

Interview with Nathan Spero

The 1960s and 70s: Pt. 1

J. This is Jane Latour at the Wagner Labor Archives on June 6 1996 interviewing Nathan Spero, former research director of the UE (United Electrical Workers) about the 1960's and '70s. So, Nat, in 1960 the IUE went out on strike against General Electric. Do you want to talk a bit about the time period to frame that strike?

N. Well, the 1950s and the 1960s were tough times for workers in General Electric and Westinghouse and the rest of the electrical industry. But we were divided, the 1950 elections, as we discussed earlier, instead of one major union representing General Electric and Westinghouse employees, we had several. The IUE was the largest of these. But other unions had very little General Electric or Westinghouse until at this time, in this strike, they gained footholds. The Teamsters, for example. The Machinists, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and several other unions, suddenly became representatives of the General Electric workers, and each was on its own pretty much, and the company did pretty much what it desired. I think I spoke about Boulwarism and the development of it. Boulware was the top company Labor Relations man, and Boulwarism was the approach he had, and the company had, of making an offer to the unions, what he thought should be made, and sticking to that offer.

J. It was take it or leave it.

N. Take it or leave it.

J. Well, this 1960 strike, when the IUE went out. 50 plants struck, 240,000 employees, and the contract that they had, that had been enforced for five years, and Cary was the head of the Negotiations Committee, and the Company mounted a strong back to work movement, and A. H. Raskin and the New York Times called it "the worst setback to a Union since World War II". And, do you remember anything about that strike and its impact on IUE and the workers that IUE represented in GE?

N. Well, naturally the defeat of a major Union in General Electric by a company, even though it was a Union we were in competition with, nevertheless affected us. Because a company, once having achieved its aims, a large part of the industry, was able to force it on all other Unions in the industry. So when I say Boulwarism could not have taken place before 1949 when it was one larger Union. Boulwarism depended on splitting the Unions up. And negotiating with them one at a time. And that setup, take it or leave it, was worked, and it worked in the 1960 strike you're talking about.

J. Now, I was reading about George Meany in 1961, said that he was at the Florida Convention of the AFL criticizing the Steelworkers, the UAW, and the Building Trades for not organizing. The IUE was trying to organize at that period. What do you remember of that, those early sixties?

N. Well, the sixties, like the 50s was a period of difficulties for the Unions. We did try to organize, but the area of red-baiting and divisions in the Union would impede our abilities to for that. Workers literally were afraid to sign up for our Union because of the atmosphere of red baiting that had been created, and, actually, as I remember the decade of the sixties, up until 1969, when finally, after twenty years, the Unions in General Electric and Westinghouse decided to get together, was a period of weakness, of failure to organize, difficulties in signing a contract.

J. I was reading about the address in 1962. Frank Donner, the General Councilor for the IUE, addressed the Convention, and he talked about the decline of the AFL-CIO, that was his topic, and they talked about, in the 7 years since the merger of the AFL and the CIO, the small number of workers who had been organized. Meanwhile, the number of eligible workers, had gone up by, increased by 3 million. And he said they only organized 200,000 plus members. Also talking about the small number of women, that they were one third of the work force, but only one seventh of the labor movement. So it was pretty weak. Now, the point you were just making about all the divisions within General Electric. In 1942, one Union represented 70 % of GE's work force, whereas in 1962 it says 25 Union represented less then 40 %. Twenty-five Unions?

N. Unions of all sorts, all craft Unions. There was a Printers Local. The Coordinated Bargaining Committee of Unions that we finally agreed to had 13 unions on the same Committee, 13 Unions. 'Cause they were the major, the AFL-CIO Unions, they had quite a number of craft Unions. There were, in Westinghouse for example, there was the Independent Federation of Salary Workers, which was a very important Union, but independent. There were salaried Unions in GE as well. So, it doesn't surprise me, there were as many as 25 Unions when 13 of them got together at the end of that decade of the sixties.

J. The IUE put out a leadership guide to contract negotiations, and it talked about the question of the rank and file rejecting contracts, the UE had a really novel way of involving large numbers of people in negotiations and collective bargaining, and also a strange policy of ratification of contracts. Do you want to talk about the process? And, how did it differ from the other Unions that were ...

N. Well, in the first place we solicited proposals from the Locals. The Locals had meetings and the membership voted on the sort of things they wanted the National Contract to contain. Then we had the meetings of Locals, representatives of Locals, and these propositions were discussed at these general meetings representing all Locals. It was a discussion of them, and this membership meeting voted to accept or to reject proposals. Once that was done, the proposals agreed to at this meeting went back to the individual Local membership meeting, where they then voted to accept or reject what had taken place at the general meeting of General Electric delegates. And so that the way it differed was that these other Unions, including the IUE, elected delegates to a meeting, and these delegates pretty much decided what the demands would be of the company. Some of the Locals had meetings, in other cases they didn't have meetings, they just sent somebody down, and there wasn't this interplay between the body that finally drew up the contract and proposals and the membership, as there was in the UE. Then, when it came to ratification of a contract we had to have our Locals as well, and the majority of the membership would accept or reject. But, in the case of the IUE, they had the same delegates group voting on it, and voting to accept or reject, and as a result especially after we had agreed to coordinated bargaining, the IUE had to go through the motions of getting the Locals to ratify the contract even though under their by-law provisions for their negotiations, their delegates were the final body. So, that's the difference: membership involved in it completely; membership involved in a limited fashion.

J. In 1964-65 the leadership in the IUE changed and Paul Jennings became President. Did that have an impact on the relationship, or what was the impact that you saw in terms of the IUE?

N. Well, Cary was the main standard there ... of, in the IUE. He was the major person who led the opposition to UE. So when he left and Paul Jennings replaced him, he didn't have exactly the same kind of crusade against the UE and things began to turn around. Actually, though, it wasn't until Bywater, who was a President of--William Bywater--Bill Bywater--who was a President of District 4--New Jersey/New York--our District 4. I'm not sure why the IUE doesn't ??--when he was selected to

replace Jennings, that was when traditions began to change, because he understood the workers were losing, as long as they ?? ...

J. Yeah. One thing I came across in our--looking at the UE publications that were produced, one pamphlet talked about "UE Leaders See Things Your Way," "because UE officers and reps live they way you do, not like high paid bosses"--and it goes into the UE policy about salaries for the officers.

N. And salaries for the coordinators, and the general policy enunciated was that our salaries would not be higher than the highest paid people in the industry, and ... in the sixties, the highest paid people in the industry, generally speaking, were machine--Class A Machine and tool and dye makers. But they began to have salaries that were higher than ours, because of our problems of organizing and maintaining membership. Our treasury was not that able to give increases even based on the cost of living. So, for a good part of my tenure there, our salaries were less than that of the highest paid people in the industries: the machine and tool and dye makers. And our offices made just a few thousand dollars more than the coordinators. So, that was our policy and that was what we held to, and that was how we operated. The same thing was true in terms of expense. We didn't have unlimited expenses. In the beginning we were allowed, something like 10 dollars a day for food. We couldn't travel first class on airplanes, we traveled tourist class. We couldn't stay at the best hotels, we stayed at cheaper hotels. Actually there was an attempt made, that organizers who were working together should share a hotel room. I must say, I resisted that. I was able to resist that (both laugh). But, that was they way things happened.