Mary Heaton Vorse
Garrison, Dee

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Chapter 16

Labor's New Millions

When CIO organizers began moving into Detroit, their prime target was General Motors, the largest manufacturing corporation in the country. A series of wildcat sit-downs in late 1936 pushed leaders of the United Auto Workers toward a strike for which they did not feel ready. On December 30, GM employees sat down and occupied two body plants in Flint, Michigan—Fisher One and Fisher Two. The most crucial CIO battle of the 1930s had begun.

On January 11, with below-zero weather outside, GM turned off the heat inside Fisher Two. That night a battle between police and workers raged for three hours, the police firing buckshot and tear gas, the strikers heaving coffee mugs, bottles, nuts and bolts. The victory of the UAW over the fleeing Flint police survived in union legend as the "Battle of the Running Bulls." Unaccustomed to the use of violence ending in union victory, conservatives blanched and hysteria flared. The Catholic bishop of Detroit proclaimed that Soviet planning was behind the sit-down strategy—a kind of red "smoke screen for revolution and civil war," he warned.¹

Michigan's Governor Frank Murphy, just elected in the New Deal landslide, sent the National Guard into Flint, but refused to use the troops in the usual manner as strikebreakers. Murphy ordered GM not to deny heating, water, or food to the strikers. The state troops, many of them sympathetic to the strikers and led by an experienced officer who had once been an auto worker, restored order around the plants.

Vorse reached Detroit ten days later. She went directly from the train to meet Carl Haessler, chief of the Federated Press and publicity director for
the Flint strikers. During their drive to Flint Haessler filled her in on the fast-moving events. They arrived at UAW headquarters in the crowded Pengelly Building, social center and staging ground for the Flint battle. A stream of men and women pushed purposefully in and out its dingy door and up and down its narrow wooden staircases twenty-four hours a day. Pairs of union guards checked credentials at every bottleneck. A first aid station, transportation center, picket captain’s room, kitchen, and reading room were always full.²

That evening, back in Detroit, Vorse and labor reporter Louis Stark of the New York Times traded information about union strategy, their meal periodically interrupted by new reports of company violence against CIO organizers. But conditions in Michigan in 1937 were quite unlike those on the Mesabi Range in 1916, or around Pittsburgh in 1919. Attacks against unionists were well reported in most major newspapers. Exposure of GM labor espionage hurt the company’s public relations effort. As one national magazine observed, GM “was in no spiritual shape to fight an honest holy war.”³

On January 28, Vorse visited a picket line in Detroit and attended an evening union meeting in Hamtramck. Her hope that the CIO, aided by the New Deal government, might at last readjust the old political and economic scales, overflowed during the Hamtramck gathering at her first sight of the Women’s Emergency Brigade of Flint. Ten women wearing red tams and red armbands with “EB” lettered on them in white, filed onto the small triangular stage in the Dodge union hall. They waited quietly, while the audience listened to reports from picket captains and local organizers. Then the chair turned to introduce the women. They had come from Flint, he said, to tell the women in Detroit how to organize, because, the chair grinned, “they say the men don’t tell us anything.” A ripple of laughter rose from the audience, anticipating fun. One slender, dark woman rose to speak.

We came over here expecting that you would have an auxiliary [of women] twice as large as you have, but I expect we have had more to do in Flint. Our Women’s Emergency Brigade is ready for action day and night, we take food over to the sit-down strikers in the plants and we are on guard to protect our husbands. We can get fifty women together at a moment’s notice, we expect and are ready for any and all emergencies.

Vorse learned that the Emergency Brigade was a unit of the Women’s Auxiliary in Flint. Women’s auxiliaries to male unions were not uncom-
mon, even before the formation of the CIO. But the Women’s Emergency Brigade was an entirely new idea: 350 women were pledged to place themselves between the strikers and any attacking police, company guards, militia, or vigilantes. The women on the stage described the origins of the Emergency Brigade. The initiative had come from Genora Johnson, a twenty-three-year-old mother of two. During the fight on January 11, when police gathered their forces for a final assault on the sit-down strikers, Johnson asked for permission to speak from the union sound car to the hundreds of spectators watching from behind the police lines. Taking the microphone, Johnson blasted the police as cowards who were willing to shoot unarmed men. She called for women in the crowd to break through police lines and come forward to protect their men, warning them that if the police were cowards enough to shoot men, they would probably shoot defenseless women too. At first a few, then many, women responded to her plea, soon followed by others, then scores of men and women who placed themselves between the police and the embattled strikers. On January 20, Johnson formed the Women’s Emergency Brigade, ready for the next skirmish. She declared: “We will form a line around the men, and if the police want to fire then they’ll just have to fire into us.”

Listening to the women talk, Vorse knew that here was her CIO story. She would tell the story of the Women’s Emergency Brigade, so easily overlooked by male reporters intent on following union leaders and reporting confrontations among the great. “I have never seen the splendid organization and determination of the Women’s Auxiliary of Flint,” Vorse wrote in her journal. “The Emergency Brigade is destined to make labor history in America, for there has never been anything like it.”

The next day Vorse moved her baggage to Flint. She was surprised to find her thirty-six-year-old son, Heaton, there; he had found a job as a stringer for the Federated Press. On the evening of January 31, she and Heaton attended a packed union gathering in the Pengelly Building. The word was out in Flint. Vorse learned there would be an attempted sit-down in a Chevrolet plant the next day, the same day on which Judge Paul V. Gadola was to hold hearings to determine if he should grant the GM petition for an injunction that would expel the strikers from Fisher One and Two.

