Mary Heaton Vorse

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Ten days after Vorse returned to Provincetown in September 1933, she left home—broken in spirit, determined to stay away for an indefinitely long period. She rented an apartment in Washington, D.C., where she would live for most of the next three years. “I have had enough. I have blown up. . . . I smash under,” she wailed. The climactic confrontation with her children occurred when she returned to find the house in disorder. Ellen was now married to the artist Jack Beauchamp, a moody alcoholic. It seemed to Vorse that her house was filled with “people on a perpetual holiday for which I am paying.” As always, she blamed herself. “It has now been established. I am a bad mother. What should I have done different? When? What moment? I guess I could not grieve more if they were dead. Despair,” she wrote in her diary.¹

“Mary Heaton Vorse has returned from a long stay in Russia and (like the rest of us) looks 100 years old,” Heterodoxy founder Marie Jenney Howe wrote to Fola La Follette in late 1933. Edmund Wilson, who saw Vorse when she passed through New York, recalled:

[Mary] got back and found . . . the children had had the garage repaired and had moved out under a tree and left there an old trunk of Mary’s which contained . . . Mary’s wedding shoes, an old garment with just a spare hole to put your head through that Joe O’Brien . . . had given her and an old velvet thing called “the abssless,” because she had sat the bottom out of it writing, worthless but she was attached to it. Mary was so furious that she burst into
tears. . . . Her troubles with her children kept getting mixed in with her reports on international affairs.

Flight from her Provincetown home was the only answer she could devise. She had been moving toward this break for over five years. "I am suffering from homesickness—for my house—for them. I want to go home. Then I remember I can't go home," she wrote. She could not counteract the weight of guilt, for she believed that her "neglect" alone was responsible for her children's "troubles." But surely her noble pose as wounded mother does not fully explain her decision to leave home. One cannot avoid the suspicion that much of her pain over Ellen's behavior was created to justify Vorse's escape to the solitude she craved in order to live and write as she pleased. For many years, she had sought a sufficient reason to escape from maternal pressures. Finally, in 1933, she had accumulated—had manufactured—enough grievances to allow her that option.

Vorse lived quietly in Washington with her younger son, Joel, who was completing high school. Her older son Heaton and his new wife Sue, of whom Mary was especially fond, moved to Washington in 1934, when Sue found a secretarial position with one of the new government agencies. Many of Vorse's friends were working in or passing through Washington in the early years of the New Deal. She often saw Robert Bruce, Jessie and Harvey O'Connor, Ann Craton and Heber Blankenhorn, Matthew Josephson, Fleeta Springer Coe, Edmund Wilson, and Charles and Adelaide Walker.

Vorse found the progressive bustle of Washington exhilarating. The mood was experimental; the movement frenetic. To heighten the drama, a conservative defense against New Deal change was already building. No one knew, Vorse told McCall's readers, how to mobilize a nation, make the machine go without scrapping it, put millions of people back to work. "They only know that from the White House comes the sound of laughter and the feeling of unswerving belief that the New Deal truly means recovery."

The capital teemed with hearings and public meetings, which she reported for the Federated Press and the New Republic. The mighty had fallen and Vorse rejoiced in the knowledge. The idea of the National Recovery Administration—the organization of economic life under government direction, with union recognition thrown in—would have been enough to send a Wobbly to jail in 1919. But in the morass of the Depres-
sion, business and political leaders were willing to try almost anything that might promise recovery. At a consumer hearing to discuss the unwieldy new NRA codes, she saw row upon row of dark-suited men with somber, strained expressions. "There sat Pa," she chortled. "For the face of big and little businesses is overwhelmingly middle-aged. Pinkly gleaming bald pates punctuated lavishly the rows of silver heads. Business . . . was a worried face. Written across it was unmistakably the track and disaster of four desperate depression years. . . . Suddenly they had been asked . . . to submit to profit fixing and to give up price fixing and hardest blow of all, to allow labor to organize. . . . Poor Pa! Poor old dog! Is he going to learn the new tricks?"

