

Interview With Nathan Spero

The 1950s 1

J. Jane Latour on March 4th, 1996, interviewing Nathan Spero about the United Electrical Workers.

Now, we're going to begin tonight talking about the 1950s. But before we begin talking about the 1950s, I thought it was important to have a prelude and to talk about 1946,--the post-War period, and the strike wave that took place that year, and the UE's role in ... in leading the strike at GE and Westinghouse.

N. It wasn't the UE had struck the electrical industry, but the United Steel Workers, the automobile workers, the Rubber Workers ... And places like RCA that we had organized, also struck.

J. Um-hum.

N. It was a national wide strike and there was cooperation between the Unions. I was on a Publicity Committee and, with Howard Rotten berg from the Steel Workers who was their Research Director, and he was an outstanding leader among us in the research field because he worked for Murray's Union, and Murray was the President of the CIO. And at one of the meetings,--and this is just an anecdote,--the first meeting, there was somebody there, a handsome man, from the Steel Workers, and he said, "In our propaganda ?? educational materials, let's not talk about prices. Let's just talk about the need to raise wages." And I spoke up and I said, "Well, if they're going to raise prices while they raise wages, we're not going to be protecting the living standards of our workers." And that turned out to be MacDonald, who was later ...

J. David MacDonald.

N. David MacDonald.

J. Later, the head of the Steel Workers.

N. And who was later the head of the Steel Workers. And I wondered if I had known who he was at the beginning, could I have contradicted him.

J. Right. Well, in fact, that leads to an important point because at that period, there was--the post-War period,--wages were falling, inflation was rising, there was a lot of unemployment and there was a lot of unrest. And that ... that was manifested in the strike wave. I think it's interesting to note, in reading about it, that every GE plant and every Westinghouse plant was closed down,--the success of that. And also, the tremendous amount of community support there was for the strikers.

N. Yeah, ???. We had a wonderful General Council, David Scribbner, and he organized legal services in every city in which there was a plant. And when the company would attempt to get an injunction against picketing or some similar action, he had lawyers prepared to defend workers' rights. And in some cases, judges refused to hand down injunctions against striking workers. Actually in, as we will see later on, Charles Wilson, who was President of the General Electric Company at the time, was very much disturbed by the fact that we had so much support from the community in so many areas. And he said, at some point, the problems with the company are Communists abroad and Unionists at home.

J. Well, he ... he was also struck by the tremendous amount of picket line activity there was, and the tremendous way that felanxes would form and prevent white collar workers,--professional workers, scientists,--from entering the plants;--was totally outraged by that kind of activity.

N. There was ... There was one other interesting factor involved in that strike. Of course, as you know,--and Jane, I know you've ... you've read widely,--the major issues was that at the end of the War, workers' take home pay fell drastically. There was no more in the overtime. And so, a major demand was that wages be increased to maintain the levels that the ... the level of living that wages represented during the War. And the eighteen-and-a-half cent settlement with General Electric and the nineteen cent settlement in Westinghouse doesn't sound like very much now, but in those days, it was a substantial increase. As I mentioned before I got into this matter of wages, the question of women and what they should be paid. And one of the first proposals that Charles E. Russell made to us was that he was willing to pay the men eighteen-and-a-half cents, but the women would get only fifteen cents an hour. And they way he justified it was that women are just bobby sockers or supplementary income. They don't need it the way men do. And of course, what ... what happened was that the Union was outraged. The men supported the women, and the settlement we got was the eighteen-and-a-half cents across the board for everybody, men and women.

J. And it was after these strikes and ... and the contract improvements,--gains, that the company brought in the famous Slemuel Bulwar, and they changed their strategy from ... actually went on the offensive against the Union. You want to speak a bit about Bulwar?

N. Yeah. Well, the collective bargaining unit with which Bulwar is identified is that the Company would make an offer to the Union and that's it. They would stick by it. But that was possible only because the Company was able, together with government and other CIO forces, to create a split in the united ranks of Electrical Workers. When the IUE was formed and managed to get bargaining rights for a good part of the industry, the Unions were split. And there Company was, therefore, able to play one part of the industry against the other and just do whatever it wanted to. Bulweard could never have been successful with that doctrine, say, in 1944 or '43, before the industry was split.

