SIDE 1 - William V. Banks by

Jim Coppess.

COPPESS: ...1933 Briggs Strike. Today's date is February 21st, 1975. O.K. You can just start by giving a brief biography.

BANKS: Well, my name is William Banks and I was born May the 6th, 1903 on a farm in Geneva, Kentucky. In 19 and 22 I received my diploma from Lincoln, University in Kentucky. I'm the father of three children: two girls and a boy. I graduated from Detroit College of Law in 19 and 29, was admitted to the bar the following year. I practiced law in the city of Detroit since that time. I was first appointed to public office by the late governor Frank Murphy. I retired from the practice of law in 19 and 50. Became active in various other public organizations and became head of International Masons. Very well.

COPPESS: O.K. Um- what was your involvement in the Briggs Strike. I know you were an attorney but was that your main involvement as an attorney?

BANKS: I was also head of the International Labor Defense at that time here in the city of Detroit.

COPPESS: Well how was uh- were you active in the strike defense?

BANKS: Naturally I had to be active in whatever defense of labor at that time that was most dominant. That's what our organization would do.

COPPESS: Yeah. Well, how was the legal defense for that strike organized? Do

you remember that?

BANKS: Sure.

COPPESS: This is the 1933 Briggs Strike.

BANKS: Sure. In the first place, when the strike was called we knew that it was going to be a rather unusual fight to say the least so we had our various branches of International Labor Defense which was set up in groups of cells differed throughout the city. We had them to participate in the fight and also be on hand in case of arrests and other ways in which the International Labor Defense would play a part. So naturally they began to arrest the strikers. And the first movement this thing that I remember helpin', they had arrested, oh- less than a hundred of the strikers in one day and I was right there the beginning of it and we had taken all of their cases on to defend them and we were getting council for them and I was chief of the council. So after they bought these cases to trial out in Highland Park, I demanded a jury trial for all of them. And as I said it was less than a hundred. I don't remember the exact number, but it was a large number. Something like eighty or more cases. And the prosecutor took the position that we would be there most of the year trying to try these cases and they were naturally gong to keep arresting more so they could see the courts there and how in part being bogged down

hopelessly. So they came to me with a proposition that if we picked out- if they picked out a few of their best cases- I think it was around seven or eight,somethin' like that- and they tried them and they were all convicted, would I then be willing to waive a jury trial on the rest of them and try them before the court. So we got in conference on this and we agreed to that. So we took up the first case-I wouldn't remember the names now- we took up the first case and before we got more than an hour and a half or two hours in the case, the judge took the position that they were being tried for high misdemeanors, low misdemeanors, disturbances of the peace and so forth and that it was nothing could come out about the strike to the jury. The only thing we could bring out to the jury was that they struck this officer, they stabbed this horse, they did something else. We couldn't bring out anything about the strike because he felt that this would naturally influence the jury. So, we adjourned court for a recess while I dug up some cases to show him that this impossible to try a case like that. The law was on our side. That we had to bring out all the circumstances surrounding it and how it came about. Well, even though we had the law to support it, he took the position that that was his ruling and if I asked any questions concerning

the strike, he would find me in contempt of court. Send me to jail as a lawyer. And I said,'well if we go on with this case I'm goin' to ask that question'. So without saying any more he went back and took the stand, called a case. So the first question I asked, ' why were you here?' So he sit there on the bench and turned red because he knew that I was defying him. Right. But the prosecutor had to agreee with me that I had that right. So the first case we tried was found not guilty. And we tried three or four cases more and each of them was found not guilty. So the prosecutor could see that I was going to win this idea of trying his best cases and gettin' a verdict of not guilty. So on the basis of that we compromised all of the rest of the cases very much to our favor. That's just about it.

COPPESS: Do- Were you able to introduce a lot of material about the strike after you had once asked the question?

BANKS: I was goin' to produce everything about it 'cause it's just like anything else. Of course they knew this: that the public out here those people were workin' people. They're in favor of people havin' to strike; it's the only weapon. But he figured if he could keep that out, then he could just about have a good time to find 'em not guilty. Somebody just come out here and hit you in the mouth and uh- See? Somebody stabbed a horse just because there was

a horse there, naturally he'd be guilty.

COPPESS: Yeah. Would- Do you remember this case I have in my notes about- you represented these three young women strikers before the justice of the peace Batter in Highland Park and they had unemployed juries. Do you remember that?

