Working Detroit

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False Starts

In the winter of 1932-1933, there were still people making cars in Detroit. They were the lucky ones—or so it may have seemed to the 300,000 unemployed workers in the city.

Leon Pody, a metal finisher at Briggs Manufacturing, did not feel so lucky. “In 1928, we used to do eight sedan backs a day, and at that time, we received $1 an hour,” explained Pody, whose job consisted of smoothing out welded seams in metal sedan bodies. After 1929 it had all gone downhill as Briggs, a medium-sized company building car bodies for Ford and Chrysler, mechanized the job and increased work loads. “Last spring,” Pody testified during public hearings in 1933, “they sped us up to twenty sedan backs a day, [and] during the summer, up to November, it had reached 32…. We were supposed to have a 52¢ basic rate, [but] they cut us back to 35¢ an hour.”

Walter Briggs, vacationing in Florida, had little doubt his workers would accept these terms. After all, “they were lucky to have a job.” If they did not want it, thousands of hungry workers wandering the streets would gladly take their place.

Briggs never finished his vacation. On January 23, 1933, 6,000 of his employees, led by the metal finishers, downed their tools and walked out of the factories. Their action sparked a strike wave of 15,000 body workers that paralyzed the city’s auto industry.

The rebellion took everyone by surprise. The strikers had no savings to live on and no established union to direct their fight. And with nearly half the city’s workers unemployed, the companies would have no apparent difficulty recruiting strikebreakers. It seemed a hopeless struggle.

But for Leon Pody and many others, the deteriorating conditions in the body plants had become intolerable. Fear of starvation had kept many of them on the job for three years. But now they drew the line. Their grievances were numerous and deeply felt, speed-up and wage cuts among the most pressing. But underlying all their complaints were fundamental changes in the organization and status of their work.

In the 1920s, metal finishers used soldering irons, hammers, and hand files to smooth out body panels and seams. Skill played an important role in these...
jobs, and metal finishers earned above-average wages. But towards the end of the decade, employers began to divide the work into less-skilled jobs, replacing the hand tools with power-driven disc sanders. Production speeds increased and wages fell. For the still-proud metal finisher, the new work arrangements were a step downward. “Our disc grinder threw a stream of lead particles in the face of our [work] partner,” recalled John (“Little John”) Anderson, a metal finisher at Briggs. “It was impossible to avoid it.”

Mechanization and deskilling also transformed the work of interior trimmers. Previously, trimmers had sewn the upholstery into the car by hand, but in the 1920s much of their work was taken over by sewing-machine operators. Now, teams of trimmers simply installed pre-assembled upholstery. Mort Furay recalled how his father’s craft was subdivided and deskilled: eventually, “a guy who had two thumbs,” as he put it, “could snap headliners and seats into place.” Many downwardly-mobile trimmers harbored a deep resentment over this dilution of their skills, and the fuse on their potentially explosive anger was lit when management cut wages and piece-work rates after 1929. With the inevitable bottlenecks and “dead time” that occurred at the start of the 1933 production season, workers spent 14-hour days in some plants but barely cleared enough in piece-work wages for lunch and trolley fare.

When the companies announced yet another round of wage cuts in January, 1933, thousands of exasperated workers rebelled, shutting down all four Briggs plants in Detroit and Highland Park, as well as Motor Products, Murray Body, and Hudson Motors (sites 10 and 27–30). Since the Auto Workers Union (AWU) had just organized a successful walkout against wage cuts at Briggs’ small tool and die-making plant, the striking workers from the big body plants chose AWU organizer Phil Raymond to lead their walkout. IWW organizers Frankedarvall and Leon Pody were also elected to the Briggs strike committee, which invited Norman Thomas, presidential candidate of the Socialist Party, to address the strikers.

Strike support came from many quarters. The Detroit Federation of Labor eventually endorsed the strike, and the Unemployed Councils frequently picketed the plants—their banners predicting that “The Unemployed Will Not Scab.” Mayor Murphy gave passive support by denying the company’s request for laborers from the city’s Employment Bureau. The Department of Street Railways also refused to provide specially-chartered trolleys for transporting strike-breakers, and Murphy refused to allow the pro-company State Police (Briggs’ Treasurer was chief advisor to the Governor) into Detroit.

