

LABOR MOVEMENT

Stanley Nowak:

Early during the first World War I was a boy selling newspapers in Chicago, in a neighborhood known as the Stockyard. The Stockworker's Union was started by the American Federation of Labor. My brothers took me to their meetings.

During the War there was a shortage of labor and many came from the south and the Black population increased.

When the war was over, at first the wages were the same as before the war started so wages were frozen; but prices during that same period went sky high so there was sort of a strike not only there but the whole country from Boston to Seattle. During that strike there were carloads of trains obviously hired by the packing house companies that brought Black people from the south to Chicago to the packing houses. There were not told there was a strike there. They were placed in some private hotels, then driven by elevator trains into the packing house yards where the people were on strike. That strike they didn't know anything about it. They were looking for jobs. That's all. Then quite a fight developed and the union movement in the whole country was crushed.

There was very close cooperation between the Blacks who came there during the war and understood. The new ones who were brought in were just completely ignorant and were brought in as strikebreakers. The pickets would detest them and there was a bloody fight.

That would be 1918, 1919, right up to the war. Actually that was the encounter of these ethnic groups from Eastern Europe. Of course, Irish were involved and the Germans. But the bulk of them were Polish, Ukrainian, Russian. That's the first time there were in contact with Black people. When they brought these Black people in as scabs, they didn't know they were scabs. The shoemaker who was reading the paper and the news for me, he explained that to me.

It was not until I came to Detroit many years later, when I started to work for the UAW in 1936 that I was introduced to Black people.

At Cadillac the man in charge was Dave Miller who came to me and said, "We have organized the White workers very well. But we have problems with Black people." And he says, "The one way we can get to them is because they all are working in the foundry, and the other white people in the foundry are Poles and they all joined." So I did. I went and talked to these Poles as I speak their language, and they gave me the name of an individual who was a leading Black person.

One of them said, "They have a sports organization. There's one individual who is sort of a leader of it. If you can talk to him

and win him over, you'll have the whole Black community." I went to see Kings. He received me very friendly and told me that some of my Polish friends spoke to him. He told me that the company gave them uniforms to play ball. I visited him once. I visited him twice but he admitted when I asked, "Did you ever take up the question of wages with them?"

"No, those things are out of the question. They give us uniforms to play ball, but wages are out of the question."

So I convinced him that something should be done to change that.

They had in Dearborn and other places, either small bars and restaurants, people who were selling jobs for the Ford Motor Company. The only thing you had to do was go there, leave your name, address and phone number and in a few days you were called to work. You worked there for about three months, and then you were fired. How I discovered this, when I came there for the summer, I ran into a very elderly lady who had a restaurant at that time that closed, and she told me that she had sold probably 500 jobs.

We worked on a proposal that the matter should be investigated. A law would forbid anyone selling jobs who had no permission, who was not a regular agency selling jobs. What happened in the meantime was that a strike took place at the Ford Motor Company and resulted in an agreement. Once the Union signed an agreement that would be out of the question.

During the strike a group of Black people at Ford remained inside when others walked out. Paul Robeson came here and sang for them and talked to them with a loud speaker and they walked out.

One reason why I became a candidate for the Senate was because when we organized meetings with the Union nobody would come. The workers were afraid. They would be spotted and fired. So the idea came that if one of us would run for public office, we would speak at public meetings. They said I would probably have the best chance as there are 20,000 Poles working at Ford. So I became a candidate. Otherwise it was a surprise that I got the nomination. The Democratic nomination was practically election.

Hildred Drew Dale:

My name is Hildred Drew, and I'm a retired International Representative for the UAW. I became involved with the labor movement because I was hired in with Chrysler during the war. That, of course, was the time of Rosie the Riveter, and the time for people who were patriotic to come forward. At the time I was hired it was so different from what it is now. They needed workers. The people needed jobs.

The labor movement is so much a part of me because I began working years and years ago and what it provided was a decent income. The concern is that every worker is a person, and that worker has

rights. One of the rights in particular is the right to be an individual, a right to get a decent wage for a fair day's work, and not only that but the involvement of the labor movement not only where you work but where you live--their commitment and concern with what is happening out in the community.