BANKS: Yeah. He was uh- Batter was the uh- judge at the time. He's the judge that I was before there. He's the one that threatened to find me in contempt.

COPPESS: Well, what were these unemployed- these juries of unemployed workers? Was that common or was that unusual?

BANKS: Well, sure. After all, employment was very rampant at that time and it's just like it is perhaps now if not worse that uh- most of the people who were employed had reasons to not get on the jury. So as a result the people who would get on the jury would usually be unemployed people. They had nothing else to do and was glad they were earning money- that jury money.

COPPESS: Oh I see. The newspapers made a big deal out of it being unemployed workers on the jury. I didn't know if that was unusual.

BANKS: Well, no. It was the times. Unless the times was unusual. The times in which we are living now are unusual. You might say is not normal.

COPPESS: Yeah. Well, in that same case the news makes a big point of uh- saying

that you- that you purposely identified yourself as from International Labor Defense.

BANKS: That's right. Why should I want to hide that? I was there to defend the workers.

COPPESS: Well, did you make a big point out of that, then?

BANKS: Sure. That labor- labor has its defense here. Because see at that time, the right to strike even was still in question and the right to picket was still in question. Why they even- when we were marchin' to Ford's after then when we were marchin' Ford out here at River Rouge, they killed some workers at that time. Shot 'em down because they kept goin'. So that was- those were perilous times for workers. So I certainly- I knew that when I identified myself with the workin' class, that the workers would naturally - all of those on the jury or any other place would be in sympathy with me and knowing that I am sympathetic to their cause 'cause most lawyers at that time didn't want to identify themselves with the workers. It was like saying, it was even- just like sayin' you were a communist. Because to them, the only people who identified themselves with workin' class people were communist. So it was just like saying you were a communist when you identified yourself with- And that- and then to get a brand of

communist was ten times as bad as it is now.

COPPESS: Were the defenses you conducted political defenses in terms of-

BANKS: I was-

COPPESS: ...defending people as workers?

BANKS: No. I wasn't interested in political- politics. I didn't care if they were Republicans, Democrats, uh- communist uh- any other belief. I didn't go into that political belief. I wasn't interested in that.

COPPESS: No. I meant in the way that you conducted the defense. Did you make a big deal about the strike and things like that?

BANKS: Oh, sure.

COPPESS: Um- There's another case involving a guy named John Lee who was - he was picked up supposedly for um- Well they're two stories. The strikers say that he was picked up because he refused an order from his parole officer to uh- to report to Briggs to take a job during the strike and the police said he was picked up on suspicion of having committed robbery. Do you remember that case?

BANKS: No, I don't.

COPPESS: O.K. I thought maybe- I thought maybe you were involved in that.

BANKS: No, I don't remember that.

COPPESS: Um- was there a difference between the way the strikers were treated by the Highland Park police and the way they were treated by the Detroit police?

BANKS: The Detroit police were not a part of that. That was only in Highland Park.

So it is entirely-

COPPESS: So, you're activities were all around the Highland Park plant, then.

BANKS: Oh, yeah. That's where the strike was. In Highland Park.

COPPESS: Well, they had four plants around the city. They had the one out on Mack Avenue, you know the one that's a Chrysler plant?

BANKS: Well, I wasn't involved in that strike out there.

COPPESS: O.K. Um- well, did you spend much time out on the picket line at Highland Park or uh- or in the strike headquarters?

BANKS: My- Most of my time was spent in uh- the International Labor Defense. We had an office up on Woodward Avenue and our various branches around the city , where I stayed in constant communication with my office up there. So I spent most of mytime up there. I would just go out there, just as you might say out of curiosity or to see what was going on and happening.

COPPESS: Well how did um- how did International Labor Defense get involved in the strike?

BANKS: Well, the International Labor Defense had been organized for years- I don't know how long before I was brought into it, It was conducted mainly by people who represented a union who set this organization up and organized from different shops- groups that were meeting ususally about once a month as I remember it now in order to keep their

organization together and to know just what activity they would take in the shops and in the communities. See it was a regular set up organization I- that had branches where we could organize.

COPPESS: Um- well what did International Labor Defense- did it do anything outside of get attorneys for the strikers. Did it do anything else to support the strike?