The next morning she was up very early. A mass meeting had been called to organize a march to the courthouse where the injunction hearings were to be held. In mid-afternoon, unionists waiting at Pengelly were told they were needed at once at Chevrolet Nine, where a sit-down attempt was in progress. When the union supporters arrived, closely followed by
reporters and newsreel crews, fighting had already begun in the plant. Vorse watched as members of the Women's Emergency Brigade marched single file toward the building. Under their heavy coats they concealed long clubs made of wood. She later recorded the memory of one Brigade member:

We got the call there was trouble down at Chevrolet no. 9. We were having a meeting of the Emergency Brigade up at the Women's Auxiliary. We went down as fast as we could. There was a big crowd gathered in front of the plant. People were fighting outside and they were fighting inside the plant. Someone yelled. “There are thugs and company police beating up our boys.” Tear gas was coming out of the plant. We formed in a line and marched right ahead. We carried the American flag before us. Of course we got gassed but we had been gassed before, nothing was going to stop us. We were going to protect our husbands. There would have been a worse fight if we hadn’t come. Seeing us march along with our flag kind of made them stop.

Several hundred Chevrolet police had been alerted by a company spy to the sit-down attempt at Chevrolet Nine. Using clubs and tear gas, the police entered the plant and drove the workers toward the rear of the huge building. Through the windows, shadowy figures could be seen battling in eerie silence behind the glass. The Emergency Brigade members began to swing their clubs and break the windows to let fresh air into the gassed unionists inside. Jumping up to reach the high windows, the women smashed the panes of glass, one after another, while another group of women fought off policemen who were trying to stop them. But by 4:00 p.m., the workers inside the plant emerged defeated. They went back to the Pengelly Building, along with members of the Emergency Brigade who had not been arrested, to wipe the tear gas from their eyes and get first aid.

Slowly, the great crowd massed outside Chevrolet Nine sensed the truth. They learned that the UAW leadership, with perfect timing, had created this diversion at Chevrolet Nine as a way of drawing the company police away from Chevrolet Four, the real objective of the union strategists. As the story spread, reporters and spectators hustled several hundred yards to Chevrolet Four, the more important plant, where all Chevrolet engines were produced.

Genora Johnson was one of the few people who had been told the real
plan. Following the instructions given her, she strung a lean line of Emergency Brigade members across the entrance to Chevrolet Four. When city police sought to enter the gap, the Brigade women locked arms and ignored police orders to move. For a precious half-hour, Genora Johnson and the brigade held the police back, for the officers were reluctant to attack unarmed women. Johnson and her crew attempted to reason with the policemen, desperately playing for time. The action of the women was a crucial contribution to the unionists who were then fighting hand-to-hand inside Chevrolet Four. By 5:30 p.m. the union gained control of the plant and effectively stopped the production of Chevrolet automobiles. During the next few hours, assisted by hundreds of union men from Detroit and Toledo, the strikers barricaded the entrances to Chevrolet Four with heavy metal moved into place by cranes. Meanwhile, the Emergency Brigade members who had retreated to Pengelly reappeared, marching single file down Chevrolet Avenue, still carrying their American flag. Following instructions from Johnson, who spoke from a sound car, several hundred Emergency Brigade women set up a revolving picket line outside Chevrolet Four. Over and over they sang “We Shall Not Be Moved.”

Mary’s joy at the sight surpassed all imaginable limits.

Although Vorse was up most of the night, she rose early on February 2. Judge Gadola ordered the evacuation of Fisher One and Two the following day. The injunction also forbade all picketing and strike activities and levied an enormous penalty on the lands and possessions of UAW officers and sit-down strikers if they failed to obey the order. Reasoning that it was not they but the employers who were defying the law by their refusal to honor the Wagner Act, the strikers decided not to move. Their telegram to the Michigan governor read: “We fully expect that if a violent effort is made to oust us many of us will be killed and we take this means of making it known to our wives, to our children, to the people of the state of Michigan and of the country that if this result follows from the attempt to eject us you are the one who must be held responsible for our deaths.”

February 3 was, in the words of the historian Sidney Fine, “the day when the Flint strike came the closest to erupting into civil war.” Expecting that the injunction ordering the expulsion of the strikers would be enforced, UAW leaders urged their locals in other towns to send as many men as possible to Flint. By dawn, the roads leading into the city were clogged with hundreds of men responding to the call. A crowd of ten-thousand gathered around Fisher One. It included about seven-hundred women wearing their red and green tams. By chance, February 3 had
been designated as Women’s Day in Flint. Women’s Auxiliaries from the surrounding cities sent their members to join the parade through Flint, which ended at Fisher One in mid-afternoon.

A tremendous demonstration occurred just before the injunction deadline. Singing pickets, six abreast, carrying clubs and pieces of metal, circled the plant, while strikers cheered from the factory windows and union sound trucks methodically called for the people to remain calm. When word came that there would be no attempt to expel the strikers, the mass gathering exploded in celebration. A jubilant victory parade moved through downtown Flint, ignoring traffic lights.

Vorse was scheduled to speak on “Labor’s Heroines” to the mass meeting in Pengelly that climaxed the Women’s Day parade and demonstrations. “Mrs. Vorse has firsthand experiences to tell of labor conflicts in American history in which such figures as Mother Jones, Fannie Sellins, Mother Bloom and other fighters took a leading part,” the announcement read. Although the meeting was scheduled for eight o’clock, the great hall was full by six. The women in the auxiliaries made brief speeches, telling the wide span of their activities: picketing, child care, food preparation, fund raising. The high point for Vorse came when all the women from Detroit stood up, held up their right hands, and took an oath to protect union members at all times and in all emergencies. The women spoke of political action too. “A little while ago there were few women interested in union,” Genora Johnson told the crowd, “but they learned through the auxiliary they have power. The workers are going to learn they have political power . . . and when they do we’ll elect every county and state official.” In her press dispatch, Vorse wrote: “A new vision to work for. A new life for workers. It might be the Emergency Brigade has started it.”

