At that time J & L already had started their espionage system, their beatings. People who were out trying to organize, to get people to sign up to join the union, were beaten.

Domenic Del Turco, Aliquippa

I’ll tell you, I just wanted to get a job and take care of my family.

Wayne Hendrickson, Elkland

It is clear that by the onset of the Great Depression in America, several generations of industrial workers had created a complex world that subtly shaped their expectations and loyalties. Memories of past labor battles, struggling but generally caring parents, family needs, neighborly assistance, routinized work, and limited power and inequalities on the job all intermingled in their consciousness. Collectively, this mélange of experience and feeling effectively shaped the foundation upon which they built their lives. As nebulous as this consciousness was, the historical drama from which it emerged and the people who moved under its influence were inescapably real as hard times worsened after 1930.

The Great Depression created an unprecedented reaction on the part of America’s industrial workers, for it posed an overwhelming threat to the family- and community-based worker enclaves scattered throughout the nation. Workers organized on a national basis, thereby transcending their family and community base, but they did not abandon the values of
Library of Congress

SWOC HEADQUARTERS, ALIQUIPPA, 1937
the workers' world. Larger organizations and strike situations often raised workers' consciousness to new levels, to new perceptions of power and social change, to be sure. But the intellectual and emotional foundation of the working-class thrust of the 1930s remained the family and community. The men interviewed here often expressed concern over power and inequality in explaining their movement toward unionization, but they were essentially the products of a family-community system that expected their support, a system that had provided for their needs for several decades. These workers had learned early in their lives that they could not change society; the experiences of their parents were still fresh in their minds. But employment security as a basis for family stability was important enough to be defended at all costs.

Some have argued that the thrust of labor reform at this time came primarily from labor leaders like John L. Lewis or liberal Democrats in the federal government. As long as historical inquiry is confined to the activities of such men, this will be the inescapable conclusion. But our probes inside the workers' world suggest that labor and governmental leaders may have been reacting to a larger ground swell of popular support for workers' rights and security. The workers' initial attempts at reform were unfocused, but the recollections presented here clearly indicate that these workingmen took matters into their own hands.

The major stimulus toward a grass-roots labor movement at the local level was unemployment. Orville Rice and others were out of work frequently before 1937. Moreover, some men clung so tenaciously to their jobs that they would never think of taking a vacation. Even more revealing is the fact that these men were reluctant to stray from their enclaves if they could help it. Louis Smolinski and Stanley Brozek returned to the mills where relatives had initially gotten them jobs and worked with them, even though periods of idleness there had forced them to look for work elsewhere in the past. Of course, unemployment weakened family stability considerably. As Brozek affirmed, there were no unemployment or pension benefits. "In 1937," he explained, "with a wife and a couple of kids, when I got my last pay check I was done."

Indeed, the strong community and workplace ties of the enclave actually facilitated the unionization and organization drives when they emerged full-blown. Any reluctance on the part of an individual worker toward organization was usually overcome by the irresistible pressure brought to bear by friends and peers working in the same department.

Throughout working-class enclaves in the early 1930s, men acted on their own to reverse the rising tide of insecurity and, as long as they were at it, to correct existing inequities. Before John L. Lewis formed the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), Stanley Brozek tells us, steelworkers in Braddock broke from the old Amalgamated Association of
Iron and Tin Workers and formed their own “Emergency Council.” In Aliquippa, according to Michael Zahorsky, men began talking about organizing before SWOC arrived, despite the company’s attempts to instill loyalty by providing the workers with picnics and other kinds of entertainment. In fact, Domenic Del Turco reveals that Aliquippa sent a delegation to Lewis as early as 1934 urging him to organize a steelworkers union.

Once this tide of organization generated by massive insecurity reached significant proportions, men began to expand their objectives and seek re­dress for the years of unfair treatment that gnawed at their sense of justice. The list was long. In Aliquippa there was bitterness over work schedules and kickbacks to foremen for preferential treatment. Everywhere suspicion had been generated among workers over uneven pay rates; “fair-haired” company boys were thought to receive more. In fact, secrecy over wages was so prevalent that in Braddock no one would reveal the contents of his pay envelope. Sometimes, according to Tom Brown, a person could be laid off simply for smoking. Essentially, however, workers challenged company and community structures with organization drives primarily to preserve the integrity of their family-, community-, and work-based en­claves. They had been powerless and treated unfairly for years, but they did not choose to move against this system until the economic dislocations of the early thirties threatened their community base. Workers were now willing to mount challenges to company power and risk injury and vio­lence. Louis Smolinski, for example, ignored the urgings of his parish priest to stop his activities. Furthermore, the strong legacy of the enclave served workers well as an integrating mechanism that facilitated unioniza­tion and collective activity. By 1937, then, at least in the towns studied here, the movement toward unionization was not only a strike for social change but both an extension of the enclave and a determined attempt to preserve it.

DOMENIC DEL TURCO

Domenic Del Turco was the son of an immigrant from the Italian province of Abruzzi, the birthplace of many immigrants to the Pittsburgh area. His father worked at the Jones & Laughlin plant in Aliquippa. In 1924 Domenic joined his father in the welded-tube department of J & L and eventually became active in the steelworkers union.

“There wasn’t much work in Sharpsburg so my father heard J & L had opened up here in Aliquippa. In 1908 he came down there and put an application in and got a job. And he stayed here. He worked in the welded-
tube section. That’s where they make pipes. They need to make welded pipe. They’d weld them and make all kind of pipe, for welding with couplings, to screw on. That’s all he made there. He worked on the skalp end of the furnace. They used to feed skalp into this furnace. It would come out a pipe. See, they are welded together.

“Skalp is a piece of steel that is cut to a certain dimension. And then, when they weld this pipe, that pipe comes whatever size you want it, whether it’s half-inch, three-quarters, or an inch. My father was the man that pushed the skalp into the furnace. He did that until he had to retire. He became disabled around fifty years of age.

“There were a lot of Italians in the butt mill. ‘Butt mill’ means simply you weld the pipe together; it becomes fused together like that and it’s called a butt. So that’s what they call the butt mill. And it’s a welded pipe; that’s why they call it the welded-tube department.

“He never talked about the company or unions. He just went to work and minded his own business. There was no such thing as unions discussed there at that time. Because if they would have discussed about unions then, you wouldn’t have been there. The company had absolute control of the town. The name of the company was the Jones & Laughlin Corporation.

“I was born in Sharpsburg in 1906 and came to Aliquippa when my mother came down with the family. I was two years old then. My mother had a daughter. My oldest sister and brother were born in Italy. They were left behind with an aunt until such time that things looked better here. My oldest brother, he was the oldest one, and my sister, and I’m next. I was the first one born here. And all the rest of them, the next four, were born in this country. There were five of us born in this country, two born in Italy.

“I was only able to go to school until the eighth grade, after I graduated from the eighth grade. And the reason for that was we had problems with some people in this country which weren’t exactly the type of people to know. They demanded money and things like that. It was the ‘black hand.’ And the result was that they bombed our house. They were extorting my dad; they were getting money till my dad finally decided to call it quits, because it was breaking him. And we had a little store to supplement our income, and they would come in the store and ask my mother for two hundred, three hundred, five hundred dollars. They were Italian Americans. No doubt about it. They knew their own people.

“And that’s how we went back to Italy, because my mother was scared. They had young kids and was afraid something might happen to the family after they bombed our house. So my dad asked them if they’d like to go back to Italy for a while, till this thing blewed over. And that’s what happened. We went to Italy in 1920.
"I returned to Aliquippa in 1924 and went to J & L and applied for a job. I was two, three months from being eighteen. So they hired me. I got hired in the welded-tube, same place my dad worked.

"I was sent to welded-tube because they needed younger people there. It was [a] type of work that the younger man was more adept at. They could learn faster, and when you're young, you get around faster too. The reason for that was because you had to be fast in doing this work, because when the pipe came out of the mill, then it came down on the floor, and you had to sort it out. So you was under continuous operation, all the time.

"No, we didn't have any union at all then. But they brought Negroes from the South to put them against whites and keep us from organizing. They could get them for cheap labor. Of course, even the whites were getting cheap labor. There's no secret about that. We got no vacations. I was hired in 1924, and from 1924 to '29, five consecutive years. I worked six, seven days a week, ten hours in the day, ten and a half at night, no vacations. Nobody got the same rate. They had what they called the 'fair-haired boys'; they paid them a certain rate. And the rest got a lesser rate. One would be getting a higher rate and one would be getting a lower rate. Well, that's because that was a company policy. They figured it all depends whether you were sympathetic toward the company.

"In one case, they fired a foreman after it was exposed that this guy was making a lot of his employees kick back. When they finally started protesting, they got rid of him. I don't know where they sent him, but I think they might have sent him somewhere else.

"They didn't have no company union then either. The company union came in J & L in 1934. As a matter of fact, it became prevalent in all the steel industries in 1934.

"If accidentally [a] guy shot his mouth off and said, 'How much you making on your job, boy?' that's how we used to find out. We got to checking and found out that some of the boys who were considered company people—when I say company people, that [means] they were leaning towards management more than they were towards the people that worked in there—were making more. And there was no secret that a lot of people were getting higher rates than other people who did the same type of work.

"They spied on you. Sure, that's the idea of giving them a higher rate. Certainly there was nothing new about that.

"Let me give you another illustration. When we first started working on organizing the union, we had a man named Mike Keller. I don't mind mentioning his name because he died for the cause. He was a Serbian man from Aliquippa. A 'fair-haired boy' for the company—I don't want to mention his name because his people are still living there—attacked him. When we were first organizing the union in Aliquippa, the police department was against us, the fire department, every governmental group was
against us. That’s why they call Aliquippa the ‘Little Siberia.’ You couldn’t even breathe in there without somebody stooging on you. While we was just out organizing the union, Mike Keller was one of these aggressive little Serbian men. In 1935 Keller was standing right in front of the police, in the middle of the street. I was not too far from him. Now this guy was a little fella; Mike Keller was little fella. He was about five feet, two inches. And this guy walked up to him [and] without any reason at all started beating him up. Now this man was big, he was about six one or two, weighed about two hundred thirty or forty pounds. And he beat this man up so bad, five or six years later he dies from the effects of the beatings. He busted his ear drums, kicked him in the head, kicked him in the stomach so bad; he was beat up so bad. And the police were standing right there and they wouldn’t move, because they had orders not to interfere. That’s how J & L was trying to control the people. But it didn’t work, because guys were so incensed about this thing that we were more determined to organize the union.

“You had to be a ‘fair-haired boy.’ Everything in town was controlled. You could not get a loan unless it was O.K.’d. You couldn’t do anything in that town unless it was O.K.’d by higher powers to be. The banks were controlled by the corporation.

“Tо show you how this area was under control, even when Roosevelt came into office the Republicans still had the town under control over the county. And we were put on WPA. There was one prominent citizen here that had a big place, farmland, a lot of land. I’m not going to mention his name either, because that’s water over the dam. But we used to go up there, clean, cut his trees down, oil the roads and everything. We used to do all that. We used to get a scrip, a one-dollar scrip every week, no cash! We used to work a ten-hour day on WPA. We got a dollar-a-week scrip. For a dollar a week you could get some beans, porkchops.

“Since they had orders from all local governments, county governments was in charge of putting these people to work. So naturally this guy figured that here was a good chance to take care of his property. He was in with the corporations. He was a local businessman.

“In the 1930s, before the union, we would work a few days a week. They tried to enlist me in the Communist Party, and I told them that communism and unionism doesn’t mix. ‘I’m a union man [Amalgamated Association of Iron and Tin Workers at this time], and I’m going to stay a union man. I don’t want no part of communism.’