Vorse was most alert to the contribution of women to the Washington whirl. To her surprise, one old friend from the prewar Village, Frances Perkins, "snubbed" her in Washington. At first disappointed and hurt, Vorse soon reached the gracious conclusion that Secretary of Labor Perkins needed to stay clear of radical associations while serving as the first woman Cabinet member.

The thirties offered a new public role to many women like Perkins who achieved prominence in New Deal government. The network of women's leaders in Washington included Perkins, Eleanor Roosevelt, Women's Bureau chief Mary Anderson, Congresswoman Mary T. Norton, Mary W. Dewson of the Democratic National Committee, and government officials like Josephine Roach, Hilda Worthington Smith, and Sue Shelton White. Vorse often visited the offices of these women, but with the exception of Hilda Smith, her relationship to them was not particularly close, even though they were of Vorse's generation, born in the 1870s and 1880s —"the generation after the great pioneers," as Molly Dewson described the group. Most of the New Deal women leaders consciously shied away from identification as "feminists" while they struggled for social reform. Perhaps, like Perkins, the network of powerful women in Washington found Vorse too far to the left to fit into its personal political strategies. Despite her position on the sidelines, however, Vorse mightily admired these women, who she felt were the most "potent" voices for compassion in Washington.

Although Vorse was generally content during her years in Washington, she was also aware that at age sixty she was no longer part of the vital center of national progressive action. This recognition, and the new sense of aging that accompanied it, influenced her decision to begin work on her autobiography. She had fallen behind on her mortgage payments, but was living comfortably enough, although with little money for extras,
through the sale of a few lollypops and articles for McCall's, and a much smaller income from her journalism. In May 1934, a fifteen-hundred-dollar advance from Farrar, Rinehart Publishers allowed her to work full time on *Footnote to Folly*. Significantly, she ended the story of her life in the smashup year of 1922. For Vorse, the most exciting and momentous period of her life had ended twelve years before, all the rest a drift downward from the pinnacle. She could not know then that in the thirties her reputation as a labor journalist would peak, or that she had three decades more of writing and work before her.

In late 1935, her autobiography elicited a series of highly positive reviews from both left and mainstream journals. *Time* noted that “few men or women have a better right than she to consider her reminiscences of an active life a footnote to the history of her time. . . . Her crusade never faltered.” *Forum* concluded that Vorse had “lived twice as hard and twice as intensely as the average person.” The *Nation* called *Footnote to Folly* “one of the most powerful documents against war in our time,” while the *Saturday Review of Literature* praised it as “one of the most notable pieces of autobiographical writing by an American woman.” John Chamberlin recommended in the New York *Times* that it be “read along with Lincoln Steffens’ ‘Autobiography,’ Frederic C. Howe’s ‘Confessions of a Reformer,’ Floyd Dell’s ‘Homecoming,’ and Brand Whitlock’s ‘Forty Years of It’ and the other great documents of liberal America.” Many reviewers commented that if there were one disappointment with the book, it was the lack of detail about Vorse’s personal life.7

In Washington Vorse was for a while part of a network fated to receive wide attention in 1948 for its connection to the Alger Hiss case. Her “Daily Summaries” written during the winter of 1933 and early spring of 1934 show that she met frequently with persons associated with what would come to be called the Ware group: Hal Ware (son of the Communist leader “Mother Bloor”), his wife, Jessica Smith, Jerome Frank, Nathaniel Weyl, Josephine Herbst, and John Herrmann. Except for Herbst and Frank, all were Communists interested in farm policy and associated with the left-liberal faction within the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Vorse came naturally enough to this group. She had long been interested in the plight of the southern tenant farmer. She had worked with Jessica Smith on Russian relief in the early twenties. She had traveled with Jo Herbst in 1932 to report the farm strike in Iowa. There they had encountered Hal Ware, who was then organizing farmers in the Midwest. In 1934,
Hal Ware invited Herbst's husband, John Herrmann, to come to work in Washington whereupon Vorse and Herbst renewed their friendship.

