

Oral History Interview of Mr. Norman Bully by Jack Skeels, University of Michigan - Wayne State University Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, October 12, 1961.

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

OF

NORMAN BULLY

I was born in Flint, Michigan. I have always lived in Flint or in the immediate vicinity of Flint. I went to the Flint public schools. I graduated from Flint High School. I became a student at General Motors Institute. I became a layout-inspector in the skilled classification at General Motors, as soon as I was out of school, I went to work in the Buick Motor Company where my father had worked since 1906. I still have about 31 years of seniority there. Question: what kind of conditions did you have in the shop when you went in in 1929 and '30?

Bully: Conditions were a great deal different than they are now.

The work was very hard. The hours were great. The supervision was on our backs all the time.

Interviewed By  
Jack W. Skeels

Higher supervision was watching them very closely. I can remember when I came into the plant in 1930 that a normal workday at that time was 9 hours a day from 7 to 5 with an hour for lunch and 5 hours on Saturday. This was a normal workweek. As you can see that there are some differences and some improvements there. When I was a boy I can remember my father being involved in trying to get a 10-hour day when he was an active labor union member. So we made improvements. These were the conditions. Many of these things that happened are almost unbelievable now.

University of Michigan - Wayne State University  
Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations  
October 12, 1961

Oral History Interview of Mr. Norman Bully by Jack Skeels, University of Michigan - Wayne State University Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, October 12, 1961.

I was born in Flint, Michigan, in 1912. I have always lived in Flint or in the immediate vicinity of Flint. I went to the Flint public schools. I graduated from Flint High School. I became a student at General Motors Institute. I became a layout inspector in the skilled classification at General Motors. As soon as I was out of school, I went to work in the Buick Motor Company where my father had worked since 1906. I still have about 31 years of seniority there.

Skeels: What kind of conditions did you have in the shop when you went in in 1929 and '30?

Bully: Conditions were a great deal different than they are now. The work was very hard. The demands were great. The supervision was on our backs all the time. Of course, the higher supervision was watching them very closely. I can remember when I came into the plant in 1930 that a normal workday at that time was 9 hours a day from 7 to 5 with an hour for lunch and 5 hours on Saturday. This was a normal workweek. So you can see that there are some differences and some improvements there. When I was a boy I can remember my father being involved in trying to get a 10-hour day when he was an active labor union member. So we made improvements. Those were the conditions. Many of these things that happened are almost unbelievable now.

Any repairs that we were responsible for in our work, we had to do after our normal workday, without pay. We were required to do many things without pay. We got paid after our workday was over. We lined up to get our checks. There was no seniority protection and no job protection. We got laid off without notice of any kind and without any reason. We were recalled at the whim of the foreman. We stood at the gates day after day after day waiting for them to say, "Well, I will call you in." It was entirely up to the foreman.

Things have changed a great deal. *we our efforts to organize. The unions*

Skeels: Was the employment pretty seasonal in those days? *refused*

Bully: Very much so. It was completely at the whim of the supervisor, not necessarily because there was not work but if he found someone whom he preferred to give the job to he just did it. It was not only seasonal employment it was also at the whim of your employer. Work may be very good and yet you find yourself out of a job.

*Bully* In fact when I hired in at Buick, I hired in at Buick because I was a catcher. The regular catcher of the baseball team in the plant that I worked in had broken his hand. I had been a catcher in high school and they needed a catcher. So I got a job. The fellow with the broken hand lost his job. He had a family. These were the conditions at that time. *out, for and against.*

Skeels: When did the union start to come in? *unions. They*

Bully: As I said before, my dad was a labor union official when I was just a small boy. However, they made very little progress. But

I remember the union's efforts to organize as far back as 1929. The first serious effort or successful effort was in 1933-34-35. This did not actually become the union that we have now. It failed and there were very few people that continued to pay their dues into this union. But in 1936 the union we now have was organized.

Skeels: Did many people join the AFL federal labor unions in the early days?

Bully: Yes. We had good membership in the early days in the union. However, there were no results from our efforts to organize. The unions themselves had no real program. The union failed because it refused to support the workers and their demands. However, in 1936 with our first successful efforts to organize, we found that the union did have a program. It has continued to grow and expand until the present day.

Skeels: How did you go about organizing in the early days or weren't you part of the organization?