On February 5, Josefipine Herbst joined Vorse in Flint to report the labor war. Assisted by Dorothy Kraus, chair of the UAW food committee at Flint, Vorse and Herbst began an ambitious project—the writing of a play for the entertainment of the strikers. It was to be a Living Newspaper style production, in which a cast of eighty—the actors, the workers playing themselves—would enrich the skeletal script by their own interpretations and impromptu contributions. Entitled Strike Marches On, the play portrayed the scenes of the Flint sit-down, preceded by a dramatization of the speedup. Vorse persuaded Morris Watson, vice-president of the American Newspaper Guild and managing producer of the Living Newspaper project of the WPA’s Federal Theater Program, to serve as producer. On February 9, Strike Marches On went into rehearsal at the Pengelly Building, with eager workers helping with costumes, scenery, and lighting.
As it turned out, the first showing of the play came after the strike ended. On the scheduled date of the first performance, GM signed an agreement with the UAW. Under pressure from the federal government, resolute union officials, and Governor Murphy, GM conceded defeat and agreed to reemployment of all strikers and a six-month grace period for the UAW to organize without fear of company interference within seventeen struck plants. The strike settlement of February 11 was perhaps the most significant union victory in American history. It cracked the industrialists' front against unionism and opened the way for the sensational growth of the CIO, modifying the structure of American politics.

That afternoon, Vorse joined the huge crowd gathered to greet the sit-down strikers emerging from Fisher One. A parade line formed, headed by the victorious strikers, the Women's Auxiliary, and the Emergency Brigade. Led by two drummers and a drum major they marched toward Chevrolet Four and Fisher Two.

Invited by a gesture from the strike leader Bob Travis to join the union delegation, Vorse walked with him into Fisher Two. "They were all sitting and waiting for us," she wrote, "dressed in clean shirts, neatly shaved with their bundles in their hands ready to go. They asked us to go through the plant and see in what [good] order they had left it. . . . I stood in the windows looking at the street toward Chevrolet Four. I saw the militia step aside and the crowd surged up. It was now dusk." The Fisher Two men emerged to cheers, and the inevitable labor songs. The men from Chevrolet Four next came out, met by their wives and children. In the dim light, Vorse jotted in her notebook:

Everyone was singing. Great calcium lights went off and illuminated the crowds of cheering people. . . . By now [the crowd] is bright with confetti, people are carrying toy balloons, the whole scene is lit by the burst of glory of the photographers' flares, the big flags punctuate the crowd with color. . . . Men and women from the cars shout to the groups of other working people who crowd the long line of march. "Join the union. We are free!"7

She remembered she was due at the Pengelly Building to put the play on, but the streets were so packed with people she could barely fight her way through. At the entrance to Pengelly she found it was impossible to move up the stairs. The auditorium was filled. Loudspeakers were erected to address the crowd of thousands outside. Almost two hours late for the opening of her Living Newspaper production, Vorse pushed to the back of the Pengelly Building and began a perilous trip up the fire escape. She
arrived just as the cast was assembled, waiting for Strike Marches On to begin. She found Morris Watson persuading some of the workers’ wives who were actresses in the play to stay. The women had not seen their striking husbands in forty-four days, and were all for bolting. Vorse took a position near the stage, to prompt the actors if they forgot their lines.

In the confusion and noise, she could not see or hear much, except to know that the jubilant workers acting the play “added detail, made it their own.” Two thousand auto workers and their families applauded at almost every line of the production.

“You ever heard of property rights?” asked the man on the loudspeaker.

“You ever heard of human rights?” the audience roared in unison with the actor.

The celebration dance at the Pengelly Building was interrupted by Bob Travis in the early hours of February 12. He announced that forty or fifty men were needed at once in Anderson, Indiana, where a large mob had surrounded a UAW victory meeting in a downtown Anderson theater. The unionists and their families in the theater, including Victor Reuther, asked Travis to send reinforcements. Nine men in Flint who owned cars were selected; four men were assigned to travel with each driver.

Vorse’s son Heaton decided to join the flying squadron on its trip to Anderson. He had only a moment to find her in the packed hall and to tell her goodbye before he left. Less than twenty-four hours later, Vorse received a midnight call. At first she thought the message that Heaton had been seriously wounded in a shooting in Indiana was a bad joke. Finally convinced, she took the next train to Anderson.

Heaton and the caravan from Flint had arrived in Anderson to find that the anti-union mob surrounding the theater had dispersed with the coming of daylight. That afternoon, Heaton and several carloads of Flint unionists drove to a seedy tavern on the edge of town where, they had been told, several unionists were being manhandled. In an apparent ambush, the owner of the tavern began shooting as soon as they got out of their cars. Nine unionists were wounded. Heaton had eighty shotgun pellets in his legs. On February 13, Anderson was placed under martial law. Heaton and nineteen others were arrested by the National Guard while the tavern owner remained free to boast of his marksmanship. “Violence and murder are in the air,” Vorse wrote Carl Haessler on February 16.⁸

For the next month Vorse remained near her son, oblivious to national events. Outside the hospital room a soldier stood day and night, guarding his prisoner. Heaton underwent two leg operations. At first it seemed he
would easily recover, but in that preantibiotic era, his infection spread. After the second operation he became feverish and pale. The doctor advised that his leg might be amputated. The odor of the hospital room reminded Vorse of the smell of the boys she had seen dying in hospital wards in France. She endured that terrible time of waiting alone in her dimly lit hotel room, after the hospital closed each night, with no friends or family there to share the anxiety, unable to sleep. She had never felt so alone. After several long weeks, Heaton slowly began to recover.

Because of Vorse's prominence and her important union and journalist friends, Heaton's shooting received wide press attention; Walter Winchell addressed the injustice on several radio broadcasts. According to the UAW attorney, the state eventually dropped all charges against Heaton and the other unionists because no one "was too anxious to try these men, in light of the fact that the perpetrator of the shooting affray has not been indicted up to this time."

The national publicity brought a deluge of letters from friends. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn wrote, "We are living in great days—dreams coming true. I feel sorry for people . . . who are living in the past and can't see the CIO and what it means to American labor . . . [for the left] can't go on forever on poor reputations and dead organizations." Katy Dos Passos, conscious of Vorse's chronic need for funds, assumed she must need help: "Feel very proud . . . We send much love to you dear . . . Do you need money? Can always raise money for our talented, beloved auntie whose triumphs and troubles are shared by your loving Katy." 9

Vorse returned to Detroit to report the consolidation of CIO strength. The Flint example set off an explosion of 447 sit-downs, involving over 400,000 workers in 1937, not only in the auto industry but in every imaginable group, from dogcatchers and textile workers to lumbermen and dime-store clerks, as millions of men and women roared, "CIO! CIO!"