“An organizer came down, and I was going to work. I heard him call my name. I turned around and he gave me a false name. He told me his name was Ben Gold. But I found out later on it wasn’t. And he says, ‘I came down purposely to see you. You’re a very aggressive young man. You’re an educated boy and you have a good vocabulary, and you are a
forceful speaker.' And he said, 'We can use people like you.' And I said, 'Are you representing a union?' He says, 'No.' 'Well,' I says, 'you’re talking to the wrong man, because I am already committed to the union. And I am organizing the union [Amalgamated] in this community and this valley.'

'This was 1934. And he says to me, 'Well, we still could use you.' I said, 'If you’re talking about any party, you’re talking about the Communist Party.' Of course, I was aware that there was a couple of organizers sent down talking to the people. He said, 'Yes.' That’s when I told him. I said, 'The Communist Party and unionism doesn’t mix. I’m a labor man and I’ll stay that way. And I’m a Christian. I don’t believe in communism.'

'Because at that time, according to the federal government, the Communist Party in this country was behind the eight ball. It just wasn't accepted in this country at that time. And to illustrate the point, we had a few of our good union people that were interviewed by the FBI several years later about their leanings towards the Communist Party. What happened was they foolishly signed a petition one time without reading it, and here it was a petition that the Communist Party was circulating around. So when he came to me and asked me to sign a petition, I said, 'I don’t sign anything until I read it.' So I read it; I gave it back to him. I said, 'I will not sign this petition. I am not a member of the Communist Party, and I don’t intend to be.' 'Well,' he says, 'you do that. We’re trying to establish democracy.' I said, 'Your kind of democracy, not mine.' The results was that this poor guy—I don’t want to mention his name for he became a union official later on and he’s dead now—had to go through a grilling for about several hours by the FBI in this country. They asked him why he signed that petition, and was he a member of the Communist Party. We were able at that time to convince the federal government, the FBI, that he foolishly signed it without even paying attention. At that time the union was coming in; everybody was signing everything, you know, not knowing what they were signing.

'We heard about this organizing over in Ambridge, and we decided to go over and listen to the organizer, because he couldn’t come into Aliquippa. As I said before, this man, P. J. Call, who was then burgess of Ambridge, was a union man himself. He told the people that any time they want to they could meet in Ambridge to talk about union. They would get police protection. When I heard about this organizing in Ambridge, of this plant, we went over and listened to him. His name was John Tepowsky. And boy, he was really a good one!

'He was from the Amalgamated. He was the organizer for the Amalgamated. And they started the speaking, and we went over to listen. Well, that’s when we first found out that the union was coming in. In the meantime, we had a man who later became financial secretary of our organization. This man knew these organizers because they originally came from
the coal mines, some of them. And some of them were with the Amal­
gamated for years, you know. And he made contact with Tepowsky about
coming to Aliquippa to organize. This was about the fall of '33. Well after
that speech over there and all that, a lot of people in this plant over here in
Ambridge decided they wanted to join the union and started organizing.
And the upshot was that the company, of course, wouldn't recognize [it
and] there was a strike. And of course we heard 'bout the strike, so we
went over. In this day, the deputies and coal and iron police and every­
body else were there, and then a riot started. They started shooting [in
Ambridge], antigas pellets. And there was homes there. This one guy was
standing on his porch watching all these things go on, and a stray bullet
killed him. It was J & L who deputized over in Aliquippa, and sent them
to Ambridge to break the strike.

"Then, after that, we started [organizing] in 1934. We talked to Te­
powsky and a man named Martin Gestner. He was an ex-coal miner one
time at West Virginia, the man I said that contacted him. And Tepowsky
asked Gestner to get us a charter. We wanted to become members of the
Amalgamated. And so we paid at that time thirty dollars for the charter.

"And then we started really organizing. We had quite a few people
then. We already had a large group, about forty or fifty, somewhere around
there. Then we went up to as high as six thousand members, which is a
heck of [a] lot of members, considering that the people we were affiliated
with wasn’t doing anything for us. We found that out later.

"Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation hired Pinkertons, and the
Burnses, believe it or not. And one of the Burnses or Pinkertons, whatever
he was, became vice-president of our union when he came down here. He
joined the union. The company asked him to join our union just to spy on
us. And this guy was trained for this. He was an ex-boxer. He was a light­
weight, but boy was he good!

"Now don’t get me wrong, I’m not trying to minimize what these other
people did. But the two plants that really were strong [for the union] was
the welded-tube and the seamless. The strongest group of people that were
for the union [Amalgamated] and really held to it was, like I told you,
Mike Keller and the Serbians, the Croats, the Ukrainians, the Italians,
and the Irish. Of course, the Irish wasn’t as large a group as the rest of
them. But those five groups were very aggressive groups.

"The organizing part of it, I like [that] the best. The strength that we
would have. It was emphasized by one man. He said if we organize, we
have strength. You got the power to fight power.

"During the Amalgamated days, the organization didn’t have any
power to convince the company that we wanted recognition. And I recog­
nized that, and I knew that if we didn’t have a powerful body behind us,
we would never get nowhere, because at that time J & L already had started
their espionage system, their beatings. People who were out trying to orga-
nize, to get people to sign up to join the union, were beaten. I escaped a
beating one night while I was out signing cards.

"Later on, there was division in the local union itself. We were dissat-
sisfied with what the Amalgamated was doing, and so a more aggressive
group—you can call us radical if you want to as far as the union is con-
cerned—decided things didn't look so good. So we decided that we wanted
to send somebody down to see John L. Lewis in Washington and see what
he could do about it.

"Finally, even though we had taken opposition, the majority agreed.
So we held the dues back. Well, what happened was that the Amalga-
mated Association wanted to know why we weren't sending dues in. And
we told them that we were not satisfied with what they were doing, and we
expected them to get recognition for us from the company so we could
become a bona fide union organization. And they told us, 'If you [don't]
send in the money, we expel you people.' I said, 'I don't give a doggone if
you expel me or not. Go ahead and expel me. So what?' Well, the upshot
was they held a convention in the West End of Pittsburgh with men from
another town. And so the upshot of the whole thing is we had our own con-
vention and we made plans. And so when we came back, we in Aliquippa
sent a car over to people [in] Washington, D.C., with a letter. And there
was six people going down, and these six people was in a Buick touring
car. And they had this letter to give to John L. Lewis. So they went down.
We couldn't do it because the officers left; good Lord knows what the
company would do to the members. Lewis talked to them and all. He says,
'I promise you that we will organize the steelworkes in the very near
future.' And Philip Murray, who was then with Lewis for the miners, was
appointed by Lewis to organize the steelworkers. And then when we were
successful we had a three-day strike down in J & L to convince J & L we
meant business. That was 1936, when the SWOC came in.

"Eventually Philip Murray met with these corporations and told them,
"We want you to recognize the union.' They wouldn't, so there was a
strike called in the steel mills in 1937.

"In the meantime, a committee was set up to negotiate with the Jones
& Laughlin Steel Corporation. I was one of the members of the commit-
tee. After three days J & L agreed to recognize us as the bargaining unit
for the employees. And that's how it began. Then we had an election on
the premise that they would hold the election and the union would lose the
election, that they wouldn't recognize them. So what happened is we took
it and got 7,000 for and 1,000 against.

"What happened was we had an awful time trying to convince the black
brothers to join. It wasn't a matter of trust. It was a matter that the com-
pany had put the fear of God in these people.
"Just like I said, one day the company brought forty nonunion Negroes to work in the plant. They came off this bus, about forty of them. They started marching in just like a group, already prepared. We tried to stop them. The first thing you know, they started swinging. We doggone near got murdered down here. I had a blackjack, and I started swinging my blackjack. I broke the doggone thing. But those guys didn’t know that I had broken it. They weren’t getting near me. They were afraid they were going to get hit with it.

"These guys went in. They [had] to come out. ‘Tonight and tomorrow we’ll be waiting for them,’ I said. ‘We’re going to get these guys.’ [Then] our union people down in the mill brought out these pieces of pipe about three feet long, about three-quarter-inch pipe; that’s what they call the scrap end of the pipe, they chop it off. ‘We’re going to wrap it up in the doggone newspapers and we’ll wait for them,’ [I said]. Well, they must have got wind of it, because them guys stayed in that doggone plant and didn’t come out. And all the time we had the dues inspection they didn’t come out. Then I was talking to James, a black union member, and I told him what happened. He says, ‘I know, I’m ashamed of my own people. But, I’m going to talk with these guys, and I’m going to tell them, ‘You’re going to get killed if you don’t quit messing around. They’re going to beat your brains in for you. We’re not playing Ping-Pong here, my friends, we’re fighting for our bread and butter here. We’re fighting for our life.’"'

So after that incident we didn’t have trouble with Negroes because then they started joining the union.

"It wasn’t because they were reluctant; the company told them [it] wanted them to come to work and didn’t want them to belong to the union. If [it] did, they wouldn’t be around."

MICHAEL ZAHORSKY

Michael Zahorsky, a second-generation Slovak American, worked most of his life at the Jones & Laughlin plant in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. Here he describes the measures the company took to keep the union out of town and relates the details of local organizing.

"I was a sticker puller at first; I worked at a coke works, then I was a millwright helper in the rectangular coke ovens. I worked there several months, and then I went into the tube mill. I was a gauger in a tube mill. It wasn’t like a continuous run in the mill. They made pipe out of a slab, maybe a piece of skalp, twenty, twenty-five feet long. And I had to write because there was a lot of people that were illiterate that worked in the mill at that time. And [being] a young kid, I was pretty sharp. They made
me a gauger. And I had this job as a gauger for a while, and then there
was a young kid who was fifteen years old who got killed, and then they
got all the young kids out of there. They checked on us, and they figured it
was too risky for us, climbing in big piles of skalp. It just fell over on him,
actually squeezed the guy to death. Then I was in a blow-engine room of
the blooming mill, and this is some of the biggest engines that they have in
the industry; [it’s] where they roll the great big ingots and blooms. And I
was doing all right. The foreman was a friend of my father’s, and they used
to drink together, and I got this job as an oiler. I had to go among these
various cranks and the various revolving wheels and all that. And one day
the foreman came up to me and said, ‘Hey, Mike, how old are you?’ I
says, ‘Sixteen.’ He says, ‘You’re too damn young to be among this stuff.
You better go someplace else.’ So then they run me out of there, and I got
a job in the office in a chemical lab. And I would run errands around
there, and I would write out little reports. Then I left J & L and went down
to a steel mill called Colonial Steel, in a little neighboring town about five
miles down the river. I worked there as a laborer for a while. I worked
around the steam hammers. I kind of liked the forging hammers. And
then I got a job in a glasshouse. I worked in a glasshouse. I used to work
twelve hours a night.

“I finally came back to J & L in the blacksmith shop. I never lost any
time. I went from one job to another because I worked like hell all the
time. I never had to have anybody with a finger up my butt to keep work­
ing. So it seemed that they laughed about it—how could I leave one job
and go to another job and keep going? Because if you do it today, they’d
probably blacklist you. They wouldn’t want you in their employ; but I was
very fortunate in that respect.

“I was a blacksmith at J & L for almost thirty years. And that was very
hard work. In addition to that, now I took pride in the place where I
worked. This sounds stupid to say. You wonder how the hell you correlate
a beautiful blacksmith shop with a shop in a mill. But our shop was always
maintained neat and clean, good production. We conducted safety meet­
ings and things of that nature.

