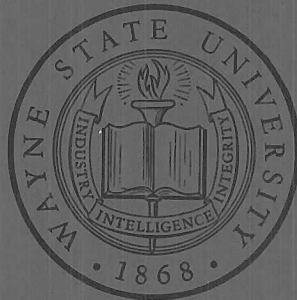


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ORAL INTERVIEW
(SESSIONS 1&2; ADDENDUM)

JACK LEVER

HERBERT HILL, INTERVIEWER
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Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

Date: May 29, 1968

Interviewer: Herbert Hill

Interviewee: Jack Lever

H: Mr. Lever, would you begin by telling us where and when you were born. Would you tell us some of your earliest memories as a worker, and how you found out about labor?

L: My name is E.J. Lever. I started my apprenticeship at the age of fourteen in Philadelphia, and in time went out west with my brother. I eventually went to work as a power plant machinist at Fort Lyons, Colorado, and thereafter worked in many places throughout the West. In 1914, I landed in Salt Lake City and was invited to join the IWW local to which Joe Hill belonged. This was about three weeks after his arrest. So I never knew him until I saw his body at the funeral in Chicago, when he was brought back. The Wobblies were active out West, but more in the northwest, meaning the timber industry in Oregon, Washington and northern Idaho.

H: What period are you talking about?

L: This was in 1914. I first heard about the IAM through the chief engineer I worked for at Fort Lyons, Colorado, but I never ran into any organized machinists out West until I started East, and stopped in Toledo, Ohio where I went to work in the Willys-Overland tool room, wherein the foreman asked me if I belonged to the IAM, and I signed a membership card, and was initiated into Lodge 105 two Friday nights later.

H: Was it not rather unusual for the foreman to ask you?

L: He was a union member himself. It was at a time when men kept union membership secret. The Willys-Overland Company was then one of the largest automobile companies in the country. It then employed 9000 people. They knew that the machinists, tool-makers, and so forth, were members of the union, but they didn't know how many or just who they were until they might discover that some individual belonged. So it was not unusual for a foreman to belong to a union where there were no issues which arose because of his belonging to supervisory personnel.

H: Were there any Negroes in the plant?

L: None whatsoever. Of course, there weren't many Negroes in Toledo in those days. There was a strong central body, and all together it was one of the largest labor bodies in the country at that time. The fellow named Bill Patterson, a longshoreman, was president of the central labor union. He was a well-known local Socialist, and he would debate Socialism with anyone who came along. One night he was invited by the Chamber of Commerce to address them on the labor movement. So he came with his overalls rolled up under his arm so he could leave for the graveyard shift where he loaded coal boats for Canada. When it came 10:30, he says "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I must go to work. I work on the graveyard shift which starts at 11:00 PM, and I must leave you." At about the same time, Professor Scott Nearing was fired by the University of Pennsylvania, and the labor movement had something to do with starting the University

of Toledo, in an old school building. Two of the three trustees appointed by Mayor Keller at the time to initiate the university were trade unionists. One was Walter Sturner, a tool maker, and the second, a railroad fireman. The third was a homeopathic physician, a famous character in that part of the country. The labor movement in Toledo, and especially the Machinists, thought it would be a good idea, with the university needing professors, that they invite Professor Nearing to teach at the University. Mr. Nearing did join the faculty, and came with his wife and two kids. So did Professor Lisserson from the University of Wisconsin, and so I attended their lectures at night at the new university.

H: May I interrupt you? When you talk about the labor movement at that time, you are speaking about the American Federation of Labor? The Machinists were affiliated to the American Federation of Labor? When you speak of this man who was president of the Central Labor Council, it is the AFL Central Labor Council? Yes? He belonged to International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) and he was a socialist? Can you tell us about the ideological influences - there were the Socialists, the Wobblies; were they prominent in the labor movement?

L: There were a number of labor leaders who were business unionists, but there were others who were socialists, and there were comparatively few local union activists in Toledo who were not members of the Socialist Party. That was true of the president, William Patterson. Now, when Scott Nearing came there, Lodge No. 105 passed a resolution inviting him

to give a lecture during the period of "good and welfare" every Friday night, and Professor Nearing would come and everybody would stand up to receive him, and a reception committee would lead him to the platform to give the lecture.

H: Do you recall the topics of any of the lectures?

L: He talked on different subjects every Friday night, and I was a little too young to realize the implications of what he was talking about.

H: Do you recall the attitude of the labor movement towards Negroes, or to Orientals, or other minorities at this time?

L: There were few Negroes and no Orientals in Toledo at the time and it simply was not an issue either as to employment, or in respect to the membership in unions as such. Of course, some Blacks belonged to the ILA and they were automatically accepted in it.

H: They were accepted?

L: Yes.

H: It is true, is it not, that the IAM had a lily-white clause in its ritual?

L: Yes.

H: Do you recall that? Describe it, please.

L: I recall it well. because as an activist, I have sworn in hundreds during those earlier years. The major sentence in the ritual concerning race read, "and I will propose for membership none other than an industrious, sober, white machinist." And that remained as part of the ritual until the beginning of World War II, although prior to that in the

1920 convention in Rochester N.Y., a man named St. Paul proposed at a caucus that the word white be struck from the ritual. That was the only objection he had to the principles of the IAM. We agreed, and presented a resolution the next morning to the Resolutions Committee of that convention. But our secret had leaked, and one of the southern delegates stood up as soon as President Johnston opened the session that morning and said, "We understand that there is a resolution coming up on the race issue and we hereby request all the Southern delegates to meet in a caucus tonight." This resulted in the resolution not being brought to the floor. The railroad machinists from the South, particularly, were strong racists at the time, or it was assumed that they were.

- H: Was it just the Southerners who opposed the resolution or some Northerners too?
- L: There was no way of telling who was opposed to it. In the Northern locals, when occasionally they came on a a rare Negro in the locals, they just took the name, and paid no attention to this particular clause (although he repeated the ritual along with the other voices following the Chairman's words), and this was not challenged by the International Executive Board. which would indicate they too favored removal of the clause but were in no political position to do so.
- H: Now, my recollection is that the clause did not actually come out of the ritual of the Machinists until the 1948 convention of the Machinists. I have examined the proceedings of the 1948 convention, and formal action was taken at that time.

You are suggesting that at the beginning of World War II, and after the President's executive order 8802 in 1941, there was some discussion, or agreement that they would ignore the lily-white clause because of the executive order. What was the situation at the time of World War II?

L: The fact is that World War II began with the Depression still being on. Plants were beginning to be built and expanded. Many of them were directly financed by the government, and those plants had to be manned, and many of those plants were in the South. Employment, in general, became a problem during the war because the war had soaked up a good deal of the unemployed. But when the executive order was issued, the Executive Council of the IAM asked advice on how they could comply with the order, without violating their own constitution. They received legal advice that the term white was in the ritual and not in the constitution, and since the ritual did not have to be voted on by referendum, the Executive Council had the authority to strike out the word white from the ritual, which they did at the time. The 1948 convention was an affirmation of the action taken earlier when they were expected to comply because of public opinion, and so forth.

H: So you are of the opinion that many of the larger locals accepted Negroes, both in the United States and Canada, during the war period, because the word white appeared in the ritual and not in the constitution?

L: Yes. We were living in a state of flux at the time with tens

of thousands joining the union, and the single word white no longer seemed important to the machine shop workers.

H: But you did say in a former conversation that those locals in the South who wanted to exclude Negroes did continue to exclude them?

L: I don't doubt that in the least.

H: Those locals formed at places where there were Negroes simply took them in; they made no special effort to recruit Negroes, but they took, shall we say a laissez-faire attitude?