Whittaker Chambers, Nathaniel Weyl, and others later testified that the Ware group was a cell of the American Communist Party. According to Chambers, who claimed to have joined the group after his arrival in Washington in the summer of 1934, it was an "underground" organization that concentrated on recruiting Washington bureaucrats and discussing Marxist theory and practice—a kind of study or support group that considered strategy and pooled ideas. Its later prominence rested entirely on Chambers's testimony that Alger Hiss was a member of the Ware circle. In August 1935, Hal Ware was killed in an automobile accident and the group disintegrated. Vorse apparently had broken her connection with it at least a year earlier, about the same time that Nathaniel Weyl claimed to have withdrawn from the meetings.

The acceptance of Vorse into the Ware circle, despite her public alignment with anti-Stalinists as a contributing editor of *Common Sense*, is another indication of the fluid political alliance between liberals and radicals in the early thirties, before the Cold War freighted such associations with ominous implications and personal danger. At any rate, it is doubtful that, as women, Mary Vorse, Jo Herbst, and Jessica Smith would have been tightly included in the deliberations of the "top level, a group of seven or so men," as Chambers described the leaders of the network. Despite the Communist rhetoric of sexual equality, the party was very much a male-dominated outfit in the 1930s.

Still, especially in consideration of her close friendship with Jo Herbst, then and later, it seems likely that Vorse would have known that Hal Ware and John Herrmann were involved in a half-secret, half-open—mostly melodramatic—courier operation between Washington and the New York Communist Party office. Herbst's biographer Elinor Langer reported that Herbst regarded this transmission "as a lot of self-important revolutionary hocus-pocus and she was irritated by it in the extreme. . . . For the Communists to function underground when they could function perfectly well above ground she believed was a mistake." Vorse left no evidence of her opinion of the Ware group or its activity. Nor did she preserve her side of the 1940s and 1950s correspondence regarding the Alger Hiss case and its impact on Jo Herbst and John Herrmann.8

Vorse's less radical friends in the labor movement were as exultant as the Ware group over the scenes of New Deal Washington. The 1932 election
of Franklin Delano Roosevelt began a new era in American labor history. In the next four years a major power shift in American society occurred. In the winter of 1933, more workers experienced greater destitution than ever known before in the United States. The misery of depression discredited business supremacy and motivated a significant portion of the labor force to fight a savage class war. Backed by a progressive federal government and encouraged by militant union leaders, workers won concessions from employers for which they had been fighting for decades. When millions of American workers demonstrated their determination to win union recognition, by violence if necessary, an upsurge of union organization transformed the balance of political and economic power in the United States. Despite employer opposition, the United Mine Workers, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union, led respectively by John L. Lewis, Sidney Hillman, and David Dubinsky, rebuilt themselves into important forces.

By 1933 a confrontation between the AFL and the labor coalition led by Lewis was already building over the question of craft unionism versus industrial organization. Because of the growth of great corporate structures and the lessened proportion of skilled workmen, the AFL’s craft unionism had become obsolete in many industries. Yet the AFL leaders—representing the labor aristocracy of skilled, white males—refused to give up their traditional jurisdictions and petty fiefdoms. The AFL leadership showed little interest in organizing semiskilled, unskilled, black, or women workers.

In the spring, summer, and fall of 1934, American labor exploded. Four major strikes and over eighteen hundred smaller ones involved almost one and one-half million workers. Many of the labor protests were led by radicals. The vast majority of American workers did not want to overthrow the government or establish socialism. They simply wanted to choose a union, win living wages and decent working conditions, break the arrogance of the owners, and claim a measure of dignity and security for themselves. They followed radical leadership because it so often seemed the only hardworking group willing to lead their fight without compromise. Business leaders and much of the nation’s press attempted to counter labor militance by the old technique of manufacturing a red scare. But the timeworn tactic did not distract labor from its goal.

