

Interview With Nathan Spero

The 1950s: 4 The Battle with The IUE Pt. 2

J. Um-hum. What Ronald Schetz follows that observation up by saying that it seems unfair, in the face of the militancy of the 1955 strike.

N. Well ...

J. But what ... what do you have to say about the ... the bargaining at this ... at this point?

N. Of course, there was no question that ... that we were split when the Company had its own way.

J. Um-hum.

N. But these people who ... who write ... say ... say what you've said, don't understand is that settlements were higher than they would otherwise have been because the IUE would otherwise have been subject to some greater criticism, especially from us. So that the fact that we were around helped improved the living standards. And secondly, in places where we were effective,--and these people don't say anything at all about it,--is in other important conditions in the contract, as for example, the Management Rights clause. That was a big area of contention between us and the Company. The IUE didn't pay much attention to us. We said that we had to limit Management's rights because, with an unlimited Management Rights clause, they could speed ... speed us up, and reassign people, and make changes that were ... that undermined peoples' conditions of work, in many ways as important or maybe more important than the simple wage increases. It's a matter of ?? function in the shop in a reasonable way. And with a Management's Rights clause that was comprehensive, the Company could do any damn thing it wanted: put up television screens and view you doing your work. They could ??time jobs and make you do twice as much, given certain kinds of Management's Rights clauses. And it's not just what I'm saying. We had a difference with the Company over contract interpretation, and we had finally agreed to arbitration, too. We took it to an arbitrator, they would look at the Management's Rights clause to see whether the Company had a right to do these things.

J. Um-hum.

N. Well, I don't see in any of these writings of how we had to take what they gave us, this distinction between our contract and their son that basis.

J. Yeah. During this period, the electrical ... electrical industry was basically reorganizing itself, according the Schatz, and building smaller plants, moving more toward the mid-west out of the northeast to the south, and reorganizing their management structure. And ...

N. Well, the Architectural Forum about the 'y0s, carried an article on what companies were doing, and they reported that General Electric had decided that it was not going to build large plants in a small town, where that large plant was the major employer, because in case of organization,--you know--the Company was in an inferior position. If you have a large plant, it means you're doing an important part of the product, and if you ... you've got a Union, it could interfere with the Company's operations. In a smaller plant, you have the advantage that there'd be lots of other small plants around and you have a better selection of manpower as well. So from several points of view, General Electric had decided no

longer large plants like Schenectady or Lynn or Pittsfield or even Philadelphia;--that it's approached not necessarily to the mid-west, but to the south, and also to New Hampshire. New Hampshire was a, to this day, a place of low wages. And ...

J. There's also a plant in Burlington, Vermont.

N. Yes. But it used to be a ?? plant. I'm not sure what it's now.

J. Yeah.

N. But it was the Company's policy. They didn't always stick to it.

J. Um-hum.

N. Sometimes, the nature of the product was such that ... that it needed a large plant. So in Louisville, they had this very large plant that made--you know--washing machines and refrigerators, and that sort of stuff. But that was the exception ?? And, as I said, it was a matter of policy, and they were carrying it out. Incidentally, Louisville was set up by taking the refrigerator product from the General Electric plant in Erie, and ... and the Erie plant was left with the building of locomotives. It turned out to be a pretty big product anyway. But around ... after World War II, well, the Louisville plant was built and products were shifted to Louisville. The interesting thing was this. In talking to management,--you know--workers on the production line were paid far lower rates in Louisville than they were in Erie. But machinists and trained people got even higher wages. The Company said, "Well, it's a matter of the labor market. We needed the more skilled people, and we were able to get these people for the lower wages."

J. So the ... the defections of districts started even before the 195--'55 movement and ... But I was interested in hearing what you had to say about 1954 in Schenectady with Leo Janboro. And he wrote a letter to Albert Fitzgerald and accused the Union of not having organized GE plants and not having gotten any substantial gains, and moved into the IUE.

N. Then, remember, Fitz-- ... Well, you wouldn't remember. But we had someone called Ruth Young, who was the Secretary/Treasurer of our UE District 4, New York and New Jersey. Jim McLeesh was the President. And she's a very capable woman.

J. Um-hum.

N. And government and non-profit organizations used her on how to speak about women and women's rights, and very capable. She came from a ?? family.

J. In 1953, when the Union had its big Women's Conference, did she participate in that?

N. Sure.

J. Yeah.

N. That was the second or third Women's Conference we had. But then, she met Leo Janbehol. Apparently ... I don't know the background of that, but they obviously fell in love. And at that same time, McCarthy hearings were going on,

J. And he was subpoenaed.

N. going from plant to plant, and people who refused to testify were being fired by the Company. Cordner,--Cordner Lock,-Cordner had set up this program of if you refused to testify, you're not patriotic.

J. Um-hum.

N. That's a reason for getting rid of you.

J. President of GE.

N. President of GE. And apparently, there was some sort of agreement worked out whereby Jandreau would not be called upon to testify, or if he testified, he name names, because he was not disciplined in any way. And he continued to be the President of the Local. At the same time, Ruth Young left the District, and they set up housekeeping together. ?? her family thought it was tragic that she did that.

J. Yeah. Well

N. She was married to somebody called Shavy Shavelson. What's his first name?--but we called him Shavy, very nice guy,--a progressive guy. She left him.

J. Um-hum.

N. But he later went to California and got a job as a long shoreman and, at least economically, he made out okay.

J. Um-hum. So in 1955, there was ... there was a decision about ... with the CP wanting to ... the trade Union Director wanting the Unions to ... feeling that the left labor Unions were too weak. They should join the mainstream. And there was a debate about that, and there was a split with four Districts leaving the UE. Was there a debate within the Union leadership about that whole question?