L: That's right. And in the average shop they had to decide if they wanted a union of all whites, or of all the workers. The constitution says all machine shop workers, male and female, and has said so since 1912 so there was a perfectly logical answer to that question, the necessities of the times.

H: When did you first come across a Negro machinist, or a Negro member of the IAM?

L: I never did come across a Negro member of the IAM, but in 1921 after returning from the first World War in France, I worked for a while at the Westinghouse Marine Division in Lester (near Chester), Pennsylvania. I was given a helper who was a Negro. The helper was about fifty years old, about twice my age. One day, the helper told me he could do my job, probably as well as I could. But he was never permitted, by the company to work as a machinist, because he was a Negro.

H: Now was that because of the union or the company?

L: The union was never strong enough to have any say over work assignments. There were some union men in the plant. He did say that he, amongst others, was recruited from the South

to act as a stationary engineer at this new plant when it was built during World War I. He didn't tell me where he was recruited from, but he did come up with that promise; when he got here he was assigned as a helper and was never permitted to work as an engineer.

H: But he did get his training in the South, and he was the first Negro you came on working in a machine shop?

L: Right.

H: Did you subsequently meet other Negroes in Machine shops?

L: Very few.

H: Why do you think that was so?

L: Well, in the South they would have been kept out in any organized plant because of the policies of the union, and in any case, there were very few union shops. The union in the South was primarily in the railroad repair shops. The railroad companies' discrimination against the Negro was both in the shop trades and the running trades, and they were used only as track laborers. In the North, there weren't any Negroes at all; consequently, there wasn't the problem.

H: So you think that the experience you had in 1921 at the Westinghouse plant in Lester, Pennsylvania was rather unusual?

L: Yes. This man was the only Negro in this tremendous plant employing several thousand workers as far as I knew. I didn't see any others. Many of us in the North were long past the feeling that a Negro worker should not be taken in. We would have taken him in, for instance, in

the large industrial areas like Philadelphia and other places since they were there; but they were not there to challenge us. Now, what's happened in the South to some degree has happened in the North. In the South, for instance, following the Civil War, foundries began to use Negro labor. It was the dirtiest work, the hardest work, and they exploited them, of course, with low pay, in the Birmingham area, and other places. At that time, by 1890, the International Molders Union elected Martin Fox as president. Martin Fox realized that at the rate Negroes were being employed in the South, they would soon displace whatever white unions they had in the South. So he made it his mission to go from one local union to another to emphasize, to convince them that they should agree to take the Negro workers in.

H: Until what year did the Molders exclude Negroes?

L: Until about 1890 when Martin Fox became president and advocated their inclusion. Of course, Negroes were then in the foundries, but not in the union. They were in unorganized foundries, which meant that Negro employment in the foundries grew, and as the number of foundries grew, white molders would be disemployed. And he used this as an argument, that the union should include all workers in the industry.

H: What was the ideological background of Martin Fox?

L: He was a socialist.

H: When you said a minute ago, Mr. Lever, that there were many of us in the labor movement who advocated including Negroes, I suspect you meant those that had a Socialist or an IWW back-

ground, which rather sharply differentiated those individuals on the race question as well as other social issues from the rank and file trade unionist. Would that be true?

L: Yes, but there was a difference between the machinists and, on the whole, the metal trades, who would be at the other extreme; so that as Negro employment grew in the Northern cities, the problem of their acceptance was more of a strategic problem, a tactical problem, than of keeping them out because they were Black. Once upon a time for instance, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers turned down a fireman who was to be promoted to engineer because he was an Indian, an American Indian.

H: On what railroad was that?

L: I don't remember. It was somewhere in the West, I'm not sure where. That stuff was published at the time. We didn't want to be placed in the same position. By we, I mean the workers in the Northern lodges of the IAM.

H: By the way, were there any other conventions - you mentioned the 1920 convention - where the race issue came up? By the way, were you a delegate to the 1920 convention?

L: I am sure there were resolutions to that effect in other conventions, but in the 1920 convention it shows in the minutes, and I know about it because I was there.

H: Would you speak now of Martin Fox?

L: Yes. Martin Fox finally convinced the Southern locals of the molders that they go along with the chartering of Negro molders' lodges, segregated all-Negro lodges. The union was then in a position to organize foundries in the Birming-

ham area, if they could, you see, which employed predominantly Negro labor. But up to that time they couldn't. So that the question of Negroes being taken in by the labor movement is not one universal attitude on the part of American workers. It depends on the industry, it depends on the cultural development of a given group of workers in the industry.

The miners' story you already know. Again, in the mines of the North in the early days, it was a question of immigrant labor rather than Negro labor.

H: As a matter of fact, ironically, Negro workers began in the mines in the South. There is a long history of slaves working in the mines, and in the bituminous industry. I have interviewed officials of the Mineworkers who tell me that it was quite common to have Negroes in the bituminous areas. Regarding the iron molders, you suggest that when Martin Fox began his campaign to organize Negroes, it was the understanding that Negroes would be organized into all-Negro segregated locals. There was no attempt to organize them on an integrated basis?

L: No, not at that time. Now there are today factories, and local unions embracing a factory which are almost entirely Negro. Now that is an accident of history - that factory was already employing Negroes almost to the exclusion of anyone else.

H: In discussing this, would your recollection indicate that if a white person and a Negro person were doing comparable work inside the plant at this time in the 1920's, there was wage discrimination, discrimination concerning promotion, and the

like?

L: In the machine shop Negroes were almost entirely absent so that there was no issue. Among the iron molders I haven't any doubt that the Negro locals in the South were paid a lower wage than the whites. For one thing, the white locals were composed of skilled workers, whereas the mass production foundries, such as the pipe foundries, sash-weight foundries, and all kinds of rough work, Negroes could do this with little training, and stayed in this classification. So Negroes to improve their wages had to begin with the low rated jobs in the first place. This did not create a differential in a plant without whites.

H: There was no effort, during this time, to have a line of promotion which would lead the unskilled into the more skilled?

L: No, because this would be done on a plant-wide basis, and an all-Negro plant with a world all its own had very little relation with a plant two hundred miles away.

H: Was it common, as you recollect, that there would be all Negro plants and all white plants?

L: Well, it wasn't contemplated that way. They simply faced up to the facts of history.

H: Employers would employ an all-white, or all-Negro work force in a given place?

L: Yes. At that time, of course, the union had almost nothing to say about the employment policies of a company, and to this day, for instance, there are very few unions outside the building trades.

H: Well, the printing industry also.

L: Well, the ITU is one of the two oldest unions in the country,

and they like the Locomotive Engineers date their union back to 1850. But actually, there were printers on strike in Philadelphia when the Constitution was being written. So the printers go way back. In fact, the Chicago Typographical Union Number 6 is called the Benjamin Franklin Typographical Union.

H: Do you have any recollections concerning the racial practices of the Typographical Union?

L: No, I don't. I never saw any printing plants in the South, for that matter.

H: During your years with the IWW do you have any recollections of seeing Negroes?

L: There were a few among the harvest workers. The agricultural workers was built beginning from Texas to Canada in 1914, through the plains-growing states, and there were some itinerant Negroes workers among them. And of course, they were taken in without any problems. The real test came on the East Coast where three of us organized the marine transport workers in the ports of Philadelphia, all the ports of the Delaware River.

H: Who were the three?

L: One of them was Ben Fletcher. I knew him very well, and we were very close.

H: He died, incidentally, in 1949.

L: He was ill for many years. Ben Fletcher, Jack Walsh and I organized the longshoremen. Walsh was an Irish-American.

H: The three of you went into Philadelphia to organize? You were sent in by the IWW?

