you would have them running around here spouting off about one thing in the morning, and then the party line would change in Moscow and they were spouting off something else in the afternoon.

Q: And what about these officers who were influenced by them?

M: Huh?

Q: What about the officers who were influenced by them?

M: Well they were, that was doing something so far as the structure of the International Union was concerned.

Q: What do you mean by that?

M: What do I mean by that? I mean by that that it was a bad influence.

Q: Did it have--can you tell by the way that they acted, their trade union policies?

M: Yes, many of them, many of them you could tell at that time.

Q: Can you give me some examples of that?

M: No, that has changed considerably since that time.

Q: Yeah, but can you give me an example of how it might have affected their policies back in the forties and fifties?

M: Huh?

Q: Can you give me an example of the way that those policies might have been affected back in the forties and fifties?

M: No, I couldn't give you any particular examples. But I know what they used to spout off here, you know. "You whites get out of the way or we're going to walk right over you. They were non-communists that said that. They were in the left-wing so far as the local union was concerned. You had the right-wingers and the left-wingers.

Q: Okay, then in contrast to that what were the policies of the right-wing? Do you have any--

M: Huh?

Q: How did the right-wing conduct its union affairs? Can you tell me a little bit about the way the right-wing union _____?

M: Yes, they were honest. They were honest and they were honest with the membership, generally speaking that happened. And they had as much to offer and sometimes more to offer than the others. I don't say that a commie couldn't have something good to offer. And because there was a commie that thought because it was good it shouldn't be supported. Yes, I agree with that, agreed with them they have the right to say what they thought, defend their right to say it, but object strenuously to an agreement with what they were saying.

- Q: So did you approve of or disprove of the House UnAmerican Activities investigation of Local 600?
- M: Yeah, some of it. You see there were some of the people that you have been talking to that were expelled from the union.
- Q: Well, did you think that that was a good thing or a bad thing for the union?
- M: No, I thought it was a bad thing. I thought it was a bad thing.
- Q: Is that because you felt that the union members should decide or what?
- M: Yeah, we should decide whether they're capable of being members of this union or not. Not McCarthy and them.
- Q: Would you say that the communists were attempting to explain to the workers the ideals of socialism in the plant or did they mainly stick with trade union issues?
- M: Not on trade union issues all the time, no. They couldn't defend it based on what's happening in the Soviet Union, and what has happened since then. Can anybody agree that there is free trade unions in the Soviet Union?
- Q: No.
- M: There isn't and never has been and there never will be so long as you've got a dictatorship. Under any dictatorship you can't have these free trade unions. The example of that is in Poland now.
- Q: But did--when they conducted their union business, did they attempt to convince the workers about the merits of socialism?
- M: Yeah, sure they did.
- Q: And how about the fellow travelers, the others on the left?
- M: Well, they listened and sometimes supported, sure.

Q: Did they have an influence on the workers as to their--

M: Oh sure, in some locations they did. Some of the people that you're now probably interviewing sit down in their building behind a lot of boxes on Joe Stalin's birthday and sing "Happy Birthday" to Joe Stalin.

Q: Would you say that the communist influence or the left-wing influence was stronger in some departments than in others?

M: Well, that's possible but I couldn't describe them or I couldn't give you any location where that was true, no.

Q: What about the communist influence during the wartime, when we were in World War II?

M: Well, do you know where they were when the World War started?

Q: Yes, I have that. I have read a few things and--

M: Yeah.

Q: Do you want to explain what your view of their influence was in the union?

M: My view of the thing was they were a bunch of goddamn cowards at that time. They were hooked up with the Germans when the war started. It's only when Germany turned against--they were singing "The boys won't go, the boys won't go" at the start. And after Russia got involved--yeah, they couldn't send enough troops over when Russia got involved in the war. That happened on the West Coast I think, my dear, where they had a five-year no-strike agreement after the war was over.

Q: Which union are you talking about?

M: I'm talking about the seafarers union.

- Q: So would you think that the union practice during the war of the communists was that they wouldn't strike and?
- M: At the start while Russia wasn't involved and then when Russia was involved, no, no, you can't do that, you can't do that.
- Q: How about the labor turnover during the war? Did that--was there a lot of turnover of men coming into the plant and going out during the World War II?
- M: Oh sure there was. There was a big influx of people. They hired anybody that was warm during the war.
- Q: Did that make a difference for the types of solidarity that there might have been within the union?
- M: No, I think the solidarity was maintained during the war so far as the union was concerned.
- Q: And what about the new people, were they coming up from the South mainly at the start?
- M: Well, a lot of them and the places where they congregated most out of the South was in I suppose around Flint, Michigan, Pontiac, Michigan. There was a big big influx of Southerners into those communities.
- Q: And--
- M: And here too.
- Q: Could you notice any difference in their attitudes towards unionism?
- M: No.
- Q: Were they pretty good unionists?
- M: Generally speaking, the most of them turned out to be pretty fair-minded and active members so far as the union was concerned.

Q: Was there any left-wing activity in the building units that you were involved with?

M: No, no.

Q: The right-wing was dominant through the whole period?