On March 2, John L. Lewis announced to an amazed public that mighty U.S. Steel had conceded to the CIO—prior to any strike—and signed a collective bargaining agreement. "What the A.F. of L. had failed to accomplish in half a century the CIO had achieved in three weeks," the historians Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine wrote. U.S. Steel came to this dramatic shift partly because the Democratic landslide in November made it unlikely that the steel industry could rely, as in the past, on the power of the state to smash a national steel strike, and partly because the corporation did not wish to risk the loss of large profits anticipated from the armaments contract then being negotiated with Great Britain—

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but mostly because a minority of militant workers within the labor force had reshaped, for the moment, at least, American economic and political reality.\(^1\)

The sit-down tactic brought tremendous power to the rank and file. Management hesitated to attack these strikers physically for fear of damage to plant and machinery. The sit-down tactic compensated for the lack of a mass union membership base within most factories. Workers maintained high morale during a sit-down, since there was no need to endure the cold or danger of a picket line, or to watch helplessly as strikebreakers were brought through the picket lines under armed escort. A sense of worker solidarity was heightened during a sit-down: workers cooperated inside, while families and supporters organized outside to provide food and information. Inherent in the notion of the sit-down is the revolutionary idea that workers who have seized the factories might also seize the means of production for more far-reaching social goals. Although substantial gains were often made by the workers during the wave of wildcat strikes, many CIO officials voiced opposition to unsanctioned worker actions, which hampered the union leaders' effectiveness in negotiating with management.

Coming at a time when FDR was pressing for reorganization of the Supreme Court, the wave of sit-downs also frightened political conservatives. In the Senate, the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee's hearings on employers' espionage tactics were only partially successful in countering the media propaganda blitz against the "hoodlums" and "Communists" who led the CIO. In the House, Martin Dies of Texas prepared his assault on organized labor that would culminate in the establishment of HUAC the next year. The anti-New Deal red baiting campaign was well along by the summer of 1937 when the CIO began a long and violent struggle against the independent steel concerns known as Little Steel. Vorse's coverage of the Little Steel War in Ohio would bring her the widest national acclaim she had yet received as a labor journalist. It would also mark the moment when her long career as a reporter entered a steep decline.

The bloody battle that the CIO's Steel Workers' Organizing Committee (SWOC) waged against the Little Steel companies in the spring and summer of 1937 resulted in eighteen deaths and hundreds of injuries. Conservative national forces effectively countered the New Deal's support of organized labor and significantly slowed the momentum of CIO
organization. Little Steel's heavily financed propaganda campaign convinced many Americans that SWOC and the CIO were dominated by revolutionaries intent on violent disruption of economic life.

Youngstown, Ohio, was the heart of the Little Steel strike, which covered seven states and brought out ninety-thousand strikers in the first major strike in the steel industry since 1919. On June 19, Vorse attended a meeting in the countryside near Youngstown. Arriving back in the city in the late evening, she was told that several workers had been injured at a battle outside Republic Steel's Stop Five. The fight occurred on the day that a group of female sympathizers and wives of the Republic strikers had assumed picket duty in observance of "Women's Day" on the picket lines. At the end of the day, several women and children sat down to rest a few feet inside the company's property line. Reports of the incident differ, but the majority of journalists agreed that Captain Charles Richmond ordered the women to move their chairs off company land. The women refused to move fast enough to please Richmond who had suffered their taunts all day and was in an ugly mood. One of the policemen fired a tear-gas grenade that fell near the feet of a woman holding a four-month-old child.

Several hundred furious strikers in a nearby field ran to aid the women. They rushed the police, throwing stones and waving clubs. The police force retreated into an underpass near the gate, firing a barrage of tear gas as they went. During the next two hours, the fighting grew more fierce. Several hundred deputies and police rushed to the scene, where about seven-hundred angry strikers and their families and friends congregated. Firing came from both sides, although observers reported that the first shots came from the company guards in the Republic plant. Two workers were killed by gunfire and at least twenty-two men and women were injured by gunshot wounds.11

Vorse came down to the Stop Five area with Scotty O'Hara, the SWOC organizer from Homestead, Pennsylvania. "All was quiet," she recalled. "The streets were perfectly empty. We passed a group of pickets without trouble. I said to Scotty, 'Am I cramping your style?' He said, 'No, come on, everything is all right.'" Suddenly a truck containing about twenty deputies drove toward them. She heard several shots. "At the sound of the rifles I turned to run, and two men fell at my feet, and suddenly I too was on the ground, with blood running down my face. One man groaned. The other lay still. I learned the next day that Jim Eperjessi, a fifty-seven-year-old Hungarian, one of the men who fell in front of me, had been killed by the bullets." Vorse was taken to the hospital with a head wound and received several stitches in her forehead.

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The next day, most of the nation’s large Sunday newspapers featured an Associated Press photo of Vorse with headlines proclaiming “Shot in Youngstown.” The dramatic picture showed blood streaming down her face and splattered over her ruffled white blouse. Conflicting reports from reporters, observers, and local Youngstown officials and citizens make it impossible to determine with certainty the nature of her wound, but it does seem probable that she cut her head as she dived for protection from flying bullets or buckshot. She several times spoke of the source of her wound as a ricocheting bullet, both publicly and in her diary, but in her description of the shooting scene in *Labor’s New Millions* she artfully phrased the description of her injury in vague terms: “Scotty O’Hara also sprawled on the ground, and I thought he had done so to get out of the way of the bullets. I had better do the same thing, I thought, and the next I knew, I was lying on the ground myself near one man who was groaning and another who lay motionless.” Vorse was not seriously injured; wearing a head bandage, she addressed a workers’ rally in Youngstown the next day. But at sixty-three, Mary Vorse was labor’s new national heroine.12

