Mary Heaton Vorse

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Chapter Ten

Union Activist

The next eighteen months marked Vorise's most intense personal involvement in union work. She emerged from the 1919 steel strike and the 1920 Amalgamated lockout as the single most experienced labor publicist in the nation. Six years later she would put that hard-won knowledge to work at the 1926 Passaic, New Jersey, textile strike, where her brilliant supervision of publicity revolutionized union tactics and helped to set the pattern for the CIO battles of the 1930s. During 1919 and 1920 her work in labor publicity, and as a union organizer among shirtwaist workers in rural Pennsylvania, completed her radicalization. During the twenties, she lost any remaining faith in American liberalism as a route to fundamental change.

In 1919 the American steel industry was the marvel of the manufacturing world, producing more steel more cheaply than any competitor. Calculation of cost dominated every management decision. The greatest saving was made in the cost of labor. After the famous 1892 labor defeat at Homestead, Pennsylvania, the steel makers eliminated unionization through well-financed blacklists and spy systems. In 1901, one-third of U.S. Steel's mills had union groups; by 1919, there was no union at all.

The industry's enormous rate of profit depended on the exploitation of the semiskilled and unskilled workers. Composed almost entirely of recent immigrants, this bottom two-thirds of the labor force existed on abysmally low wages. The accident rate of the unskilled was almost twice the average of the English-speaking workers. Local officials habitually cheated and jailed the lowest-paid workers for minor offenses, raking off a portion of the fines. Ethnic differences divided these workers from native workers and
each other. Life in the Hunkyvilles of the steel district was dismal, harsh, and hopeless.

Labor stability was disrupted by the beginning of war in Europe, which slowed immigration and brought a labor shortage. Most important, the federal government, in an abrupt departure from tradition, set up a National War Labor Board that defended the right of labor to organize and put pressure on the steel companies to end the hated twelve-hour day. The unprecedented neutrality of the federal government led some AFL officials to believe that the time had come to organize the steel industry. The impetus came from Chicago, where William Z. Foster had successfully organized packing-house workers during the war. Representing the National Committee for Organizing the Iron and Steel Workers, Foster began work in the key Pittsburgh district in 1918. Meanwhile, however, the war ended and federal controls over business were relaxed. Steel management again had a free hand.1

During the first months of 1919 a fight for freedom of speech and freedom of assembly was waged by the steelworkers in the Pittsburgh district. Labor meetings were often forbidden by local public officials under pressure from the steel companies. “Jesus Christ himself could not speak in Duquesne for the A.F. of L.,” the mayor there boasted. After 98 percent of the workers voting called for a strike, Foster and AFL President Samuel Gompers reluctantly set the date for late September. The Great Steel Strike, covering ten states and bringing out about 350,000 workers, could not be stopped. In preparation, Pennsylvania’s Allegheny County sheriff forbade the meeting of three or more persons in any public outdoor place and deputized five thousand men who were chosen, paid, and armed by the steel companies. In addition, the mounted “Cossacks”—the state troopers—were spread thinly through the steel towns.2

Confronting this power, a small staff at the underfinanced headquarters office in Pittsburgh attempted to direct the revolt of over one-quarter of a million men. These included Foster, his wife and stepdaughter, one stenographer, a publicity agent named Edwin Newdick—and Mary. She began work as an unpaid publicist, serving as assistant to Newdick. She helped write the weekly strike bulletin, ran the mimeograph machine, handled correspondence, and visited the strike towns on various missions, sometimes on matters of relief, sometimes to speak at or to organize women’s meetings. Within two days the strike consumed her completely. For the next seven weeks, her days were very structured. She arose at seven and wrote until ten. Then she reported to the strike headquarters and usually worked until eleven each night. At first, she “lived in a state
of white-hot anger.” There seemed to be no end to the tales of violence and injustice. Later she became inured to the hourly reports of beatings, arrests, jail sentences, and fines.

Vorse seemed to be the only office worker who did not realize the strike was doomed from the start. The twenty-four AFL craft unions under the umbrella of the National Committee sabotaged their own effort. They refused to provide adequate funds or organizers and fought bitterly among themselves, split by jurisdictional disputes and ethnic hatreds. Civil liberty in western Pennsylvania simply ceased to exist for the strikers. From almost all the pulpits and newspapers of the country came hostility or silence. The strikers even lacked communication with one another. The wonder is that they held on as long as they did, through almost four months of strife.