Bully: I sure was. Well, everybody did what he could. Everybody talked to the fellow across the road and the fellow who rode with him and the fellow who worked with him and to his neighbors and his relatives. That was the main topic of conversation I would say in Flint for a period of a couple of years. No matter where you went, this is what people talked about, for and against. In the plants it was not difficult to organize the unions. They organized themselves almost because people were just so tired and so disgusted and so discouraged with the conditions they worked under



and the kind of security, or lack of security, they had that they were anxious to join the union. Of course, we had some people who hid behind other reasons for not joining. They thought they would do better or had been doing better by being friends with the boss or relatives to supervision. They resisted. We also had some people who conscientiously resisted. I feel they conscientiously resisted either for religious reasons or principles that they felt were important. However, eventually they all joined the union.

Skeels: Before the sit-downs came I suppose there were not too many people in the union at Buick?

Bully: No, there were not. I would say 5 per cent of the total employees were in the union. They were consistently in the union. However, it never really started to expand and work until late 1936.

Skeels: When the sit-down was occurring at Fisher and Chevrolet, what was the affect upon your plant at that time?

Bully: Fisher and Chevrolet and Standard Cotton and some of these other plants who actually sat down in their plants were fighting our fight and we felt that we should be sitting down with them. However, it was not necessary. We did not even have the opportunity because when the Fisher Body Number 1 workers sat down, there were no more bodies available so the Buick was locked out. They locked us out of the plant. We could not work. So most of us went out to the other plants and helped with the sit-down strikes. Some of us, myself and many other fellows, climbed in and out of those plants to relieve

Bully: It is hard to say when the thing started to move it seems

those fellows. We took our turns sitting in the plants. We worked on getting food and many other tasks outside of the plants that had to be done in order to maintain the fellows in the plants. So Buick people found themselves pretty well occupied supporting the strikes at Fisher and Chevrolet and Standard Cotton.

There was quite a bit of volunteer union help in those days. There was no problem at all in getting help. Everybody wanted to be a part of it. It was not difficult to get food and the like either. Some of it was purchased but most of it was donated. In fact, I remember taking trucks and going out into the farm areas around here and getting whole truckloads of potatoes and whole beef carcasses and things like that donated by farmers to support the strikers. We had the support of the community.

Skeels: Was there some feeling that it might not be possible to win the strike at the time it was occurring?

Bully: Yes. Of course there is always this feeling. People are a little timid about new and strange things and about defying some of the old order. However, I honestly believe that most of the fellows felt as I felt that conditions had gotten bad enough so that it did not make any difference what happened. We could not lose any more than we had lost. They could not get much worse. The most we could lose was a job that we could not make a living on anyway. This was the worst thing that could happen to us.

Skeels: What types of people tended to come in first out at Buick?

Bully: It is hard to say when the thing started to move it seems

that everybody came. There was no type, the young fellows, the older men, everyone seemed equally to desire the union, to want the union, and to support the union. better working conditions, better lighting.

Skeels: Who were some of the people that played an important role in these early days in Buick? these things seem minor and insignificant

Bully: There are many of them and lots of them are still around.

I can recall at the present time names like Art Case, who was a regional director and officer of the union, John McGill, Ed Geiger, Marlin Butler, Earl Hawk, Roy Middleton and Jack Holt. There are so many that I know I missed some of them this way. I would not want to offend them. But there are many. There are still some of those fellows who were active who are still active. Still some of them are officers of our union at Buick. But there are so many of them that it is hard to remember their names or to recall them. It would not be difficult to make a list of them. in the foundry in Buick, which

Skeels: When the General Motors strike was settled in February of 1937, how did this affect the Buick plant? at the end of a drop cord.

Bully: We had formal recognition of the union. This was the important thing. This is what so many people had waited for or had held off waiting for some form of recognition. When we had recognition, we had a little one-page contract which was very broad but we made the most of it I feel. We interpreted it to be an open-door policy on recognizing the union. So we immediately made the most of it. what

Skeels: Did you have any problem of figuring out what you wanted to do with having just recognition?

Bully: Oh, gosh no! There were so many things that needed changing, ventilation in the plants, safety precautions in the plant, shorter work hours, higher wages, better working conditions, better lighting. All these things were so many needs that kept us so busy we just could not keep up with them. All these things seem minor and insignificant if taken separately but when put all together there was a tremendous job to be done. They kept us so busy that we were three or four years getting these basic needs taken care of, sanitation and safety especially.

There were no showers. There were no provisions for showers or no provisions to even wash your hands before you ate lunch although the foremen and supervisors all had a wash room. There was none provided for the workers. Dining rooms were dirty and infested with cockroaches. The facilities in the cafeterias were terrible. It was just unbelievable.