Vorse’s injuries won her astounding attention from several groups of fresh admirers. She described one union rally to her daughter: “I am rapidly becoming a legend among the miners and steelworkers. Scotty O’Hara who was with me [at Youngstown] tells the story better and better every time. This is what it’s gotten to be at meetings he speaks at: ‘And I lifted her up—our Mary. She was bleeding like a stuck pig. ‘Are you hurt, Mary?’ I sez. ‘No, Scotty,’ sez she. I’m not. They can cut out my eye but they can’t cut my heart out of the strike.’ It goes over big. I expect to be known as Mother Vorse to the steelworkers. I can see it coming.” Meanwhile, the Federated Press, notorious for its low or nonexistent salaries, took the unprecedented step of forming a special fund for keeping her in the field. John Hammond donated the initial seventy-five dollars.13

The Communist Party, ever alert to public relations in the Popular Front era, also discovered Vorse’s new appeal. The party previously had made no real attempt to woo her into joining the League of American Writers, organized in 1935. She now appeared as a bright star to party leaders. Vorse had attended the league-sponsored Second Congress of American Writers held in New York in early June, and received no special notice there, but after the Youngstown shootings, the report of that congress proudly spotlighted her wound “by a vigilante bullet.” In July, the league executive secretary wrote Vorse she was “horified to hear about the shooting” and reported that the league had voted to make her a member: “Membership application is enclosed.” Two months later, the league again
hustled Vorse to join their ranks. Myra Page offered Vorse an invitation to speak to a group of league writers in New York in December. Perhaps anticipating a rebuff, Page added with hesitance, “I know you have to be careful and I appreciate the reasons for it.”

Even the FBI paid new attention to her, increasing its surveillance of her activities. Yet Vorse was probably saved from the worst effects of government persecution by the intervention of one of the most conservative Congressmen in Washington. Allen T. Treadway from Massachusetts, whose long tenure in Congress (from 1913 to 1945) made him the ranking Republican member of the powerful Ways and Means Committee, had a special fondness for Vorse, his first cousin.

His tolerance of Cousin Mary's misguided propensity to sometimes stray into areas where reds congregated is well illustrated in his response to her injury at Youngstown. He told the House that Vorse, “my nearest relation, aside from my own immediate family,” had become another innocent victim of the violence instigated by the hoodlums led by John L. Lewis and the CIO, all “aided and abetted” by FDR and the Democratic administration. A discreet but impatient call from Congressman Treadway to the FBI was sufficient to lessen, at least temporarily, any FBI interest in her case.

None of the sudden acclaim seemed more remarkable to Vorse, however, than the attention showered on her by Ernest Hemingway. When Vorse traveled to Key West in the spring of 1938, Hemingway, who had always ignored her during her trips to the Keys, now sent his wife, Pauline, to fetch Vorse and bring her to his house. Receiving Vorse as he reclined in bed, he lauded her writing as “clear and cool.” Vorse was at first flattered: “No one is better than he is at his best as a conscientious craftsman,” she preened herself under his praise. Four days later, she had grown tired of his adolescent strutting and vision of True Masculinity. Hemingway—a man who took immense pride in killing fish—bored and annoyed her. She was miffed that his notice of her rested solely on his belief that she had demonstrated manly courage under fire. “Now suddenly I am in the Hemingway inner circle,” she muttered to her diary in March. “All because I got a scratch on the puss. The long years in which I have been in the labor movement, have been in danger and served with devotion, when I was arrested, mobbed, kidnapped—all that didn’t mean anything. Because I happened to get shot it did. Last night I read [Hemingway's] To Have and Have Not with amazement—a very juvenile performance.” The next evening, listening to Hemingway's bluster, she scornfully noted: “Ernest thinks war is glorious.”

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Hemingway’s belated attention to her did bring one nice dividend. Through his influence, she was allowed to rent for a pittance a spacious home on the water within the Key West Navy Yard. She was sure she would “never again have anything so perfect for a writing place.” That spring she completed Labor’s New Millions, her story of the formation of the CIO.

Published in 1938, it recreates the high drama of worker struggle from the first CIO strike to the consolidation of an organization nearly two million strong in less than two years. The overriding theme of the book is the role played by organized labor in realizing the most basic ideals of American democracy. She examines the history of union busting, the manipulation of the media and public opinion by well-financed employer organizations, and the successful new organizational techniques evolved by the CIO. She praises the CIO’s welcome to black workers and highlights the contribution of women to labor victory. Throughout, Vorse emphasizes that it was not the New Deal government, but the massed strength of thousands of militant workers, that served as the crucial driving force to expand democracy and force a more equitable relationship between employer and employee.

The other predominant theme of Labor’s New Millions is the nature and purpose of the red hunt. Falsely accusing unionists of being radicals was the employer’s favorite weapon long before the Communist Party was formed, Vorse knew, citing incident after incident from before World War I. Throughout the book, Vorse presents convincing evidence, in instance after instance, strike after strike, of how the old red bogey was trotted out to confuse the public, weaken the union drive, and falsely brand the New Deal and the CIO as Communist dominated. She does not deny the presence of Communists in the CIO; she simply denies the predominance of their influence, and refuses to discuss either their limited or potential power.

Labor's New Millions is frequently cited in labor histories along with Benjamin Stolberg’s rival account, The Story of the CIO, also published in 1938. The freelance journalist Stolberg, like Vorse, is critical of union busting. But nearly half of Stolberg’s book focuses on the CIO as an organization in grave danger of subversion by Communists. Stolberg’s work sounds obviously dated and biased today, in a way Vorse’s book does not, partly because she does not discuss the various factional leaders within the CIO. History has changed many of Stolberg’s red villains into heroes of anticommunism. His work was heavily publicized by the AFL and conservative business and political groups. Vorse’s more measured
appraisal of the CIO and communism could not serve the needs of the day in the same way that the sensational “exposés” of the increasing number of anti-Communist specialists like Stolberg could.