“In the steel plant we do everything, even make horseshoes. Of course,
the horseshoes, we call them government jobs. You know what a govern­
ment job is? In any industry where you do work, it’s paid for by the com­
pany, but you’re doing it for someone else on the side. Even some of the
supervision would come in, and I made horseshoes for them, or I made
rings for foremen. They needed chains. They had farms or something, and
they needed chains. I welded chains for them. They needed tongs; I’d make
a million tongs. But I did everything from small forgings—I made tongs,
all kinds of hand tools, masonry tools, and tools they needed around the
mill, all kinds of wrenches or forgings from which they turned gears or shafts. You know, we done all that stuff.

"This is one area where you had all ethnic groups. You had all nationalities. You had Scotch; you had Irish; you had Italian; you had Croatians; you had Slovaks; Serbians. You had a mixture of everything. The blacksmith shop was not dominated by any specific group like you do find in some industries.

"In the blacksmith shop it’s almost impossible to work by yourself. You must have a helper, and if you’re doing some very small job, like welding small chains, you can do it yourself. But if you’ve got something where you’ve got to have striking with a sledge or operating with a steam hammer, you must have a helper. And if it’s a very large forging, you’re going to have people that’s assisting you with a hammer. You might have five, six men on a team, just like in a regular forge shop on a flat die. In a blacksmith shop, you use a flat die. We use a lot of various forging dies, but it’s not like a drop-forging shop, where you stud a blanket to a mold and you slap it down with one punch of a hammer and then you have the piece, just like a molding, a casting and all. In a blacksmith shop you’ve got to do a lot of hand specialty work. It’s really a wonderful craft.

"While there was a mixture, it was only natural for an old-timer to favor his own kind. If he was a Croatian and he saw a nice strong young Croatian boy that he kind of liked, he would try to get him there to be his helper. An Italian would do the same thing, just like the Slovak. But it’s a natural thing. Maybe he even had a daughter and wanted him to marry his daughter.

"In the blacksmith shop you could start out as a helper, but you had to learn to drive the hammer. I learned to strike a sledge and learned the various movements. You’re holding tools in your hand and you rely on the man striking the sledge or steam hammer. To learn to run a steam hammer you got to be extremely careful. It’s a hazardous thing, so you didn’t operate the hammer immediately. Sometimes they have the presses or they have the steam hammer or they have the bolt header. You had to learn how to operate these machines. But you would come in as a helper and you would work up to be a hammer driver or first helper like that.

"After Roosevelt was elected in 1932, the Democratic Party promised labor that they were going to get them some freedom at their work. One of these freedoms would be the formation of a union. The companies were alerted to all this, so the companies were not going to be caught asleep. So they started organizing what were called the company unions. In Jones & Laughlin, and a great number of the steel companies, they call it the employees’ representative plan. They called us together and said, ‘We’re going to get big-hearted now.’ In other words, this is probably what this
amounted to: ‘You’re going to have your own representative now. Instead of going to your foreman with your gripes, you’re going to have your own representative in the various departments for your gripes and your grievances; you’re going to go to him with this.’ And they organized about two years before the steelworkers organized. And the company was very lavish with the money. Oh, they were lavish. They put on some of the most beautiful picnics you ever saw. They spent up to ten thousand dollars. They brought nationally known, prominent bands and comedians here. They gave the kids all the pop and soda and hotdogs they wanted. They brought in all kinds of rides and concessions. They went all out! In other words, they spent unlimited money to keep the union out.

“I remember [how it was] in this mill here in 1936. We talked about it months before John L. Lewis decided that they were going to help the workers get organized. And they called it the SWOC, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. I’ll never forget—[it’s] like yesterday. It was in 1936, shortly after the flood. An organizer of the SWOC came into Aliquippa, a man by the name of Joseph Timko. He was a Slovak; he came in from the coal fields. Why he came in to see me I don’t know. But I lived down the end of the street here; the house is razed now. I was just getting ready to leave for someplace, and I didn’t have too much time to talk to him. I wanted him to come back. But anyhow, we had a pastor at that time by the name of Monsignor Joseph Altany. He’s pastor of St. Michael’s Church in Munhall now. And he came from the coal fields. He came in from Nemacolin, Pennsylvania. And he was a man’s man. He was a humanitarian. He felt that the company owed the people something. And Timko came in and we talked to him. Of course, everybody feared for their jobs; everybody did. Don’t let anybody tell you they didn’t. I talked to a lot of these fellas after it was over with, and they said, ‘Well, I didn’t give a damn,’ ‘To hell with it,’ and this and that. They talked like that, but they all had that fear of the job, because the company fired many. I knew personally every one of the men that they fired here at the mill. They framed these men. I know ’em all. Most of them are still living. I think there’s only about four living in the community. There were dozens of men who lost their jobs and nobody knew why. It was because of their interest in the organization of the union.

“Timko didn’t come in here with any fanfare. He came because the police force was dominated by the company and everything. The county police were also controlled by the company. He came here incognito on a friendly visit. And, of course, he disclosed to us that he was a union man. Manny Woods, another organizer for Phil Murray, came in here around the same time, from Castle Shannon. And this town became fired up very fast. We had some wonderful people.

“They would hold meetings secretly in various homes. They would also
meet in some of the neighborhoods’ halls. And there was never a meeting held, it seemed, that there wasn’t a stooge of the company there. It seemed that the meeting wasn’t half over sometimes and someone would walk out, probably to call a raid by the company police. The company could deputize the police then. The deputies were like the old coal and iron police and they had [the] authority of state policemen. And the company used that to the fullest.

“Here in Aliquippa, as I have said, the company started to combat the organization of the union by this employees’ representative plan. Then, when they heard there was going to be [a] strong organizational drive here, they set up what they called the Committee of 500. This committee was made up of professional people led by a certain Doctor Gelland. They also had high-school teachers and business people in the community. They thought they were doing the right thing when they said that the union was going to come in here and take all the money out of the community. And this feeling of theirs against the union got to be damn strong
here. You know, they went around the mill and they wanted us to sign pa-
pers that we’d join this committee as vigilantes against any outsiders want-
ing to come in and organize. They would tell us, ‘Well, we don’t mind you
people organizing yourselves but we don’t want nobody from the outside
coming in here and stirring up trouble in the community. We got a won-
derful community here.’ And the Committee of 500 was extended to [a]
committee of five thousand. That meant that every fourth person in this
community was signing up here to be in this committee and oppose the
first strike they called around here, in Ambridge, across the river.

‘The committee went up to Ambridge. They even took ex-servicemen.
I saw men cry. And they said, ‘What the hell am I going to do, Mike? I
have to go. They’re going to take us.’ And they put arm bands on them
and they gave them clubs and even guns. They took them on trucks from
the J & L plant and took them down to the Ambridge bridge. They had a
movie camera set up and everything. I was there and I saw that, that after-
noon. I would say that ninety-eight percent of them went against their bet-
ter judgment for fear of losing their jobs.

“So they used tactics like that, but it didn’t work. Governor Pinchot’s
wife—she was a son of a bitch when it came to the rights of people—came
to Aliquippa and held a meeting [in 1937]. I thought there was going to be
[a] thousand people killed. There were thousands and thousands of people
congregated in the center of town. And do you know the company had
manual machine guns in the windows in the hotel. If need be, they was
prepared to ‘mow ‘em down.’ Hard to believe. Mrs. Pinchot came into
town and led the parade of steelworkers. They marched up to the Polish
hall in what we call Plan 11; it is the Negro section of town today. And she
[gave] a speech there. She spoke for the organization of the steelworkers.
That was the first real break.”

**LOUIS SMOLINSKI
AND STANLEY BROZEK**

*Stanley Brozek and Louis Smolinski were second-generation Polish
Americans. Brozek was born in 1910 in the coal-mining town of
Trauger, Pennsylvania; his father had followed friends from Poland
to the H. C. Frick coke mines there. Smolinski’s father had
immigrated first to Rankin, where he labored in a wire mill, and
then, in 1913, to Braddock, where he died from a mill injury at the
age of forty-three. Brozek and Smolinski offer a glimpse of what it
was like getting a union started in Braddock in the thirties.*

**Brozek:** “My dad worked first in Fayette County but had some friends
in Trauger and moved there. He worked at the A. C. Frick mines, loading
slag into the coke ovens. My dad started when he was thirteen. At that time you went to school and you worked. He always used to tell me how he used to fall asleep in school. So he started at Frick and I distinctly recall him telling me that he ran a little dinkey. The dinkey ran lorry cars and dumped the coal onto the side. He stayed there until 1913, when he came to Braddock to work in the Edgar Thomson Works.

"My first real job was in the same mill as my dad. I had odd jobs like working the fruit store and selling newspapers before that. My dad helped me get the job in the mill. At that time usually a father could speak for his son. He spoke to the superintendent. That's the way it was in 1928. I worked in the general labor department at first and transferred into the open hearth in 1929. Then came the big layoffs of 1931, 1932, and 1933. Since I was one of the youngest ones in the open hearth, I was among the first to go. In those years I got a job as a sales-route man for the Grand Union Tea Company. And I stayed there until I got tired of working six
days a week on the road and traveling all the time. And then my dad got
me back into the mill by talking to a superintendent who was a good
friend of his. He said, 'My boy wants to come back.' So he gave me work
because I was there before. I got hired back, in 1937."

**Smolinski:** "I started at Edgar Thomson in 1929. My brother worked
there and brought me a letter from the boss saying I could start. I was do-
ing all kind of labor work and gradually worked up to the boiler. When
the Depression started there was no work and I got a job myself at West-
inghouse. I got laid off up there, though, and I never thought that I would
ever come back to the mill. It was a boom in 1937 and I got back to the
mill. But 1938 was a bust again and I thought of getting out.

"I thought I’d like to get out into business or politics. I thought I would
like to get into something that would serve the people. As a young fella in
the mill I worked ten hours a day, sixty hours a week. And I thought to
myself, 'What the hell am I going to do here all my life?' Of course, never
thinking that things were going to change. So anyway, I thought to myself,
cooped up here for ten hours a day, 'Why can't I do something outside
and mingle with people all the time?' So actually my aspirations were for
something outside, mingling with people. That's the way I felt when I was
a young fella.

"Before the mill, I had been in a glassworks. You know, every glass
blower had his own boys to take care of—the core boy, the mull boy, the
carry-in boy. And I was carrying in and then I was the core boy. Everybody
was getting different money. When the mull boy quit, [the glass blower]
got another boy. I said, 'No way. I'm not working if I can't be the mull
boy. I'm next in line for that job.' He said, 'No, he's going to work.' I said,
'O.K., I quit. I'm on strike.' And he couldn't do no work because he
didn't have nobody else to carry the stuff in. So finally after about an hour
he came to me and said, 'Come on. You're the mull boy.' Then everything
was all right. We went back to work. But I didn't stay there long. That's
when I got a call from the mill.

"At the Edgar Thomson mill the maintenance department was mostly
Irish people. All the electricians and everything, practically ninety per-
cent, were Irish. The Polish people dominated the foundry. And in the fin-
ishing department there was Polish, Slavish, and colored, [but] not too
many colored."

**Brozek:** "The Irish had, when I was a youngster at the open hearth,
the first helper, second helpers, and most of the slaggers. We had a few
Slovaks. The Irish also predominated in the machine shop, and the Scotch,
Irish, and English were roll turners. I know the foundry was Polish because
I worked right across from it.

"One of our problems was the differing wages. William Jacko was our
president around 1940. He was put on our union's wage and equity com-
mittee to standardize wages according to job class and the contents of jobs. Jacko told me that he found over two thousand four hundred different kinds of wage rates at United States Steel. At our boiler shop for years the men were afraid to show their pay envelopes to each other. We got paid by cash, and if you got even two or three cents more an hour it was good money. Nobody would let you see their pay envelopes in the boiler shop, and that's the truth.