- L: We started it ourselves, and then we received a charter from the IWW, from Bill Haywood - Big Bill Haywood.
- H: What did you call your union?
- L: We called it the Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union. This was in 1916.
- H: Will you please tell us your experiences here and all you possibly can of Ben Fletcher?
- E: Ben Fletcher, I always thought, was one of the best organizers I knew. He was a Negro. I know very little about his early background. I met him on the waterfront and we found out we were in agreement that we ought to help the longshoremen get organized. He was a very good man. Our problem has always been for the three of us working in Philadelphia, to organize everyone. Later, in Baltimore, we organized Negro workers, only because half of the longshoremen were mostly of Polish descent, some of them Irish, but mostly Polish. The ILA came in and organized whites and left the Negroes out. And we said a union is a union. And we proceeded to organize the Negroes - and we did organize the Negroes.
- H: The Negroes joined the IWW in large numbers?
- L: In large numbers, that is right.
- H: Did the same thing happen in Philadelphia?
- L: Oh, yes. In Philadelphia the Negroes at that time were between 50 and 60% of the 4800 men we had organized. You must bear in mind that there was no Wagner act, that there was nothing but the mounted police along the waterfront with their clubs and guns, and it was murder to organize whites, let alone Negroes.

- H: Would you say that the Negroes were amenable to trade union organization?
- L: No, but we had as much success in organizing Negroes as whites; all in spite of the many Negroes from the South who could not read or write.
- H: Did whites in either the port of Baltimore or of Philadelphia resist joining the same unions with Negroes?
- L: In Baltimore they did, because they were already ahead of us in joining the ILA. In Philadelphia, the longshoremen last tried to organize the docks in the 1890's. But they failed. And then in 1913 Joe Ettor came to Philadelphia. Joe Ettor was an Italian-born organizer, a very effective guy, who was married to an American girl, a stenographer in New York.
- H: He was an organizer for the ILA?
- L: No, he was general organizer for the IWW, under Bill Haywood. And he got a few of them together, but they failed. Then we came along three years later. We talked to some of the younger longshoremen who knew about this, but didn't know how to do it. We got involved in the thing. It so happened that among the three of us, Ben Fletcher, Jack Walsh, and myself, I was the only skilled worker. I worked as a toolmaker and earned good wages for that day. It came to about \$27 per week for 48 hours. So I managed to work nights so that I could spend some hours on the waterfront with them.
- H: You were not actually a longshoreman - you were a machinist?
- L: That's right.
- H: But you functioned during your own time as a volunteer organizer for the Wobblies on the docks?

L: That's right.

H: Did Ben Fletcher work as a longshoreman? And Jim Walsh?

L: When they had to pick up some money they took odd jobs on the waterfront. But I didn't have any trouble getting work, and my \$27 a week kept the three of us alive.

H: Now, let me ask you this - we're talking about 1921?

L: No, 1916.

H: 1916. Were you able to organize interracial units, that is, unions of whites and Negroes on the Philadelphia docks?

L: We had few problems about that - a union is a union, and all workers must belong to the same union.

H: Do you have any recollections what the percentages were?

L: The percentages were over 50% Negro. That's Philadelphia, Camden, all the Delaware River ports.

H: You did not have competition from the ILA?

L: No, not in the Delaware River ports. In Baltimore we did.

H: Is that why you were not able to organize on an integrated basis in Baltimore?

L: No question about it, in our minds. Of course, Baltimore is more of^a Southern city. But many of the Negroes in the ports of Philadelphia were Southerners, very much so.

H: In Baltimore, when you got there in 1916, you found that the ILA had organized all of the whites?

L: Right. The ILA in the port of Baltimore had one all-white local.

H: The Negroes, who you say comprised over 50% of the workers, were not organized? And this was by design? But the IWW through Fletcher and Walsh and you organized the Negro

longshoremen. Did you get collective bargaining agreements?

L: We didn't get formal bargaining, but we simply told people to stop work until they got what they wanted.

H: You never signed any contracts. It was not the practice of the IWW to sign contracts, anyway.

L: No. As a matter of fact, we were criticized by IWW people in Philadelphia for formalizing contracts, for we were the first ones in the IWW to negotiate formal agreements with the employers.

H: In the port of Philadelphia you did sign contracts?

L: Right.

H: Now, from my reading - please correct me if I am wrong - I judge that Ben Fletcher was probably the leading Negro Wobbly in this period. You agree? I find that he was expelled from the IWW because of something that happened on the waterfront during the Philadelphia organizing campaign. I'm not clear why he was expelled. Do you think the reason might be that he signed agreements?

L: No, that happened while I was in France with the American Expeditionary Forces, or shortly thereafter when I went back to my activities with the International Association of Machinists.

H: You can think of no other reason why he was expelled from the IWW? There is reference in the IWW papers to ideological disagreements, and my guess is that the reason for it is that he signed contracts.

L: I shouldn't be surprised at all.

H: The IWW regarded it as a sort of betrayal of the working class,

and that you were engaged in class collaboration - you were class collaborationists.

L: But the term class collaboration was not invented until the Communists came along. Bill Foster used the term.

H: The IWW had their own terms for it.

L: The unions' name was the Marine Transport Workers, but it also included the seamen. Now there was a coastwide trade in those days, Merchants and Miners Transportation Company, and some other independent companies. They have all gone out of business now. So there is no water communication between the coastal cities now. Now, we never got the merchants and miners. We got some members, largely the fire crews, you see. These were freighters, and carried some passengers. The firemen joined the Wobblies, because to them the Wobblies were the American syndicalist organization, which is an arguable point, you see, because they are industrial unionists, really, and not anarchist-syndicalists as such.

H: What company was this?

L: The Merchants and Miners Transportation Company.

H: And this was a freighter line which went along the Atlantic seaboard?

L: Yes, from Boston to Galveston, I think. We also got the deep-sea sailors, both the deck hands and the crews, the fire-crews and such. Many of them were Spaniards, Portuguese, with Negroes among them.

H: Did they join the IWW unions?

L: Yes, we took them in. There was no problem. The International Seaman's Union was the old union. It was not very strong in those days, and it was a deep-sea union.

H: Was that Andrew Furuseth?

L: Yes.

H: Now, Furuseth was very bigoted. He had a color bar.

L: He had something else, too, in that he always talked about the men who "go down to the sea in ships." He always spoke in Norwegian dialect. I knew him a little. He always wore a double breasted blue serge suit and slept on a cot some place. The AFL office in Washington was just a cubby-hole. They were just a poor union. But he is the man who sold Robert LaFollette, Senior, in the Senate on a bill to free "the men who go down to the sea in ships." And in time the LaFollette seaman's bill was passed. In 1916 there was a dramatic appeal by Senator LaFollette to President Wilson to sign that bill, making America the sole soil of freedom, where, once a human being steps on these shores, he becomes a free man, which is a declaration of independence, second to none. President Wilson signed the bill. Now, if you haven't run into it. you can probably get it through the New York Times. It was a tremendous appeal by Senator LaFollette.

H: How do you account for Andrew Furuseth's strong and oft-repeated anti-Negro bias?

L: I don't know, it's hard to tell. He was a Norwegian by birth, talked like a Norwegian sailor.

H: What other recollections do you have during your IWW days, Mr. Lever, concerning any other Negro involvement? Do you recall any other Negroes beside Ben Fletcher?

L: Aside from the rank and file in the union, once we organized, whose president in Philadelphia, incidentally, was also a Negro.

H: Really? Tell me.

L: I don't remember his name - we referred to him as the old man.

H: The president of the Longshoremen's Union?

L: Yes, the Marine Transport Workers Union. the Wobbly union.

