

Interview With Nathan Spero

The 1950s: 3 The Battle With the IUE Pt. 1

J. Well, one of the things I was reading about East Pittsburgh, is that it ... the .. Ronald Schutz notes that the IUE was extremely ideological and focusing on politics and patriotism and all of that, whereas the UE stuck to facts and figures and was focusing on economics.

N. That was true.

J. and you must have been turning out a lot of ammunition, through the Research Department.

N. We did. But first,--you know,--there's another area that I hadn't touched, the attacks on the Union and that was informers;--

J. Um-hum.

N. people that were planted in the Union. Spedic C-e,

J. Um-hum.

N. was a notorious ...

J. He spoke ... In 1950, he came forward, under cover agent, and testified, and ... and that was about that whole area,--that whole Pittsburgh area.

N. that's right. And I think, somewhat later on, Matuso

J. Um-hum.

N. testified ... Matuzo later recanted. Incidentally, before hang up the Union in 1983, Father Rice

J. Right.

N. came out and said that "I did the wrong things. I hurt people by doing what I did."

J. And he also acknowledged the effect on the labor movement of these attacks.

N. That's right.

J. 1964. Well, what about Matt S--how did you say his name?

N. Cvetic.

J. CVETIC.

N. C-v-e-t-i-c.

J. That ... That was pretty devastating.

N. ?? He had a ?? Matt Svetic. The thing is that ... that there were quite a number of them who very frequently had something wrong with them. They either had some psychological problem or they were caught lying, or they were bribed. And ... And as I say, their testimony was revealed before an election. But the factory workers who saw these guys make all sorts of claims about people who were Communists, and it worried them.

J. Um-hum.

N. They were fearful for their jobs.

J. Right. Well, another thing that I was interested in was that, in the 1950s, the number of televisions ... television set ownership grows precipitously, and all of these hearings were being televised locally . For example, the hearings that they had in Lynn when they were having elections, were televised so that people got to watch from their home what was going on in this ... and ...

N. And literally had this ?? hired them to be lives.

J. Right. And that was a popular .. very popular television show. Right? Didn't it become a ...

N. Yes. And I mean it was ?? popular. But it dealt with Communism at the ... the Lynn plant. And the Lyhn plant, I think, at the time made airplane parts, so they had the national security angle as well.

J. Um-hum. And threatening to take the jobs away;--the loss of defense contracts. Well, I'll stop for a minute.

... there were positive things that you did.

N. We did. For example, during World War II, questions were raised by labor about the BLS Consumer Price Index, and there was some agreement that it's likely understated the cost of living at the time. And that was import-- ... important because wage increases were geared to cost of living.

J. Um-hum.

N. But in the 1950s, we decided ... Russ Nixon,--who was an economist who actually handled ... had Kennedy in .. in his class ... President Kennedy in his class at Harvard. And ?? was our Washington representative,--got together and decided we would publish the true index of the cost of living. And we spent months on it and published an imposing booklet in which we examined all aspects of the BLS Consumers Price Index, and were critical of it. And for several years, every quarter, we would issue our own index of the cost of living, which was considerably higher than the BLS index.

J. Um-hum.

N. The ... See,--the BLS claimed that it was a Consumers Price Index;--that it was prices that they were measuring. And our point was that it was the cost of living that had to be measured;--that even if something was of better quality, you still had to pay more money for it,--you know?

J. Um-hum.

N. You ... Instead of aspirin, you can use Advil® now. Advil is more expensive than aspirin. It does pretty much the same trick,--maybe a little better,--but you're paying more money for it.

J. Um-hum.

N. But the BLS index would work it so that the increased cost was negated, and chained the new product onto the old index so that ... Aspirins, say, were \$2.00 and Advil almost \$4.00,

J. Um-hum.

N. that the \$2.00 price they would bring at the HD index at the price that aspirins were,--the same price. And thereafter, if Advils went up in price, they would counted. But they would eliminate the difference between the aspirin and the ... an Advil. And that was true of area after area, where they would just measure increases in prices, not increases in the cost of living. And we also claimed that Federal taxes ought to be part of the index,--you know. If workers were ... If workers income would be determined by increases in prices, why not count in cost of living increases. Why not count in taxes in;--

J. Taxes.

N. tax increases.

J. Um-hum.

N. So, as I say, we had some kind of impact. The ... One of the Congressional Committees asked us to come down and testify. And they weren't very pleasant to us,--they were hostile,--but we got our point across. And I think ...

N. ... issued our own unemployment figures as well, for several years.

J. Um-hum.

N. and I think that perhaps they influenced the Labor Department, 'cause for a while,--and I'm ... I'm just doing now,--we published nine or ten estimates of unemployment, taking into account in each one of them, a different factor: whether or not they worked part-time, whether it was an economic reason for working part-time,--

J. Um-hum.

N. some estimates of people who dropped out of the labor market because there was no work to be had... See,-for a number of years, they did

J. Um-hum.

N. But the major index didn't carry these sub-indexes that perhaps were more important.

J. Yeah, more indicative really of unemployment.

N. And then ... Then, there was another area that we found very important, and that was the question of the budget for a worker's standard of living.

J. Um-hum.

N. And we fought to have the DLS,--you know--institute that. The University of Cal--California had one that's called the Heller Budget for a moderate standard of living. They published that for years. Somehow, it seems to have dropped out. The government,--the Federal government, from time to time, did publish some sort of standard of living and income ??doing it during and after the War. And so, we argued ?? about that,--the Commissioner of Labor Statistics. And he said, "Well, yeah, we'll do it, but we'd better be careful. If we make it too high, it'll look ridiculous. So we have ..."--and these are pretty much the words he said,--

J. Um-hum.

N. "so we have to get out an index that people will accept." Then, we got out our own index and published it for several years. And the government's index had three parts: a high standard of living, a moderate, and a minimum standard of living. And it was pretty good, even in that sense, because it's been years since they've issued it, but I remember, say in 1980, a moderate standard of living required an income of \$25000.00 a year, which was far higher than the average income of working people.

J. Um-hum.

N. But with the Reagan administration, these things fell by the wayside. The budget,--the income that workers needed for a standard of living was dropped, as one or another important gain status--statistical measures. But these were all things that we were pushing in the '50s: the Consumers Price Index, the Unemployment Index, the Workers' Standard Of Living Index.

J. Did you ... Did you get some fair reactions to the ... to the work that you did, in terms of people really assessing ... getting the heart of what you were doing, as opposed to just--yo8u know--red baiting and saying ... You got some fair stories reporting on it?

N. Well, we did get some favorable treatment, mostly under the progressive press, because we'd get these things out and the attack on it would be that's it's a Communist ??

J. Right.

N. You can't trust it. These people are ... are untrustworthy. God knows what they'll say.

J. Um-hum.

N. So that the support we should have gotten, we didn't. But we were able to use it effectively with our own people, because ... while the negotiations, a very important factor in determining the kind of settlement you get is the strength of the ... of the Union

J. Um-hum.

N. and of the Local that's involved. But one of the ways you could build up the strength was by pointing out to them the injustices they ... they were experiencing,--you know?--

J. Um-hum.

N. that prices were going up and they might get a cost of living increase that's much lower,

J. Um-hum.

N. So that they're wages would fall lower than necessary for a moderate standard of living. So what we did boosted our memberships' determination to win better standards ... better wage and benefit settlements.

J. One of the charges that the IUE made against the UE was that, because of the weakened position of the UE, the UE basically had to accept anything that Gen--General Electric and Westinghouse would offer, as opposed to ...

N. I read that in ?? part in this book.