BANKS: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. We would make up leaflets setting forth labor point of view and distribute through our various branches, were distributed to the people out on the street and especially the people in the plant and the people coming out of the plant and so forth. We carried on whatever, as we used to call it, agit-prop. possible. And it means agitation and propaganda. (Laughter). We called it the agit- prop. department.

COPPESS: Well how many peo- Do you remember how many people were active out of International Labor Defense then around the time of the strike would have been participating in supporting the strike?

BANKS: Well, of course that would fluctuate according to what was going on. In normal times, when there was nothing in particular that labor was involved in, we had something like less than fifty branches around the city with uh- approximately ten or twelve people just about in each branch. Some of 'em would run up to twenty-five and some of 'em

run down to four or five people. But they - I'd say that our average around ten or twelve people a branch. So it was pretty- we had a pretty strong organization then.

COPPESS: Around the middle of February the General Defense Committee from the IWW came in to start conducting defense especially at Highland Park, I think. Do you remember why that change took place in the defense work?

BANKS: I don't remember that.

COPPESS: O.K. I thought - Um- Do you - You remember Phil Raymond who led the strike at that-

BANKS: Oh, yeah. I remember Phil Raymond very well.

COPPESS: Well, there was- there was a certain amount of opposition to his leadership that developed in the strike. Do you remember if that was any particular group of strikers that led that, or if it- Or how that came to be?

BANKS: No, I don't. Phil Raymond was very militant and he was one of our best officers in the International Labor Defense. I don't remember any particular reason why any opposition developed to him. I can tell you this. That every leader in those times, was constantly under fire and attempt to discredit him in every way possible. If they could find anything in his background at all the F.B.I. was workin' with the

local government and if they could find anything at all to discredit a man, they would discredit him. And we had a lot of people at that time thatwould come in and sign up as workers in our plant just for the purpose of stirring up trouble and making trouble among the workers. Try to divide them and so forth . You can't just imagine now- as a young fellow- you can't imagine how much that was done. They would put- they would hire people, bring 'em in there and just in order for them to get in there and find ways of makin' trouble and dividing the workers. And a lot of times they would even lead in assaulting a police officer or something like that just in order to get the workers uh- discredit and so forth. So, I don't remember specifically, but I remember Phil Raymond was a very militant worker, fighter and part of our organization.

COPPESS: Well um- Phil Raymond, of course, as a member of the Communist Party at that time because he had run for office and think like that.

BANKS: We didn't make any difference. I didn't make any difference as to what polit- I told you before. I'm not interested in a man's political beliefs and they would try to stamp- like they later tried to stamp President Roosevelt as a communist. Anybody that had a following among the workers, it is up to the F.B.I. at that time and other state organizations to try to show anything possible

to make him a person who is undesirable as uh- being- workin' with law and authority. So that uh- that would not be unusual.

OPPESS: No.. What I was wondering about though was I read some articles in the Party Organizer, a magazine that the Communist Party put out back then, about the Young Communist League organizing at the Briggs plant in Highland Park and also I think the Auto Workers Union had some perspective to start organizing there. I was wondering if once the strike started, you heard anything about how that organizing went. How they would conduct their organizing or if those people were still around and active and what sort of activities they were involved in?

ANKS: In every labor- formation that it would take their place- formation that would take place, you would have a large flux of membership that would come in at that time. The Young Communist League was very active and uh- naturally during that time when their fathers and mothers were involved in the various labor movement, their sons and daughters would become active in the Young Communist League. And they were just like young people now. People are no different. The thing that was most prominent. The thing that was most attention was the thing that always attract the young people in. They'd come in and take part in it and you'd always have more

sympathetic uh- attitude towards them because they are young people. I-I don't remember just what the age is but I know they would start anywhere from eight and nine years old and go up to seventeen-eighteen years old. Young Communist League.

COPPESS: Um- during the strike, a lot of the radical, political groups in Detroit, at least five of 'em that I found out, came around the strike and were passing out stuff and speaking and some of 'em were among the strikers. Do you remember what each of those groups did? The role they played in the strike?

BANKS: They were all doin' just about the same thing. They would meet, just like we would meet in our office, formulate what the literature should contain, what should be the demands and what position that we were going to take on every question that came up and then when we got- after we had formulated that, the committee then would have a committee that would publish it by way of leaflets because the newspapers uh- at that time were very anti-labor and they would hardly publish anything that they thought the public would more or less agree with that labor was doing.