For instance, I can remember that in the foundry in Buick, which is one of the largest and most modern foundries in the world today, they had drop-cord lights, which is a bulb at the end of a drop cord. The dust, smoke and dirt was so thick in there that you could not recognize a man 12 feet away from you. This was true. People cannot believe that now when they go through these new modern plants and see the air cleaning systems. The plants have been remodeled and redesigned and all the equipment is changed. It is hard to get people to understand what an old foundry was like and what the situation was and what the conditions were that men worked under. But these things have been

to meet with the union?



rectified now. But it has been a long time and it was a hard job getting it done. But there were so many things that needed to be done that it was unbelievable.

Skeels: Was most of your work then done just at the local level at that time?

Bully: Yes. The first contract just seemed to cut the cord. Everybody went to work trying to remedy the working conditions in their plant, trying to bring up their wage rates, trying to eliminate the favoritism with our seniority systems, and trying to design and work out the problems of seniority. So we actually did know what we wanted and could work out some kind of system that was fair. Every plant in the area had a different idea of how they should work and today it is still true.

Each of these plants has their own independent idea of what kind of protection seniority should give. It is designed primarily on a trial and error method in that particular plant. They are not the same. This was surprising to me when I first went to work for the international union as an international representative. I assumed that Buick had the best system that there possibly was because I had helped to fashion it. I did not realize that each plant had some program that met their own individual needs. I was quite surprised and amazed to find all these differences and yet it was what people that worked in that plant wanted.

Skeels: Was management pretty much taken aback when they first had to meet with the union?

Bully: Oh yes! They felt this to be a personal matter. I can remember the superintendents in the various plants looked upon this as a personal insult that threatened their authority and so forth. There was a great deal of resistance at first. Based upon these feelings of, "Just what right does he have to come in here and suggest this to me? That is my responsibility," and so forth. But you know over the years it worked itself out. We do not have this sort of relationship today. Most of the foremen and supervisors learned to get along with the union. Those who did not were eventually eliminated through age, retirement and so on. Then we found a new situation. We found that management was recognizing that young men in the plant who showed ability or leadership in the union made pretty good management material too. So we started to lose many of our union leaders to management. So we eventually found ourselves in the plant with a superintendent who had been a committeeman. He was a good superintendent too.

Skeels: Why was it that the various locals like Buick broke away from Local 156?

Bully: First of all, each of us had a different situation to deal with. We did not realize all these reasons at the time. For instance, at Buick we had a fairly large membership a large self-contained automobile factory with many different types of work. Our problems were not exactly the same as they were at Fisher Body where they manufactured a body and more or less one type of work. I do not mean

one type of work but at Buick, for instance, we had foundries, forges, machine shops, assembly shops, maintenance shops and powerhouses. We had all of these things. At some of the other plants they had merely an assembly plant. So our problems were really different. We did not realize it, at least I did not, that at that time that was our problem. Each of us felt that we ought to have autonomy to settle our own problems.

When we talked about seniority provisions and union security, we found that the things that Fisher Body wanted to do or another plant wanted to do did not meet our needs; so we quarrelled. We were continually at odds about the solutions to our problems. It is easy to see now that there was a fundamental reason for it. It just did not work in both places. In addition to that there was a certain matter of pride involved for each plant. They wanted to be identified with the union. They wanted to work out their own programs. They had their own leadership. They were developing leadership. Each felt a need for a local union and so it developed that way.

Skeels: Did the Martin group ever have much of a strong following in the Buick plant?

Bully: Oh yes. We were divided almost 50-50 for a long period of time. Homer Martin was quite a hero. Later some of us became a little disillusioned. But for a long time at Buick it was pretty evenly divided. This, of course, dissipated much of our strength and our ability to negotiate with management successfully. As a result of the big split in '39, we had two bargaining committees at the

Buick. It created a great deal of hard feelings within the union itself. Management capitalized on this. Our progress came to a standstill. However, as soon as the decision was made, things started to work well. Fact, I think they helped to promote it to some extent.

Skeels: What do you think led to the downfall of Martin in the Buick in the Flint area? bar Board in 1939. In fact, just before this vote

Bully: I think that Homer Martin did not have a real concept of organized labor. He lacked the fundamental knowledge of the problems of the people in the plant. While he was a wonderful speaker, a fine personality and really a hard working man and sincere, he found himself unable to cope with the problems. Just talking would not do the job. It got to the point where you had to produce. When he could not produce, rather than lose the power that he had and the office that he had, he started to do things which actually were harmful to the union. As he traveled down that road, it got more and more so, so eventually he eliminated himself. and die strike to be honest about it. It

Skeels: In the Fisher local there were newspaper reports that there were actual battles between the Martin supporters and the CIO supporters. Did things ever reach that level in Buick?