When the strike began, the steel companies financed a media campaign that portrayed the union leadership as Soviet-inspired revolutionaries bent on destroying political democracy. That this charge was wholly without basis is a point on which all modern scholars agree. In fact, the left-wing parties at this time were urging the steelworkers not to follow AFL leadership. But in 1919, government, church, and press were almost unanimous in their denunciation of the nonexistent red menace.4

Charges of radicalism and violent repression of unionism by industrialists were hardly novelties in American labor history. Nor were news distortions or media blackouts of strike events anything new. But the circumstances surrounding the 1919 steel strike varied in one respect from previous labor wars. The difference was the existence of a private, reputable outside investigating body, which collected affidavits and sent investigators throughout the steel district to collect notarized evidence of illegals and information on the workers’ wages and living conditions. The report of the Interchurch World Movement, a liberal Protestant civic organization supported by forty-two denominations, exposed the sins of the steel industry in two volumes published in 1920 and 1921. The Interchurch Report was to make an important contribution to the eventual end of the twelve-hour day, and to the influential Senate investigation of the 1930s which exposed the union-busting tactics practiced by many employers.5

Vorse worked as an investigator with the Interchurch Commission of Inquiry, traveling widely through several states to gather facts. Her first sight of the Pennsylvania battlefield was in Butler and Braddock, where Foster sent her during the first week after she arrived in Pittsburgh. At Butler, strike organizers were arrested without warrants, robbed of their belongings, and slapped in jail without charges. In Braddock, by the end
of December, 150 workers would be arrested, jailed, and fined on charges
of laughing or smiling at the police or going out of their houses before
daylight.

Vorse watched two of the trooper Cossacks ride abreast down the street;
they were swinging their clubs. "The word went through the courts and
alleys," she reported. "All the little boys ran out to stare at them. Women
came out of houses and stood on doorsteps, their babies in their arms;
striking steel workers came out from courtyards. . . . The Cossacks walked
their horses to the end of the street; then they turned and smartly trotted
their horses back. They drove the people from the street. They drove
the women and children back from their stoops into the houses. . . .
They looked as if they were having a good time seeing the people scurry
into their homes like frightened rabbits." On an opposite corner a Polish
worker stood defiantly. "I'm standing on my own stoop," he protested to
the troopers. The officers cursed him, lifted their clubs, and made as if to
ride into his house. The man very slowly turned and went into his home.
A woman pulled at Vorse's arm and said: "Come inside missus, you'll get
hurt."  

At this juncture, on November 12, a report on the activity of the Inter ­
church Commission was prepared by a corporation spy. The document
gave prominent attention to Vorse.

Mrs. Vorse . . . was a former member of the I.W.W. and took
a very active part in the Range strike several years ago. . . . She
has been active in a large number of the I.W.W. strikes and other
radical movements, acting as a special writer for newspapers and
magazines she gets away with a lot of propaganda for the I.W.W.
. . . These are the worst kind of Reds to be connected with as they
are to a certain extent high up in circles that are hard to reach and
they can spread propaganda that hurts the work of others.  

This report was distributed in hundreds of thousands of copies by the
steel industry as proof that the Interchurch Movement was controlled
by "radical Reds." In December, ministers representing the Interchurch
Commission of Inquiry met with Judge Elbert H. Gary, chairman of U.S.
Steel. Gary refused to discuss any mediation plan for ending the strike; he
instead grilled the nationally known clergymen for over two hours about
the charges made in the document.

The Ohio Manufacturing Association published the report on Decem ­
ber 9 and circulated it among its seven hundred members. After weeks
of legal battles, in which the Interchurch Commission was forced to
squander thousands of dollars of its slim resources, the Ohio Association retracted its charges. Nevertheless, the report was published in Industry and anonymously distributed nationwide. Even as late as the summer of 1920, the Industrial Conference Board, representing the country’s largest manufacturers, circulated hundreds of copies.

In early November 1919, Vorse learned that the aged radical agitator, Mother Jones, was in Pittsburgh. Jay Brown, a union leader, warned Vorse not to be hurt if Mother Jones was rude to her, for she didn’t like middle-class women. Mother Jones had not changed her style of dress in two decades—a black silk basque with a lavender vest and lace around the neck, a bonnet covering her white hair.

“Why Mary O’Brien, it’s you,” Mother Jones cried and kissed her.

Mother Jones had admired Joe O’Brien. “For the hundredth time I had a friend because I had been his wife,” Vorse remembered.