COPPESS: Um- also as I understand it that during the strike the police had a practice of arresting strikers and then moving them from police station to police station, every twenty-four hours.

BANKS: Yeah, they did quite a bit of that, yeah. I've forgotten what they

called that. We- Oh I think we called that a round robin procedure that they had. That they'd arrest them and we would call up and they'd say 'yeah, they were here, but uh- we had to send 'em over to such and such a place because we had too many people here to fill the cells'and then you'd get over there 'no, they're not here' and then if you finally found 'em ' yeah, we sent 'em to such place' so that way they'd keep 'em in jail.

COPPESS: How would you handle that? Was there any way you could uh- get around them doing that? Make 'em stop doing that sort of thing?

BANKS: No, there was no way you could really stop them. You' just had to use harassment. You had to keep them so busy until they couldn't do it. In other words we get out as many habus corpuses as we could, and serve it on the police department. Now when you get out of habus corpus, the police have to answer it. So, they come into court and then you show that where they were arrested and so forth and he says, 'yes, they were here, but they were transferred there'. And the judge would say, 'alright, then you have him before me at such and such a time and such and such a place'. And that way we'd tie up so many police until finally they'd have to come through with it. Just a matter, as I said, of harassment. They were harassing us, and we in turn were doing what we could to harass

them.

COPPESS: Um- also during the strike, one night early on in the strike, Phil Raymond was arrested coming from a meeting of strikers. And I think Maurice Sugar was his personal attorney. But were you involved in that at all? In his defense or do you-

BANKS: Yes. Morris Sugar had been in the movement oh, I imagine twenty years before I came into it. He was a lawyer here in the city of Detroit. And uh- he was acquainted with all of those persons like Philip Raymond who had been active over the years. And they would get in touch with him because they knew him personally.

COPPESS: Well, later on in the strike, I think in the beginning of March or so, at the Mack Avenue plant, there was- some strikers started up this organization called the American Industrial Association. Do you remember anything about that?

BANKS: No, I don't.

COPPESS: O.K. Was it- Did you notice any particular trade of worker bein' in the lead of the strike. For instance, I see a lot of references to metal finishers, uh- as being the leaders of the strike. Did you come in contact with a lot of them?

BANKS: I don't know of that.

COPPESS: Um- also I came across a Young Communist League leaflet which mentioned attempts of they said, politicians, I don't know who they're

referring to, to try and recruit black workers from the lower east side to be strike breakers during the strike. Do you remember if any of that went on?

BANKS: Oh, yeah. They did that everywhere. See at that time you can't quite imagine that uh- in a lot of plants there was no black workers in there at all. In some plants there 100% white. And those who did have black workers they would be pushin' a broom, cleaning a toilet, somethin'- somethin' menial and you might say degrading, 'cause that is always attempt to make a division between the white workers and the black workers so that they - there would be contempt always between the two groups. So, we had to make special effort to get-uh- bring blacks in to the International Labor Defense because before I came in there it was all white.

COPPESS: Well, did the- were the strikers successfully able to overcome that?

BANKS: Yes, we were able to do that to a great extent because many of the militant, most militant white workers, their parents had come from Europe. They didn't have this natural inbred racial animosity here in the United States. So that when we showed them the idea that this was just an effort to divide the workers, they could understand it much better than a native born worker, because a

native born worker, most of them had come here from the South and they had in them that the black man was inferior by nature. They felt that, so it was much harder to reach them. Even though when we reached them, they usually were more militant than that child of a foreign born person because they say, 'well, we are Americans here'. And they- at that time, foreign borns were looked upon with a little bit disfavor so that when the naturally the native born American felt that he was- you might say had more rights than the foreign born did.

COPPESS: Would- Do you remember anything else about the strike that we haven't got into? I've been mainly asking you about the legal end because I didn't know if you were involved in other things.

BANKS: No, I wasn't too involved in other things. I had my hands full tryin' to look after the International Labor Defense. As I said, I was head of it at that time. I think they called it secretariat. And I was elected the secretariat of the International Defense Labor here in Detroit. With uh- office up there on Woodward Avenue. So it kept me just about busy and that-

COPPESS: That was a full time job.

BANKS: Yeah. That's right. Full time job.

COPPESS: O.K. Well that's about all my questions.

BANKS: Very well.

END OF TAPE.