This show of public support helped lead to quick settlements at Motor Products, Murray, and Hudson, with management at all three companies agreeing to rescind the wage cuts. But at Briggs, the strikers also demanded the company negotiate with their elected Shop Committee to iron out future disputes. Briggs’ management, fearful the company might lose its Ford contract if it gave any such recognition to organized workers, refused to even discuss the issue.

Denouncing the strikers as communists, Walter Briggs returned from Florida and assembled an army of police to reopen his plants. He began with the Highland Park facility he had rented from Ford since 1928. Highland Park, after welcoming the 65 State Police sent by Democratic Governor William Comstock, sent 50 police officers to aid the company. Briggs also paid $4 a day to 130 men specially deputized by the County Sheriff—making the force a wholly-owned subsidiary of the company.

Picketing workers were driven from the plant gates and strikebreakers escorted in. Police arrested scores of strike supporters (Phil Raymond among them) for “agitating,” selling papers without a permit, “criminal syndicalism,” assault, immigration violations, and even “attempted cruelty to animals”—a police horse in this case.

To protect strikebreakers from harassment, the company housed them inside the factories. Barracks were installed in the Mack Avenue plant in Detroit for 500 men on the fourth floor and 300 women on the second. With strikebreakers trucked in and finished parts and car bodies trucked out under Detroit police escort, Briggs was able to revive production in both Detroit and Highland Park by early February.

The Strike Committee meanwhile splintered into warring factions, undermining any hope of sustaining the battle. Resenting the Communist-led AWU’s leadership role, some non-Communist radicals joined with conservatives in a successful campaign to oust Phil Raymond as strike leader; the Unemployed Councils were also barred from the picket lines. In turn, the Communist Party’s national leader, Earl Browder, alienated many potential sup-
porters by publicly claiming the strike was a Communist-led rebellion. Since the overwhelming majority of strikers and shop-floor leaders were not Communists, Browder’s exaggerated claim put Phil Raymond in a serious bind, for he had insisted he was leading the strike as a trade unionist, not a Communist Party organizer.

In March, the Briggs strike collapsed as hunger and despair drove the diminishing band of picketers back to work. Yet even in failure, the Briggs strike had a positive outcome: “This first ‘depression strike,’” as Business Week noted, “is the beginning of a process which establishes the limit of pay and hours and treatment that men will stand.” It was, in fact, the stirring of a soon-to-be-born union movement.

That same March, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated President. “This nation asks for action,” Roosevelt declared as he took office. “We must act and act quickly.”

Few doubted the need for urgency, for as F.D.R. entered the White House in 1933, the national economy had slumped to unimagined depths. A nationwide wave of layoffs, bankruptcies, and plant closings left a total of 13 million people—25 percent of the nation’s workforce—unemployed. The country’s banking system collapsed when Detroit’s banks, unable to collect loans from bankrupt companies, announced they had lost their depositers’ money and would close their doors. A chain reaction of panic withdrawals and nationwide bank failures followed. In Detroit and elsewhere, cash-starved cities were paying their workers with printed IOUs.

In this fear-laden atmosphere, Congress hurriedly enacted a dozen major “New Deal” reforms. There was something for everyone in this grab-bag of crisis politics: for the cities and the jobless, there were public-works projects and federal dollars to shore up sagging relief efforts; for farmers there were agricultural subsidies and crop controls; for reformers, there were new regulations barring the reckless banking practices of the 1920s; for drinkers, there was the repeal of Prohibition; for business, there was the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), designed to promote business confidence and investment. Much like Republican policy in the 1920s, the NIRA encouraged trade associations to agree on industry-wide Codes of Conduct that eliminated “destructive competition,” especially price and wage cutting. For workers, there was Section 7a of the NIRA establishing their right to “organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing”—a right not to be tampered with by the “interference, restraint, or coercion of employers.”