Bully: Oh it was a common occurrence at Buick. In fact there is a park called Oak Park right across the street from the plant 12 gate at Buick. There were at least one or two fist fights every lunch hour there. Sometimes it was not always outside the plant either. It was very heated. We had two unions actually. true. A man who perhaps



We did not get any bargaining with both of them. The company just said, "We do not know who to recognize. We do not know who represents the people." Understandably they took advantage of the situation. In fact, I think they helped to promote it to some extent. Bargaining was re-established, after we had a vote that, I think, was conducted by the Labor Board in 1939. In fact, just before this vote we were successful in Buick in proving to the Martin people that we had superior numbers in our union so that they sort of withdrew prior to the vote. However, the vote did the job.

Skeels: What role did the '39 tool and die strike play or didn't it play much of a role in Buick?

Bully: It was the same as it was in most of these plants in the area. It was a very important strike. It did exactly what the union had hoped it would do. It stopped production at a very crucial time. In fact, it prohibited production from beginning. It was not necessarily completely a tool and die strike to be honest about it. It was a strike by the workers using the organized tool and die industry to keep management from getting into production with the model. It was effective and it worked well.

Skeels: Did it help to get you any more recognition in the plant at the time?

Bully: Yes. It proved one thing to management, the more highly skilled the group and the more difficult it is to replace, the more bargaining strength they have. This is still true. A man who perhaps

is a sweeper in the plant, or a small group of sweepers, without the strength of the rest of the labor movement by themselves, do not have too much bargaining power because they are very simple to replace. However, the more highly skilled the more difficult to replace the worker becomes, the more power they have. For instance, you see the problems that we are having now. In many places it is the tool and die and other skilled workers, who are rejecting contract provisions that apply to them and holding up the entire contracts.

Skeels: Since you could not get things out of Martin, who did the Buick people go to to try to get results in the international at the time?

Bully: Frankly, we pretty much played it by ourselves. Each local union here in Flint did very much the same thing. We had no national leader whom we rallied to. However, George Addes began to emerge as a strong personality and a fellow who we did support for many years after that. George Addes emerged as a real leader. Of course, R. J. Thomas did also. There were others. But those were the two who eventually came out.

Skeels: At the time they were very important. How long did it take until you would say you were back to full strength in your bargaining?

Bully: I think perhaps two weeks after the vote we were back. Two weeks after the vote we were in full swing.

Skeels: Was most of the factionalism within the union subdued by 1940?

Bully: No. It was not. It was intensified more and more. The moment we disposed of the factionalism that came about because of Martin, we found ourselves with a factional fight between what we call the left wing or pro-communist group within our union and those who resisted. We found this developing. This became even a much more bitter factional fight than we had had before that. In fact, the thing never did completely get straightened out until after Reuther was elected president of the UAW.

Skeels: Did you find after the split that you had fewer problems of wildcat strikes and the like than you had right after you got your first recognition?

Bully: No, I do not think that that was true. I think that right after our recognition we had many wildcat strikes of very short duration and usually successful. But after the split we had many wildcat strikes but they were a different type of strike at that time. They were more organized at that time and they were for different reasons. They were not for an immediate problem of a new safety device on one machine or something like that. They were more broad and fundamental reasons from whole plants.

For instance, we wanted a wash-up period for the whole plant or perhaps a pay increase for the whole plant or safety precautions for the entire plant. We found that they were more broad and the problems represented more workers. There were not so many problems, but they were more fundamental to all the people. When we first



organized, if we needed something on one job or for one man's protection and we did not get it, we struck the plant. This happened and it was usually successful. But as I say later while we still had the same unauthorized type of strike, it was for a different reason, more fundamental and more broad in its application and not quite so successful either because we got into the war period then and we had the no-strike pledge. This, of course, found us in trouble with our international union. I say, "us," but many of our local unions found themselves in trouble not only with the government and with the management of the plants, but also, with our own international union.

Skeels: Now in the prewar period would the company bargain when you were out on a wildcat strike?