The thunder of mass revolt shook the nation in 1934. In Ohio, A. J. Muste’s American Workers’ Party organized the unemployed to join the mass picketing of strikers against Auto-Lite. At “The Battle of Toledo,” workers fought police and the National Guard, attacked jails, defied tear
gas and rifle fire, cheered their union leaders in courtrooms, hurled bricks, bolts, and hinges, threatened a general strike, and at last won union recognition and restoration of wage reductions. In Minneapolis, a bastion of the open shop, almost a third of the county population consisted of the unemployed and their families. Led by socialists and Trotskyists, the city’s truck drivers shut down the city market. In May, July, and August, tens of thousands of massed workers, armed with clubs, supported by local farmers, fought pitched battles against bullets, tear gas, police, and the National Guard in the city streets. In the end, the teamsters smashed the open shop in Minneapolis and were guaranteed that union representatives elected by the majority would bargain for all. On the West Coast, the radical Harry Bridges led a strike of longshoremen that closed down most coastal ports and won union recognition and reform of the hated “shape-up” system. This stunning labor victory came after strikers fought police and guardsmen with rocks and bolts in the face of gunfire and tear gas, after a dramatic funeral parade where more than thirty thousand mourners silently marched behind the bodies of two workers killed in the labor war, and after a four-day general strike. In Philadelphia, in 1934, cab drivers burned taxicabs; in New York, cab drivers refused to drive. Communists led strikes of the miserably exploited farm workers, from California to New Jersey. In Des Moines the electrical workers cut off the switches. Across the nation, cooks, reporters, typists, clerks, copper miners, skilled and unskilled, marched, fought, and picketed, often joining in renditions of the “Internationale” or old Wobbly songs.

The Republicans were routed in the elections of 1934. “Boys—this is our hour,” Harry Hopkins said. “We’ve got to get everything we want—a works program, social security, wages and hours, everything—now or never.” In New York City, Clifford Odets’s play Waiting for Lefty drew large crowds. The script ended with the audience rising to shout: “STRIKE! STRIKE! STRIKE!” Vorse saw Waiting for Lefty two nights in a row, returning the second evening with Josephine Herbst. With thousands of other progressives, they rejoiced at the new power of labor. “The impetus given labor under N.R.A. . . . would all have been in vain without the million marching feet,” Vorse wrote, “labor in a thousand unions and factories demanding organization and going into the conflict with new techniques, with new spontaneous inventions, with a brilliant suppleness of combat hitherto unimagined.” The spiraling-up hope of 1934 brought Vorse a letter from a dear friend from whom she had heard nothing for years. “Dear Mary . . . Are we revolutionizing or not?” wrote Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.9

But the largest strike of 1934 was to end in a bitter labor defeat. Called

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by the AFL affiliate the United Textile Workers, the national cotton-textile strike brought out almost half a million strikers from Alabama to Maine. Employers responded in the customary manner—armed guards, spies, eviction of strikers' families from company houses, attacks on union leaders, jailing of organizers, and pressure on state authorities to send in the National Guard. Reporting from the strike areas in New England, Vorse also blamed the UTW loss on FDR's board of inquiry, which issued its findings against union recognition and suggested that wages, hours, and working conditions receive attention from future government "studies." 10

Back in Washington in early 1935, the left-liberal faction within the Agricultural Adjustment Administration was purged, including some members of the Ware circle. The showdown came over the issue of the rights of southern tenant farmers who had been dispossessed of their shacks and brutally oppressed by southern officials and landowners. When Jerome Frank and his allies within the AAA moved to stop further evictions without cause, FDR and Henry Wallace, the secretary of agriculture, decided to dismiss the young reformers from the AAA. This was done in the interest of political expediency, for the New Deal political coalition was heavily dependent on cotton-state spokesmen in Congress who served the interests of southern landlords. Vorse saw the defeat of Frank as the final clear sign that the New Deal would mean only reform, not deep social change. The New Deal has been "all washed up since the 'purge,'" she wrote Matthew Josephson in February. 11

Yet in 1935, both liberal government and the labor movement were to undergo revitalization. Over the summer, Congress passed several of its most far-reaching reform measures yet. One of the first to become law was the Wagner Act, which allowed workers to select union representatives through majority vote, and restrained employers from discharging union members, fostering company unions, or committing other "unfair labor practices." The Wagner Act spun through to victory in both houses in July. Then, in the fall of 1935, at the stormy AFL convention in Atlantic City, the modern American labor movement was born, its entry into life forever symbolized by the right-hand punch driven by the mine workers' John L. Lewis into the face of the carpenters' president, William Hutcheson. That scuffle on the floor of the convention was followed by the formation in November of the Committee of Industrial Organization as a rival organization within the AFL. Led by Lewis, the union leaders of the CIO committed themselves to an all-out and immediate effort toward industrial organization of the workers in the largest American industries.