M: No, I would--there were some of the men there, sure, but they never dominated it and that was the largest unit in the Rouge plant. There was over 14,000 UAW members in the Aircraft building when it reached its peak. They were producing the engines for the bombers.

Q: Where did most of those workers come from?

M: Well--

Q: Did they transfer from other plants or--

M: Yes, because there was no--the automobile production then practically died, so they were transferred from the other units in the plant into the Aircraft building during the war.

Q: Did many outside workers come in?

M: Oh many people were hired in, sure, many new people were hired in. And then after the war was over they all matriculated back to their units that they had been transferred from, after the war.

Q: What's your opinion of the administratorship that the International Union imposed on Local 600 in 1952?

M: That's because of the activities of some of the people at Local 600.

Q: Do you think that it was successful or--

M: It would have been detrimental to the welfare of the International Union. That's why an administrator is put over any local union because the activities in that local union may be detrimental to the welfare of the International Union.

Q: So you agree with that position?

M: When an administrator is needed they should be placed over it because the business of the local union isn't being conducted based on the constitution of the International Union.

Q: Do you think that the administratorship succeeded?

M: Yes, it did, yes it did. This has become a quietened down local union and a well behaved local union and made a big contribution so far as the International Union is concerned and still does, still does.

Q: Well what happened to the left-wing unions--I mean the left-wing union leaders that either got kicked out by the administratorship or by the House UnAmerican Activities? What happened to them after all this occurred?

M: I don't know what happened to some of them but the International Union didn't become vindictive about that. Many of those who are in leadership of this International Union of ours got jobs with the International Union. Many of them they were affiliated with the AF of L. Many of them went to the AF of L. R. J. Thomas went to the AF of L. Dick Leonard went to the AF of L. Jack Livingston went to the AF of L. They were all--

Q: What about people who were involved with the Local 600?

M: Huh?

Q: What about the left-wingers who were involved with the Local 600?

M: I don't know what happened to any of them.

Q: Did they stay around in the plants even though they couldn't run for office?

M: I don't know who was all expelled at that time.

Q: Well, some of the ones--there were five that were expelled by the administratorship. That was Boatin, McPhaul, Nelson Davis, Ed Locke.

M: Ed Locke. They went back to the plant.

Q: They just worked as rank and file.

M: Worked in the plant. Boatin went back to the plant. Boatin went back to the plant and then quit, then became a contractor--became an employer. So far as I know that's what he got into. He got into the construction business. Ed Locke continued until he retired.

Q: I would like to get back a little bit to the kind of political influence that the right- vs. the left-wing might have had on workers. When it came to voting in elections do you think that the policies of the union leader had an effect on the way the workers themselves would vote in elections for a United States President and Vice President?

M: Well, generally speaking, I think they had some influence, generally speaking, and of course the economic situation in the country had a lot of bearing on that too, as to how it was affecting the welfare of the workers in the plant. You were able to convey some of that stuff back to the workers of what was happening so far as the administration in the country was concerned and the reaction to what was happening. You can see what's happening today, can't you?

Q: Uh-huh. But how did the alignments go? Did the right-wing support the Democratic Party in those times?

M: Yeah.

Q: And what about the left-wing?

M: I was the oldest precinct delegate in the State of Michigan in the Democratic Party, yeah.

Q: And the left-wing within the union, who did they?

M: They generally supported the--generally the same candidates that we supported at that time.

Q: Was anybody in favor of Wallace in '48?

M: No, not that I know of, not that I know. And, of course, we are not sailing in tranquil waters today either. It's not the same as it used to be, you know, as far as the union is concerned. It used to be you were able to get a fair share of the pie, but then recently there has been no pie so now instead of getting it, it's giving. It's a question of either a job or no job in a lot of instances. That's why the upset on the part of everybody so far as this administration is concerned. They haven't done anything to try and alleviate the situation.

Q: Going back a little bit to the period during World War II, can you tell me what some of the right-wing policies were in the plant concerning incentives, incentive pays and the no-strike pledge?

M: The no-strike pledge was taken at the meeting in the Masonic Temple. R. J. Thomas was the President of this International Union at that time and so far as the incentives were concerned the International Union had been opposed to the incentive plan. But they got an incentive plan here at the steel mill in the Rouge plant at that time because it was a question of either the steel mill being closed down or getting more production out. So the Ford Motor Company laid the gauntlet down and they said we either close the mill down or we go to an incentive plan. And it took a long long time to convince the

International Union by people here at Local 600 to allow an incentive plan to be put in the Rouge plant.

Q: At what time was this?

M: Oh, that's--I'm not too sure of the year, dear, when the incentive plan went in. But now the thing has changed. Now they want the incentive plan out of there or they're going to close down because they can't meet the domestic competition in steel. Now this is what the whole issue is now so far as that plant at the Rouge is concerned, whether it is going to stay open or whether it is going to close based on the amount of concessions that the workers in that plant are willing to give.

Q: So what about the no-strike pledge also. Did the right-wing oppose the no strike pledge?

M: No, the right-wing supported the no strike pledge.

Q: And did it support the incentives?

M: That was the equality of sacrifice program.

Q: Uh huh.

M: Yeah.

Q: Okay, I think that that's--