Bully: They sure did. This is the way it was done. I remember getting fired seven times in one year, in 1937. None of them ever stuck. What actually happened was we went in to management with the demands from the fellows I represented in this particular plant. I worked in the transmission plant, which employed some 1,200 people. We made transmissions for Buicks, Oldsmobiles, and Pontiacs in this plant. We went to the superintendent with a problem I had not been able to settle with the foreman. Incidentally, you could not settle any problems with the foreman. They had no authority whatsoever to do these things. This is still very much true. The lower supervision does not have a great deal of authority. So you would wind up in the superintendent's office and you would make your request and you would get a refusal. Then you would get a little more persuasive and, of

treat.



course, tempers would flare and I would be fired. Right away the superintendent would order the clerk to go out and pull my card out of the rack, which is the way of stopping your pay. This he would do with great glee too. He was a funny old fellow. He was real happy to do this. So the minute he would do this, I would just wave. They had glass-enclosed offices. I would just wave and all the fellows would shut off their machines and they would all come out and stand in the aisles.

We had a potent weapon in the plant I worked in. We had a heat treat. This heat treat was a very expensive process and a large operation. They had large electrical furnaces. The material had to go through the furnace in a certain length of time in order to come out the way it was supposed to be. If it were left in there it would burn up. It was very expensive, not only that but the furnaces would melt and cost the company a great deal of money and would take weeks to get back into operation after extensive repair to those furnaces. So we had a pretty potent weapon.

The fellows in the heat treat would stop working. The phone would ring in front of the superintendent, "They have stopped working in the heat treat." It would not be long until he was pleading with me to tell those fellows to go back to work. "I cannot do that. I do not even work here any more. You fired me." It would not be long until he would put the card back into the rack and we would settle our problem and get the plant back into operation, usually though within the time limits of spoiling that material in the heat treat.

But the same thing was true in the powerhouse. Each plant found some spot where there was real pressure. That was the way it operated. You called them wildcat strikes. They were not spontaneous necessarily but they were very effective.

Skeels: When you went into war production, were there any problems of conversion at the time?

Bully: This was a tragic thing and discouraging to most of us who were young and a little idealistic anyhow. First of all the plants we worked for would not convert to war production until they had gotten the concessions from the government that they wanted. They finally went into production on a cost-plus basis. This is one of the fundamental things that got industry into trouble on featherbedding. They themselves brought it on during the war. They encouraged it.

In the department I worked in, they did not even turn the lights on for three weeks. All the employees were sitting in there, getting paid, and they did not even turn the lights on, or the machines. They were not ready for production. The reason they were sitting there was because if they were not employed at their highest skill, they could go to another plant and hire in. There was a great deal of this sort of thing. No one seemed to care. It cost G. M. nothing. In fact, the more it cost the greater the profit. We had no problems negotiating things that we could never get from private industry when they held the purse strings. But out of government money these things came easily.

We did not seem to have a great deal of trouble with grievances then either. We had a fairly good relationship with the corporation established at that time. I mean they respected the union's strength and ability to stop production. They were convinced of the employees' support of the union. So since it was not their own money they were giving away, we did not have too many problems there. It was much simpler then than at any other time.

Skeels: What were you producing?

Bully: Well, in the plants in Buick, we produced aircraft engines, medium tanks, and guns. They had many contracts. They had one aluminum foundry which the government built. Since that time Buick has purchased it and it is now a part of Buick property. They had many many projects but primarily they were producing aircraft engines, tanks, and gun mounts.

Skeels: Was there any problem converting people who had been on the assembly line type of work to some other new type, we will say making an aircraft engine or tank or something like that?

Bully: There was much less trouble than anybody had anticipated. The conversion was not as difficult as you would think. People readily adapted themselves to the relatively higher skilled jobs. We found too that we had many people working in those plants capable of doing extremely complicated work who, of course, had never been recognized or had never had the opportunity to show their ability. We found those people and, of course, they were very helpful in getting the program going.



Skeels: What I was wondering about is something like this. Even on an assembly line there are different grades of skill and work. Take a man that does a fairly skilled job on the assembly line, say, some type of repair work at the end or metal finish of some variety. You start up a new type of work, wasn't there a problem in trying to find something of comparable skills so he would not feel, "Well, I have lost this additional pay and status that I had before?"

Bully: First of all, the way it was handled in most of these plants and especially in this plant was that if a man was a grinder, operated a grinder on automobile production, he could very easily be transferred to a grinder in aircraft production where the tolerances were much closer. The materials were different. The skill required was much greater. But he was readily adaptable. Now those people whom you mentioned, for instance assembly line people with no particular machine skills, learned very readily. We had people who were there and plenty capable of showing them and teaching but they adapted much more readily than anyone had thought possible. They became capable operators and capable workmen in these new skills in a very short time and with a minimum of scrap. It was amazing. Everyone was amazed.