Vorse knew that CIO Communists were greatly outnumbered in the labor movement by traditional trade-union leaders. She believed that since Communists were so precariously dependent on the good will and tolerance of CIO leadership and the mass of unionists, Communist organizers would be dropped from the labor movement the moment they lost their usefulness or overreached accepted bounds. She felt that the leading party functionaries, many of whom she had known for years, were no threat either to capitalism or to democracy, for they were ineffectual leaders of an essentially undemocratic and foreign-based movement, which as constituted could never hold a mass appeal for American workers.

Vorse was also sure that the historic red hunt was not motivated by any actual threat of the Communist Party to capitalist hegemony, but was rather the prime means used by conservatives to discredit labor successes and progressive reform. She would not join that effort, no matter what the consequences to her pocketbook and popular reputation. This conviction best explains why she ridiculed and scorned the Communist left in her private writings and conversations, while refusing to attack American Communists in her published work. Of course, this decision meant running the risk of being branded as a “Communist” by the right and even a “fellow traveler” by non-Communist liberals and leftists, despite her early rejection of Bolshevik dictatorship. The example of the Soviet Union had never been the center of her political universe. Rather, it was her own radicalizing experiences and her recognition of the social construction of the suffering of the poor that determined her stance as an independent democratic socialist. Vorse’s public political stand was already an anachronism, as out of fashion during the economic recession and New Deal fallback of the late 1930s as it had been during the Red Scare and conservative retrenchment of the 1920s.

But if Vorse’s political perspective can be justified by historical hindsight, if Labor’s New Millions still reads well today with its ever-fresh vision of expanded justice, still one cannot avoid a sense of incompleteness in the work, a kind of studied simplicity, which sometimes brings it nearer to propaganda than to art. The complex history of labor, with its intricate relationships and contradictions, recognized in her private writings, is not relayed in her book. The reader is instead told a simple story of capital versus labor, the rich and powerful versus the people. Although this tale is not false, it is less than whole. In her desire to protect the beleaguered

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CIO, Vorse does not risk the suggestion that any failure of the CIO might be self-imposed.

In her public analysis of the Little Steel defeat, so crucial to the slowing of CIO progress, Vorse only briefly discusses SWOC’s failure to provide the worker education and publicity essential to winning a strike. She does not mention the serious inadequacy of the relief provided by SWOC to strikers and their families. Another defeating factor was SWOC’s rigid top-down hierarchy, which damped worker spirit and initiative. Vorse addressed this factor in typically polite fashion: “The organization has been built so rapidly in the eighteen months of the S.W.O.C.’s existence that there has not been sufficient opportunity for the development of leadership within its ranks.”

Perhaps she went this far in her public criticism because she was still stinging from Bruce Bliven’s rebuke to her in the fall of 1937. Bliven, an editor of the New Republic, wrote her a stiff note: “Several of us in the office were quite disturbed about the marked difference between your article on the steel strike and your discussion of it when we were at lunch. I think a very valuable service can be rendered to the CIO by criticizing its tactics when they need criticism. I am sure it is doing them no service in the long run to argue publicly that everything is rosy, when you know privately that things have been pretty badly mismanaged.”

Vorse was sixty-four years old in 1938 and the political climate was changing. Her encounter with Bliven indicates that if she had not yet lost her writing talent, she had lost her sense of political discretion, another sign, perhaps, of her aging in the eyes of others.

Without question, the years from 1938 to 1942 are the nadir of her biography. There was collapse on every front—personal, professional, financial, political. In many ways this time of retreat was for her similar to the decade of the twenties, but with one important difference. It would require infinitely more courage to recover and begin anew when nearing seventy, than at age fifty.

First, there was the family trouble. Through much of these four years, Vorse was so obsessed with family concerns that momentous national and world events appear in the gloom-filled pages of her journal as accounts of radio or newspaper reports, as though only the most agitated tones of the newscasters or the blackest of headlines were capable of breaking into her dismal trance. As the woes of her immediate family accumulated, Vorse found it more and more difficult to discern what portion of sorrow
sprang from chance and circumstance and what proceeded from her own creation. One great loss was the death of her daughter-in-law in January 1938, from an infection following a minor operation. Even after Sue Vorse’s separation from Heaton the year before, she had remained a kind of daughter substitute. For many years after Sue’s death, Vorse longed to be with her, to share a thought, a sight, a burden.

Vorse’s anxiety over her two older children heightened in the late 1930s. When Heaton remarried, Vorse so disapproved of his new wife that she broke off contact with him for several years. If such cold rejection seemed vastly out of character for Vorse, who had for decades played the long-suffering mother, it paid a dividend in ending a felt financial responsibility. Ellen and her artist husband, Jack Beauchamp, lived in Vorse’s Provincetown house during the depression years of the late 1930s. Vorse hated their quarreling and heavy drinking. Whatever the reality, the household on which she broods in her diary of this period is presented as of night-marish quality—the constant “rows” between shifting participants in various combinations of conflict, the shouts and dramatic exits by one person or another, followed by the tearful returns. To complete the misery, first Jack, and then Ellen, was so ravaged by alcohol as to become tubercular in 1939. Both required care in a sanitorium for many months.

Overwhelmed by medical bills and general family expenses, Vorse tried to grind out a few lollypops, but sold only two during five years. For the first time in two decades, she learned to function without the help of a literary agent, an indication both of her limited output and the agents’ consequent lack of interest in her work. “Every lollypop I ever wrote has been a coffin nail in my reputation,” Vorse wrote in her diary in 1940. One of her last attempts to earn an income from the sale of light fiction to the popular magazines brought her a welcome large payment of four hundred and fifty dollars that year. But the emotional price she paid for this “whimsical tale of Negro life” had grown higher than her economic need: “I can’t stand anymore cuteness about Southern tragedy,” she wrote in her diary.

In 1942, Vorse published her sixteenth book, the last of her career, a lively history of Provincetown spanning the years since her arrival there in 1906. Judged by the New York Times as a “full-charged and beautiful book,” Time and the Town sold well. Yet in her chosen beach home, where she had raised her family and resided for thirty-five years, she had failed to create the kind of secure community she would have liked to occupy in old age. Her natural aloofness and political incompatibility kept her apart from the town’s inner circle of notables, especially its respectable
Most Portuguese residents of Provincetown did not find her life style, politics, or lack of religious beliefs appealing; many resented her literary descriptions of their “dark-skinned beauty” and “foreign” way of life.