Eight months before the CIO was formed, Vorse accepted a govern-
ment position. Hired by her old Village friend John Collier, the controversial New Deal commissioner of Indian affairs, she became publicity director for the Indian Bureau and editor of *Indians at Work*, the Bureau’s in-house, biweekly journal. During his tenure as Indian commissioner from 1933 to 1945, Collier vigorously attacked the belief that Indians should be assimilated into white society. His reform goals aroused strong opposition from various business interests, as well as from some Indian groups who did not favor Indian communal segregation and return to a tribal heritage.12

Collier offered the job as editor to Vorse at the very appealing salary of thirty-two hundred dollars. Agreeing to begin work as soon as she finished her autobiography, she was officially appointed to the Office of Indian Affairs in late February 1935. Under her direction for the next twenty-one months, *Indians at Work* propagandaized for Collier’s reform ideals, castigated his opponents, and featured articles from anthropologists, lawyers, and conservationists that dealt with all aspects of Indian life. As editor, Vorse made several trips west to Indian reservations and gatherings where she reported the achievements of the bureau and lauded the effect of Collier’s reforms on Indian culture, education, and economic development.13

She received a leave of absence from her post as editor in November 1936. According to FBI records, her personnel file in the Interior Department indicated that “she had been cited for inefficiency” prior to her resignation in July 1937. The full story of Vorse’s departure from government work, however, is considerably more interesting. Her exit was influenced by the denunciation of her before Senate and House committees on Indian affairs. She and her colleagues on Collier’s staff were smeared as “Christ-mocking, Communist-aiding, subversives bent upon finding a back door entrance for the establishment of Communism in the United States of America, and supplanting of the Stars and Stripes with the red flag of Moscow.”14

Being singled out for redbaiting was hardly a new experience for Vorse by 1936. She had been named by several radical-hounding police forces, legislative committees, and intelligence agencies during World War I and after. The Lusk Committee, founded by the New York legislature in 1919, listed her “seditious” associations. The Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Justice had tracked and recorded her political and literary activities between 1919 and 1922. Her name also appeared on the well-publicized 1928 “blacklist” of the Daughters of the American Revolution, where she was described as “a Communist” and banned as a speaker before DAR gatherings.

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Elizabeth Dilling's private publication of *The Red Network* in 1934 was perhaps the single most irresponsible—and most humorous—example of anti-Communist propaganda in this period. Aiming at the “Communistic” New Deal, Dilling listed 460 organizations and 1,300 persons as American members of the international Communist conspiracy. Vorse, as well as most of her close friends, along with a host of liberals like Jane Addams, John Dewey, and Eleanor Roosevelt, were featured in Dilling’s book, complete with each individual’s connection to “Communist” organizations and activities. The few journals that reviewed *The Red Network* in 1934 treated it as a howler, some even recommending it as an inexpensive and accurate guide to the people and groups most concerned with social justice in the United States. But Federal Laboratories, Inc., a chemical munition firm serving strikebreakers, with a 60 percent share of the domestic tear-gas market and distribution rights to the Thompson submachine gun, at once recognized the value of Dilling’s work; the firm distributed a copy of *The Red Network* to prospective customers. Initially, however, Dilling’s book was recognized by most for what it was—an anti-New Deal diatribe favored only by the far-right fringe. Yet, by 1938, when redbaiting again became respectable in the halls of Congress, Dilling was hailed as an incontestable authority to support congressional attacks on the civil liberties of political dissenters. Beginning with the reign of Martin Dies and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), American political leadership legitimized the activity that would come to be called McCarthyism.