Vorse traveled with Mother Jones on a speaking tour to Ohio. Mother Jones sat beside Vorse on the train, talking almost to herself: “Oh, it’s coming... There’s a terrible bitter tide rolling up and welling up in this country... Look at these towns; look out of the window... Look at... the wealth... made by the blood of slaves.”

Mother Jones could not endure the suffering of the workers’ children. It was related in her mind to the indifference of rich women. She talked of “brutal women hung about with the decorations they have bought with the blood of children.” This was to her a literal fact.

Vorse spent two weeks traveling with Mother Jones through Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio, talking to the strikers and organizers. She visited a women’s meeting in the basement of a Slovak church in Pennsylvania. There were about seventy women there, many carrying their babies. Most of them wore the frilled caps the women in steel towns used to keep the slack out of their hair. “They did not sit quiet the way the men did at meetings,” Vorse wrote. “They talked back to the organizer. He sweated under their questions. They wanted to know the exact status of the strike; they wanted to know their chances of winning. They wanted to know if they got out on the picket line if it would help.” The organizer talked to them in their own language, his voice tight with earnestness. “You could feel the women’s will to fight. It was terrible to realize that all their sacrifices and all their courage were in vain.”

Day after day, Vorse strained to write stories like these about the steel-workers and their families, driving herself to find the right combination of words, the exact tone that would elicit the reader’s understanding, would dissolve the fog of press lies and half-lies that obscured the progress of

Union Activist

157
the strike, would express the meaning of lives strung in conflict against overwhelming power. Her stories appeared in the strike bulletin, in labor newspapers, in the Survey, Outlook, and the Nation. She made hardly a dent in the national press coverage so hostile to “Red Foster” and his gang of “revolutionaries.”

Privately, Vorse and her co-worker Edwin Newdick bemoaned Foster’s closed nature, his lack of communicative skills, his rigid and suspicious spirit. When Vorse visited Samuel Gompers’s office in an attempt to win a statement of support from him, Newdick reported to Vorse that Foster resented her interference. “I feel very much up in the air,” Newdick wrote her, “if every publicity idea which we work up ourselves is to be sat upon by Foster.” Toward the end of the strike, Newdick again voiced his despair to Vorse. “I have felt that there was a tragic inadequacy in the smug advice of the [daily strike] Bulletins—of course, we were doing the best we could, but sometimes it sickened me to think of those fine strikers alert and waiting for a leader. . . . Thank you so much for your help and encouragement. I realize poignantly what it means. Economic determinism grant us a chance some day to retrieve this inadequate performance and apply some of the things which we’ve learned here.”

Vorse traveled twice to New York during the strike. Her liberal friends were amazed to learn that thousands of men were still out. “A reader of the Pittsburgh newspapers,” the Interchurch Report stated, “must have gained the impression that the large number of men conceded to have gone out on September 22 had done so with no other intention than that of turning round and flocking back to their jobs beginning September 23.” The editors in New York were not interested in stories of a living strike. With all the steel centers crippled, the strike went on as though in a vacuum.

From Pittsburgh, Vorse wrote urgent emotional appeals to liberals across the nation. To William Hard, author of the famous muckraker article of 1907, “Making Steel and Killing Men”: “I beg you to write the story of this steel strike. . . . If we who call ourselves liberal . . . do not cry out when all the rights and liberties on which America is supposed to rest are cynically denied in this fashion, no one else will.” To Will Irwin, her boss on the Committee on Public Information: “I wish it were possible for you to use your pen in fighting Prussianism at home.” To William Allen White, a liberal editor: “I wish to goodness you would see your way clear to take a trip up here. . . . Here is a strike which is the turning point perhaps of the industrial history of America, and it is of the greatest importance that the public at large should know all they can about it. But none of
the liberal writers have yet turned up here. . . . Not a word has been said about the sweeping denial of the liberties of the people."  

Vorse's political experience during the steel strike and later so intrigued the author John Dos Passos that he patterned several of his fictional characters on her life. He and his wife Katy were longtime friends and neighbors of Vorse's, Katy having settled in Provincetown in the early 1920s. Scholars who have discussed the work of Dos Passos have not recognized that he used Mary Vorse as the model for his portrayal of Mary French, one of the twelve leading characters in his classic trilogy U.S.A. Through Mary French (and later in his creation of Anne Comfort in Chosen Country), Dos Passos showed his grudging fascination with Mary Vorse's whole-hearted devotion to labor's cause.  