Despite her many years in Provincetown, and her abiding love of the town, she was not really an integral part of the community. Half regretfully, she wrote in her diary, “I can imagine nothing more arrogant than the way I have lived my life with a complete disregard to the opinions . . . of all the comfortable people of the town . . . I remember how shocked I was when I discovered that . . . the dentist’s wife was an interesting woman in her own right.” Just as in Amherst, she both scorned and coveted inclusion in an environment she romantically conceived as united in its essence, while at the same time she took hurtful pride in exclusion.

As the Depression deepened in the late thirties, she was forced to borrow money from friends like Edmund Wilson, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, and Cornelia Pinchot. Through most of the thirties she was unable to pay her mortgage or property taxes. The management of the Provincetown bank and her brother Fred Marvin interceded several times to save her house from repossession. Begging and borrowing, she squeaked through one dispiriting financial crisis after another.

Although she attended several CIO and Amalgamated conventions, Vorse all but withdrew from labor reporting from 1938 to 1942. For a woman who had been in the thick of the CIO battle—conferring with John Brophy and Len DeCaux, monitoring AFL meetings for David Dubinsky, marching alongside Bob Travis into the Flint factories to bring out the sit-down strikers, receiving injuries on the front lines in the Little Steel War—the sudden shift from active participant to sideline observer was startling in its swiftness and finality. Her changed position cannot be explained by her advancing age or her preoccupation with family concerns alone, for she would demonstrate her physical and mental vitality in future years, and it seems most probable that it was the absence of meaningful work that led to her obsession with family problems, rather than the reverse. Her loss of journalistic opportunity and status was the result of external events she could not control: the slowing of CIO momentum, the factionalism that rent the unions, and the successful conservative attack on liberalism and radicalism within the labor movement and without. Vorse foundered in confusion for a long while, while seeking new direction, although, in fact, she would never recapture the esteem and influence that had once been hers.
The new political environment also affected the CIO chieftains. David Dubinsky returned his International Ladies' Garment Workers Union to the AFL in 1938, ostensibly because of his fear of Communist influence on the CIO. John L. Lewis and Sidney Hillman were also ready to move against the Communists, a decision based as much on political expediency and common-sense public relations as on anti-Communist beliefs. Lewis removed John Brophy and Harry Bridges from their CIO positions in 1939; Philip Murray purged Communist organizers from SWOC. In August 1939, when Stalin and Hitler signed their Non-Aggression Treaty, the party's credibility was irreparably damaged by its brazen flip-flop from praise of FDR to denunciations of New Deal officials as war-mongering, Wall Street imperialists. This zigzag shattered the Communist unionists' reputation not only among left intellectuals and CIO leaders, but also among politically aware rank-and-file unionists as well. Thus, even before the war began, or the party line shifted again when Hitler invaded the USSR, the influence of the left within the CIO was drastically weakened.

These events had an inevitable impact on Vorse's standing as a labor publicist. On the one hand, she found that she was now honored as an engaging old-timer, a relic of the glory days of labor's struggle. Thus, when she showed up at the press table during the Amalgamated convention of 1938 (having traveled there with Len DeCaux who was not to be purged from CIO office until 1947), Vorse wrote her children: "Sidney Hillman came down from the platform and shook both my hands and told me how glad he was to see me and sent down word that I was to be the guest of the convention and invited me to the luncheon the board was giving for Lewis. . . . I wasn't allowed to buy meals or anything for myself and they begged me to stay longer." On the other hand, she was publicly denounced as a Communist before the House Un-American Activities Committee as well as by the largest mass circulation magazine of the period, the Saturday Evening Post.

On August 12, 1938, HUAC opened its first formal hearings. The next day, John Frey of the AFL named "280 organizers in C.I.O. unions, under salary, who are members of the Communist Party." Vorse was number eighty-six on Frey's list:

Mary Heaton Vorse, directing organizations of C.I.O. women's auxiliaries. At one time she was alleged to be the secretary of William Z. Foster. She wrote her red memoirs while publicity
agent in the Indian Bureau in United States Department of Interior. Reported on leave from Department of Interior while operating for C.I.O. She has just published a book which is strictly C.I.O. in character and she was one of the active “red” leaders at the 1936 Tampa A.F.L. convention.

Frey’s diatribe was heavily publicized, even though he offered no evidence to support his charges. Three days later, the delusional right-winger Walter S. Steele, editor of the ultraconservative National Republic, began his testimony before HUAC. He assured the Congressmen that Communists had infected hundreds of American organizations, including the Camp Fire Girls. He named Vorse as among “45 leaders” of the John Reed Clubs, who were “engaged in revolutionary activities, either in propaganda or agitation and organizational work.” Alice Lee Jemison, who accused Vorse and other members of the Indian Bureau of being Communists, was the third witness to smear Vorse before HUAC in 1938, and again before another House committee in 1940.

In early 1941, Benjamin Stolberg published a scurrilous attack on Vorse and several other non-Communist leftists sympathetic to the CIO in the Saturday Evening Post. In faithful imitation of HUAC style, Stolberg found a few real reds in the labor movement and then proceeded to smear as “Stalinists” anyone associated with them at any time in the past who did not practice his kind of ritualistic anticommunism. Stolberg praised HUAC as “the most competent research organization in the Government on subversive activities,” and charged that Vorse’s Labor’s New Millions was a “Communist version of the CIO,” published by a house whose list read like a “Bolshevik Five Foot Shelf.”

Certainly these attacks had a considerable influence on public opinion and many publishers. Vorse was troubled enough by Stolberg’s accusations to write her friend Gardner “Pat” Jackson, a crusading liberal journalist who had been branded in Stolberg’s magazine article as “a Stalinist busybody in Washington,” to inquire what could be done to protest Stolberg’s libelous journalism. Branded as a red journalist, Vorse was obviously a liability to labor’s publicity efforts. This was clear even to the small group of Provincetown citizens who in 1939 let her know that they did not want her assistance in Washington with their planned town recreation project because two of the town leaders on the project committee scorned her as “a red.”