"Some got more pay because they brought the 'boss' a drink or a meal. Logan was the boss at the boiler shop. I remember the old Slovak people talking down on Calvert Street: 'Oh, Logan is going to get a chicken dinner or some chicken soup.'"

Smolinski: "In 1934 the company proposed their own union. As soon as section 7A [of the National Industrial Recovery Act] was announced, they proposed the company union. I was standing on a corner one time and a few fellas come down and passed out cards. They said the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers was going to have a meeting in Homestead. They gave me a lot of these tickets to pass out for all steelworkers to go to the meeting. I said to him to come to Braddock and organize Braddock. He told me he couldn't do it unless he had two hundred signatures. I said that would be easy, and me and a couple of other fellas went out and got three hundred, and they put an organizer in Braddock. The Amalgamated officials said you can't serve two masters. And when Phil Murray took over, he told us to go in and break that company union. So we went into a meeting of the company union and asked for a raise of a dollar a day. We had five company representatives and five workers at the meeting. One of the superintendents of the engineering department even voted for us; he said he could use the raise. A week later he wasn't a representative anymore."

Brozek: "I became aware of the whole thing at the time Louis was active in the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers with a fella named John Chorey. Now Chorey used to come to my dad's house quite often. And they would talk union. And Louis had quite a number of meetings in the old hall in Braddock. And even though I worked for Grand Union at that time, I had so many union people come to my dad's house, I got interested in it. And so I learned just by hearing these fellas talk about their problems. They complained mostly about shortened work or hours and working conditions. My father also complained about the strike in 1919 and the way the 'Cossacks' came around with their horses and just beat you up. I recall a bunch of kids sitting on our porch, and they came down and told them to get the hell out of there and stay in the house. That's the way it was.

"It was this way when we were organizing in Braddock. Some of the union officers couldn't walk the streets. If my brother-in-law would see me
coming, he would cross over [to] the other side of the street so as not to be seen with me. When I went in different taverns it was the same thing. We found two members in our organization who were spies for the company.

"The company never offered you a vacation. My dad started working in 1899 and never got one until 1936. What was the purpose of giving him one [in 1936]? It was to discourage him from joining the union."
Smolinski: "A lot of guys would never take a vacation because they thought they were doing the company a favor.

"In 1934 we first tried to organize the Amalgamated in Braddock. I was a delegate to the convention in the West End of Pittsburgh. We were supposed to go on strike and voted for it. But at another convention about two weeks after that the Amalgamated wouldn’t give us credentials. They told us that we weren’t a recognized organization and they didn’t want rabble-rousers and everything. So we had a meeting; we had to rent a hall about two blocks away from the Amalgamated place. State troopers were there on horses and everything; they made sure there was no trouble.

"The Amalgamated had put organizers in these different towns and tried to organize a union. They had some old puddlers and people like that. But it was an old organization by these old fellows. And they wouldn’t let everybody join. After that first convention they disqualified most of us. We were unhappy with the Amalgamated when they threw us out of that hall. They didn’t want no part of us, I think. So from there we started an emergency council. We had our council when the Steel Workers Organizing Committee came in.

"You take our finishing department. Well, that’s where the organization came from. Mostly Polish and Slavish worked there and we all got together. There were rail straighteners, rail drillers, rail chippers, pilers. Some of those rails weighed almost a ton. You know, it was a ‘Hunky’ union. Well a lot of them Irish and every damn thing called it that. Some of the bosses and other damn things called it a ‘Hunky’ union. Everybody from the finishing department was in it. And there [were] many Negroes there too, and some could even speak Slovak. But when we first started our council we had a couple of Irish guys like Benny Dolwide from the storage department and Tom Connally from the maintenance department. But everybody was afraid, and nobody would want to be seen with you. I went to one meeting in Ambridge and couldn’t get a drink because no clubs could sell anything. So I went to my uncle’s house with five other guys and knock on the door. He let us in but told us to hurry up and have a drink because he didn’t want anybody to know that we had been there.

"See, the Republican party controlled Braddock at that time. Let me tell you a story. We had a burgess named Callahan. In 1938 he tried to make a comeback. He was defeated because when the Depression set in the people started swinging away from the Republican party to the Democrats. So Callahan and his group were slowly being eliminated politically, losing office by office. In 1938 Callahan wanted to make a comeback in one way or another. I forgot what he ran for in Braddock. And I’m working at the polls down in the First Ward. So Callahan and I had a pretty good talk. He loved to take a drink. And he started telling me stories about what happened years ago. And he said, 'I wish I had only a dollar
for every ballot that I sent floating down the river. I’d be in Florida living it up.’ And then another thing—this is all coming back to me now—when I moved into my house in Braddock in 1935 I was fixing the coal stove. I took the coverplate off the stove and out falls ballots, a whole bunch of them. I’m thinking, ‘I’ll be goddamned.’

‘We even brought Mrs. Pinchot to Braddock. We had her down here twice. And that’s when my parish priest called me up and said, ‘What you got this chick in here for?’ I said, ‘What do you mean?’ He told me that I couldn’t let her speak here. He started raising hell with me. ‘You have to leave her go,’ he said, ‘and cancel that meeting.’ I told him that she was a good organizer and [I said,] ‘I ain’t canceling nothing.’ I guess the company got after him or some damn thing. I don’t know why he opposed her. He was a Polish priest.”

Brozek: ‘I’ll tell you some incident that happened to me in the late twenties. In ’28 I graduated from North Braddock High School and started working in the open hearth at Edgar Thomson. When I was first there I saw this colored kid get out of the pits and sit down. Then old Pete Quin, a boss, come by and thought he was looking [away from his work] and said, ‘That’s it. You’re fired.’ From that day on I figured, boy, this system ain’t for me. And my uncle, Al Marsh, he was active in the union field with the coal mining, with Phil Murray up in District 5. He moved to Ambridge and got a job with the American Bridge Company. So I says, ‘Uncle Al, I like to play a saxophone.’ Now, in them days we had no high-school band. Otherwise, I’d been there with one of their instruments. So he got me a saxophone in 1928, [and] I played with a musical group for a number of years after that. But anyway, this had to be around 1930, because I had to have been off half the time. And I remember him callin’ me up on Saturday. He says, ‘What are you doin’, Stanley?’ I says, ‘Tomorrow, I have nothing for tomorrow.’ [He says,] ‘I want you to come down to Ambridge. Bring your gang down, or else bring a few down, as many as you can scrape up.’ So anyway, I got my brother and I got another fella that played banjo. My brother played a trumpet and a banjo. I had my saxophone. So we go down into Ambridge. And I never asked him what the hell it was all about. I figured, well, he’s gonna have a little shindig or something. So Sunday we go over to—now this was in—we go over to Aliquippa. He takes us up to Aliquippa. Now Aliquippa was a hotbed for unionism. So we go to Aliquippa; there was about ten trucks lined up in front of this Croatian house. And so we come along and we get into one of these trucks. At that time you were allowed to take gangs in trucks. If you remember goin’ back all them years. They’d take them to picnics, you know, in trucks. Today they prohibit that. But anyway, so we—my uncle and us fellas—went in one truck and we start goin’. And I said, ‘Where we goin’?’ He said, ‘We’re goin’ to a picnic ground.’ You would be surprised
to know how long we rode to go to that picnic ground. And whatever bumpy roads we got to go [on to get] to that picnic ground. So I says to my uncle Al, ‘What’s cookin’? Boy, we must have passed fifteen picnic grounds before we got here.’ He said, ‘Stanley, this is a union meeting.’ I thought, ‘What the hell are we?’ He said, ‘We have to hide. We have to go so damn far away from town.’ And that’s the kind of, that’s the fear, you understand, that was in these groups of people. And they were all mostly Croatian at that time. That was from [the] Ambridge and Aliquippa group, because I never forgot their lamb. You know how the Croatians cook lamb. It’s salty as hell. And I’ll never forget eating that salty lamb over there. Now that, that’s my early experience, the fear that people had within them. Because if the company found out—if, say, it was close to Ambridge (there was a lot of picnic ground right around Ambridge), say they had [the union meeting] right over there—why the company agents would be right over there or the company bosses. And the first thing you know there would be arrests.

“We wanted that union in 1937. What benefits did we have? When you were laid off, what benefit could you get from an insurance policy that you paid one dollar a month into? You had nothing else. Whenever a group would band together they would say, ‘We’ve got to have something better than this. We have nothing to take care of our family [with] when we [are] sick.’ Today we have something. In 1937, with a wife and a couple of kids, when I got my last pay check I was done. There was no unemployment compensation. There was no organized relief. So we had a goal.”

Smolinski: “The older men were primarily interested in a pension plan. The company already had a plan, but the most the fellas ever got was thirty dollars a month.”

Brozek: “We weren’t Communists either. Now in 1937 when the union first organized and we got our first contract, we had no publications. We had what I call a ‘half-moon’ printing machine. We made leaflets with a stencil and ink. Then we felt we had better get some kind of regular publication if we are going to keep our people informed. So a fella named Orville Rice and me were named to start some kind of a local paper to pass out every month to the men. We didn’t know anything about printing. We made our first one with a typewriter and a mimeograph machine. It was so crude, I tell you, I was ashamed to pass it out. But then along comes a fella [Teddy Bartman] into the local and asks me if I want to learn something about printing. I said, ‘My God, I need somebody to help!’ I never questioned who he was. All I knew was his name. I didn’t even ask him where he works. I assumed he was a steelworker. So what do you think? He taught me everything about stencils and putting out a paper. And we found out he was a Communist. They were overenthusiastic. But we only had a few—you could count them on your fingers—that would really claim
to be a Communist. I'll tell exactly what happened. That's right, it had to be before '41 or '40. That's [when] I believe the connection come. When this Teddy Bartman left, I started getting a call from a fella named Myers in East Pittsburgh. And Myers wanted me to subscribe to the Daily Worker. I said, 'No, I'm not interested in the Daily Worker.' So what do you think, Myers would pay me a visit every Sunday with the Sunday Daily Worker and [give] it to me for free. So I accepted the paper, and Myers would have a little bit to say. And then, finally, I got a visit from a fella named Burkhart. If you remember that Burkhart, he was a 'Commie' organizer in Local 601 in East Pittsburgh. Burkhart made a personal visit. I still remember it. How he came into my [home]—we sat in the kitchen on the couch and my wife was at the other side. And Burkhart gave me the spiel about signin' the 'Commie' card. He was with another fella. Lord knows I forgot his name, but I never forgot Burkhart. Because he come along and gave me his spiel and, actually, practically begged me to sign a 'Commie' card. Now that's the one experience that I never forgot.

"Now, the last one—I never told this to anybody. This is the first time. About 1944, '45, I was the recording secretary for Local 1219. And one of our girls quit. One of our office girls quit. And I'm in the office in the evening. And this girl comes in and she introduces herself. And she actually introduces herself as a member of the Communist Party. And she asks me what could I do to get her in our office as the office worker. Now you saw how that works. First there's Teddy Bartman with the newspaper. There is this fella Myers with the copy of the Daily Worker. There's this fella Burkhart chasing me, understand, to sign a 'Commie' card. And then in '45 or '44—it was in that period—they hadn't forgotten me. Here come this—and it was a Jewish girl too! She came there and she come along askin' me to give her some [work as] a secretary. She wanted to see what I could do to get her a place in our office as a clerk. Now that's the way that outfit works. I wasn't interested in their setup. I just felt that they have a program where the end justifies the means, you understand. And they will lie and cheat. And they don't give a damn what happens to you as long as their aims are satisfied. Their ideals are satisfied. No religion at all; that thought never entered me. It is just the idea that they'll do anything. And they'll even betray ya to further their aims. One time the Pittsburgh Press accused me of signing a 'Commie' petition. Oh yeah. They had me listed as signin' down there. My name got on that petition. And it was fake, like a number of other things. So I went down to the Pittsburgh Press to argue it out with them, you understand? Now the newspapers at that time had the upper hand and they laughed at me. I remember. The guy practically stared at me when I was down in Pittsburgh. And I never forgot that either.

