

Interview With Nathan Spero

The 1950s: 2

J. I wanted to talk about the Taft/Hartley ... the passage of the Taft/Hartley, back in '47,

N. Yes.

J. and its impact on the ability to do a lot of things: to wage secondary boycotts, to mount mass picket lines, and also the affidavit... the signing of the affidavit ... the Communist affidavit. Do you want to speak about Taft/Hartley a bit?

N. ?? The ... In the first place, the support for the Taft/Hartley bill came from company lobbyists;--people who worked for ... lawyers who worked for General Electric and other companies. And as you indicated, there were a whole host of Wagner Act provisions that protected the right to ... to organize that were ... were repealed or made less effective. As you say, secondary boycott,--difficulties with signing people up to become Union members,--there were interferences with that ... There were so many of those, at the time ...

J. The division of a Union shop, and the right to pass "right to work" laws in ... by State ...

N. But one of the most important parts of it was the Taft/Hartley affidavits. And if a Union did not sign a statement that he or she was not a Communist, that Union couldn't use the facilities of the National Labor Relations Board. And at the beginning, when that law was passed;--it was vetoed by Trumann; passed over his veto;--he didn't do very much to line up support for it;--that several Unions undertook, on the basis of principle, to refuse to sign. John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers ...

J. But at first, there was agreement within the CIO that ... that they weren't going to sign, which pretty quickly, started to crumble, within months.

N. That's right.

J. But ... but basically, Murray even spoke out against signing the affidavits and standing ...

N. That's right. There was ... just like ... just as there was criticism of the law altogether, and there was great indignation that patriotic Unionists had to declare they were not Communists, and therefore, enemies of the country. The idea that, To Murray, it was demeaning,--you know. It wasn't a matter of principle. In any event, as you say, whatever sounds of opposition were made at the Convention quickly crumbled, and only a few Unions refused to sign. The ... The Mine Workers held out altogether. I don't think they ever signed it.

J. Um-hum.

N. We held out for a couple of years. But in that period of time, other other Unions, who were critical of us because, one, we wouldn't support Trumann, and, two, because we wouldn't support the Marshall Plan, began to raid us. And we couldn't participate in the elections because our officers had refused to sign. And I think, at the last interview I had with you, I told you about the difference between

officers of the UE, where Emsbach, in principle, said we must not sign. Mathis, who was the Director of organ-- ... Organization, said, "We'll be decimated if we don't sign, because these other Unions are raiding us and we can't fight back,

J. Um-hum.

N. And we can't organize either because the NLRB won't run an election for us."

J. Couldn't appear on the ballot.

N. So eventually, we did sign.

J. Um-hum.

N. There was a difference in temperament between Mathis and Emsbach. Emsbach was high on principal, but generally found it difficult to do the ground work to get support among Union members. Mathis was a tactician, and he was always working together with people in the field, so he usually was able to carry his principle out, --his tactics out, despite Emsbach's opposition. In any event, we did sign.

J. Um-hum. Well, in ... between the enactment of it and the 1949 signing the affidavit, there were over five hundred raids on the ... five hundred elections that took place with ... in opposition to the UE; --people trying to ... Unions trying to get in on the already organized members.

N. There was ... I didn't ... I didn't know that it was as many as that, but it was widespread.

J. Um-hum.

N. We were being beset on all sides.

J. Well, so '49, that was ... that was the year of the signature. That was also the year, as you mentioned, when the UE pulled out of the CIO,--refused to pay,--because the officers had tried to get Murray to speak out against this raiding and do something , 'cause they had a policy about it. When he failed to, they stopped paying taxes. And then they boycotted the Convention of the CIO. Now, the ... a lot of the books I've read have said that the ... the CP policy was to stay within the mainstream and to stay within the CIO and that ... point to this as a ... a direct contradiction of the UE officers, --you know, --in terms of the question of Communism; --that this was not the policy, but that that was the decision of the leaders to do that, --leave the CIO.

N. UE leaders were independent. Perhaps they might have Communist beliefs at times and might have supported the Soviet Union. But when it came to day to day decisions in the shop, if they disagreed with so-called official Communist Party policy, they just didn't pay any attention to it. And ... they were determined to have the UE continue as an independent Union. They did not think that the UE could continue to function on a principled basis if it joined ... if it changed its policies to be acceptable to the CIO. So that there were splits taking place between the leadership of the Union and between Communists who tried to impose doctrine, and the splits got wider and wider until, in 1955,--you know--

J. Yeah. Well, let's ... let's go chronologically. But in ... Also, in '49, at the same time, at the same Convention, the charter was granted to the IUE.

N. Right.

J. And the ... that whole think had been going on for quite awhile, too, with James Carry trying to organize around his candidacy.