The events of the late 1930s left her without a commitment to any political faction. She agreed with Lewis that labor should not tie itself to
the Democratic Party, and favored his suggestion of a third-party farmer-labor alliance. Like Lewis, she was highly critical of FDR’s assignment of massive defense contracts to employers who blatantly violated the Wagner Act. Yet she deplored Lewis’s refusal to join the antifascist coalition and was appalled by his endorsement of the Republican candidate for president in 1940. At the CIO convention that year she observed—this time from the sidelines—one startling event after another: Lewis’s resignation as CIO president after his appeal for FDR’s defeat had been rebuked by the votes of labor; the Communist CIO faction’s vote in favor of an anti-Communist resolution that placed Communists and fascists in the same category, a vote, furthermore, that had been supported by party leadership. Labor’s political world was topsy-turvy. She returned home “in a shell-shocked state.”

Vorse had been committed to the destruction of fascism since her observation of Hitler’s Germany in 1933, a position sharply in contrast to her earlier feminist-based pacifism. She abhorred the isolationist mood of many Americans and the failure of the Western democracies to provide aid to the Republican forces fighting Franco-led fascists in the Spanish Civil War. After the Munich settlement, she correctly predicted that “the two dictators [Hitler and Stalin] will come to terms to limit the British Empire. . . . I feel as though the people who have been soaked in the Marxist dialectic are living in a former century. That is all over now. All the talk of collective security was antiquated Bunk . . . as was the Popular Front. . . . For what Germany is aiming at is not ‘revision’ or justice or Lebensraum, but a rearrangement of the world as we know it. This has been . . . proved by the words of Adolph Hitler and [stated] by various . . . socialist theoreticians, but it is still not believed by the majority of Americans.”

In the four months prior to Hitler’s invasion of Poland and the advent of World War II, she reported events in Europe for the New Republic, the New York Times, and the North American Newspaper Alliance. She traveled through France, Germany, and Switzerland and to Belgrade and Budapest between April and September of 1939. “It is not by chance that I am here,” she wrote in her diary. “It is by some deep inner necessity. . . . I couldn’t help coming—and when I got here and the familiar sights of Paris closed around me I knew why I had come. I had come to defend France. It was so absurd, an old woman like myself come to save France that I
laughed out loud. And then it didn't seem so funny because I am part of the strength of France. I am one small atom of her combined power. And there was another reason for my coming, not so pure. It was that the corruption of the passion for news is such that one would rather die than miss anything, literally rather die—"30

Vorse sailed home from Europe in September 1939, a week after war began. At sixty-five, she felt an understandable urge to flee what might become an actual battleground at any moment, although as it turned out, the deceptive quiet of the “phony war” would stretch another six months before Hitler began his western offensive.

Vorse was also distressed because she had experienced an inability to gather news during her assignment to prewar Europe. For the first time in her life she admitted the incalculable but pernicious effect of age on her journalistic opportunities. During the past few years she had slowly become aware, with increasing anger, of the unfamiliar difficulties she now faced when gathering information or gaining access to news sources, or when attempting to charm her way through barriers to research. As a younger woman reporter, she had been an interesting sexualized novelty to many of those who manned the doorways to news gathering. Vorse had instinctively used her feminine skills to enchant or manipulate in aid of her search for a story. But now her inquiries were apt to be greeted with no interest, or, more often, with the excessive and distant politeness due a motherly figure. She faced suspicion that there was something unbecoming in a woman of her age still in quest of news, that she might even be a little daft, or at the least, eccentric, and thus a potential nuisance. Now she fully realized the impact of advancing age on the seriousness with which she and her work were greeted by the masculine-dominated worlds of war, politics, and diplomacy.

All these factors drove her home from Europe, but as soon as she arrived in New York she suffered a nervous collapse as serious as the one of 1928, aggravated by her regret that she had ignominiously left wartime Europe and thus “missed the story of my life. I should have stayed in France. And maybe even died there.” Every front-page war story she read that was written by a reporter whom she considered inferior to herself sent her into new spasms of guilt and self-fury: “This remorse at having missed my best chance in life will follow me always and I shall never get over it. . . . My place given up—and the anguish that I felt against myself welled up again and followed me even into my sleep.” She threw up black clots of blood. In this troubled time, old friends offered her refuge, money, and affection. Wealthy John Gilbert Winant, the New Deal ambassador

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to Britain, stunned her by his offer to finance a month's vacation in Cuba, "just because he thought I was tired," she wrote. In Havana, in the late fall of 1939, she rested in grateful solitude, regained her health, and rebuilt her emotional defenses.\(^{31}\)

She brooded about how to regain her standing as an author: "So many years out of the market makes my position only a little better than a beginner," she moaned. "While the whole world in which I live is being torn up," she wrote, "so is my own private life." She reread her diaries of the past fifteen years—"a painful examination into my relations with my children." The exercise brought her as close to self-analysis as she could comfortably manage: "My daily notes . . . make a pattern of me escaping family—swamped again—escaping again—neither refusing to be involved [in their lives] nor resolving the difficulties of two generations."\(^{32}\)

Soon after the entry of the United States into the war, she went to New York in search of a war assignment, knowing that "in the field, moved by events, I write well, otherwise I don't." Suddenly the economy was booming, jobs were plentiful, and the dreadful Russian Communists had become America's allies. Suddenly the publishers and editors did not seem to mind Voise's reputation as a leftist. From the New York Post she received a large advance for a series of stories on American war workers, especially women workers.

She was sixty-eight years old, with a war ahead of her and a postwar reconstruction to report. This was a story Mary Voise would rather die—"literally rather die"—than miss. She happily began her "last lap," as she called it then, a final surge of active reporting that would last for seven years, take her all over the nation, down to Mexico, and back to Europe for two years of work abroad.

"Oh God let me write like an angel," she entered in her diary.\(^{33}\)