The two port delegates, once we organized, were both whites, Chestnut, and Paul Baker. Baker died within the last few years. He remained a life-long operator on the waterfront. They are run entirely by Negroes these days. I see them once in a while, but their history is so short, they don't remember me.

H: They are all ILA?

L: They are all in the ILA.

H: In a segregated local?

L: No, the ILA doesn't segregate them, it just take them.

H: It does segregate them in Baltimore, in New Orleans. and in other ports.

L: Are they still in separate locals in Baltimore? We got there just a little while after the ILA organized them. I don't think we got there more than a year, really less than a year after ILA came. They met in our hall. Jack Walsh and I convinced an old man who owned the building at 435 South Broadway in Baltimore which had a shoe store on the first floor, a pool hall on the second, and the third floor was a meeting hall with an office in the back. We persuaded this old man to give us a three-year lease. This was the Marine Transport Workers in Baltimore. But the longshoremen, the ILA met there. So we let them meet there - they only met every two weeks - and one day it became my duty as secretary

to present them with a rent bill. So I rapped on the door, and I gave the man the bill, and it was on the Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union letterhead. Well you know what happened. The minute he closed the door, and took it in and showed it to the chairman, the roof blew off. The rest of the business consisted of deciding whether they were going to pay rent to us or move. So they decided to move. This was in 1917.

H: Would you describe your trade union activity after 1917?

How long did you work in Philadelphia as an organizer on the docks for the Wobblies?

L: I stayed there until I moved to Baltimore as a machinist, a tool-maker where I again worked nights. so we could devote our time to organizing the docks. And we succeeded in organizing the Negroes. And what is now the American Smelting and Refining Company, the copper smelters on the Canton side of the port - we organized them, because our longshoremen used to have to pass through on the road which ran through the plant. They're now the copper-workers, in the Steelworkers. The Steelworkers don't know it but that's how it started. And of course we had a bunch of sailors. The important part of that thing with the passage of the LaFollette's Seaman's Act was that any crew of any nation which landed on American soil had the right to break its contract and find the protection of the American Seaman's Act. But the British Admiralty and the Danes and a number of other countries wouldn't recognize it. Meantime, because of the British submarines the American government decided to arm its vessels. (the British had already

done that), which meant that it had a crew of sailors, navy sailors to man the guns. The British Admiralty, which had run the seas for a couple of hundred years before that, would not recognize the LaFollette Act. Thus, the ship's captain would march his uniformed British sailors to the U.S. Commissioner, who would just be a lawyer or someone in the port, and protest that we were taking their crew away from them. The British Admiralty insisted on its own rules, and they didn't give a damn where they were, in Philadelphia or anywhere. The captain would argue with the U.S. Commissioner, with his sailors lined up in formation, while we argued before the U.S. Commissioner, "Look, it's the law." Of course, they knew it. And we would take the seamen off the boats. Now what happened is that the British had increased the sailors' rates, their wages, and on top of that they gave them a 50% submarine bonus, whereupon the American vessels also did the same. But when they came to this country, they found that our rate was approximately twice as high as the rate on which the European countries based theirs. So what would happen is that we would take the crew off, and in most cases the crew would come off the ship, and wait in boarding houses until another vessel came along. The crews would then start out at American rates. The war was on and we were organizing sailors to beat the band. Any sailor could double his wages simply by joining the union. What happened to them when they got back to their own ports was a different story.

H: What happened during the 1920's? What sort of trade union

activity were you engaged in then?

L: Well, I was - from 1919 on we established in Philadelphia a trade-union college. By we, I mean the machinists. Freda Miller, who was then secretary of the Women's Trade Union League, and Pauline Newman of ILGWU. Freda Miller, later became New York State Industrial Commissioner, and chief of the U.S. Labor Department's Womens' Bureau - the Textile Workers, and the Hosiery Workers.

H: Did you know any of the famous IWW leaders?

L: I knew Bill Haywood quite well. And Gene Debs, who of course helped start the IWW at the convention of 1905, but later separated from them and devoted his time to the Socialist movement as such; Vincent St. John, who, of course was a very active guy in the IWW movement; I knew Moyer (of Moyer, Haywood & Pettibone - Western Federation of Miners case), a little bit. Bill Foster I knew from about 1919 when he became the secretary of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee of that day. I knew Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Of course, she was a very much admired girl at the time. To us, you see, she was a girl. She married and had a baby son. She married an engineer by name of Flynn. He drowned on a fishing trip in Lake Erie with another man. Her maiden name was Gurley.

H: How about James Buchanan?

L: I didn't know him until the 30's when he was mixed up with the Trotskyites. Carlo Tresca I knew from 1916, again because he got involved up on the Mesabi Range, and I had something to do with trying to get him out of jail. Giovannetti

I met in New York, heard him speak a couple of times, but I never saw him afterward. I think his activities were in New York and New England.

H: Were you active in the 20's and the early 30's in the Machinists Union? How long did you stay in the IWW?

L: Officially until I joined the army and went across. A number of my associates were anti-war, and I was not. We fell out on that. There weren't any particular arguments, but we fell out on this thing. I decided it was my duty to go to war. We questioned the IWW position. What does any Union do when its country goes to war? We had to load the stuff on the ships. I would say that I dropped out in early 1918 before I went in the army. When I came back, the scene had already changed. Here is an interesting point - in 1917: There was a Colonel Freely, of the regular army, who was in charge of the Schuylkill Arsenal, which was an old quartermaster supply depot in Philadelphia. He asked us whether he could meet with the longshoremen to convince them of the necessity of moving the stuff from the port of Philadelphia. By that time, what with ships being sunk, the damned stuff was piled up on the tracks on Delaware Avenue as high as the cranes could stack them - guns, trucks, food, all boxed. So we arranged for him to address the meeting. Paul Baker and I met him at the end of the Elevated which ran to South Street in Philadelphia, and we took him to 113 Catherine Street. Walter Neff was then the secretary of the Local - he was a real spark plug behind the agricultural workers, (I don't remember the president's name), but it was agreed since the president was a Negro, he

was to introduce me, and for me to introduce the colonel. We stood outside this 4 by 4 framework which we had built around the secretary's and the chairman's desks, because when that crowd (we could squeeze in as many as 600 in that hall) started pushing forward over the back benches, they would just fall in on the officers, so we fenced them in. So there I stood outside the railing with this colonel all dressed up in this uniform. The chairman introduced me, and I thereupon introduced the colonel with a few flourishing phrases as best I knew how. Then, much to my surprise, the colonel pulled out a piece of army foolscap which had about 200 words, double spaced, on the sheet. In halting terms, he broke up every sentence, as though he was afraid to say it, and then he went to the second page, and there were just a few lines on it. and that was the end of his speech! That's all he had. So, I stood there, my heart beating, you know. After all, it was no speech at all. And I realized then the colonel's knees were shaking inside his pants. He was scared. It didn't occur to me until that moment, because he stopped, that the guy was obviously shivering inside. So I had to pick up this thing. I said, "Mr. Chairman, the Colonel is ready for questions." So the guys began to pour in the questions. We were engaged in a lockout against the Furnace, Witty & Company which was a then-famous British water transport concern, and they considered themselves British Admiralty in every port. We had won recognition from everybody else. But on their docks they wouldn't let our people in, and finally locked them out. They hired gunmen and thugs, who were fed and slept on the closed docks, and tried to get

the work done, and of course "it was holding up the war effort," you know.

H: All right - so the war is over, and you come back with the American Expeditionary Forces. What did you do during the 1920's?