Only three weeks after her appointment to the Indian Bureau, Vorse attended the hearings of the House Committee on Indian Affairs that questioned Collier about his connection to the American Civil Liberties Union, cited by the committee member from Montana as a group seeking to “protect the Communists in their advocacy of force and violence to overthrow the government.” The committee also heard Alice Lee Jemison, spokeswoman for the American Indian Federation and a major critic of Collier and the Indian New Deal. Jemison branded Collier an atheist and red. For evidence, she presented poems Collier had earlier written in praise of Isadora Duncan. A year later, in hearings before the Senate Indian Affairs Subcommittee, Jemison and her associates in the American Indian Federation named seven members of Collier’s staff, including Vorse, the one woman listed, as “admirers” of the ACLU and charged “that there can be no doubt that the purpose of the present group in control of Indian Affairs is to establish ‘communism’ in the United States.”

Five months later, Vorse left the bureau on a “leave of absence.” Two
of the six males named by Jemison also left the service then. Perhaps, as a sixty-two-year-old woman, Vorse was easily expendable. The evidence shows that Jemison believed Vorse more vulnerable to charges of leftist association than were the four males named, all of whom remained on the government payroll after 1937. When Jemison next appeared as a witness before HUAC in 1938, she gave little attention to those four men but testified at length regarding Vorse's reputation as a “well-known, left-wing labor agitator and writer” who “while in the employ of the Federal Government . . . published a book . . . in which she recounted her twenty years of work and association with William Foster and other Communists . . . including her third husband, Robert Minor, at one time Communist candidate for President of the United States, now a member of the central committee.”

Two years later, Jemison lamented before the House Committee on Indian Affairs that “back in 1935, 1936, 1937, and even as late as 1938, most people laughed in your face if you talked about subversive activities, particularly communism.” But times were good for right-wing red chasers like Jemison by the end of the thirties. In June 1940, Jemison was allowed two days to recite before the House committee an expanded version of her 1938 HUAC testimony recounting Vorse’s “subversive” activities and associations since 1912. Jemison concluded that “there is a surprising similarity of language in the terms used [in Vorse’s autobiography Footnote to Folly] to describe the peasants of Italy taking over the land of the property owners and seizing the factories which she witnessed [in fact, Vorse neither witnessed nor discussed this in her autobiography] and the language used by Commissioner Collier to explain his ‘organized communities’ and other parts of his program.”

In December 1941, although Vorse had left government employment three years before, Director J. Edgar Hoover instituted an FBI investigation of her possible violation of the Hatch Act, which prohibited government employment to those who sought to overthrow the government. The FBI inquiry relied on a search of the HUAC file, which held twenty-seven index cards under Vorse’s name. Much of HUAC’s “investigation,” which was based solely on Dilling’s book, was faithfully copied into FBI files as “Security Matter-C,” a designation that marked her as a “Communist” and “potentially dangerous to the internal security of the United States.” In 1944, she was assigned a Security Index number; this ensured that the FBI maintain a listing of her current address so that she could be found and quickly arrested in the event of a “national emergency.” Thus did Vorse’s brief employment in the Indian Bureau reap totally unexpected re-

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suits. Once trapped within the FBI filing system, few citizens escaped, no matter how unjustly maligned. Although largely unrecognized by Vorse, this predicament would profoundly affect her future opportunities as a journalist.

It was not the red smear alone that influenced Vorse’s exit from government employ. Her course was also determined by a request for help with publicity from John Brophy and Len DeCaux, two leading officials of the newly formed CIO. Mary had reached that stage in life when a rising sense of the chill of exclusion had made the writing of an autobiography seem appropriate. She found the invitation to reenter the center circle of labor activists irresistible, and the attention paid her by CIO leaders immensely gratifying.

In late 1935, John L. Lewis made a calculated decision to draw on the energy and dedication of his former left-wing critics to spark the creation of the CIO. He appointed his socialist foe John Brophy—who had challenged Lewis’s autocratic control of the United Mine Workers in the 1920s, often working with Communists to do so—as director of CIO organization. Brophy immediately hired the talented, British-born, left-wing journalist, Len DeCaux, another former dissident in the UMW, as CIO publicity director. Like Brophy and DeCaux, Vorse had taken the side of the progressive faction in the fight within the miners’ union. She had shared the common left attitude toward Lewis, who functioned as a Coolidge–Hoover Republican and champion redbaiter during the twenties. Now this powerful man Lewis was taking the lead in a principled and courageous stand against the ossified AFL leadership in his drive to organize the mass-production industries. His cool nerve and self-confidence dramatized the aspirations of millions of workers.