Yet Dos Passos presented Mary French's courage and idealism, her propensity to make sacrificial personal choices, as essentially pathetic, because unrewarded. Mary French is steamrolled by powers beyond her reach and eventually betrayed by every political force, even by the left. If Mary French earns more sympathy and respect from Dos Passos than any other character in his trilogy, she is nonetheless shown to be as uncomprehending and helpless as every other radical in U.S.A. He wrote the story of Mary French at a time when the disastrous effect of Mary Vorse's love affair with Robert Minor was still fresh in his mind. Dos Passos used the life of Mary French to illustrate his theme of humanism destroying itself in collision with the rigidity of the egocentric left.

As portrayed in The Big Money in 1936, Mary French develops a social conscience through the example of her gentle father. She is inspired to redirect her life, "thinking of the work there was to be done to make the country what it ought to be, the social conditions, the slums, the shanties with filthy tottering backhouses, the miners' children in grubby coats too big for them, the overworked women stooping over stoves, the youngsters struggling for an education in nightschools, hunger and unemployment and drink, and the police and the lawyers and the judges always ready to take it out on the weak." In Pittsburgh, Mary French is fired from her job as a reporter when she writes a story sympathetic to the workers during the 1919 steel strike. Like Mary Vorse, she then becomes a publicity worker in Foster's office in Pittsburgh.

As publicist for the strikers, Mary French "had never worked so hard in her life." She sees "meetings broken up and the troopers in their darkgray uniforms, moving in a line down the unpaved alleys of company patches, beating up men and women with their clubs, kicking children out of their way, chasing old men off their front stoops." She "spent hours trying to
wheedle A.P. and U.P. men into sending straight stories” out of Pittsburgh, and “smoothed out the grammar in the English language leaflets.”

The fall flies by. Her clothes fall into disrepair, her hair is uncurled, she has no money. She cannot sleep “for the memory of the things she’d seen, the jailings, the bloody heads, the wreck of some family’s parlor, sofa cut open, chairs smashed, china closet hacked to pieces with an axe, after the troopers had been through looking for literature.”

Finally, Dos Passos allows Mary French to realize that the strike is over, “that the highpaid workers weren’t coming out and that the lowpaid workers were going to lose their strike.” Mary French hardly knows herself when she looks “at her face in the greenspotted giltframed mirror over the washstand.” Like Mary Vorse in 1920, Mary French had “a haggard, desperate look. She was beginning to look like a striker herself.” With so much in the balance, the defeat of the strike has become Mary French’s personal tragedy.

“Do we live in two worlds?” Mary Vorse wrote in her journal in late 1919. “Is there no means to communicate what I see to those who live outside? I am living inside a world where people are toiling only to hang on to life, and their efforts for betterment are met with suspicion and hate. But I do not mind the hate as much as the complacent indifference, or that complacency so much as the ignorance and hostility of the good who are the unknowing tools of rapacity and greed.”

When Mary Vorse visited Youngstown she heard the gasping sobs of a man outside the union office. A steelworker was crying because he had scabbed. He said, “I didn’t mean to. They told me everyone had gone back to work.” His friends stood around him, embarrassed, silent, clumsily patting his shoulder. He leaned against the wall, sobbing, his face in his arms. For Vorse, the sound of the steelworker’s groans in the dark hall outside the strike office in Youngstown would always represent the doomed soul of the Great Steel Strike.

In the last dreary weeks of the strike, before its official end on January 8, 1920, came the raids of the Department of Justice. In the steel towns workers were spirited away. Their families were left without support, told nothing of their men’s fate. Some of the workers were deported. Most, after having been held in prison for months without charge, eventually returned home. The steel strike concluded without a single gain for the workers. Twenty workers’ lives had been lost. William Foster gravitated toward the Communists and Samuel Gompers became even more vehement in his
denunciation of “bolshevism.” The “lean years” of labor in the 1920s had begun.