L: During the 1920's, I went to Brookwood Labor College in 1921. I was one of the first labor students. I am one of the persons who built that property. I was there two years. During the summer between the first and the second year, I acted as secretary with the Pennsylvania Committee for Political Prisoners who were still trying to get the Wobblies out of Leavenworth. It was in 1920, when I met Roger Baldwin. We had him down to a meeting in Philadelphia.

H: What year did Bill Haywood and his group come out of prison?

L: It was in 1924. I think they had been in since 1919. They had been tried late in 1918, or thereabouts; originally there were 166 of them who had been indicted; some of them, like Jack White, whose last known address was in Tonopa, Nevada. He was dead but his name was on the indictment for five years. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Joe Ettore and Carlo Tresca challenged the indictment in a federal court, on the right of a trial for them in Chicago. So they were not tried by Judge Kennesaw Landis, later a baseball commissioner. Joe Ettore stayed in Philadelphia sub rosa. There were two Italian cooperative grocery stores, and they made him manager of the stores, and so gave him a chance to survive. I was the fellow in charge of raising the money, to raise \$10,000 bail a piece, a fantastic sum. It took up

a long time to raise it. We finally brought him in, but not Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. The federal district attorney in Philadelphia was a Quaker and his sister was anti-war. She was mixed up with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. He was Francis Fisher Kane. After investigating the situation, he resigned, publicly, to President Wilson, in opposition to Palmer's illegal raid policies, and of course that created a great furor, you know. I didn't realize it at the time although I was on the Defense Committee, whom we were really dealing with. He was much better prepared to do what was necessary than we were. He is dead now. He turned out to be a wonderful guy, and later we were good friends for years. He was interested in workers education, civil liberties and the like.

H: I would like now to get back to the trade union, if we can. During this period you had stopped your IWW activity, and you were active in the IAM.

L: In 1920, we elected Clinton S. Golden as representative of District 1 of the Machinists. District 1 was in Philadelphia, and I became the district organizer for the Machinists. That was a full-time job. Then in 1921, I went to Brookwood, and in the summer acted as secretary of the Pennsylvania Committee for Political Prisoners, then went back for the 1922/23 session. Then, when I returned from Brookwood, Clint Golden went to work with Sidney Hillman as utility man, as they called it, to do various public contacts, and so on, and I took his place as the representative of the Machinists; in other words, District

director of District 1. I did that for a couple of years from 1923-25, and at the same time acted as the Executive Secretary of the Philadelphia Labor College which we ran out of our office, and then in 1923 when my term ran out, I took on the Philadelphia Labor College full-time, until 1926.

H: Were there any Negroes active in the labor movement at that time:

L: There were a few, but not too many - no one I remember. There were no Negro machinists, and I don't recall any Negro textile-workers. The textile workers were very active in the labor education movement. That was in 1926. That year, I went to the shops. In 1927, I went back to Brookwood, to take charge of physical properties, the grounds, and so forth, and worked there for about a year. Then I went into the aircraft industry at Chance-Vought, on Long Island, and worked at that until 1929. Then I went to the Mayo Clinic for several months and back again to the shops. In 1929, I went back to Brookwood and there were a couple more years of service in the workers education movement. From there on, in 1930, I went with Consumers' Research. That was when Stuart Chase was its first president, and I became its vice-president. Actually, they wanted a trade-unionist, and someone who could help them run the organization. I was with them for a couple of years. During that period when I was more or less a conditioned "cooperator", old style, I became more or less exposed to consumer problems on a more objective basis; it was then I put my mind to

work on the problems of the American consumer as such, not just the worker as producer, but the worker as consumer as well. Out of it grew a committee in 1932 or 1933 in New York, composed of myself, Joe Kutcher, another rebel machinist-engineer, an accountant and his wife, a couple of lawyers. We met once a week for a couple of years just studying why cooperative^s fail. At the end, I wrote up a proposal for establishing America's first cooperative mail-order house. We took a leaf out of Consumers' Research, we tested the products and we rated them against the specifications of the National Bureau of Standards. Instead of "advertising" the products, we listed the specifications of each product and its cost, and where we knew the labor conditions under which it was made, we would have one added sentence, "Made under Fair Labor Conditions." We started with a mimeographed sheet, and at the end of three years, we ended up with the "Consumers Defender" with a circulation of 60,000.

H: Now we are in the heart of the Depression. You were still a card-carrying member of the IAM. When did you first hear of the CIO?

L: When everybody else heard about it at the AFL San Francisco and Philadelphia conventions. (I think that is right). Of course, no one knew what was going to happen, but it turned out that these were the historic years.

H: When did you first become involved in the Steelworkers Organizing Committee?

L: When it started in June, 1936, right here. Of course, Clint Golden was at that time setting up the office of the Committee in Pittsburg, and we were both living here in Solebury, which is in Bucks County Pennsylvania, 40 miles north of Philadelphia. And of course, I would be interested in attempts to organize the Steelworkers. But I was still walking around with a cane - I had a breakdown that lasted eight months, because the Commies captured Cooperative Distributors, after their Consumers' Research strike. So, I lay around for several months in the hospital and spent the rest of my time out here, trying to get on my feet. With SWOC set up in June 1936, I got some of the first notices, and I began visiting those I thought would be interested, including the machinists. And one day, I received a slip from Clint Golden in Pittsburg; A Hungarian Steelworker, an open hearth helper in Roebbling, New Jersey, sent a letter to his Hungarian paper, a weekly in Cleveland, in which he said, "The CIO help everybody except us poor devils in Roebbling," in Hungarian, upon which the editor in Cleveland translated it into English, and sent it to Phil Murray, handed it to Clint Golden, and Clint stuck it in an envelope and sent it to me, writing on the margin, "I guess this is in your bailiwick." So I cleaned up my \$190 Ford sedan, and went down there. Well, I knew Roebbling was a closed town 15 miles south of Trenton. Well, how do I get in? The one gate leading into the plant (and town) was floodlighted, armed guards watching it. I couldn't just drive in. So, by driving around I found a gravel quarry a little bit

north of it, just off the road, and away from the floodlights. So I drove the Ford into the gravel pit, left it, and began walking around the dark side of the fence, to see if there was any other way to get in. There wasn't. The weeds were very high around it. Then my foot slipped. And lo and behold! erosion had washed down the gravel under the fence near the area where the houses stood. In the dark, I worked my way into it under the fence. There were no street lights in those company houses. Finally, just at random, I picked a house in the middle of a block and rapped on the door. Some woman came to the door. I said, "I'm looking for Mr. Kovachs; do you know Mr. Kovachs?" There must have been dozens of Kovachs' "Oh, he lives about the same distance as this from the corner on the third street over." There were no numbers on the houses, so I went looking but didn't get anywhere. Another night, I came back again, having found a free admission to this thing. On the third time, I got there late at night - it must have been one or two in the morning, I found my Mr. Kovachs. His wife opened the door while he was eating. She let me in, and I started talking with him - explained how I got there and that I was ready to answer his questions. "You mean I write to my paper in Cleveland," he said, "and you come all the way from Pittsburgh to see me?" I didn't come from Pittsburgh, I came from Solesbury. Where was that? About forty miles from here. "Big town?" No, just farms. "Farm? With horses and cows? You wash the kids on Sunday morning and take them to church?" Lots of people do. "Ah! Good!" He

had landed in this country twenty years earlier with his bride, and they had been put on a wooden coach and sent to Roebbling, New Jersey. He had been locked up there ever since. But he had a beautiful boy and girl who were about fifteen or sixteen who were going to school in Trenton, about 15 miles north, and he paid their bus fare. There was no other way for them to get to school. He had never worked anywhere else. He raised his voice to tell me that his boy and his girl had to "finish high school," that was after telling me not to raise my voice. I asked what he was afraid of - he had the Wagner Act, and all. "These walls have ears", he said. "The Priest come, men at work, women talk. Priest, he is company man. Then I lost my job, the kids go hungry." Well, that was the beginning of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee in the North Atlantic seaboard area.