Response to this impressive range of reforms was enthusiastic. Huge rallies and parades drummed up support for the NIRA’s wage and hour standards, encouraging over two million employers to endorse the Codes and place a “Blue Eagle”—the symbol of NIRA compliance—on their products. In Detroit, 15,000 people paraded down Woodward in a hopeful “March of the Re-Employed,” preceded by twenty ballet dancers in blue velvet costumes and six Blue Eagle flags. “Now it is the duty,” speakers declared, “of all women to buy

*The day the banks closed, February 14, 1933. The government-declared “Holiday,” called to prevent panic withdrawals from cash-starved banks, left Hamtramck depositers empty-handed.*
A burst of adrenaline shot through the nation, raising the economy out of its nearly comatose state. But there was no full recovery. Through the remainder of 1933 and well into 1934, survival was still the paramount goal of most companies and most workers.

Survival wasn’t easy for workers seeking positive change. Despite the promises of Section 7a, their right to organize proved illusory. As documented later by Senate investigators, employers routinely fired or blacklisted union sympathizers, usually on the pretext of “shoddy work” or “insubordination.” GM employed 14 detective agencies to spy on union supporters; Chrysler later admitted planting over 40 professional labor spies in its Detroit factories to infiltrate unions and obtain membership lists.

Most effective in nullifying Section 7a, however, were management-approved “Employee Associations” initiated and bankrolled by many companies in 1933 and 1934. To attract support away from independent unions and AFL craft organizations, some employers—GM and Hudson among them—required membership in their company union to qualify for insurance benefits. At Great Lakes Steel in River Rouge and Ecorse (site 31), leaders of the company-financed “Employee Representation Plan” promised free beer and cut-rate hunting ammunition to participating workers from Blue Eagle stores.”

For thousands of Detroiters, road-building programs (above, on Grand River), sewing rooms, and cultural projects (“Art Black’s Federal Project Dance Orchestra”) organized by the Works Progress Administration provided wages and a sense of hope. “The WPA brought us stability,” recalled Wallace Christie, who spent 2½ years on road crews in Detroit. “It brought us through a rough time. I had a wife and two kids to support. It paid our rent, our food.”

Together with other government programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps, the WPA not only produced thousands of jobs, but also valuable public improvements throughout Michigan, including hundreds of bridges, thousands of miles of roads, dozens of parks and recreation centers, and public art projects in post offices from blue-collar Hamtramck to suburban Birmingham.
steel workers.

"We bargained for clean windows and floors without grease," recalled Richard Frankensteen, a delegate to the company-sponsored "Works Council" at Dodge Main (site 32). "Things that were important, but meaningless in take-home pay. When it came to dollars and cents, we were powerless." Chrysler did not leave such matters to chance. Under terms established by the company, management representatives cast half the votes in Council meetings, and needed only a third to veto any proposal.

Unfortunately, the American Federation of Labor had no more clout than these company unions. Its craft organizations did not welcome the mass of unskilled and semi-skilled workers demanding aggressive leadership. Craft-union leaders had grown accustomed in the 1920s to running things their own way, and many feared that industrial unions would undermine their control. They insisted the AFL pursue a cautious, half-way policy: the Federation would organize autoworkers into all-encompassing "federal" locals, but only on a temporary, plant-by-plant basis. Once these catch-all local unions were established, the craft unions planned to take out the machinists, metal polishers, and other skilled workers, leaving the "federal" locals with only the least-skilled factory hands.

Militancy was not on the AFL's agenda. "I never voted for a strike in my life," boasted William Collins, the former street railway worker sent by the AFL to organize Detroit's autoworkers. "I have always opposed them." Since employers had made clear their intention to subvert Section 7a by organizing company-controlled unions, autoworkers might well have wondered how Collins intended to win recognition for bona-fide worker organizations. The answer came in March of 1934. Rather than challenge the companies with a strike—a challenge many rank and file members and leaders were calling for—the AFL would rely on President Roosevelt to determine if company-controlled unions violated Section 7a.

When Roosevelt unexpectedly sanctioned the company unions, the AFL's credibility was destroyed. "I remember that night being up in the Pengelly Building in Flint," recalled Leonard Woodcock, an AFL member at Borg Warner in Detroit, "and men simply tearing up their membership cards and throwing them on the floor.... There was a deep sense of betrayal which carried over in the adamancy against the AFL for years afterwards."