"One way we signed up a lot of men was through 'dues inspection.' The 'dues inspection' really helped where we picketed the gates at different plants. We would form groups from Braddock, Duquesne, Clairton, and
all of a sudden we would surround a mill like Homestead. Nobody went in unless he showed a union card. That’s what we call a dues picket line. And that’s what used to bring them in line. One month I collected nine thousand six hundred dollars. We always had a dues problem until we got the check-off system. Yeah. Say you was makin’ four, five, six dollars a day. So you say your dues are ten dollars a month. Suppose you had to pay it by cash and come up to the office and pay it. We found out that so many would just pass that office. We had cash payday. So many would pass and they’d say, ‘I’ll see ya next month. I’ll see ya next month.’ Well, if you wait three months now, and you have thirty dollars to shell out, do you know what happens? You just let it drag and say to hell with it. And that’s the same thing that happened at that time to quite an extent. They would just neglect. I would say a good percentage of that was pure neglect. And then when you try to hit ‘em on the head to get the four, five, or six dollars, you have a hell of a time. How many times was it thrown up to you, ‘Hey, you S.O.B. sucker, you’re payin’ and I’m not. I’m gettin’ the same as you.’ So I was laid off in ’37 and started to act as recording secretary for my local. I think in ’38 or ’39. So then there was—something happened amongst the grievance committee. And I was told to write a letter to Harry Brittle, the superintendent. Well, you know, we all had a militant nature. We weren’t gonna write no ‘please’ letter, you understand. And I wrote a letter to Mr. Brittle. And I guess it had a little warlike attitude to it. And he got mad as hell! And I forgot who told me; whenever they went up to discuss things and old Harry Brittle was there. At that time the superintendent used to step in, like Slick. He said, ‘That Stanley Brozek will never get hired in this mill again.’ So they started takin’ ‘em back, in ’39 I think. Yeah. So I started goin’. Nothin’ doin’. And I remember Graham was taken from the foundry and was made chief of personnel. And I went up to see ‘im. I forget how many times. And do you know, I would sit in his office sometimes for fifteen minutes. And he wouldn’t say a word to me. He wouldn’t even talk to me. I’d be waitin’ for him to say somethin’. So anyway, that lasted about nine months. So Chorey was the grievance man in the rolling department and Charlie Boyle was in maintenance. So then I says, ‘We are going to file a case of discrimination due to my union activities.’ At that time you could pick your grievance man. So I picked John Chorey, who was chairman. So John Chorey, he’s arguin’ my case. And what happened [was], on that basis—that I was discriminated against for my union activities—I got rehired.”

**ORVILLE RICE**

Orville Rice was born in East Pittsburgh. His father was an Irish migrant who worked on the railroad in Ohio and then found a job
In a coal mine near Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania. Whenever work was slack in the mines, he would return to railroad work in Pittsburgh. Orville was born in 1908, the youngest of seven children. Because older brothers and sisters helped support the family, he was allowed to finish high school before entering the Edgar Thomson Steel Works at Braddock in 1929. Getting a job at Edgar Thomson was not too difficult because one of Orville's older brothers was already working there in the loading department.

"My mother died at an early age. I was only twelve when she died. My father raised me, and my sister kept house. It was one of these fine things. The grandmother comes in and picks up where there was distress, pain, and when you're having problems and so forth, and the youngest sister, she kept house for us with her family. The only thing I wanted to do was something of [a] necessity, and that was to go to work and earn some money. I went to a brother-in-law who was an inspector at Edgar Thomson. He got me a job as a laborer in the Edgar Thomson plant of U.S. Steel with the laborers at the converting mill. At the converting mill they made steel. That was the first steel-making process in the industry. We have a conventional converter. Originally it was Andrew Carnegie's. It was one of his plants. And they had the old Bessemer converters. And we worked there. I did everything. We cleaned up and watched the vessels as they were preparing to blow in steel. Whatever had to be done, you did it.

"I was on a labor gang. Everyone was mixed. There was no [segregation]. Everybody worked together and shared together. There was no segregation or ethnic jealousy as has been told about or rumored in today's society. You see, the blacks, the Slovaks, the Irish, everybody is together. Now this was in '29. And after that I was there for some time and my brother-in-law got me transferred to the electric department where I got a job as a craneman. And a craneman was more money. You'd make more money. And the work was less physical for one thing. Much more attractive as a work room. You learned from the operator. They had no training program at that time. You went up and you learned from the operator. He taught you. And as you, reasonably, was able to control the cranes, why then you were on your own. You had to learn, as you went along, other, more sophisticated things necessary to do such [work] as changing rolls and such.

"The electrical and mechanical merged and it became the mechanical department, I mean the maintenance department. From there we moved around to various mills. We had five mills. We had No. 1, No. 2, No. 3, and No. 4 rolling mills, and a building mill. So you moved to the various mills as you were needed. And you learned the operations. And then eventually our mill, we had... You're coming into the Depression now. So
after the Depression—you know, from about late 1930 until 1936, probably—the NRA come in, which reduced the number of hours per week [we were] allowed to work. When the NRA came in, that meant more people were hired, because the hours were reduced. At one time I was makin' seventy-five cents an hour workin' on the crane, workin' ten hours a day. And then, when the Depression come in, they reduced our wages without tellin' us any reason why. No negotiation at all; they just knocked us down to thirty-five cents an hour. But in the meantime, whenever work would be slack, and in the Depression, there was a lot of workers laid off. Those that went on welfare—this was before they had public welfare—the plant, that is the corporation, issued welfare vouchers to the employees that were laid off. And they would go every week and get a basket. And then, when it was all over, the company demanded that they pay back in dollars and
cents the value of all the items that they had received in their baskets during the time that they were laid off. The company was paying for them, apparently. The total cost approached two thousand dollars, depending on the size of the family and the size of the basket you received. And then when [you] started back at work the company took out so much from your pay. It was on the basis of the company store.

"We were laid off, off and on from 1930 until 1936. At one time we were unemployed for as long as six months without getting a day's work. You might report for work every day of the week for seven days and not get a day's work. Then you might get a day, a day and a half, or two days. This was going on through the years [till] it come down to the point where you didn't have anything and most everybody was living on welfare flour. Things were so rough. You didn't have money to buy coal and so forth. In our town we organized the older men to help. One of them organized the group that went out and mined coal in these abandoned mines. This was in Monroeville. We lived in East Pittsburgh. The people from East Pittsburgh, the committee, banded together and had the younger fellas [go] out and dig the coal. The operation was supervised by the old coal miners such as my dad, and so forth. They used to be coal miners but now were unemployed. They used to haul the coal in with a truck after their work was finished during the day. That would be from about four o'clock in the afternoon until it got dark. But all the widows got a load of coal first and then everybody who helped, or everybody who worked in the group, got their coal in alphabetical order. It was communism in its truest sense. And it was how the people stuck together. They had no welfare at that time—that was before welfare was organized. But you got flour from the government, what they called Depression flour. And the truck again hauled the flour, and everybody who carried the flour into the various houses who were to receive it worked for nothin'. This was all gratis. It was very cooperative. It kept the people together.

"Sometimes you'd look for other work. You'd answer an ad in the paper, and every ad that you answered was a sales job. Picking up a vacuum cleaner and going door to door. You didn't even have any money to take a streetcar ride to the agency in which you were applying for the job. There was no jobs available for a nonprofessional. And very little work was available for the professional. It is hard to realize in this day and age how severe unemployment really was. Even in a plant like ours, at Edgar Thomson. [It was] not a little plant; at that time they employed in the neighborhood of about five thousand. Even the engineers were laid off, the plant guards were laid off. There was no work. They were down completely. And the plant guards' positions were taken over by the supervision. There was no security, absolutely none! And if you were the friend of a boss, or if you had a friend who was the friend of a boss, then you had
a possibility of getting priority when a job would be opened. For instance, you reported and maybe twenty would be standing in line, and there may be only five jobs available. And the boss would pick out the five men who were going to work and the rest of them would go home. The [ones picked] would be favored [men]. And just before my time, yes, payoffs were very open and widespread. The favored men would bring the boss whiskey and—I have no proof—but [it] even [got] to the point (that was pretty well rumored) that bosses were sleeping with the wives of some of the men that were given preferential treatment. Now this is before my time. This is in the early twenties. During my time the boss said either you work or you don't. When we came back to work after the Depression—[during] one of the long stretches of the Depression we were off about six or eight months—we were lined up in what we called the shanty, the recording room. And the boss said, 'Who can run the crane on No. 2 mill?' All the men, the older, more experienced men, had not come back to work yet, because they had had their I.D. cards lifted by the company at the time they were laid off, and they were still out on the street. I didn't have welfare. As you got your welfare you had your I.D. card. The I.D. card was inside your check; that was your number. But I didn't get any welfare, because I was single. So I still had my I.D. card. Whenever the work resumed, whenever they reopened the plant for work, I still had my I.D. card. We were lined up [looking for work] and there was another fella in the same position as me. He was much older than me and more experienced than me with the position. And the boss picked me because I was a craneman at No. 2 mill. And the next day we lined up the same way and the boss picked me again. Well, being a younger fella and thinking this was unfair, I spoke up and said that I had worked the previous day (more or less being an idealist). [Well,] I was burned by the boss. 'Listen, sonny,' he said, 'you do what I say or you go out the gate.' Ironically, after we got the union—with the same foreman—we had a couple of differences. He was an old 'Johnny Bull' and he was stubborn.

"I was first motivated, more or less, to join a union about 1934, '35. Father Rice* was touring the district advocating that the young people, as well as the older ones, get interested in [the] union. 'Get interested in organizing your union,' [he said]. At that time they were threatened with communism. Communist organizers run for the Steel Workers Organizing Committee [set up] by the United Mine Workers Union [and they] were making great inroads and had a lot of influence. Some of the more alert individuals involved, like Father Rice and so forth, could see what was coming. He advocated, along with Father Joyce, that a number of the

*The Reverend Charles Owen Rice, a prominent priest in the Pittsburgh area during the 1930s, was known for his sympathetic views toward labor.
young folks [who were] interested [should] fight the Communist influx. They were more or less afraid, apprehensive that the Communists would take over after the union became organized. And understandably so, because [the Communists] had been trained and they knew what unions were all about. We were young, practically young punks comin’ out of school. We didn’t know what the hell it was all about. But we knew we had a cause and we knew it [was] right. We knew that it wasn’t right the way the companies were treating the men. I was never so shocked in my life. When I come out of school [I] went up on the crane and saw the menial jobs that were performed by the blacks. When I first went into the mill they had them down in the sewers. But it was the most menial thing, cleaning out oil-sludge trenches and everything that was menial. They were never given any effort, any opportunity rather, to rise above the level of laborer. It struck me! I had a sickening feeling whenever I saw this because I went to grade school and high school with blacks, and the valedictorian of our high-school class was a black. Of course, they had a little advantage there, insofar as they were Catholic [schools]. And I had gone to grade school, parochial grade school, and to public high school. And they were very good athletes on top of that, and they were very good families. We considered them on our level.