One of the things our late President Reuther said that stays with us and will always be with us is that you cannot separate the breadbox from the ballot box. Many of the things that we have accomplished at the negotiating table were accomplished at that time because of sitting down and talking. If you don't really protect yourself when it comes times for elections, and in community and political activity, much of that can be taken away with just the stroke of a pen.

I got involved in the labor movement because I saw the needs of the workers and I saw many times the lack of dignity that was shown them by management, and taking advantage of them because many who were not educated, did not understand the contract. I got involved because I want to help people.

When I was coming along, my dad worked at Fords, and there were family discussions. There was a time when families sat around a table together and ate together and talked. We were a union family. My father worked at Ford Motor Car Company and in so doing, my brother became a medical doctor. My mother never worked. That income was sufficient.

The structure of the labor movement and the union is that there are elected officers. People who run for office get elected, and they represent people within the city area. So I ran for chief steward and I ran for committee woman. I ran for recording secretary. I was always running and/or supporting others that I felt were the most qualified or I felt were sincerely concerned about helping other people, not just themselves.

There was a time when you couldn't find a seat at union meetings. It didn't have to be about something that just applied to Hildred Drew or to Gwendolyn Edwards. It was all of us working together, pulling the same way.

I didn't have any slogans, but I had secret strategies. I learned after a defeat or two that you can't take anyone for granted. Even those who work around you. You would assume that the people wearing your cap that says, "Vote for Hildred Dangerfield" would vote for Hildred Dangerfield. But a number of people who had the caps on didn't because I took them for granted. You learn a lesson because when you've lost, you've lost. So I learned some strategies--to talk to everybody and don't wait 'till it's time for you to run. Be involved in people's activities. Be involved with their families. Be involved with their feelings. Be involved with their government. Just be interested in people.

Gwendolyn Edwards:

When I went to work for Fords, I had worked at J. L. Hudson for many years as a maid, I decided that I wanted to make some more money. Well, I got very active in the Union, and we started a woman's committee out there because we felt the women were being discriminated against for the good jobs.

I worked in the glass plant for 10 years. I made windshields. I was one of the first Black women they hired.

I got involved in the labor movement because I was getting the run around from a lot of people, and I went to the Union and said, "They're not treating me fairly," and they started working on my case. If I wanted to apply for a different job, they would have some excuse to keep me from doing it if it was more money. So I got tired of it so I got real active in the Union. As a matter of fact, I was an international rep for the Union for several years because they discriminated against me.

John White:

At the plant I worked at there was a 20 cent differential in wages between men and women. Before the union we worked 13 hours a night. The women could only work 10 hours a day and 54 hours a week. They could work four hours on Saturday and five 10 hour days. That necessitated the men working 13 hours a night because the women worked from seven until five, and then we would come in and stay until seven in the morning.

In 1932 the wage was 18-24 cents an hour for women. For a man the maximum production wage was 32 cents per hour. It would have been quite a bit different if you could have collected the 32 cents for the 13 hours you spent there. That was not the way it operated. You only got paid for the house you were on that machine or line. If the line had to stop or broke down, you checked out and went to sit in the locker room on your own time until they found a job for you. You could be there five or six hours without any compensation. You worked about three months out of the year. That was the length of the production. They would dump it all out then shut down or reduce the employment. Once I got fired because I asked for the weekend off to get married. They told me if I wasn't there Saturday and Sunday don't bother coming back. I went back Monday; and, of course, they had pulled my card to told me they had no job for me.

Hodges Mason:

I worked for a roofing company. I was anti-union. I was sent to Fords as one of the roofers. They moved us around the pig iron foundry. They roped off sections and people going through would walk around. They were pouring pig iron ingots. Those guys were working right under us. That's what burned me up. The tile that

we were laying weighted 160 pounds. They were made out of cement. If they fell that 210 feet to the ground it would kill a person instantly.

Outside was 12 degrees below zero. The guys would fall out from the excessive heat inside. One man would get under his arms and the other would get his feet and try to get him outside in that weather until he would come to. He was supposed to come back in and resume his work. He was so weak he could hardly stand up. I said to the guy, "Don't you have a union in here?"