N. Well, what happened was not only that James Carry tried to organize around his candidacy, but the facilities of the CIO National Office, of the Steel Union itself, of the UAW, and so on,

J. Um-hum.

N. ??

J. For that UE Members For Democratic ...

N. Action ...

J. Action ...

N. That organization was set up. The ... The church was mobilized. In fact, the church was mobilized in city after city to speak out and say that the Union were Communist controlled and that was an abomination under God. And not only that, but Truman sent a ... a letter to the first IUE Convention in which he praised them for their fight on subversives. And people like Simonton, who was Secretary Of Defense, and Maurice Tobin, who, at the time, was the Secretary Of Labor, said they would support the IUE. And actually, they did. They came out and they would speak to meetings of the IUE, and tell them what a wonderful job their leaders were doing. So we had a tremendous amount of opposition to us from different quarters: from the ...from the government, from religious leaders, from Unions ...

J. From all different government agencies.

N. That's right.

J. Department Of Justice, FBI, Senate and House Committee ... sub-Committees ...

N. ?? couldn't stop them. For example, we had the Noel Laboratory in Schenectady,--the atomic energy laboratory. They ruled that we ... we could not be a ... work there if you were a member of the UE;--that it was a risk,--a national security risk. The same thing happened in Chicago, the atomic energy laboratory there. So the Union was made to be anti-patriotic, anti-religious ... speared in a million different ways. And it really was amazing the way we held together. David Scribner, whom I mentioned as the

J. council

N. wonderful council said that our Union was being held together at the time by what was it? spit and...

J. Polish?

N. spit and polish.

J. Considering that the UE had so many defense contracts and represented workers in all of these large plants with defense contracts, the whole question about support for the Progressive Party and the

Marshall Plann,--opposition to the Marshall Plan ... Was ... Was there debate within the Union leadership about whether or not that was a wise thing to do, or it was going to be splitting, or was that just...

N. Well, you mean Henry Wallace's Party?

J. Um-hum.

N. The Union, at the time, tried to differentiate between the fact that somebody like ?? Fitzgerald, our President, was on the Committee, and the policy of the Union itself which we said did not take a position in support of any political group. In fact, of course, we campaigned for Henry Wallace, but that was done by individuals and it wasn't an official Union policy. And as a result of that, incidentally, in election after election,--general election for President, we never took a position in support of one candidate or another until Johnson ran for President against Goldwater.

J. Um-hum.

N. At that time, we supported Johnson. But we felt that, in view of what had happened in Vietnam and that sort of stuff, that that was a mistake, too.

J. Yeah.

N. I think, to this day, the Union policy is to support individuals who are active in the interests of working people rather than political parties and so on.

J. So, the ... the biggest ... the biggest fights for the ... against the IUE for the UE membership took place,--the early ones--in Pennsylvania, in Erie and in East Pittsburgh.

N. Well, when we had ... When we were under attack in the late '40s, around '49, by the IUE and there was this nationwide campaign, where we, as I said, being the support of other Unions, we, for publicity purposes I guess, asked the NLRB to run a one day national election. But we dropped that position and fought the IUE ?? on a plant by plant basis. Now, the IUE was in trouble because, in order to run for election--an NLRB election,--they had to sign up the required percentage of ...

J. Thirty percent.

N. and they were finding it hard to do it. So Bullwear actually said, in one of the hearings, we took the IUE leadership off the spot because we petitioned for NLRB elections in all of our plants because we said that we didn't think that the UE represented the membership. And under the rules of the NLRB, at that time,

J. Because of Taft/Hartley they could do that.

N. Thank you ?? and so the IUE got on the ballot in every one of these States, in every one of the plants, including East Pittsburgh and in Schenectady and South Philadelphia and God knows how many other plants;--Over a hundred plants throughout the country. And the elections were held early in May, from ...

J. Um-hum.

N. early in 1950 in May, and the agitation against us was intensified. Terrible, it got worse;-- greater intervention,--and we lost the majority of our support. I think we went up to forty percent among the membership and held on, at that time, to some of these large plants in Schenectady

J. Um-hum.

N. and in South Philadelphia.

J. But the ... the split was really right down the middle. The ... the East Pittsburgh vote was only by a hundred votes,

N. Yeah ??

J. the first election, and then the rerun was a little further apart, but it was like significantly split.

N. Yeah. Well, there, the ?? played a huge part in organizing opposition to the UE, and on Sundays, parishes throughout the area the priests would actually sermonize against the UE. And of course, the government officials ... import officials would come in. And ... and I'm ... I'm not sure, but once again, before this election, there were hearings before the ...

J. There were.

N. House Un-American Committee or the Senate Internal Security Sub-committee

J. Um-hum.

N. that then became a practice whenever there was an election, to hold hearings, call people, publish information of Communist domination. The companies would then fire people who--or suspend and then fire--people who ... who took the Fifth Amendment, but an atmosphere of group fear was created throughout the country. And the government's Committees,--I'm trying to think of ?? the industrial policy...

J. Personal security ...

N. Committee got involved too, and they brought up charges against people who were active in the Union. And frequently, just being active in the IU ... in the UE was the ?? reason for the support to say: these people who are subversive, they cannot work under government contracts. So it was an awful period. Sometimes, I think, in reading back over what I've done with the ... how it happened, that I purposely blanked out some of the ...