“I heard Father Rice speak at our parish one Sunday afternoon advocating that we get interested, join the union and get interested and inject our voice in the union. And much to my surprise, all of a sudden I found myself on my feet. He said, ‘Yes?’ I said, ‘I’d like to ask a question.’ ‘Yes, go ahead,’ [he replied]. I told him my name and I told him the question. The question in substance was this: ‘What in the hell are you [doing] out here giving us hell for not gettin’ interested in the union? When here our parish priests have never, never alerted us to the conditions? Not once have they made any effort to teach us, to give us the facts of life concerning the union.’ I said, ‘We [are] like stray sheep.’ It [was] shortly afterward that Father Rice started a labor school in Central Catholic High School. A friend of mine and I went down and attended every week. And this is the first that we had learned about unions. We had Father O’Hensley, who was a priest in the diocese of Pittsburgh. He was teaching economics. We had a Father Joyce, who taught us public speaking. And we had an Amalgamated member come out who taught us public speaking. And on union tactics, Father Rice—he was the principal teacher on union tactics.

“I went to the labor school in 1936 while I was running a crane in the rail mill. The company had what they call a company union, [but] we didn’t know what it was all about. So we voted for our representatives. They were very passive. And when it came down to hard-nose bargaining, why there wasn’t any bargaining. A couple of our men from maintenance
went and testified against our company. And one was from the pike shop. These two went to Washington to testify at that time against the company. This was when the union was on the brink of breaking through. A lot of antiunion, procompany propaganda had been pushed up to this time. And this is the time before the Wagner Labor Act came into being. See, the Wagner Labor Act came in and guaranteed the rights of the laborer, the worker, to organize. And I couldn't work elsewhere. There were no jobs to be gotten. And as an untrained worker I had nothing to offer. I was a nonprofessional. I had no skill to offer. I'm a laborer. I come out of high school and [went] right into the mills and started labor. After we could—after 1936, '37, and '38—I did go to Edgar Thomson diesel school, diesel engineering. I went two years there.

"In the rail mill there were no representatives from the SWOC. There were volunteer workers such as Stanley Brozek's dad, John Chorey, and Louis Smolinski, and a few of these who had gained experience in the old Amalgamated Association of Iron, Tin, and Steel Workers had some association [with] or knowledge of what they called the 'Hunky Strike.' This [was] a strike that was called about 1919. It was a strike that was participated in [in] greater numbers by the Slovaks and the Poles and so forth. These people were much more active in trying to unionize at that time. And rumor had it, or [so] it was claimed, that the company infiltrated the ranks with their spies, who in turn agitated, 'Strike, strike, strike.' [But] when the strike came off they were not organized well enough. They were too weak, in too weak of a position to be able to fight the company with a strike of any length of time. And they weren't organized with the groups in the more sophisticated operations, such as the open hearth, the rail mills, and so forth. This was in 1919. And as a result of their former experience they realized much greater than us people—the younger employees and even some of the older employees—that the iron was hot. The time was ripe to strike, to 'strike the iron' for organizing the union.

"Mainly [what] I used to see at the meetings was most of the older workers. You didn't have any of the younger fellas. When the SWOC was organized, they would have their meetings. And mostly the older people, it would be the older employees that would be there, the middle-aged and the older. I would say from forty up, forty-five and up in age. At that time I didn't realize the danger involved, because I had no knowledge—I had no understanding of what the 1919 strike was all about. And we would go to the SWOC meeting and they would give you a report and try to give you a pep talk about what is goin' on and how we have to get these cards signed and so forth. I didn't have any knowledge of what the danger was until I was told, 'Either get rid of those damn cards or you won't have a job.' Now, you signed somebody behind a column or down in a scale hole, or wherever. And you had to watch, too, who you were signing up, because if
word was carried back to the boss what you were doing, then you were in jeopardy. It got to the point where our general superintendent, by the name of Slick—I remember this plain—he called us, assembled us all over in the motor room of the rolling mill. And he got up there with tears in his eyes, advocating—in fact demanding—that we not sign a union card, because, [he said], ‘We are a benevolent company. [We have] always treated you people as sons, practically. [We] are the ones who are providing your livelihood, and these—the union organizers coming in here—are like a bunch of scoundrels, outsiders trying to tell you what to do. And the only thing they are doing is jeopardizing your job.’ He put on such a good act that I went out of there with second thoughts. He was saying, ‘I’m a good guy and you’re our boy. And we take care of each other and we work together and we live together, everything but play together.’ And this was quite impressive. I thought there was some legitimate reasons for the union with what I saw. It sounded pretty easy to get a job, but after you were in there you were treated more or less on a friendship basis. You had older men, who had no possible chance to advance. And they were shunted aside. And they were treated on the basis of how the boss felt about them. If the boss felt he liked them, or they knew somebody that knew somebody that knew the boss, that’s how they were treated. You wasn’t judged on your ability, in the main. For instance, we had motor inspectors’ helpers. But they had no chance of advancement to motor inspector unless somebody died or was pensioned. The union in later years come along and advocated a training program. And it would be called an apprentice program where[by] the younger employees given proper training would be judged by examination periodically, and raised in rank and wages to a higher level to compensate for their knowledge and their ability. We never had this in the old days. And this more or less progressed in every avenue or in every job classification. And this is one of the things—I was more or less an idealist. I thought fair play should have been exercised. I was surprised by the lack of fair play when there was no union, when I started workin’ there. Because I never knew of anybody who was being honest with the other fella. Even in the union we had some who advocated what they called ‘jazzin’ the company: ‘Tell lies to the company in negotiations because the S.O.B.’s, they lied to us.’ Well, we know that. But it was always my feeling that you don’t lie to them. You have no crooked roads—no crooked paths to go and straighten out. You conduct your negotiations on an honest, upright basis and you will be more successful in the end.

“Sure, we had people who were afraid to join the union. Do I remember them. And how, I remember them! People on the upper, on the better-paying jobs were the ones who were difficult to organize. When we had our first dues picket you paid a dollar a month. It was supposed to be a two-dollar initiation fee. We would forget about that and just get them to sign
a card. They would sign a card and when it come time to pay their dues
they wouldn't pay their dues. So, as a result, you had maybe fifteen hun­
dred members, but you weren't getting [all] the dues. We sat around a
pot-belly stove getting splinters in our ass passin' the hat tryin' to get coal.
These men wouldn't pay the dollar a month. Now, I'm talking about the
better-[paid] people. They were passive. Everybody's the rank and file.
But the idea is, the [poorer-paid] employee was more willing to pay the
dollar a month than the higher-paid employee. In other words, the fella
who was gettin' the bigger piece of the pie was the one who did not want to
run the risk of being stigmatized in the eyes of the company by [their]
knowing that he was a member of the union. Secondly, [if] it would so
happen, he [might] be demoted. If the company [found] fault with his
work, he [might] be demoted. It was realistic. He was being realistic be­
cause he had reached the pinnacle of his class. But laborers, the helpers
and so forth, they were more willing to pay their dues. They were willing to
pay their dues, and they did pay their dues. Now, we come along to the
SWOC—the knowledgeable individual such as John O'Malley and Louis
Smolinski and John Josycak and these people. They were not only willing
to pay their dues but they were willing to risk their position so see the
union be accepted. I remember the first dues picket we had. We had a
dues picket. You showed your card as you entered the gate. And if you
didn't—if your card was not stamped with having paid your dues for that
month—then the pickets would brush you aside and shoulder you, and
this, that, and the other. And I could remember one of our heaters, I had
been after this guy for a full six months to get [him] to join the union. And
he lived in my neighborhood, and I couldn't convince him. And what did
he do? He gave another individual five dollars to go down to the union and
get him five dollars' worth of stamps to punch on his cards, but he
wouldn't tell me about it. I was so strong for him. I was organizing, you
know, up on the crane. It didn't matter to some of us. We were brash
enough to [do that]. [It was] not that we were courageous; we were just
brash enough. We didn't realize the danger involved. But we were so im­
bued, we were so convinced that the union was the proper thing. And as
such, we [had] to band together in order to increase the value of that labor.
And then you realize the true value of that labor. I am not an engineer and
I wasn't an engineer and I wouldn't be able to sell my service as an engi­
neer or a doctor or a lawyer, and such and such. That is what I thought
about. And I saw so many people around, you know, workin' in the mill,
workin' in the factory, [and] so forth. They were barely makin' ends meet.
You were just makin' enough to keep body and soul speakin' to each other.
This does sound a little far-fetched, but that's how it was.

"When we were going to the meetings, someone from the international
office would speak, like Dave McDonald. This was the organizing stage.
You'd go to the meetings where the district office would have organizers talk. And what we heard them say, generally we generated that into local enthusiasm. It was surprising; to some extent it was a lot of local motivation. [But] on one occasion there was a socialist come out of Westinghouse. A fellow by the name of—what was his name, Richman or something. He got a job in our plant. And he later introduced himself to me. I was an officer at the time. He introduced himself to me as a socialist. And he had connections. His father-in-law was a high officer in the Socialist party. He tried to advocate to me the proposition that I would be a leader, one of the leaders in the ranks and that I would be compensated by their, uh, central office. And that I could move up in the ranks. He was telling the truth. I inquired from him, and he was telling the truth. But that was the opposite of my [beliefs]—in other words I didn't go along. I knew enough about socialism to realize that it was, first of all, anti-Catholic. It was against my religion. I'm a Catholic. That in itself...And then I realized, too, from what we had read up to this time, that what we had studied [was true], that socialism can't be entirely successful, although we have our doubts about capitalism. At the labor school, we studied all of that.

"Now, you're talkin' about the heaters and the rollers. The heaters and the rollers and the first helpers and so forth, they were passive when it came to runnin' the risk of organizing, of joining, and of advocating the union. They were passive. But as time went on, the company was relentless in keeping the pressure on all groups. And working conditions, they absolutely refused to introduce better working conditions. Absolutely refused! And this—now, this teed off the second helper, especially the second helpers and all those below the first helper. They were—they really became teed off, and every shift that come out, of course, somebody would come out cursin' the boss. And the company wouldn't take notice of this; [they] refused to take notice of this. They kept the workingman's back to the wall, refusing to make his conditions any better. Before we organized, you didn't have any vacations. You didn't have any insurance and such and such. You were reportin' for work seven days a week. And you may get one day, if you're fortunate. You may get work two or three days or you're goin' home—times are slow. But the company absolutely refused to recognize the problems of the workers."

THOMAS BROWN

Thomas Brown was the son of a loader of large bolts of paper for the Hammermill Paper Company. Born in Erie, Pennsylvania, he came from a family that was involved in various labor activities.
His father was active in a local 'engineers' union at Hammermill, and his mother had been president of Toymakers Lodge 1520 at the Marx Toyworks, which employed mostly females.

"My mother went into the toyworks when things were really tough, around 1929. I was about thirteen years old, so you know someone had to get out to make a buck. Nearly everyone was unemployed, and she was glad to work for fifteen or twenty cents an hour for ten hours a day, five and a half days a week. Around 1936 they started to organize themselves within the International Association of Machinists. So I saw organizing going on in my family and community. I got my education early.

"My father was Irish, and he was in the engineer local of the AFL. He wasn't an officer, but was an active member. He raised me to be a church-going man—very much so. I was raised that way. 'Give an hour a Sunday to God,' [he taught us]. Everyone in my family was that way because things can't be done well unless someone bigger than us is helping us. I believe that way.