Skeels: Was there any increase in the number of Negroes hired in the Buick plant and if there was, how did this come about?

Bully: Yes. There was. Of course, it came about primarily because of the shortage of workers and a need for more men and women. There have been Negroes employed at the Buick plant for many years but



they have been confined to the foundry and were not even on the machine jobs in the other plants. Of course, the Federal Government's program at that time made it necessary that they be used without discrimination in all types of work. This is what actually opened the door to the Negro employee in industry. They came to all parts of the plant. They did the jobs and they did them well and they have always stayed. They have had no problem since that time holding these jobs. But this is what made it possible.

A number of women were hired the same way. I think prior to the war the only women who worked at Buick were women who came there during the First World War. They had been there over a long period of time doing a certain type of work in a certain restricted area in the plant. I remember one as an example in what they called the wire room in the assembly plant where they worked with the wiring that goes in the dash to the instruments and so forth and in making up these harnesses. They also had worked on several jobs as inspectors. But what with the war and the need for more and more manpower, thousands and thousands of women were hired. But they have almost disappeared from the plant now.

Skeels: I suppose this brought about a big change in the union with so many people and so few of them going through the critical days of 1937?

Bully: Yes it did. It brought about great changes in the union. We got what was called a maintenance of membership clause for this very

reason. The union did not have to spend most of its time organizing and maintaining its membership so that it gave some security to the union and allowed the union to function in other ways. That was quite successful. But it did mean a great difference in our union membership because there we had people primarily from out of state who had never been in contact with the union and had no knowledge of the conditions in these plants prior to the union. Therefore, they did not feel the same deep sense of loyalties to the union.

Skeels: But the officers usually continued to be the people who went back to '37 and earlier?

Bully: Yes. Not necessarily all of them because we had new people who became immediately interested in the union and were quite effective and very capable. Much of the leadership we have now came into the plants at that time. However, the top leadership of our union were people who had been there through the early struggles.

During the war I was on the shop committee and had been for some time. I was chairman of the shop committee and then early in the war I accepted an appointment by Walter Reuther to the General Motors Department as an international representative for the union. I worked for the union then outside of the plant for the GM Department until I went away to service. When I came back from service I continued to work on this assignment until 1948 or '49. Then I quit and went back into the plant and became an officer of my local union again. Then I was elected to this job.

Skeels: What was the reason for the development of an opposition to the no-strike pledge out at Buick?

Bully: We felt that the managements were taking great advantage of the no-strike pledge. While they were contributing nothing that they were not paid for, there was no sense of real participation on management's part. This was a cost-plus arrangement and as I said before they did not care how high you ran the cost because the profits were greater. There was no equality of sacrifice we felt. Now the workers were required to continue to work regardless of their problems and the settlement of their problems and yet we felt that the company was contributing very little. So there was resentment.

Of course the company took advantage of this situation. The fact that we had pledged that we would not strike meant that when we went in to negotiate for something, a mere "no" was enough. There was nothing much that we could do about it. We had government agencies, of course, and long drawn-out procedures to seek relief but they were so time consuming and so detailed and very very difficult.

Skeels: This was then felt as a way of making your collective bargaining more effective.

Bully: Well it was a desperation move actually. When we found that there was no other solution except a wildcat strike, we found ourselves striking not only against the corporation but against practically the government, at least public opinion, and our own union and its pledge.

Skeels: But you did not have any trouble getting the people out at the time?

Bully: No. In fact our problem was to keep them at work. You see, most of the people that worked in these plants realized the situation too and felt just as I have described to you. The corporations were showing no sense of patriotism or loyalty and were contributing nothing. All the sacrifices were on the part of the workers. When real and pressing grievances arose and there was no solution and management hid behind the no-strike pledge, then people felt that they were justified. They were justified in forcing a settlement. I do not necessarily think that in all cases they were right but there were some cases where there was no other course too.

Skeels: Did General Motors try to maintain discipline as firmly during the war as it did before the war?