In 1928 I went to Packard Motor Car Company. They had a guy they called Skinny. He was the foreman. He walked up to me and said, "I want to tell you something, something that will do you good for years to come. He said, "Do you know how to pull enamel? Go over there and let that guy teach you." They had an assembly line along the wall. Each guy was taking a certain part of the crank case. They were chipping crank cases. I was considered darn good. I was fast. A guy they called Buddy came to me and said, "Hey Sonny, you think you're pretty damn good, don't you?"

I said, "Well I know I'm good."

He asked, "Do you think you could beat me?"

I said, "Sure." He asked how much and I said \$10.00. I beat him out. Then we went for double or nothing, and I beat him again. But he was a stooge. They were working piece work. They were running bonuses, and they wanted to run the bonus up to 200 percent. They didn't have enough sense to know that they were giving the company production.

In 1930, that was the heart of the depression, I got a job shoveling sand at Bowman Aluminum. It was piece work. They paid by the ton. You took the foreman's word about how much sand was in there. The oldtimers knew just about, but they were afraid to do any talking. They had 40 ton, 60 ton, 90 ton, 100 ton cars that come in there. They'd pay you 50 cents a ton. They'd get a car that weighed 70 ton, 80 ton and tell you you had forty.

It was in 1936, I had established myself quite well in the plant. I was back at Bowman Aluminum as a chipper. You got so much for each casting. On the roof there was a time study man and the guys didn't know it. They would cut the prices on the job. You could make as much as \$5.02 working piece work, but you could only make 45 cents an hour on an hourly rate. The Blacks made 45 cents, and the Whites made 55, 65 and 75 cents for the same job. All the Negroes were in the knockout department and the band saws and grinding. That's where you knock the cores out of the castings that have been poured.

They would have the castings stacked up on a platform. The foreman would go to the extreme end of the plant, then he'd take the metal guys, then all the various departments. He would call them

castings scrap. They weren't scrap. Then he would dock everyone of them which meant that somebody had goofed on them, maybe. So after he docked all them, he would go and get a truck driver and have him pick the castings up. There may have been a few bad ones, but 85 per cent of those castings were good, but almost four departments had been docked.

That went on for some time. One day a big guy that was pouring metal said, "We want to shut this so and so down. Can you shut down your department?"

I said, "I haven't been here very long. I haven't got as much seniority."

"But you should be able to do it."

I said, "Yes, I'll shut it down. When do you want to do it?"
It was about 7:45 a.m.

He said, "9:00 o'clock."

In December, 1936, I remember very well. I went through the department talking to the guys, told them what we planned, and they said they would go for it. At 9:00 o'clock he spread his hands.

I said, "Hit the button, everybody in this plant, not just this department, is on strike."

They sent me upstairs representing my department. We didn't have any union. We just went up ourselves. At 2:45 pm. we came back. We had gained a 10 percent increase in pay. They liked my way of negotiating, not raising the devil, just telling them what the score really was. We worked from December until March. Then the company's seven other plants went on strike. They closed down the plants. They were on strike on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. Friday, before noon, the foreman came to each one and said, "Everyone goes home at noon." I didn't realize what the score was, but when I got home there was a telegram saying, "Do not report for work until further notice." They had locked us out. I was mad.

On Monday I went out to a meeting of the Local 2, just out of curiosity. I said, I'm going down there to turn it down.

They started talking about what their strategy was going to be. They said, "We need a steward."

I said, "Don't make me a steward because I don't belong to your union and I don't intend to."

"You will be, that's all right."

We went on and they discovered they had to have somebody on the negotiating committee. They recommended I be put on the negotiating committee. "I told you damn guys that I'm not in your

union and I'm not interested in being in it. I don't need you fellows to tell me what to do, and I'm not going to pay you a dollar a month."

They said, "You'll be a member."

I went down to the Book Cadillac Hotel. Went home, changed clothes and went down there and asked for the Bowman Suite. They told me it was 2224. "Thank you very much."