“Who gets the bird—the hunter or the dog?” was Lewis’s oft-quoted reply to David Dubinsky, who remonstrated with Lewis about the wisdom of using so many Communists and independent leftists in the early days of the CIO. Lewis understood his need for committed activists as he moved toward that confrontation with superior force in which labor had usually come out the loser. Lewis also believed that the left activists needed him as much, or more, than he did them; he was supremely confident that he could use them to achieve his own goals. Lewis needed militant, experienced organizers and staffers, people who would work for little or no money and whose reward was personal achievement and the realization of social goals. Most of these who stood outside the AFL in the 1930s
were radicals, either Communist or non-Communist. His own UMW staff was little help, for it was loaded with mediocrities—the result of the consolidation of his dictatorial control over his associates in the 1920s. Shortly after the CIO struggle got under way, young and capable new leaders rose from the rank and file, but the first teams to go into battle for the industrial union movement in 1936 were usually composed of the scarred veterans of the Brophy-DeCaux-Vorse variety. The only reason Lewis did not use more of them was that there were no more at hand.

DeCaux first approached Vorse on July 9, 1936. Prior to his job with the CIO, DeCaux had been the Washington representative of the Federated Press, the labor news service Vorse had helped to staff after the 1919 defeat in steel. He knew Vorse as a politically trustworthy journalist, the author of *Man and Steel*, and the foremost labor publicist. Brophy and DeCaux visited her Washington apartment often in early July. Perhaps they were lonely for good talk, talk that went on until late into the night. They ate her meals, and drank, and talked of Lewis and his motives. In that brief moment of left-to-center unity in the CIO’s first year, DeCaux recalled it was like “light after darkness . . . seen by the red and rebellious, now playing their full part in what they held to be a great working-class advance against the capitalist class. There was light, and a heady happy feeling in the solidarity of common struggle in a splendid common cause.” Vorse left on July 19 for the Pittsburgh area, returned briefly to report to DeCaux at the CIO headquarters in Washington, and then left for a second tour of the steel towns of Pennsylvania and Ohio in early August. She was gleeful to be back at “real” work, she wrote Dos Passos.¹⁶

Within a few months, Vorse would become conditioned to the sight of hundreds of determined union members meeting in open assembly, but on this first field trip to report the formation of the CIO, she could not shake for one moment an incredulous sense of wonder. The mass meetings she saw in 1936 seemed nothing less than miraculous, so sharp was the contrast to her memory of the steel towns seventeen years before, when she had visited workers’ homes where every knock on a door meant terror, and women looked out at her through a crack with frightened, drawn faces. Now she was met at the train station by a knot of smiling workers’ wives who had been sent to greet her from a CIO headquarters office on the thirty-sixth floor of a Pittsburgh skyscraper. She moved, at first, as through two worlds simultaneously, one real before her eyes, and the other insistently shadowed by ghosts.

Take the meeting at Braddock, in a sunny park, where thousands stood—men and women, girls in bright summer dresses and little boys with
caps in hand—and bowed their heads for a full minute of silence in honor of their priest, Father Kazinsci, with whom she had shared so many gray hours in 1919, when not even two workers could have stopped to talk on the streets of Braddock, without fear of beatings, or worse. Now there was Father Kazinsci standing on a high platform, his head all white, still saying the old words: “Have courage. Join the union. Only through unity have you strength.” And beside her, applauding, were four black steelworkers wearing CIO pins, the descendants of the black workers who in 1919 had been brought in large numbers as scabs.