Bully: Absolutely not. All discipline was relaxed. It was a different place entirely. It proved to me that when you removed the profit motive, things change. Again after the war when there was a problem of profits, things really tightened up and we had great conflict. We had a real showdown. This occurred immediately after the war in conversion back to peacetime production. Of course there was a great change in the employment picture. People who had come here from the South and from other parts of the state and who had not been here originally found themselves without jobs. The people who were from the community found themselves for a long period of time without



jobs. Many of them had, during the war for some reason or other, been in another defense plant at a higher skill and they were called back. There was a great upheaval and change in trying to revert back to the former status. Of course reverting back was very difficult. Then, too, management was very anxious to get into the production of automobiles but we still had many restrictions such as shortages of material, shortages of manpower in some cases, rearrangements of plants, getting rid of government-owned equipment and getting their equipment back into operation and so forth, and new machinery ordered and not able to get it. I was not here at the time. I was in an army hospital and I did not get home until after the strike. I am acquainted with this because of my family and all my friends and of course I kept in close contact with the union.

Skeels: A lot of people though had quite a few war bonds I would imagine at the end of the war.

Bully: That is right. Most people did participate in the bond drives and had accumulated some money.

Skeels: Was there a certain feeling that a showdown would not be too bad because they had a little money and they had not had much of a vacation in a long time too?

Bully: Well there was some of that I suppose but really what happened is this: The people in the plants who had been there for years and years before knew that this could not be a permanent arrangement and that there would be a real attempt made to go back to the preunion

days because management too had accumulated surpluses and had been preparing for a showdown. People in the union felt that immediately after the war the showdown would be whether or not the union would be destroyed as it had after the First World War and that we would go back to the preunion days. When management was accumulating surpluses, we knew that the people had accumulated some, not necessarily for this reason but they had them and we knew that this showdown was inevitable, at least we felt that it was. Almost all union people or union leaders at the time and most of the people themselves understood this.

Skeels: Referring back to some of the conditions, in the 1943 Buffalo Convention the incentive wages were a big question. How did the people in the plant feel about this?

Bully: They were absolutely opposed to incentive pay. We found that the incentive pay had many evils. In fact, they still have some in isolated places in the plant where people have wanted it because they had a high rate structure and different work. But people found that incentive pay set a worker against a worker and that while you got incentive pay this year for producing 10 per cent above the normal, the next year you found that that 10 per cent was added to your normal and you were required to produce that to hold your job. We found that to the older worker or perhaps the slower worker this put him out of a job eventually.

We found ourselves in competition with each other and that there were always a few who are capable of doing a great deal more than the locals after the 113-day strike. Were there many problems of production

normal average worker. These people would be placed on jobs and the norm would be set and it would almost be impossible for people to maintain it. So while you make a little extra money for a year or period of time by producing more than the normal rate, eventually you lost it anyway. You found yourself in a rat race each year getting a little older and a little less able to maintain the pace. You found yourself eventually in the same spot that you had put the first man in, out of a job. So we felt very strongly about this and still do.

Skeels: I do not suppose George Addes helped himself any in the Flint area by being more on the favorable side of the incentive wage question?

Bully: I would not say that. I would say that George Addes was a great favorite of most of the Flint people for many years. There was a great confidence in George Addes and a real affection and a real feeling for George Addes as a very capable, dedicated man. But different plants had different problems. He came from an area where perhaps that might fit but it did not fit in our area. I do not think this hurt George Addes. I think what hurt George Addes was his alliance with a group of other fellows who had in the showdown been in the extreme left-wing element in the union. George chose to go with this group. I think George Addes could still be an officer of our union today had this not been true.

Skeels: You went back into the shop. You were servicing the GM locals after the 113-day strike. Were there many problems of production

standards even after the strike? and a problem enforcing discipline

Bully: Oh many! Production standards became one of our biggest problems and still are. It is a continual contest about how to get more work for less money. Of course, from the workers viewpoint it is a problem of trying to maintain a normal work pace and living wage for it that you can keep up and that a normal individual can do. So it is still a problem. It is still our fundamental problem.

Skeels: Do you think that by the end of the war that the company had come to accept the union more than before the war? arbitrary action

Bully: No. I think the company did not come to accept the union completely until after the strike in 1945-46. After they lost this strike I think that they capitulated at that time to accept the union. I think prior to that time they had always looked for a weak spot. They were always waiting, probing and then the war, of course, came along and unions had more government support at that time and some protection. But this was a showdown fight and the unions were able to maintain their position. I think in 1950 the company truly accepted the union as a permanent fixture with a five-year agreement and with pension programs and so on and so forth, obligating themselves to workers for the future. I think this was really and truly the first real gesture on the part of management that they owed something to the workers and that unions were a permanent part of our American economy.]

Skeels: One of the things that General Motors is known for is its attempt to develop discipline. How did this occur over time? could

fire him. This became a pattern.