H: Did you organize a local?

L: Well, we organized a local, even though it took five years to organize this one and the Trenton plant, where the wire cable were made for the Brooklyn Bridge.

H: Were there any Negroes in the local?

L: Yes, there were - of course, there weren't many Negroes.

H: What did the Negroes do?

L: All the usual jobs that Negroes got to do - laborers' jobs. They weren't in a compound. They were scattered around. There weren't as many Negroes as there are not, you know. It's an open town now. They worked as helpers mostly, at

at 33 1/3 cents an hour.

H: It's Roebling wire, isn't it?

L: They make cable and wire. I could take you down there and show you how cables are made. You have to see it made. It would make your head swim.

H: You became an organizer for the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, then?

L: That's right, a volunteer organizer, from the beginning.

H: We're at 1936 now. Tell me about some of the other plants you went in, with emphasis on your contacts with Negroes. Do you recall any significant conversations with Negroes in the steel industry?

L: There were some Negroes in the shipyards hereabouts, and in New York ship§ in Camden. There were Negroes in foundries. There were almost no Negroes at Henry Disston & Son who employed 2200 people.

H: How about the Bethlehem yards at Sparrows Point, Maryland?

L: Definitely.

H: How about Crucible Steel?

L: Crucible Steel is in Harrison, New Jersey.

H: I know, I helped organize there. They had two plants in Jersey, Harrison and Jersey City.

L: They had eight plants, altogether including the above. By the way, McCoomb died the other day. He was the one I contacted when we organized them in Jersey City. They were having free speech fights in Jersey City, with Norman Thomas and Roger Baldwin soap-boxing against Mayor Hague, but we organized the Steelworkers quietly and had

our first joint delegates meeting in New York, when we called in delegates from the various locals so that we could agree on the content of a contract. They were the people who were designated to be on the negotiating committee. That was in 1937. It was in 1937, also, that we took over the Worthington Corporation. The chief engineer, who was also the manager of the company, was a very decent fellow. The personnel director was a decent fellow also. And they had already some good personnel policies in vogue. When the steelworkers began to organize, and the skilled foundry workers - incidentally they had women working in the foundry, making cores, and so forth - that local was first being organized by Jim Matles, under the guise of the Machinists, who was the business agent in Newark for the Machinists. We organized an Organizing Council in North Jersey of the various activists in the CIO. It was then we began to discover who was a Communist and who was not. So we discovered quite a few things. How Matles issued an application card, containing the wording of the Wagner Act, "I hereby select _____ as my bargaining agency." But he had worked in enough words so as to localize the thing in the Newark Machinists' office. That way, he would decide where to take them, when the time came. Well, they weren't sophisticated enough, the rank and file. But as soon as I saw the application blank, "Now we know where we're at," I said. So we took them into the Steelworkers and they became Local 1833 of 2,000 people. We got a very good contract, clear and to the point. And

they already had better conditions than other people. Past that point, they established a local office and had a girl as secretary. And they had collected initiation fees of \$3.00, each which was the Machinists' procedures. But it remained in their local and never got transferred to the IAM. Once SWOC chartered them, they put the money in the bank. And the first \$3000 was sent to Pittsburgh by the Worthington local, the first dues money received by SWOC from any local, SWOC operating at the time with funds donated by the original national unions who initiated CIO.

Date: May 29, 1968

Interviewer: Herbert Hill

Interviewee: Jack Lever

2nd Session

H: Up to '37, were Negroes responsive to the CIO organizing drives?

L: Where there were Negroes, and of course that depended upon whether any Negro leadership had developed, just personal leadership - guys they respected and so on. Where it hadn't developed, they were an inert mass and they had to be reached just the same as the white people did, potential leadership had to be found and dug out.

H: What happened when the Steelworkers Organizing Committee was transformed into the United Steel Workers of America?

L: That was in 1942 at the Cleveland Convention.

H: What were you doing at that time?

L: I was with the War Production Board. I was first with the National Defense Advisory Committee, working with Hillman, then it became the War Production Board.

H: You left the S.W.O.C.?

L: That's right. I quit during the Bethlehem campaign. From '36 to '39, SWOC had 3 sets of organizers to try to organize the Eastern Bethlehem plants; and Bethlehem was the leader of the Little Steel Strike at that time. From Philadelphia, we had organized clear 'round Bethlehem, Lebanon and Pottstown, etc. By that time, in 1939, the Bethlehem workers who were trying to join the steelworkers gradually began to

realize that the plants surrounding them already belonged to the steelworkers, the remaining few union loyalists who were not destroyed by McDonald's and his agents' tactics saw some of the other fellows from union plants. Those other fellows did not seem much smarter than they were, so they figured there must be something wrong with themselves. Actually, they didn't make it because they were misled. Finally, Phil Murray called me in and said, "Why don't you take the Bethlehem campaign?"

H: You were in charge of the Bethlehem campaign?

L: Yes, I was, but I was still the director of the North Atlantic Seaboard Area out of Philadelphia, including Eastern Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and New England, except the Bethlehem plant.

H: You were, during the SWOC period, the district director for the steelworkers operating out of Philadelphia?

L: The North Atlantic Seaboard Area. I was the district director covering that total area.

H: What year did you do your work for the War Production Board?

L: Early 1941, and I stayed with them for four years.

H: 1945, you went back to the United SteelWorkers of America?

L: Before 1945, I came back here and wrote "Labor Management Cooperation" for Harper's and other things. I never went back on the staff of the SteelWorkers. That was

from '45 on, and I became active writing in the field of labor management cooperation.

H: When you came out of the War Production Board, you were not involved with organized labor?

L: No. In an official capacity I was not with organized labor. I was not on the payroll.

H: Were you still a Machinist?

L: Yes.

H: Did you work as a Machinist?

L: Yes, I worked in a number of plants, until 1961, but I had no official role with the CIO. One objection I've always had to the younger crowd, obviously inherited from earlier times, a fellow who belonged to the labor movement felt that it was "his church" and that was where he belonged. There was little separation between the few on the payroll (and there were few in those days) and the fellow who worked in the plant and supported the union anyway even though he got no pay from it. The tendency of the bureaucracy today is that when you're connected with the labor movement, you hold an official job. Well, what about the 16 million who pay their dues?

H: Did you ever go back to any official position with the labor movement after '45? What have you been doing?

L: Between 1945 and the rest of the 40's when I was writing and doing odd jobs he^{re} and there, I worked in a number of plants in an area some square miles of the Delaware Valley, from Bristol north for 40 miles, 15 miles each side of the river. I checked on every machine shop in

the whole damn business all on my own. I was interested in the reaction of the rank and file on the job towards the labor movement as they knew it at that time. I found that they were mostly against it. Smaller plants were full of escapists from the steelworkers, the autoworkers,, the machinists, the molders, the sheet metal workers, the electricians, that was a remarkable thing to dig up. The bureaucratization of the labor movement for one thing, the institutionalization, the attitudes the men who held the job, that the union was not their servant but the boss. The American worker in unions today in many cases feels he is sandwiched in between 2 sets of bosses. He joined the union to face up to the boss. Now he needs a union to reach the union to reach the boss. I've talked to the fellows without a union card. They would say, "I belonged, I worked over there; it isn't as hot as it ought to be, I remember," and so on. I walked into an aircraft products plant, only about 10 miles from here at the time. A girl was in the new plant office, mowed, grass growing around it and it was very nice. I asked to see the man in charge and the girl handed me a regular application blank, to which I said, "There's no need filling it out unless the man wants me, you see." She found him and he came out and all I did was sign my name on the bottom of this application blank, E.J. Lever. Lo and behold, here comes a guy named Hoffman who said, "There is only one Lever I ever knew, what are you doing here?" He took me into the plant and we spent quite a

long time together. He was one of my sit-down strikers at Quality Stove Company down here in Hatboro. He worked in the tool room then, he had a glass eye. He started off as a weld^er, by 30 his welding rig blew up and the torch blew one of his eyes out and burned him. He had 2 kids, he then went into a tool room and spent 4 years to learn tool making, with a wife and kids. He was one of the first to join the union, when they organized. We had a good time together during the creative period when we had two si^t-down strikes there. Now he was superintendent of this doggone plant.