"In the Depression, hamburger was six pounds for a quarter, but nobody had the quarter to buy the meat. We were just glad to be going to school and never thinking of the future afterwards. In those days anyone who had any ideas about going out and leaving high school was terrific. During the Depression I would get out of school and go and load wood. They were chopping the wood, and I would distribute it to people who had coal stoves. By doing so I would qualify my family to get groceries once a week so we could eat. I had a brother and a sister like myself, so I just could not continue to go to school. We all had the same ambition in those days: to go out and get yourself a job.

"I did finish high school and then went to work at the Marx Toyworks for about six months. When things tapered off around Christmas time, I went to General Electric in December of 1936. I worked there until 1939, [when I] was laid off for a while. In 1940 I came back and stayed until the war started.

"When I was at GE in 1937 we didn't have a union. It made things tough. If you came in to work and they told you on a Friday night that they wanted you to work on Saturday and you didn't show up, you wouldn't have a job on Monday. And you couldn't smoke in the place at all. If you were caught smoking, you got a week off. In those times they had bull pens in the center of the plant where everybody could see you if you took a ten-minute break. And on some occasions the boss would have nephews or sons in from school. They would lay us off for the summer and bring those kids in to work for a few months. And in those days if you were off two weeks you lost your service [seniority]. Twice I went out because someone needed a job for the summer months. I was brought back in after Labor
Day, but I had to start my service over again. That was some of the things that started us on the road to organization.

“At first they had a company union. They didn’t ask you to join; you were just given a card which cost a dollar a year. At that time four or five people would meet with the company each month and discuss differences. They called them the grievance committee. If you were a little bit too vocal or the kind of an individual that they just couldn’t talk down, they would lay you off. But some of these guys were with the company all day and would have a nice dinner and cigars. Men on the grievance committee always had real nice jobs for themselves. They always had all the overtime they possibly wanted.

“In the AFL in those days nobody seemed interested in us. They were only interested in skilled people: tool and die makers, carpenters, tinsmen, and the like. No one seemed interested in the semiskilled or the unskilled. That’s where the CIO came into the picture back in 1936. I mean, what about the common guy in the shop that runs a machine, or a sheetmetal man that runs shears, or a punch-press operator that sets up a press, or a man that repairs tool dies and that kind of stuff?

“I worked in the refrigeration division from 1936 to 1940. It was strictly mass production. The unit came down the line and boom, boom, boom, refrigerators. I was a crib man and moved equipment for them. I was also a shear operator, cutting up steel for [the] outer cases and liner bottoms they put on the refrigerators. I even worked in the paint department for a while, where they painted the cases. It would be considered semiskilled [work]. But a lot of it was common labor. In my job you could wind up doing a dozen different jobs a day. In mass production you could very well be running in four screws a day or sealing the door or welding. You might even run a punch press or shears. In those days we had about sixty percent men and the rest were women. A lot of women worked with the finished product. They were used because of their small hands. Men had a tendency to be clumsy with small parts. If you knocked a small part off it wasn’t going to the customer. And a lot of women were used in the paint department downstairs. At that time in our refrigeration unit alone there were maybe eight or nine thousand employees.

“The only thing in those days that played quite a bit of a part in getting jobs was the Masonic Order. If you wore your ring it seemed to be a factor. Today it has changed and the Catholics like us play just as big a part as the ‘big wheels’ in the plant. Compared to years when it was mostly all Masonic, we got many guys in the plant who are even in the Knights of Columbus. But Erie was dominated by the Masonic Order. Years ago it helped to be a Mason to get skilled work.

“Before the union, if you had a grievance you could go to this committeeman. But you didn’t get very far. He’d shuffle you off. Those men leaned
toward the company. They’d spend a whole day with the different gripes and complaints in the different divisions. They would come back down and say, ‘Well, that’s as far as they can go now.’ Sometimes they would tell us that we would hear more about a matter later. But you never heard no more. If you continued to holler, they would think you were a troublemaker and might lay you off. They’d say they thought you were raising a lot of flack. Once you were laid off you just sat home and they wouldn’t call you. They got rid of many of us that way, but since the union came in they can’t do that no more.

“I joined the union when it first started. We had to meet secretly because they used to watch us all the time. If they caught you, they got rid of you because they didn’t want a union. They had the company union, and you paid a dollar a year to belong. If they caught you handing things out, they sent you home for a day or maybe a week. Jim Kennedy, a bricklayer, used to sneak pamphlets into the plant. Everybody was used to a bricklayer bringing in a bag. They would carry their tools in it and all. We had a couple of women who were custodians and used to clean the ladies rest rooms. They would bring material into the plant and pass it around.

“Erie was always noted to a certain extent as having a bad record for labor. GE pretty much had their own way. They kept Henry Ford out of here, and other organizations that wanted to come in forty and fifty years ago, because they had the thing pretty well locked up and didn’t want nothing to disturb their setup.* GE played a part in the Chamber of Commerce. They didn’t want some outfit coming in that paid a pretty good scale or a better scale. It would upset their cart because they had this thing pretty well locked up. Other family firms like Hammermill Bond all owned the plants here. They had this town to themselves. They didn’t want no big firm to come in from the outside that didn’t really belong in the clan.

“In the 1940s, when we got so big and powerful, a ‘Red-scare’ came into the picture. They dragged us through all the mud and slime and everything they could think of. What they did to the electrical workers from the Atlantic to the Pacific you could never replace. Many guys went to their graves condemned. They crucified the guys. Then, later on, the FBI finally came out and said that after all the years of investigation nothing could be established for sure. But it didn’t put us back where we were. I went through that Red smear. I know what it was like. Christ, you come out of church on a Sunday morning and the priest would say, ‘Hey, you still with the Red union? Why don’t you think it over?’ It put you in a real fighting mood. But I don’t think [people wanted] to go through that, be-

*Similar comments surfaced in our Bethlehem and Nanticoke interviews. Workers told us how Bethlehem Steel guarded against competition for unskilled labor, which might have driven wages upward.
cause [they were] not only fighting the company. [they were] fighting for jobs to be protected. [We] had these people bothering [us]. They were out at the gate handing out literature for this and that. And we were fighting to defend our own principle, what we believed in. You not only had to go in and worry about your job, but you had to fight the company. We caught these finks once outside trying to bust our organization and take us over to another organization. They were never successful, because we were pretty well solid. So this stuff of trying to be Communists was from people who were out of their minds. None of us were Communists."

JOE RUDIAK

"Earlier Joe Rudiak discussed life in the industrial town of Lyndora, Pennsylvania, the center of operations of the massive Standard Steel Car Company. Here he indicates some of his reasons for joining the union movement in the 1930s, among them his family background and his disillusionment with religious institutions.

"After Roosevelt came in I was able to get hired. I was able to pick out a department that I wanted to go into. See, there was no unions in the place. I was able to pick out a department through the cooperation of the foreman and some friends in the department. I went into the finishing part of the freight car. The freight car was completely finished, and all we had to do was take out the flaws that the inspector told us had to be corrected. My job in the finishing department was stenciling on the lettering of the freight cars. That's what I did.

"It gave me a chance to move around. I never went for the money part of it, never. Money didn't concern me a bit. I was single. I didn't have a family, and I was still able to make the play on Saturdays and Sundays. And it gave me a lot of opportunities to enjoy myself on the outside. I worked [was paid for] eight hours a day and I was able to finish up in six hours. It was very clean and there was no whistles blowing, no finishing someone else's job. It payed very little.

"At that time they didn't know what others were making. It seemed that it was very seldom that anybody knew what [the others] made. It was a nonunion shop. There was no union at the time. Even with your buddy that you're working with on the same job, doing the same work, you'd go to the paymaster and [he'd] have the check turned upside down and you'd close it, put it in here [in your pocket]. And it was almost an insult, it was a dangerous thing, to ask the other fella, your buddy, 'How much did you get this week?' So the other people in the other departments—where they
were making maybe twelve, fourteen dollars a day, and you were making four dollars a day—they would consider that you were making good money. But you would tell 'em, 'Now look, I'm not making any money. You guys are the ones that's making the money.' But very seldom someone would take out and show you his check.

"My uncle spent eighteen months in the Western Penitentiary. He was involved at that time in the 1919 steel strike. He was involved in upsetting the suburban streetcar hauling scabs in from the country. And he was given a stiff sentence of eighteen months because he wouldn't turn stool pigeon. So, you're living in his house and you're listening to the language and they're talking about so-and-so and all that. And you're in the corner and there's company there and different things and you're listening and now it's getting embedded in you. And I happened to just fall into that. And having a little bit of a cultural background, as far as music was concerned, finally you had to go into the union.

"I was eighteen years old when I joined the union, the American Federation of Musicians. So all of us became union men because we were musicians. That came automatically. Well, you don't know, you have no fear. And I got this job, and I was a union man. And I was very proud of it. They needed us. And finally the Depression came along, and everybody was out of work. And I became doubly union conscious, very union conscious. In fact, I went overboard and didn't electioneer for Roosevelt, didn't electioneer for Hoover. I electioneered for Norman Thomas during those days. And finally Roosevelt became president of the United States and the NRA came out. And I joined the Amalgamated Iron and Tin Workers. They sent an organizer down and he spoke of the right to bargain collectively and have union elections. He came down and I got acquainted with him. We formed an unemployment club, before the NRA came out, with the steelworkers and different things. We formed an unemployment club with banners and all that, just a place to meet, play cards, and smoke cigarettes. Because the churches had failed us, there was nothing open and all that. So Johnny Ludern came in from the Amalgamated Iron and Tin Workers and I joined 'em. We signed up cards and we decided we were going to organize the place. We had a lot of confidence that since Roosevelt became president of the United States, [the] Pullman plant was going to open again. So we decided that the best thing to do was sign up the people on the outside that are unemployed. And when they do go back, we'll have enough cards. It didn't work that way. We did get about sixty percent of them. I just don't know; he [Ludern] had all the cards. And here we were sold out. He was working with management. The Amalgamated man was working with the management. He turned all the cards into the management and everything. We found this
out through some of the workers that found Johnny Ludern playing golf with 'em at the Butler Country Club, with the manager of the plant. We questioned him and everything. He skipped town on us and took some money—I don't know how much. I guess it wasn't too much. And that sort of broke the camel's back.

"[Then] the plant got an order for a thousand freight cars and I went back to work. I worked there about two hours. That's when the timekeeper came in, and just about an hour later the employment agent, Burt Hill, came along with two company police and marched me out of the place.

"And there's three hundred men out at the gate that never worked in the place. And they were, you know, waiting. The fellas knew me, some of them. And one fella made a remark in front of the entire gang. They pushed me out of the main gate. They pushed me out and I'll never forget it! He said, 'They threw you out for union activities."

"I decided to go in the next day on my own. So I went to another gate. The police didn't know me. No employment agent was there, and I went to the same department. It was 6:30, quarter to seven in the morning. Bill Stock was the foreman; he was the general foreman. 'Gee,' he said, 'you're back, huh?' I said, 'That's right, everything's squared up.' He put me on the job. Burt Hill came along again with two police to get me out. The timekeeper came in; about an hour later, Dick came in. And the boss didn't know what was happening—I guess he did know—and I pointed out on the bulletin board 'the right to organize.' And I challenged them. I don't know, I just made the statement and they left me and I kept working. And I was there until the place was almost practically organized.

"After what my father went through, blacklisting and everything, I wanted it organized. And I can't do it myself. There's got to be somebody else with me, more and more workers to go in with me. Now, I don't know who to trust. So after signing the card, a week or two weeks, the first person I signed up was a black fella, Andy Walker. I'm not going into his house or anybody's house. And I signed him up and finally we got together with a few others and got sympathy and everything, but still the workers were scared with the experience of the 1919 steel strike.