In early January 1920, the Red Scare climaxed with the Palmer raids. Virtually every Communist or left-socialist leader was either forced underground or arrested during the next few months. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer’s rampage netted some five thousand persons in over thirty cities. Wholesale arrests were made in pool halls, homes, cafes, or wherever radicals were believed to meet. An orchestra and all the dancers were arrested at an allegedly left-wing dance. In one town in Connecticut, the persons who visited the suspected radicals in jail were also arrested. It was not until the late spring of 1920 that the illegalities of federal, state, and local agencies were stemmed by a tardy protest from some outraged judges, reporters, government officials, and prominent liberals. By this time, the disruption of the American radical movement was nearly complete, and the trade unions thoroughly cowed.15

After her return to New York, Vorse feared that her radical connections, or her involvement with Robert Minor, might also sweep her into the Department of Justice net. When the raids began, Minor and all of her socialist and Wobbly friends who were able to had either left the city temporarily or were staying with relatives or friends for a few days, until they could judge the nature of the terror raised against them. Vorse’s class background and literary reputation were no certain proof against arrest. By late 1919, not only workers and aliens, but liberals of every type—clergy, teachers, publishers, journalists, even elected officials—were coming under suspicion from right-wing groups and government spokesmen.

Vorse may have realized that she had been under the surveillance of the Department of Justice since at least early 1919. While she was still in Europe, the Bureau of Investigation had begun an investigation of the source of an anarchist pamphlet that was first distributed in San Francisco. The trail eventually led a bureau agent named McDevitt to Hippolyte Havel in the Village. Posing as an Irish radical, McDevitt fed Havel liquor, waited until he passed out, and then stole Havel’s address book. Vorse’s name was one of those reported by McDevitt when he presented the bureau with his discovery of that dangerous “radical group”—the Provincetown Players. McDevitt had a special grudge against Vorse. He warned his superiors that it was she who, through a mysterious “government connection,” had tipped off Havel about McDevitt’s true identity and thus blown the agent’s cover in the Village.16

During the Red Scare, J. Edgar Hoover collected a “Weekly Radical Report” from his field officers across the nation. Vorse’s involvement
with the organizations graded "Ultra-Radical" was periodically noted; these "subversive" groups included the steelworkers' organizing committee, the Interchurch World Movement, the Federated Press wire service, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and the American Civil Liberties Union. Hoover also kept confidential files in his personal office. These special files, kept separate from the bureau's, and later, the FBI's central records, sometimes contained information obtained by the government through illegal means (such as break-ins or mail robberies), or held tidbits of political intelligence that Hoover thought he might later use to ingratiate himself with powerful men and high public officials, or to influence those persons into cooperation with bureau needs.

In November 1919, Hoover's "Personal and Confidential" file held a copy of an illegally obtained letter addressed to Vorse at Pittsburgh. The letter was from Harry Weinberger, a liberal attorney in New York City. Weinberger was intent on awakening labor organizations to the way in which the federal government's deportation arrests in the fall of 1919 were designed, not to catch reds, but to break strikes. "The first manifestation of that has appeared in the steel strike," Weinberger wrote Vorse. He asked her to obtain the names of all strikers recently arrested in the Pittsburgh area, the circumstances of their arrests, a copy of the alleged charges, and a statement of where the men were being held. Special agent R. B. Spence from the bureau's Philadelphia office forwarded to his superior a copy of this stolen letter. Spence marked it, "Refer to Mr. Hoover," with the warning: "Inasmuch as this letter came from a very confidential source out of the Department, and the original reached Mrs. [Mary Heaton Vorse] O'Brien through the usual course of the mails, it is requested that you handle this information very carefully." Hoover placed it for safekeeping in his separate "Personal and Confidential" file system.¹⁷

Thus in early January 1920, with so many of her friends in jail or fleeing the city, it is understandable that Vorse was afraid to stay in New York. At this time the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America was providing transportation for some of its best people, those who felt most vulnerable to Palmer's "Reign of Terror," to areas outside the state. Making use of her union friends, Vorse hastily acquired a job as an organizer with the Amalgamated—in the safely distant coalfields of rural Pennsylvania.

After the grim struggle in steel, her work with the Amalgamated seemed to her almost a light interlude. Yet state troopers were to be called out on her account. She was to lead a strike, to be thrown out of halls, to be called a Bolshevik and a wildcat, and to have her union stolen from her
by the AFL. Only to someone who had come from the scenes of the steel strike could organizing shirtmakers seem a relaxation.

Vorse was sent to Pottsville, Pennsylvania, eighty miles northwest of Philadelphia, where the Amalgamated was conducting a campaign in the heart of the anthracite region. She was assigned as assistant to a neophyte organizer, Ann Craton, who would become a lifelong friend and a major financial benefactor in Vorse's last years. The story of Ann Craton's political and intellectual development before 1920 is important for all it reveals about the influence of Vorse's generation of rebellious women on their younger admirers, and about the effect of tumultuous social protest on idealistic young people of this era.18

Ann Craton had been born to wealth in North Carolina. Her social education began with the suffrage movement. As a college student in Washington, D.C., she had marched in cap and gown with fifteen thousand women in the suffrage parade of March 1913. The women's ranks were attacked by a jeering mob of men. She saw hoodlums drag women out of line, tear their clothes and banners, and pummel them with rotten fruit, while police and soldiers stood by laughing. Linking arms, four abreast, the women stuck to their aim, pushing through the hostile throng. It was Ann Craton's baptism in politics.