The Strawberry Strike

Autoworkers were not the only ones fighting long odds to win better working conditions. Workers in Detroit's grocery and produce warehouses had not suffered the same layoffs as autoworkers (hungry people bought food before they bought cars), but working conditions and pay had deteriorated rapidly after 1929. Dock workers at Kroger's Green Street warehouse (site 33) were on the job 12 hours a day in 1931, but were only paid for the time they spent loading and unloading shipments as they arrived. "We'd only get maybe five or six hours in actual pay," recalled Martin Haggerty, "and at 32¢ an hour that wasn't much."

"If you made $15 a week you got about $10 in scrip and $5 in cash," Bobby Holmes remembered. "You spent the scrip in their stores, where it was good." Like the auto companies, Kroger refused to give its workers any job guarantees. Warehousemen were simply expected to appear at the beginning of each shift to wait for work — and then frequently found the foreman giving jobs to friends and relatives.

Resentment among warehousemen came to a head in May, 1931. With a train load of Florida strawberries half unloaded, the night crew was taking its regular lunch break when the foreman suddenly laid off two men and replaced them with strangers. Led by a stocky 18-year-old named Jimmy Hoffa, most of the 175-man crew refused to continue work. The strawberries, meanwhile, began to spoil.

After several hours, management rehired the two laid-off workers and began negotiations with the warehousemen's independent union. The resulting one-year contract compelled Kroger to end all discriminatory hiring policies and to guarantee a half-day's pay for each man called into work.

The victory was short-lived. Kroger refused to renew the contract the next year, and eventually fired several of the "Strawberry Boys," including Hoffa. But this was only the beginning, both of an 11-year battle to organize Kroger and of Hoffa's tumultuous union career.
In the wake of this disaster, a new generation of independent unions began to fill the void left by the AFL. The most militant of these newcomers had the tamer of names: the Mechanics Educational Society of America (MESA). “We don’t meander with the NIRA,” declared MESA leader Matthew Smith, an English socialist who immigrated to Detroit in the 1920s, “but fight any encroachment of the bosses by direct action in the plants.” In fact, the name of this fire-breathing organization was intentionally misleading. “It was chosen to confuse the bosses,” as Elizabeth McCracken, MESA’s full-time secretary recalled later, “and many of them were under the impression the men in the shops were going to learn math.”

MESA initially enrolled only the most highly trained autoworkers in the industry—the skilled “tool and die” makers. Tool and die makers were the ones called on to build the specialized parts for the cutting, stamping, and grinding machines the industry used to shape metal. Their skills were always in demand, particularly as companies began restyling their cars every year, and consequently, needed toolmakers to retool their factories.

In the Depression, employers had cut toolmaker wages as jobs grew scarcer, but the passage of the NIRA and its promise of economic revival gave these more assertive skilled tradesmen new hope. Having renounced the cautious, ineffectual leadership of the AFL, MESA’s members brazenly challenged the entire industry in the fall of 1933, launching strikes to recover lost wages in the tool and die plants of Detroit, Pontiac, and Flint.

Their six-week battle won only modest gains in pay and working conditions, but MESA’s David-against-Goliath stance attracted wide support. In 1934, the organization broadened its ranks to include less-skilled workers—closing a plant’s tool and die operations had proven too difficult when strikebreakers could cross MESA picket lines along with production workers. Few unskilled workers actually joined, but many semiskilled metalworkers did, and MESA’s membership climbed to 35,000 by January, 1935.

That winter also saw the formation of the independent Automotive Industrial Workers Association (AIWA), centered at Dodge Main. Unlike MESA, the AIWA began as an all-inclusive industrial union—in part because the management-controlled Works Council

 Blow for Blow

While employers and judges questioned the legality of the National Industrial Recovery Act, violence served as the final arbiter of many strikes.

“At the slightest provocation,” recalled toolmaker Bill Stevenson, a strike leader during the 1933 MESA walkout, “we were clubbed down unmercifully.” The police, however, did not have a monopoly on violence. In late October, 3,000 striking toolmakers attacked eight different shops in Detroit, burning blueprints and tool diagrams as they drove from plant to plant. Their fast-moving motorcade stayed just a step ahead of the police, pictured above outside GM’s Ternstedt plant (site 34).