"One of the faults that I had was my enemy became the church. They were not doing their job, I felt. I sort of isolated myself from the religious people. They thought I was a Bolshevik because I spoke with the socialist leader Norman Thomas. I sort of isolated myself, but anyway, being a musician, they still had to respect me, and they'd see me at the dances, their weddings. They still had to stay on the good side of me, and they knew I had connections of some kind. And I was very cooperative with the immigrants because I'd try to [solve] their problems during the Depression, try to get 'em on relief, go back to the bank, be their interpreter."
Earlier Louis Heim described his life as that of a transient worker moving from one job to another, and he noted the difficulties he and his family had experienced by the early 1930s. In 1937, like steelworkers in other mill towns, he began to support the union at Bethlehem Steel in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. In this excerpt he describes the internal disagreements that faced the rank and file, among them the cultural predilections of the Pennsylvania Dutch.

"In 1937 they voted to organize a union. For me, there was no company harassment as far as I was concerned. In our meetings I stressed common sense. Here is what I told the men. I said, 'Look, if you go down to that plant and tear things up, its going to make it hard on us and we'll get nothing. Not only that, if you rip things [machinery] up, how long will it be before they make repairs and we can go back to work? The company will become hard-nose.'

"In fact, during the first strike we had we were supposed to walk out after midnight whenever they gave us the word. I had a furnace full of rods at [the] time the word came around to shut down. I said, 'Wait a minute. I have a furnace full of rods and it's going to take me about an hour to empty it. I'm going to empty it.' Then some big goof came over and said, 'I'm going over and pull the switch.' And one of the helpers, he was a big farmer, said, 'Shall I stop him?' I said, 'If he touches that switch, break his arm.' The thing was this. If we had shut down we would have had a hundred rods in that furnace. Now even before those rods hit the furnace, they had already cost the company a lot of dollars. Well I couldn't see losing them. Once those rods cooled in there it would have created a mess and made it awfully hard to ever get the furnace started up again. 'Listen, this strike isn't going to last forever,' I said. 'When we come back we are going to be able to use those rods.' Well, finally I won my point. But later I got 'bawled out' at union headquarters.

"Then someone got the idea that they were going to throw a stick of dynamite in the electric generators. I said, 'You go ahead and do that. You'll knock the whole plant out. But when are you gonna go back to work?' You always had a few fellas who could only think of tearing things up. They don't see any further than that.

"I joined the union to help my family, but also because of abuses by the boss. If you looked at a boss wrong they could let you go. After the union those things changed. Before the union you had no job security at all. You had to be careful what you said, how you looked.

"In the twenties I quit Bethlehem Steel when there were things I didn't
like. But by 1937 I was forty-two years old, I needed a job, and I had a family. So I joined the union. As you get older, you learn to swallow a few things once in a while.

"Most of the opposition to the steelworkers union in Lebanon was over the payment of dues, especially among the Amish and Mennonites. They were opposed to dues; they thought it was wrong. At that time you could still gain union benefits without joining. I felt that all should pay this fair share if they were getting the benefits. In fact, dues were good for me. When I returned I got more money in one lump sum than I ever paid in dues. It was very tough to get a union started in Lebanon. You had your Pennsylvania Dutch. They were very stubborn. The trouble is you can lead them, but don't try to drive them. When our local started a political action committee, I was on that committee and many union officials talked about Aliquippa and what they accomplished there. 'Listen,' I said, 'Aliquippa is one thing and Lebanon is another.' I said, 'You have independent minded, Pennsylvania Dutchmen down there. If you can persuade them, fine. But don't go up there and tell them they gotta do this, because that's the time they're not going to do it.' "

WAYNE HENDRICKSON

Wayne Hendrickson was born in 1910 in Westfield, Pennsylvania, where his father worked as a carpenter. He remained in Westfield until he was twenty, although his father died when he was sixteen. After his father died, the family depended on the wages Wayne's older brother brought home from the Westfield tannery. In 1924, after he had finished the eighth grade, Wayne began earning wages by cracking stone for the state highway department. He did not leave his family of origin until he married and moved to Elkland, a nearby town, where he was promised work in a tannery. Wayne fought to form a union in 1937, but when the Elkland facility he worked for finally closed in 1972, he and hundreds of other men who were in the later stages of their careers lost both their jobs and their pensions. It was a blow which inflicted physical as well as financial suffering on many families.

"In 1930 I couldn't get a job at the Westfield tannery. It was hard to get a job anyplace. I was more than lucky to get a job. Joe Kiaski was hiring at Elkland. I told him that I had two slices of bread for breakfast and I came down to see what I could do. He put me to work for about two weeks and I got laid off. I kept on going back. There was a bridge there and about a hundred men would be on that bridge every morning looking for
work. It was a waiting line to get work. After a couple of weeks of going there, they put me back and I worked there [till the tannery closed].

“T’ll tell you, I just wanted to get a job and take care of my family. I didn’t want to [do] anything else. I could have been a carpenter, as good a carpenter as any in the country. But I didn’t like it. The fact is I didn’t have the nerve to charge a price [high enough] to make a living on it. If you can’t do that, then you can’t be a carpenter.

“After I was in Elkland for about two years, I built my own house. It was like a chicken coop at first. I saved up some money and went down to the mill and got the two-by-fours I wanted. They trusted me. I would pay them a few dollars a week, and I got just about all I could use up in wood. You could get a lot of lumber for five dollars back then. Oh it was hot in the summertime. I had a coal stove and only tar paper on the outside. On the backside I had epsom salt bags on it.

“In the tannery they put me in the cut shop, where they cut soles out for shoes. I would check the bags out and put them on the truck for taggin’. I also worked for a time in the cement house and as a shipping clerk. In the cut shop you learned to cut the leather. You had two blades and when the leather came down you would have to run your blades over it. It was a hard job. You had to stand on one foot to make the blades run. It was also dangerous. Andy Wyatt lost one finger.

“The cut shop sometimes had over a hundred men in it and was one of the bigger departments in the tannery. But you had to wait your turn. I had to work there a long, long time before I could become a cutter—ten or twelve years. The reason I finally left the cut shop, though, was Andy Wyatt. He would cut about twenty-five rolls of soles a day and I had to cut forty-eight for the same pay. I could never figure it out; only [the owners] did that. So I went down where they hung heads—just a piece of leather from the head of a cow. You’d cut the leather to a certain shape and load them onto a cart with wheels. I made more money doing this in the scrub shop. I just couldn’t see staying in the cut shop for the price.

“In the scrub shop they took the hair off the hides and soaked them for nine days to tan them. Then they would put them on wheels, treat them, and then flatten the hides out. Some would be piled in the cement shop and then would be sent to the cut shop. They tied them up into different grades and sent them to shoe factories all over the world.

“I did work on a grading machine for a while. You had to sort the soles into each grade. It wasn’t dangerous and I was often goin’ to sleep on the job. Many men would go to sleep. I slept in the chair I sat on. I never liked it. And if you don’t like a job then you’re no good on it. There was a foreman, but they weren’t too bad. They acted in a disgusted manner if you fell asleep. But I wasn’t fooled. No one was going to do nothing because if you don’t like a job you just don’t do it.
"When I first worked at Elkland they didn’t have any union. Later they did get the Elkland Leatherworkers Association. That was more or less a company outfit. That was the first one they started. I didn’t go to their meetings, however, because it was a company outfit. They collected dues, but if there was something they wanted, they would buy four or five cases of beer and at the meeting they would have that beer. There were a bunch of guys who would vote for anything to get that beer.

"Around 1937 there was talk around about the CIO. An organizer [Joe Massida] came in from Boston. Richard Kreisler, a local man, also helped him organize. But Kreisler’s father used to come to the [CIO] meetings and tell the company what was happening. We held meetings in a chicken coop. I own it now, but my brother-in-law owned it then. It was about the only place you could meet. You couldn’t meet downtown. There would be war. It was pretty dangerous for us fellas. You could get killed. We would probably have about fifty fans up here on the hill when we had a meeting.

"I mean the company had a big hold on the town and the bank. And the bank had a big hold on the people. Does that make sense? They would turn you down for a loan if the “old boy” said so. I mean old man [William] Ellison, the owner. He lived in Boston, but he could still call the shots in Elkland. They were on the borough council too. A big company has a lot to do with a town.

"They did talk union inside the tannery. But only a few guys were with Massida, [and] they had to sign the men up on the outside—on street corners. Organizers like Elmer Backus were rollers, and Al Wright hung leather. I’d say a good part of the men in the cut shop, where I was, favored the CIO. Of course, as time went on, a lot got ‘cold feet.’

"Personally I approved of some of it, but a lot of it I didn’t like. I believed in the union, but I didn’t think you had to fight. I didn’t approve of carrying guns around. The company had guns too. They brought [in] this detective outfit from Philadelphia.

"One day [in July 1937] I went down to help my wife’s uncle. He was a carpenter at the tannery. I had to help him get a tool box out during the strike. And I helped my foreman, Jake Clark, run the machines. But the guys called me a scab. I told Jake that these guys are bitchin’ about me. I told him I didn’t care because of the money or because I want to, but to help him keep the machines running. But I was sick of it all and soon went home. The next day the guys apologized to me.

"These detectives were strikebreakers and the ones that stirred up a lot of trouble. One day the union guys began throwing rocks at the detectives [and destroying the cars of ‘loyal’ employees who were working inside the plant].

"At first all the men had walked out when the CIO called a strike, but they started to drift back to work soon. I stayed out, though, for quite a
while, nearly a year. I walked out at first, to tell you the truth, because everybody else did. I wasn’t unhappy with the company. But when we start throwing rocks at the people who were going back to work I was arrested. Even women were throwing stones just as good as men.

“When I was arrested along with [five] other guys, they took me down to a jail in Elkland, and then to a trial in Wellsboro. And Chet Astin was the [prosecuting] lawyer. I knew him all my life. I met him and said, ‘What are you going to do, hang us?’ He said, ‘Ain’t gonna do nothin’ to ya.’ He said they just wanted to get after you guys. Chet was working for the company. We had CIO lawyers but went to jail for about five days. I don’t think the union worried about us that much, though, because a day or two later we had signed our own bail and were on our way.

“I wouldn’t say that the men who wanted to go back to work were loyal. After two days on strike I just think that they wanted to go back to work for their own families, not for the companies. The fact is, the company
said that the best men were on strike. In other words the ‘stool pigeons’
were the ones who were bad workers. I really think the guys in the com-
pany had more respect for the guy that struck than those who came back.
When I worked for Jake Clark in the cut shop, he gave me a hard time. He
knew that I was right sometimes and I knew that he was right. But we
always had a lot of respect because I always did a day’s work. When I
finally came back to work he was pretty harsh for a while and started to
lay down the law. I told him to go to hell and done my work. Some of them
didn’t associate with me for a while, but after a while it changed.

“I wanted to go back to work after that, but they wouldn’t hire me.
The labor board [NLRB] made them take me back. There was no use leav-
ing Elkland. There was no place else to work. Jobs like that weren’t around.
I did work in the Corning glassworks for a year and on a garbage truck.
Elmer Backus went back to the tannery, but he couldn’t take the bad feel-
ing from the other men. Some men never went back to the tannery.

“I continued to go to union meetings. It got so that they would have
beer and push through things. They wouldn’t let a majority of the people
have a vote. They’d hang on and keep you there until you had to go home
and get up in the morning for work. They’d push through things that most
men didn’t want. All the men wanted was pensions, but the unions wouldn’t
give them pensions when the tannery closed [1972].”