After graduation from George Washington University in 1915, Craton worked briefly in a settlement house. She left social work in the autumn of 1918 when she joined a team of three hundred women field agents hired to gather statistics for the U.S. Bureau of Labor. The fieldworkers were to go to seventy-one large industrial cities and twenty-six small cities to collect facts and figures on how much it cost workers to live. Craton's teammate was a young socialist woman who stressed the evidence of class exploitation which they daily observed on their tour.

After her government job ended, Ann Craton knew New York City—with its "foreign restaurants with red tablecloths and its Greenwich Village tearooms, with dripping candles, frequented by socialists, labor leaders, the intelligentsia"—was the place for her. She took a job with a child labor committee that sought to keep children in school and out of the crowded labor market. She was too open in her criticism of the rich women who helped to finance the program. "You have such a regrettable way of putting the wrong emphasis on things," said her supervisor with patience. "Try to remember that we are living through most disturbing times and we

Union Activist  163
must all keep the proper balance. Avoid turning to the left, my dear," the supervisor told her.

Craton had her red card now, not in the Socialist Party but in the left wing of the socialist movement. She could not warm up to the Communist Labor Party leaders. The comrades implied that she did not read enough party literature. Craton didn’t like the theoretical approach, she told them. She thought it was silly to distribute party leaflets on the waterfront that called on the peasants and workers of New York to unite.

After social reform and leftist politics had failed her, Craton decided to try the labor movement. She chose to work with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, which in 1914 had broken from the AFL in protest against craft unionism and the corrupt labor bureaucracy. With courage born of naïveté, she made an appointment to see Sidney Hillman, head of the Amalgamated. His receptionist kindly sandwiched her between two labor delegations who were waiting to see him. Hillman listened politely to her halting explanation about how she wanted to be an organizer. He fired questions at her: "Did she belong to a Union? Could she run a machine? What did she know of factory conditions?" She found his Russian-Jewish accent hard to follow. "Just as I expected," Hillman dismissed her. "You sentimental middle-class liberals take up my time. The labor movement has more to offer you than you do to it." If she was really sincere about wanting to work in the labor movement, he said, why not work in a nonunion factory and demonstrate her capacity by organizing her coworkers? She managed to stammer that as an English-speaking native American, she could be helpful in organizing the large number of women in the shirt industry, the majority of whom were native-born young girls. Hillman looked thoughtful for a long moment. Then he shook his head firmly. He was a busy man. "I am sorry I can’t use you," he said. Crestfallen, she crept away.

The next morning’s mail brought Craton a letter from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. It was signed, "Sidney Hillman, General President." She read that she was appointed a general organizer and directed to report at once to the Shirtmakers’ Union in Philadelphia.

And so it was that Ann Craton, in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, on January 10, 1920, a week after the Palmer raids, intersected with the "distinguished novelist" and "veteran labor reporter," Mary Heaton Vorse, as the Pottsville newspaper described her. Craton felt "proud and protected" to be teamed with Vorse. Vorse was nearly twice Craton’s age, but she liked the young woman at once. In many ways they shared a common history.
They seemed a good team, novice organizers though they were. Craton looked too small and too young to be charged with such a difficult responsibility, Vorse thought. She looked hardly older than the girls they hoped to organize.

When the clothing trades were organized a decade before, some of the shirt manufacturers had escaped union wages by moving their factories to the little mining towns of Schuylkill County in Pennsylvania. There was little other employment available to the miners’ wives and daughters who were recruited for the shirt factories. The factory girls—many under fifteen years old—worked for as little as $3.50 a week. Most worked a six-day week and an eight- to nine-hour day. The sweatshop had also moved into the beautiful Schuylkill valley towns. The older women—widows or women with large families or sick husbands—did piecework at home. They were paid an average of ten cents an hour.

In the Schuylkill valley, the Amalgamated fought the AFL. Employers who feared an Amalgamated victory in their factories frequently called in AFL affiliates like the United Textile Workers or the United Garment Workers to raid the Amalgamated’s organization. Employers preferred to deal with the more conservative AFL unions, which had demonstrated less obvious concern for the welfare of women workers.