H: Did you go to work there?

L: No, he said, "You know I thought you were one of those big shots in Washington," I replied, "You know I don't get very big." Somehow they learn to feel that there is something wrong with the labor movement. This fellow said, "You know, I never could put my finger on the reason why certain rulings were made in the union. All the explanations made no sense to me. They were not directly related to the problems we were dealing with." This guy was superintendent in that precision plant, so he was an intelligent fellow in his own right. That was in the 50's. In '52, J.M. Kaplan found me by going around Harvard, Chicago, Cornell, Columbia, and so on. He was trying to turn over the Wild Grape Juice Co. farmers cooperative, the concord grape producers. He was a farm boy from Massachusetts. He said he went around and talked to the professors trying to find one who could show him how to convert an old

corporation into a cooperatively owned corporation; he didn't find one. "Now, he said, can we do it?" Said I, "Sure, we can. It depends on how much you want to do it, how much of it do you own?" He said, "Nearly all of it." "All right, you make the decisions, I'll advise you," I said. I was caught working on this thing. I used to have to start for work at 6:00 A.M.. I had fellows helping me to build this house. Every once in a while, he'd get a brainstorm and he'd call me back to New York. That began in '47. We finally made a deal, I was working on another book, (on consumers), which needed a couple of months more before I could start on his project.

Then, Kaplan was invited by Walter Reuther to address a farmer-labor conference in Detroit. But he wormed out of it by having me go in his place. Murray Lincoln addressed that meeting one night, and I addressed it the next night. I have some of that in the above manuscript. The next few years I spent propagating the future consumers movement, now culminating in the Consumers Federation of America, the Philadelphia and Bucks County consumers organizations, etc. In 1956, a fellow came to this house who was a young Cornell mechanical engineering graduate, who had some gadget in his hand and he said, "Somebody told me about you. The world of automation is waiting for the 'sensor'. I get around as a sales engineer for Bridgeport Brass in the Chicago area. I keep picking up these rumors that people are working on it." I looked at this thing and I said, "I don't even know what you're

talking about. But I think the significant statement you've just made is that people are working on it. Historically, that means that it will come through and it will probably come through in several different places, and several different versions meant to solve the same problems. If other people can do it, if we put our minds to it, we too can do it." We agreed. He rented an old factory building which made wagon wheels during the Civil War; and where in the 1870's Samuel Gompers, according to his biography, may have rolled cigars - in Lambertville, N.J., across the river here. I worked there that winter for 8 months, and produced a working model of the sensor. While he was out selling stock for the company, I wouldn't sell stock for anybody. Eight months later, he took the thing down to Melpar, the Westinghouse electronics division on Lee highway in Virginia, and showed the purchasing agent. A couple of army colonels who were working on military stuff came in, tried it and said, "OK, you got it. We've worked diligently on our models; how much do you want for it? How do you do it with one guy working in that cold place?" The fellow got \$3,500 a piece. I built the first two. Another one raises 1 million spring chickens a year in a plant in Delaware, in 4 quarter million lots, but I don't own a piece of the Company because I don't want to get involved. I was involved enough in it to get him started. In four years, he made 39.7% in profits.

H: I'd like to get back to the labor movement. You say you never went back to a professional job in organized labor?

L: No.

H: But you remained as a machinist all these years? You said in the 1950's you made a survey and you found a significant disaffection in the part of the rank and file machinists in regards to the leadership of the Machinists Union and the whole attitude and dissatisfactions of the labor movement. To what do you attribute that?

L: I attribute this to the institutionalization of the labor movement; it's stratified. Its large staff which is an entirely new group which has attached itself to the labor movement since the coming of the CIO... Both the old AFL unions and the new ones have the strange attitude that they are the labor movement and something that they don't realize themselves is that this is copying from the field of social work, an operative social worker dealing with a client. They don't understand that a trade unionist is a citizen in his own right, and that the union exists because of his will.

H: You're suggesting that the trade union leadership of guys and membership is a client?

L: No question about it, for whom they perform services and for whom decisions are made.

H: What do you think of George Meany?

L: George Meany is an able, skilled political leader of the union movement. In terms of the political power of the labor movement in this country, I think George Meany has made a contribution. But the fact still remains, that only about 20% of the American labor is organized, of those who are eligible under the trade union movement's own conception of who belongs to it and who doesn't. The labor movement has not, since the shaking down of the CIO into another instit-

utionalized group of unions, developed a means of reaching the young people. Unless they reach the young people, they are automatically doomed. Doomed in the sense, not that there will not be a trade union movement, but a new and more satisfying labor movement will come along built by the young people who don't like the old.

H: What do you think of the unions that were once good pioneering, socially conscious unions like the International Ladies Garment Workers Union? What do you think of them today?

L: Again, they are a service union that had to take care of the people. Historically, they've done a lot, obviously, and of course the early people in the movement had paid the price and had made the sacrifices to build that kind of movement. They have attempted to condition their people in union thinking, the attitude of trade unionists toward life in general, but I don't think they have succeeded any more than other unions have. Of course, they have a problem of mostly women, and they are still the kind of union which represents ethnic groups, the more recent ethnic groups in an industry that lends itself to that kind of employment. They will probably continue as a service organization. I think the days of pioneering as such are in the past, and I think that would be true of most of the unions. After all, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers was certainly a pioneering union even more so in some respects than the International Ladies Garment Workers. They grew out of the same environment, they had pretty much the same history, but business unionism takes over in time, and just as the ILG under its new leadership is pretty much the same kind of union it was

under its old, when the change comes in the Amalgamed Clothing Workers, it will be pretty much the same. Organized labor used to develop much broader philosophy of trade unionism than there are many signs of today. Again, we explored this thing 40 years ago when the B & O Plant first came along. I was just as much against it as anybody, because I couldn't reconcile helping private railroad corporations which have always exploited us to become more prosperous. But something happened to me and people like Clint Golden and others who were close to the rank and file. We attended the first meeting of the B & O Plant after the B & O 1922 shop craft strike was first settled with B & O President Dan Willard, who was once himself a trade unionist as a locomotive engineer on the Central of Vermont. Those meetings were with rank and file activists, who knew "how not to run a railroad," and they won us over. Today, some 3,000 plants, railroads and public institutions in Canada operate this way, and Canadian union spirit is better than ours.

- H: You mentioned the President of the Machinists Union who was a socialist. What was his name?
- L: William H. Johnston, between 1912-24, '25. He was a member of the Socialist Party in his earlier days. He was an expression of the social thinking of the local leadership, the advance guard of the IAM in those days.
- H: Would you say part of the reason why business unionism has triumphed with their lack of social vision, is that there is an end to socialist influence, that socialist thinking and other left ideology has been wiped out of the labor movement?