Or take the two friendly state troopers she met in Aliquippa, who would not be riding down workers in the streets with three-foot clubs raised over their heads, but who had been sent to ensure law and order by a state whose lieutenant governor was a former union miner. Of course there were still the company spies and “stoolies” in the steel towns, and plenty of rumors about the tear gas and machine guns being purchased by the steel mills. But the old fear was missing. Twenty-five hundred volunteer and two hundred paid organizers operated openly, and from Ohio to West Virginia, every vote for a New Deal ticket was a vote for the CIO. All in all, it was a peculiarly significant trip for her in that summer of 1936, a weird fusion of past and present. She summed it up: “There is an awful power and might in steel, but there is an awful power and might in this age-old drive for freedom. It is like a force of nature irresistible as a tide; it recedes, but it does not die.”

Back in Washington in August, Vorse enjoyed a week’s visit with Jo Herbst. Herbst had made a final split from John Herrmann the year before, at his furious insistence, and she, like Vorse, yearned to believe that it was her own political and intellectual integrity, colliding with the rigid faith of a Communist husband, that made the break inevitable. She and Vorse also clung to the resentful knowledge that a more politically compliant woman had walked away with their men. Vorse had admired Herbst’s 1935 “Cuba on the Barricades” series in the New Masses. She wanted to hear more about Herbst’s dangerous meetings with the Cuban guerrillas resisting the powerful U.S. sugar interests, which helped the Fulgencio Batista regime consolidate its dictatorship.

And of course the two women discussed the New York literary quarrel then consuming a vast amount of the time of a set of Communist and non-Communist writers, who were all aglow over the supposedly vital political significance of the literary debate over “proletarian realism,” a tiff from which Herbst had just retreated in revulsion. The literary wars of the New York critics had flared up when the Communist Party had shifted
into its Popular Front period in 1935. The Communist attempt to build an antifascist alliance with bourgeois radical writers had founded on the party's tendency to endorse art for its political line, a propensity heatedly denied or confirmed according to one's place at any particular moment in one literary faction or another. The relation of all this literary tussle to revolution was murky, but inconsequential, Vorse and Herbst agreed. They felt so partly because as activists they scorned the never-ending talk of self-absorbed cultural radicals who would never visit a picket line or a guerrilla stronghold in the mountains of eastern Cuba, and partly because as women thinkers and writers, they were inconsequential to the raging literary combatants in New York. It is not difficult to imagine the look exchanged between the two when Herbst told Vorse how when the Communist organizers of the conference of the League of American Writers belatedly recognized that they had a Negro (it was Richard Wright), but no woman on the program, they popped Herbst up on the platform at the last minute before the solemn opening ceremony began.18

In November 1936, Vorse left Washington to report the AFL convention in Tampa. For years she had ridiculed the stodgy AFL chieftains about their annual junket to the Florida sun. This year, the CIO unions, representing over one-third of the federation's total membership, were absent from the convention. The remaining craft-union forces obediently voted to make the suspension of the CIO unions official. The only surprise of the meeting was when Republican William Hutcherson, who headed the powerful AFL unit of carpenters, announced that he was so shaken by FDR's landslide election that he could not travel to Tampa.

In common with most CIO supporters, Vorse hoped for an accommodation with the AFL. David Dubinsky of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union was the most ardent peacemaker on the CIO Executive Board. He asked Vorse to observe the meetings of the carpenters at Lakeland, Florida. Vorse received more detailed instructions by telephone from the ILGWU vice-president, Julius Hochman. To judge from her final report, she was asked to gauge the strength of industrial unionism sentiment within Hutcherson's union, for which Hochman paid her a welcome hundred dollars.19

After the conventions, Vorse traveled to Key West for a visit with Katy and John Dos Passos who had promised her "a dandy house and plenty of room."20 Eighty percent of Key West's citizens had been on relief in 1934 and the governor had considered moving the entire population to Tampa. Now it was a New Deal boom town, with Federal Emergency Relief Administration money flowing through, and artists and authors
painting murals and writing guidebooks. The town still had its rowdy and irresponsible charm, complete with Ernest Hemingway. "I would stay here much longer," Vorse wrote Ellen, "if things weren't so exciting out in the world."

By January 20 she was headed north toward Detroit, pulled there by that uncanny sixth sense for news that invariably brought her to the center of action.