Bully: General Motors has never had a problem enforcing discipline up until we had the union because they would just fire you any time they disagreed with what you were doing or what you were thinking even. But after the union we found that discipline became somewhat of a problem. The corporations were attempting to enforce it and they attempted to enforce it in the same rigid way they always had. Of course the union resisted because it was not justified in many cases. So sort of a pattern developed that the corporation started building up a record which would justify a discharge or disciplinary action by an impartial umpire.

The first time I had even noticed this building up of record was that we had had a number of people employed in the plant who were habitual drunks prior to the union. They were there because they were somebody's relative or friend or something else. After the union was established though, these people all came under the seniority rules and were not eligible for any special considerations any more or promotions and so forth. The company found themselves ready to get rid of them and would like to get rid of them. Of course, we found the union going to bat for their member. So the company started at that time building records. A man would come in drunk and they would fire him. The committee would negotiate that this was too harsh a penalty for such an infraction of the rules. They would give him a period of time off or some sort of disciplinary action and they would become progressively more strict each time. Eventually they would fire him. This became a pattern.

long at the time?

The company still follows this pattern in many things where they find a man is either actually violating the rules or a very aggressive union man with perhaps an antagonistic personality who begins to find himself in hot water and the company clamps down. Eventually they start to ease him out by progressive discipline and increasingly more severe discipline such as a day off, three days off, a week off, a month off or firing him. Perhaps the umpire will put him back and then he will be fired again later. Eventually they build up a very impressive record of discipline and then the man is gone. This is about the whole picture of discipline in the plants. However, as I said before the union discipline was a real stringent thing and there was no question about it, they just fired you for whatever reason they might have. They could fire you for anything and did.

Skeels: Do you think this makes it harder for the union committeeman to be tough with the company?

Bully: No. I do not think so because our union stewards have been pretty intelligent fellows. They become pretty well versed in the agreement too. It is only those who have a real short temper or perhaps get involved in physical violence and things of this kind who get in trouble. But the average committeeman or representative in the union is a pretty shrewd fellow. He knows what provisions are built in the agreement and he knows how to operate within that agreement. He does not find himself in a great deal of trouble.

Skeels: How was the 1950 agreement accepted by the members? Do you think that there was an idea that they thought the agreement was too long at the time?

Bully: This I can answer with some authority. I was a member of the national negotiating committee for General Motors in 1950. I had some real qualms about agreeing to a five-year agreement. So I came home during the negotiations and I had a talk with people I know and respect in the union. They were just fellows working in the plant who have been good union people. I found that these people were heaving a big sigh of relief because we were going to have labor peace for five years with no work interruptions for five years. They had not recuperated as yet financially from the 1946 strike. They were heaving a sigh of relief, especially if we made some significant gains and we did. Of course we could not have done this if we did not have some outstanding achievements and this year we did. We got a pension agreement for the first time. These things justified a long-term agreement. I tell you, I think that the union needed this labor peace for this five-year period as much as the company did. We needed to recuperate and reorganize and it was welcomed. We found that the members accepted it overwhelmingly. They were happy to have this kind of assurance.)

Skeels: So you would say over the term of years that you have been associated with Buick and the like that you have seen a big change come about in the plants?

Bully: I certainly have in the working conditions and the dignity that a man has. There was no such thing prior to the union. A man was like a machine. Any supervisor could say anything to a man. There was nothing you could do about it. You either accepted it or you





Wayne State University  
LABOR HISTORY ARCHIVES  
Oral History Transcripts

Date	Name	Address
3/19/63	J. H. Perlstein	530 Riverside Dr. N.Y. 27, N.Y.
6/15/64	"	"
7-17-67	James A. Neechtelein	Queen's University
8/15/71	Joyce Kase	University of Wisconsin
1-4-72	David L. Dolan	713 Winthrop, Flint, Mich
7/16/74	Kathy Coxtorn	U of Oklahoma
2/23/75	Martin Glaberman	WBU
6/2/90	Carl Roswicz	ICSU
Aug 9 77	John Blacell	Open University
7/2/81	Joyce Peterson	F. I. U.
8/4/81	Michael Murovich	Univ. Massachusetts / Boston
5/11/83	John Bunt	Outland Univ
1/29/88	Steve Mey	IIT
1-30-86	Steven Zitch	University of Toledo
2-4-88	Nancy Juhin	Purdue
2-21-86	Richard Bozgay	Warsaw University
6/29/87	John Zirk	CUA
Nov/28/93	Satoshi Takata	00C:JPN ; WBU
Sept/20/96	Satoshi Takata	00C:JPN