Vorse went to Pottsville with Dora Lohse, the Amalgamated’s ace woman organizer, and Abe Plotkin, a union official from Philadelphia. Plotkin told them how Department of Justice agents had seized union records and broken into some of the union members’ houses in Philadelphia. Dora Lohse had been at a Socialist Party meeting in Brooklyn when Palmer’s agents struck. They had broken down the door and searched everyone for “subversive” literature. In the confusion Lohse escaped and hid in a rear hallway. Later she climbed down the ice-coated fire escape into a courtyard where she hid behind the garbage cans for hours, until she could go to a friend’s house. The Amalgamated officials had promptly shipped her off, along with Vorse, to the safety of the Pennsylvania coalfields.

Lohse announced that she was too tired to speak at the union meeting Craton had arranged that evening for the young girl workers from the silk mill. She complained that her back still hurt from sliding down the fire escape.

Vorse agreed to speak in Lohse’s place. When Vorse and Craton reached the meeting hall, the door was locked from the inside. A policeman and a man wearing a red hat and carrying an ax came toward them. Mr. Steven—
son, the fire chief of Pottsville, was also the president of the Pottsville Central Labor Union. He shouted: "There they are." He pointed his ax at Vorse and Craton. "There are the wildcats. Throw them out!"

The lone policeman looked at tiny Ann Craton and Vorse. "Throw out them? Throw?" he asked in wonder. Stevenson assumed a heroic pose to bar the door, as though he were stopping the Red Hordes.

Just then, the door opened and a disheveled Abe Plotkin was shoved violently outside. More people emerged from the room. The officers of the new silk workers' union were accompanied by two portly men smoking cigars and wearing heavy gold watch chains.

"AF of L organizers," Craton heard Vorse gasp.

Stevenson made a long speech about how Vorse and Craton were trying to lead the good working people of Pottsville into a red union. The Central Labor Union had discovered their deceit in time, he said, and had invited the only legitimate union, the United Textile Workers, to take over the silk workers' local.

Vorse and Craton were escorted away by the friendly policeman.

Later they knocked on Lohse's door. She was in bed reading. They told her of the evening's events. She stood on the bed in her long white nightgown. She threw books and pillows at them. She cursed. She flung her bedroom slippers at them.

"You didn't force your way into the hall you had paid for?" Lohse cried.

"You didn't try to speak? You let the United Textile Workers steal your $300.00 Treasury, your 300 members, and your charter?"

Lohse stumbled over the bedclothes to reach Plotkin who was sitting on the edge of the bed, his face in his hands. She shook him vigorously before she pushed him onto the floor.

"The three of you stood there? Without opening your mouths? You innocents, you intellectuals, you parlor pinks! What good are you in the labor movement?" Lohse shrieked.

It was not a propitious beginning for Vorse and Ann Craton. Yet Stevenson, in his ludicrous fireman's outfit, and the genial policeman were not, after all, the hard-mouthed troopers and armed drunken thugs of the steel district. She was now in Molly MacGuire country, Vorse knew. The young girls they sought to organize were the daughters of miners with a long history of union fights behind them. The sympathy of local labor was a comforting background for her work in these small towns of eastern Pennsylvania. Despite her initial failure, Vorse felt contented—and safe.

It was not long before Craton and Vorse, inexperienced as they were, signed up the girls and called a strike. Vorse helped organize the picket
lines. One morning Craton stopped one of the young scabs hurrying by and put her hand gently on the girl’s shoulder. For this Craton was arrested for assault and intimidation. The Amalgamated officials in Philadelphia paid the six-hundred-dollar bail and impatiently explained to their two green organizers that the law forbade them to touch anyone.

When Vorse and Craton learned that an AFL man was coming to town, they were determined to redeem themselves from any reputation as “parlor pinks.” The best tactic, they decided, was direct confrontation. They enlisted two boys to announce throughout the miners’ quarters that there would be a special meeting that night, an unusual mixed meeting for women and men together.

Strange rumors circulated throughout the day and the meeting room was jammed. Vorse and Craton explained that the AFL would try to use the miners to influence their daughters, when the Amalgamated had been first in the field, had made the first effort to organize their daughters. Everyone agreed that the miners would allow Vorse and Craton to debate their case freely with the organizer from the United Garment Workers before a decision was made.