Q. Um-hum.

N. But Bulwearism is the product of a split industry.

J. Reading about the ... the Unions' arguments for wage increases and looking at the qu3stion of the whole ability to pay, and the Company's feeling that that was socially and economically irresponsible, the ... the whole approach to Company proffits and trying to protect them, saying that there was a three way partner ship;--and then, the Company's effort to promote the Company position throughout the community: the production of all kinds of materials and orchestrating the presentation of their demand,--their take it or leave it offer. Do you want to speak a bit about that?

N. Well, the Company's economic rationalization was that it wasn't only workers that they had an obligation to. They had an obligation to stock holders, to consumers, suppliers, God knows who else, so that everybody had to be taken care of, and that the Union had to take its position with all ... with all the others. The question of the increased productivity of workers was appraised, and the Company's answer there was that it wasn't just workers that contributed to the increased productivity, but capital that was supplied by stock holders,--the efforts of sub-contractors to bring down costs, etc. etc. so that really, the workers had very little to do with increasing productivity through ... So they had this economic theory and they published their General Electric Bulletin

J. Um-hum.

N. with this stuff spelled out, and spread it around the country.

J. I was reading about their pamphlets: Understanding Profits and Economics In One Lesson?

N. Well, that was that;--that everybody contributed to productivity,

J. Um-hum.

N. and the Union really had no particular right to get any increases. I remember being at a meeting at which the Company's top economist was present, and they spelled out this thing. And it sounded so ridiculous because, in effect, it sounded as though workers should take a reduction of pay they had so little to do with productivity. And we all burst out laughing. And that man never was presented to us again. We kept him out of future negotiations.

J. I was reading that the ... the Research Department produced a tremendous amount of material and produce it in a way that got a lot of publicity. And that the Union also hired Carl Mirizoni to produce this film: The Great Swindle. Was that in this period?

N. Yes, it was. Actually, what happened at the time was that ... that Committee of research people that had met, with MacDonald as Chair,--whom I didn't realize was Chair,--we worked up a division of work. We each undertook to publicize varying aspects of the economic processes which showed that Unions needed and should get wage increases. For the Research Director of the UAW, at the time, Jim Wishard, at the time,--took up the question of profits. I handled, among other things, the question of the ... the pay,-the compensation that the companies paid and some question of the kind of profit sharing scheme the Company had. And Howard Rottenbury took another tack, and we pooled our resources. And we'd hired a expert, Arnie Scripzer, for various organizations, writing up commercial blurbs, and we furnished him with that kind of information. So it was a joint effort and showed what Unions working together, could do,

J. Um-hum.

N. as contrasted to what happened when we were split, and the UAW in a sense, was split between its Socialists and left wingers.

J. Right. Well, reading in this book by Ronald Schatz about the UE,--the Electrical Workers,--he makes the point that you just made, that the Union could have successfully fought Bulwarism, and that alone they could have handled, but they were handicapped by the onslaught against the UE leadership and against the Communists in the labor movement, and the whole

ganging up of the federal government and the labor movement,--including the CIO,--against the UE. And I wanted to ask you about,--sticking still to the '40s,--1947, which was the first time that witnesses came forward out of the UE to talk about the involvement of Communists in the Union. And four UE leaders went to the House On Un-American Activities in Washington, right before a major campaign election, and testified about the UE leadership and left wing politics of the UE? You want to speak about that?

N. Yeah. That must have been the ...

J. Bridgeport, Schenectady and New York.

N. The ... Representative Hartley's Committee at the time, if I remember correctly. And he ... You might say that was the initiation

J. Um-hum.

N. of the tactic of finding people who would testify against the UE;--bring in ... bringing them in just before a negotiation or an organizational drive to ... to frighten people into thinking that they were supporting Communists;--that the Communists were getting ready to take over the country ... All sorts of outlandish claims were made. And I remember, I write a little pamphlet for our people exposing Hartley and his background. He had a shady background. And I think he went to jail, as a matter of fact.

J. Hmm. He was from New Jersey,--Republican from New Jersey.

N. I think he did go to jail over some wrong doing. But ...

J. But that was ... That set the stage for what was to come.

N. For what was to come.

J. Um-hum.

N. You know,--Bullwheat and the General Electric Company sets the ... set the stage for their no compromise policy by supporting the setting up of the IUE. In 1949. when we retired or we resigned from the CIO,--refused to pay dues for several months. Some of the historians say we were thrown out, but ?? we didn't resign;--that the CIO set up a special Un, headed by James Carry, who is the same ...