L: To some degree yes. I am equally convinced that the ideas expressed by Socialists today and in the past quarter century or so, or, say, since the end of the IWW, are themselves regressive. One thing that the Socialist has convinced the public at large ----. Government ownership of an industry is not necessarily pro public motivation. Private ownership of an industry is not necessarily philosophically, anti-public. It depends on the kinds of leadership that takes over those corporations and the social uses to which they put them. We have been conditioned that this is a "free enterprise" system and of course they don't know what they are talking about. They don't know the meaning of oligopoly, they don't know the meaning of monopoly, they don't know the meaning of the weakness of public regulation of private utilities. The language has been changed, the advertising fraternities have come in and brainwashed the people, so a corporation which goes "public" is a privately owned, privately held corporation which sells its stock to stock holders. That's hardly the meaning of public ownership or going public by a long shot, according to the dictionary. I've come to the conclusion that ownership is not the determining factor, that ownership is not the determining factor in terms of corporate policy. The, then director of Volkswagon when it was re-organized after the war when the state of Saxony and the federal government of Germany were quarreling about who's going to own the damn thing, said, "I don't give a damn who owns it as long as I run it." Management is the controlling agency of a corporation. It would be true of private industry as well as in government. We have discovered in the

American experience what I call the TVA approach.

H: How do you think this applies to organized labor; do the members run their unions?

L: No.

H: Who runs it?

L: The leadership runs the union. Management runs the corporation.

The agreement as to what the workers are going to get out of this deal is largely advisory conferences and all the rest.

But in the final analysis a few top people make the decisions.

I don't know how to improve upon that, but in terms of a broader motivation the industrial revolution has robbed the worker of a sense of belonging with respect to the way in which he earns his living, and until that's restored a good deal of happiness and joy has gone out of life. How do you restore it? This is what we labor-management cooperation guys have been talking about right along.

H: How do you feel organized labor has responded to the racial crisis? Do you think it has responded positively?

L: I think on the whole it has responded in a positive way. Historically, labor is for equality.

H: They are for them, but very often major unions don't practice them.

L: Yes, this is a problem that Negro intellectuals have not thought through, in depth. For instance, how do you, how far do you get by blaming the leaders of the Building Trades for not employing as many Negroes as they should? Today, not 15 or 30 years ago, are the leaders responsible for keeping out Negroes from their particular occupations? Today, I think it is questionable, because it gets to be a econo-

omic issue between the in's and the out's. Negroes happen to be the out's, they've always been the out's.

H: The white unionists use their power to keep the out's out.

L: Yes, but the white unionist rank and file -

H: What you're trying to say is that the white unionist rank and file as a group is a racist group.

L: No, it is an economic thing more than a racist thing.

H: But they let some white people in, but they excluded all Negroes.

L: That's a racist thing, but also an economic thing. Here's a bricklayer who has a son. It's not necessary for them to go to college. He's a bricklayer, his father was a bricklayer, he wants his son to be a bricklayer. They think like ancient guildsmen. Who is the union going to put in an apprenticeship job? A union member's son, or some fellow from the outside? Purely on race issue, there are a number of leaders in the building trades who are perfectly willing to compromise. But when you get down to the local union, the leaders are against the guys who pay their bills, who live in one place, work through one local union - which is their daily bread. Yet, he is expected to tear himself loose in order to place them into a position where they have to agree with him. He's not ready to make that kind of a sacrifice, for after all, he is a political animal, and it's his bread also.

H: I'd like to get on tape, Mr. Lever, a biographical note about you and then to read it into the tape. This is from a book published in 1936 entitled, The Decline and Rise of the Consumer, a philosophy about consumer cooperation by Horace

M. Kallen. The book is published by the D. Appleton Century Company, New York and London. And Professor Horace M. Kallen on pg. 277 says the following: he refers to the founder of a philosophy of consumer organization and I will quote: "His name is Edward J. Lever. A guant, restless, eloquent, thin man in the early forties, Lever is of the older American stock. He grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania, developed a taste for machinery and became a machinist, and thence a trades-unionist with a vision of the industrial scene and the working-man's problem rare indeed in the present generation of native leaders of organized labor. A member, and for a period an organizer, of the International Association of Machinists - a constituent of the American Federation of Labor - his experience there convinced him of the necessity of a specially directed professional and cultural education for workers planning a career in the trades-union movement. He founded and for a time directed, the Philadelphia Labor College, and passed from that to the faculty of Brookwood Labor College. He participated in the organization of the Brotherhood of Utility Workers, and for some time served Consumers Research as vice president."

And then he goes on to explain your role as a leader in the Consumer movement. Pages 277-278 of Kallen, The Decline and Rise of the Consumer, is a discussion of the work of E.J. Lever. He quotes you on p. 276, "Consumers cannot take over the business of the country. And why should they? Let the owners bear the onus of running the business, but let the consumers organize and squeeze them from one side and

labor from the other. Then, labor and the consumers do not bear the responsibility for the defects in the business system, but neither are they exploited."

This has been an interview with Mr. E.J. Lever, May 29, 1968 at his home, his very charming and lovely home in the woods in Solebury, Pennsylvania. Thank you very much Mr. Lever.

ADDENDUM

Horace M. Kallen, a philosopher, tried to forecast a revival of the cooperative movement in this country, in spite of its repeated failures for over a century. He was, and probably still is, a doctrinaire cooperator. A friend of Dr. J.P. Warbasse, for many years president and angel of the Cooperative League (After the British model, the latter itself proving a failure during the post World War II period, in face of the expansion of corporate distribution in Britain). At the same time, not understanding how the labor movement came into being, he had no comparative yardstick on the why and how one form of economic organization succeeds while other^s fail.

What I tried to get Kallen to understand, is the need for a new approach: Wage earners, many of whom were illiterate, could start a century and much earlier - when 19th century capitalism was just beginning to emerge in this country, through trial and error, nevertheless succeeded in pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps. They too tried other forms of Mutual Aid, eventually shaking down to unions as their first line of defense, on the job, where they earned their living.

Granted, consumer organization in its very nature is more complex than unionism, the very removal of responsibility for ownership and management of enterprise, for which wage earners are not conditioned, suggests an alternative suitable to their own capacity consumer collective bargaining. Simply, through economic organization, as consumers, in the very locality where they buy their living, they, as the ultimate paymasters of the marketplace, thus place themselves in the position of the counter-

vailing power to the seller interests, currently the sole arbiters of the consumers' welfare. As paymasters, they can say to the sellers, "This we (I) will buy, that we won't." All in contrast to leaving such decisions to Adam Smith's little busy-man running around the marketplace (the "businessman"), buying cheap and selling dear. Does consumer bargaining work? Since then we have developed to the point where actual consumer contracts can be signed with large chains, protect consumers on price and quality - and save them 20% on the "regular" prices (on drugs) charged the un-organized consumer.

All this is also an answer to the poorly thought out approach of Nader and others, who really think in terms of politics rather than economics. Pass laws, say they, and the consumer will be protected. Will he? Who enforces the law, corporate agents in government employ, themselves top-down, businessminded bureaucrats? Workers know better through their own hard won experience. Suppose there were no local unions and at the same time a "labor movement" in Washington, with Gompers or Meany in charge, would labor laws be enforced and wages better?

That, doctrinaire cooperators immersed in ideology exclusive of all other values simply do not understand, no more than what makes unions click. And the same goes for political socialists and similar dreamers, as more recent events indicate. It's now 36 years since Kallen's book. Where are all those dreamed of co-ops? As a matter of simple history, I was the one who chartered the ones who still survive - the "successful" ones (as president of Cooperative Distributors, not by the Cooperative League) Witness: Berkeley, Cornell, Univ. of Chicago, Washing-

ton, etc. They were even warned in advance they would fail.

What then to the Warbasse-Kallen dream? -E.J.L. December, 1972