Finally the UGW man arrived, a Mr. Berkson. A mammoth overflow meeting was held in the United Mine Workers’ Hall. Berkson looked nervous and very unhappy. “He says that he did not come here for a debate,” the miners told Craton and Vorse. “He says he thinks he will go.” The miners, however, were not about to cancel the show. Many of them had left their night shifts for the anticipated entertainment. On the floor sat the giggling Amalgamated girls. They had been allowed in by the doorkeeper. Berkson was forced forward.

It wasn’t much of a speech. Berkson lauded the AFL. He claimed the Amalgamated was an IWW union. He wanted to save their innocent girls from such a red union, he said. Then Vorse and Craton spoke. No matter what they said the miners cheered them. Vorse asked sweetly if “Brother Berkson” had anything more to say. He did not. A miner rose to announce to their visitor that there was no train leaving town that night, but that there was one that left early in the morning. More cheers.

It was a day that Vorse and Ann Craton called forever after “The Perfect Day.” The bourgeois intellectuals lost a strike. But they made a union.

Vorse continued her work with the Amalgamated in New York City for another year, primarily as general publicist and writer for the union’s newspaper, the Advance. Although the work paid very little, she was able to survive through the sale of a few lollipops to the women’s magazines and several articles on labor and postwar Europe to the better-paying journals.
like Harper's and Outlook. With her two youngest children living with
their Aunt Josie in Texas, her expenses were low. Vorse felt her work with
the Amalgamated produced some of the best labor pieces she ever wrote
during her long career as a labor journalist.

By 1920, the counteroffensive of capital was in full stride. Conservative
clothing manufacturers charged the Amalgamated with bolshevization of
the American clothing industry. After a bumbling attempt by several em-
ployers to bribe union officials was exposed to the public by Hillman, the
Clothing Manufacturers' Association of New York made clear its determi-
nation to break the Amalgamated and to institute the open shop in New
York City. On December 8, 1920, the famed New York lockout began
when thousands of union members were fired; the next day Vorse began
full-time work with the publicity section at the Amalgamated headquarters
in New York City. The long lockout, lasting six months, was a war of
attrition. The union had the task of feeding tens of thousands of union
members and their families, organizing armies of pickets, and keeping up
union spirit, while informing members and outsiders of the real meaning
of the strike and its progress.

Heber Blankenhorn (later to marry Ann Craton) was director of union
publicity. Blankenhorn, an ex-editor of the New York Evening Sun, had
first known Vorse well in his position as investigator for the Interchurch
World Movement during the steel strike. He hired Vorse, her sister Het-
erodite Gertrude Williams, and former A Clubber Robert Bruere to staff
the publicity office for the Amalgamated during the lockout. Blankenhorn
and Bruere had earlier established the Bureau of Industrial Research, one
of the first efforts to generate favorable publicity for trade unionism. Their
work on the Interchurch Report taught them that union survival depended
on adequate labor research and reporting, then virtually nonexistent as an
organized effort. In the fall of 1919, they helped to form the Federated
Press, a nonprofit daily news service providing labor news and national
news from a labor viewpoint.21

Blankenhorn convinced Sidney Hillman that the big job of publicity
was not with Amalgamated members, but with "the metropolitan dailies
that influenced the big employers, the reporters, the courts, the police
department and city hall." Vorse was hired to do human interest news "for
the labor press, the string of 200 small labor papers around the country,
and 125 out-of-town papers" that subscribed to the new Federated Press
Service. Hillman soon learned the value of effective publicity. Later, he
added an information service, which distributed daily communiques to
union halls all over the country and to press and government officials.22
During the long months of the lockout, Vorse traveled the union-hall circuit, arranging meetings, investigating relief cases, organizing the speakers' bureau, interviewing the workers. Her series of articles was syndicated throughout the labor press of the country. She was "fulfilling the promise that she had made to herself eight years before," to "write about workers, and for workers." 23

By April, the solidarity and peaceful determination of union members severely demoralized the employers. The lockout ended when the union shop and conditions that Hillman had offered six months earlier were accepted by the employers. In the dismal labor history of union defeats in the 1920s, the victory after the Amalgamated lockout is one bright spot.

Vorse was now a seasoned union activist. At Lawrence and the Mesabi, in the steel strike, in mining towns in Pennsylvania, in the New York lockout, she sharpened her political and social analysis. Her best lessons about the nature of the forces opposing the poor and unorganized were gained firsthand.

At age forty-six, she had pushed a long way past Amherst.