He said, "Wait just a minute," and I stopped. The bell hop came. "Show this man up the service elevator."

"I didn't come down here to do any damn service. I'm on the negotiating committee." My overcoat coat \$75, and my suit cost \$69. I was well-dressed, there's no question about that.

He said, "This way please." He walked past the passenger elevator as he was taking me to the service elevator. I stepped on the passenger elevator and said, "22." At that time I weighed 236 pounds.

He said, "But...."

"But hell," I said, "22."

The life in the union was entirely different then. When we went to the picket line in 1937, 38, 39 we didn't know whether we were coming back alive. April 26, 1938, 125 police jumped 32 of us on the picket line. They were using the police to bring in scabs. I wasn't doing anything but walking the picket line, and they brought the scabs in, and this guy said to them, "You see that big Nigger over there. He's dangerous. When trouble breaks out, get him."

They started hitting, and I put my hands up to let the clubs slide off. I thought I had to get out of there somehow. I was up against the wall in a suit costing \$69.50 and wearing eyeglasses. Those guys came in and the first thing they did was pound on my arms and hands. I picked up a little guy and put him over my head. I turned around to run. Whenever you went to the picket line, you knew about going around the place and finding how to get out of there.

Our local union had to go along with the union that agreed to accept the Chrysler contract and use it as a pattern. We lost a lot. I went into the plant after I joined the union and went all out. Some of the Negroes told me that if you hot a union in there, they're gonna kick all the Negroes out. Management, they brainwashed them to a great extent.

I said, "Look, I'm gonna tell you fellas something. I'm Negro and I don't take any foolishness. I just want to tell you one thing. When you buid a building, you have to put down a foundation. In

that foundation you put lime, cement, stone and sand. Is that right?"

"Yep, that's right."

I said, "When you pour it and let it set, it hardens. And if you take one of them ingredients out, you'll wreck the foundation. I'm saying that you should be in the foundation."

There was a Frenchman that was an inspector before we had the lockout. He was making 75 cents an hour. The Negroes were getting 45 cents an hour. The whites were making 55, 65 and 75 cents an hour. He came out after we had been on strike for two weeks, and he came in like a slimey turtle, quiet as he could be after the strike was over. When we decided we were going to officially organize the plant, get chief stewards, assistant stewards, committee men, there was a guy by the name of Bill Falls. He married the Frenchman's sister. He said, Boy, this union is sure going along fine. You know who we should get for chief steward in this department?"

"Nope, who?"

"That so and so Frenchman. Boy, he'll fight like hell."

I said, "What's wrong with me? I've been carrying the ball."

"You've done a good job, but that so and so Frenchman is the guy."

When we had an organization meeting that night, they jumped up and nominated me and they nominated the Frenchman. He beat me by a landslide. I said to a guy, "Johnson, loan me yhour hat." He handed it to me. "Mr. Chairman, I told these guys if I should find one semblance of discrimination in this union that I'd be the first to talk about it. I've built the union in this so and so plant, and I'm asking everyone of you guys that believe I'm right to pull off your buttons and bring them and put them in this hat." I pulled mine off and put it in the hat. Every one of them except two followed. I said, "Brother Chairman, I'd like to make a motion. I move that we split the department in half. Have the inspection department in one jurisdiction and the bandsaw men, the chippers, the grinders, the knockout saw men in another." They passed it. That endeared me to the Blacks and Whites alike because they saw that I wasn't going to take any foolishness.

There was a guy named James Walton. They ran him for President when I had been vice president for three years. Then they wanted to run more guys. I said, "What the hell is this? That guy can't put a motion on his wall less put it before a house."

"Yeah, but we want him for president. After all, he has you."

I said, "Has me, hell! He doesn't have me. I've got to run. I'm the best foreman in this local and one of the best in the country,

and here's a guy that doesn't know anything at all, and you're going to reach down and bring him up and make him president. You can go to hell." I didn't run. I didn't campaign, and they wrote me in and I beat him to death.

I had the distinction of being the first Black president in the history of the UAW. I was dedicated to the union movement. I jumped into it with both feet because I felt I had disappointed my mother by not having become a doctor.