Earlier that month, over 7,000 striking toolmakers marched through downtown Detroit to counter management claims they had returned to work (inset).
at Dodge had originally been established as a plant-wide body. The worker delegates to the Council retained this feature of the company organization when they decided, in February, 1935, to organize an independent union. But it soon became evident this budding single-plant organization would have little leverage so long as competing companies remained unorganized. When worker delegates at Dodge proposed shortening the workday from nine hours to eight, management threatened to sub-contract part of their operations to low-cost suppliers like Briggs. If autoworkers were to improve their conditions, “the only way they could do so,” as Richard Frankensteen later put it, “was to organize the competitors and force their wages up.”

Opening its ranks to as many autoworkers as it could reach in Detroit, the AIWA received the blessings of Father Coughlin and grew to 24,000 members.

With the AIWA’s rapid growth, all the elements of a potentially powerful organization seemed to be at hand. All that was needed was unity: MESA’s skilled tradesmen and militant leadership, combined with the AIWA’s mass base among production workers, and the AFL’s national resources, could then sweep aside the Open Shop.

Yet, however impressive the actual gains and future potential of Detroit’s new unions, most autoworkers in Detroit and elsewhere were still unaffiliated and non-committal in 1935. The majority probably sympathized with the goals of MESA and the AIWA, and many were certainly prepared to join once the “final” battle to unionize the industry began. But a wait-and-see attitude prevailed in most plants, for as many workers saw it, Detroit’s new unions were still no match for the determined opposition of Open Shop employers. So long as the companies controlled the plants and the police controlled the streets, striking workers simply could not prevent management from using strikebreakers to reemerge production. Neither could the city’s fledgling unions protect their members from company reprisals. Firings of union supporters were still common enough to make many autoworkers fearful of joining. Such fears were hardly diminished when the Supreme Court, in May, 1935, voided the entire National Industrial Recovery Act—including Section 7a.

This decision marked a crucial juncture for Detroit’s struggling union movement. Having come so far, there was a real danger of losing momentum and succumbing to a demoralizing round of infighting between rival organizations. The “final battle” would have to be joined sooner rather than later, and victory would require new initiatives, new strategies, and new leaders.

“You Milled Around Like Cattle . . .”

For workers like those pictured above, waiting to find jobs at Ford’s Rouge plant in Dearborn, an overriding grievance in the Depression years was the rampant favoritism in hiring and firing. Job insecurity was especially prevalent in the auto industry, where companies routinely laid off production workers during retooling, and then hired whomever they pleased when production of new models began in the late fall.

“The bosses relatives came first,” recalled Russell Leach, a production worker at Briggs. Then came the people who regularly catered to the foreman, “that is, cut his grass, painted his kitchen, repaired his garage. . . . [But] when you once reached the age of 40, you were no longer given any preference.” Older men, most foremen reasoned, could not work as long or as fast as younger workers.

Younger women faced a different sort of discrimination. “We would all mill around at the gates,” Ann Shafer remembered of her early years at Motor Products, “and the foreman would come and say, “I need you, you, and you . . . and the rest of you can go home . . . . You milled around like cattle and hoped to catch the eye . . . and a lot of women put up with pinching and patting and other overtures in order to work.”

The steel industry was no different. In hunting season, supervisors at Great Lakes Steel expected men returning from the woods to drop off a share of the kill. One worker in the Open Hearth department became so accustomed to such shakedowns he adopted the name “Boom-Boom”—while shooting ducks, the first “boom” was for the foreman, the second for himself.

Resentment over these varied forms of job begging and blackmail motivated many early union supporters. Charlie Westphal, a maintenance man at GM’s Cadillac plant in Detroit (site 35), vividly recalled the day Cadillac workers were lined up for rehiring after a long layoff in 1933. “It was raining, a cold, real cold rain. They wouldn’t even let us inside the gates, and we had a couple of thousand people out there in the rain. So we came down at the foot of Clark Street, and there was a bar there . . . and that’s where we organized what we called the AF of I Independent Auto Workers.”

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