N. Sure there was. There was a debate. There were discussions at Board meetings, at the General Executive Board meeting,--a discussion in the various Districts. And I'm trying to think of a guy named Barry something or other,--I'll add it later on,--who was actively campaigning to have District 4,--he was on our National staff,--to have District 4 join the mainstream. Archie Cole was one of these people who campaigned to have District 4 join the mainstream. There were debates. And one of the dreadful things about the Party, at that time, was this. Under a su-- ... Under the Communist Control Act, where Party members were being tried and sent to jail because they ?? the Soviet language,--the Judge's name will come to me,--there was a great fear among Party members in the Union, and they were looking for safety. The Party had no national control any more because many of its people went to mail and others went underground, and they had FBI agents in it. You didn't have a monolithic Party. And they had no real control over the Union. And what happened was that, like in District 4, they decided to join the IUE. In District 9, in the Michigan area, Locals joined the UAW. Some of our Sylvania Locals are part of General Telephone and Electronic now;-join the Machinists.

J. Um-hum.

N. And this was all because of the general agitation of the Party that you had to join the mainstream. And so, nothing really was worked out, just groups just broke away. And the tragedy was that, when they joined the mainstream, instead of influencing policies in the mainstream, they were influenced by the ...

J. Or cast aside.

N. Or some of them ... Archie Cole, I think, was fired after a while. Ben Riscan, who had joined the Machinists, lost his job after a while. And then you had, I think, the Senate Internal Subversive Activists Committee

J. Um-hum.

N. held hearings with these ... some of these people. And what they did, some ?? ardent UE members, was say "We will testify. Today, we are not coming as Party members. But we refuse to answer questions about the past." So it sounded as though the ... our organization was a Communist ... was Communist.

J. Yeah.

N. And ... But, as I say, many of them did not hang around very long. They were fired after a while. Archie Cole was one of them, and he was heartsick over it. He grew up as a Union member... a Union functionary. And eventually he got back. And as you know, ?? became Director of Organization under Bywater, presently...

J. Um-hum.

N. presently the President of the IUE.

J. Yeah. So the UE lost fifty thousand members and ...

N. That's how Matt listed it.

J. About thirty staff members? Yeah, those are Mathis figures.

N. I'll tell you, the membership figures were terribly inflated.

J. I think ??-you know?

N. Even Troy ... Even Troy,--you know,--who ??

J. That's Leo Troy from Rutgers.

N. Leo Troy ... He was the ... He had the slowest ... lowest estimates, but I think he over--also over-estimated.

J. I've read that. I've read that history.

N. I think I told you about the ... the *U.S. News And World Report* carrying the story about our membership, how large it was,--So Maphlus called up and said, "That was a very air figure although discretion have you, to terribly underestimate it." So they said, "Mr. Maphlus, that was the figure you gave us a few ... a few months ago."

J. That's funny. Well, I have her the membership figures, also probably from Paplus: 1967, 79000or 71000, and by 1960, reached the bottom figure that they reported: 580000. And then it started to grow.

N. Probably ??

J. Yeah.

N. I'll tell you, we had to submit figures to the Department Of Labor. At that time, it published this directory of International Trade Unions. Later on, the ... the ... the organization in Washington that puts out The Services ... B services ...

J. Oh, yeah, BNA.

N. Bureau Of National ... Later on, it took that over. So I had to supply the figures. And I was very ... I just didn't like what I was doing. So I worked out a strategy for that. They said, "We've added up ..."--The Bureau Of Labor Statistics, Department Of Labor said, "We've added up the contracts you have on file,"--you know. They have this

J. Um-hum.

N. system of contacts on file at the Department Of Labor, and you can call up and get a copy sent to you of contracts throughout the country. "We've added up your major contracts. You don't come anywhere close to it." So I said, "Well, that might be so, but we have thousands and thousands of members who are members of the UE who working IUE shops and we include those in our membership." So ... So they had nothing to say, especially since many of the AF of L/CIO Unions padded their membership as well.

J. Well, as we move to the end of talking about the '60s, I'm ... I want to ask you about the impact of the '60s on individuals that you were close to, and ... and the impact on yourself, from a personal point of view.

N. Well, one of the things is that, in the '50s, the figures you just read show declining UE membership, and our wages were never too high. So I think, for that ten year period, we never got an increase and we worked ... What did you say? We're not large enough to sustain an adequate standard of living. The Union always had this policy,--and it's in the Constitution,--that its members would not get more than the most skilled members in the industry got. We couldn't get any more than that.

J. Um-hum.

N. And they usually got much less. So our wives had to go to work. My daughter became ill when Cindy went back to work. Couldn't exist on the UE salary. So that was an impact on us as staff members. But the people that we knew, Charley Nelson and ... in Erie,--he was President of the Local,--a wonderful guy,--he lost his job because of his refusal to testify.

J. Out of principle?

N. On principle.

J. And the Union challenged that ?? policy and had to withdraw it when he died of cancer,

N. Yes. So ...

J. very young, twenty-two years old.

N. He was a young ... handsome, young man. His brother, however, continues to be active in the Erie plant, so we ran into him ... In Philadelphia, Local 155, Abe Davis was the Business Agent in the tool and dye shops,--a very nice, capable guy;--I think openly a Communist, till in one of his shops, one of the trusted people in the shop turned out to be a stool pigeon for the FBI. And his wife just couldn't take it. She separated from him. Here she thought she was living with a wonderful person ... had the same kind of politics as he had ... she had, he turned out to be a stool pigeon. So you had cases of that sort. And some of our organizers lost their jobs, and because they were good organizers, were able to do quite well in other fields. One of them, in Pittsburgh, worked out an insurance plan that he was able to sell around the country which made him quite wealthy. So you had this mixture. Some organizers just had hard times. Walter Barry is the name of the man I was talking about in District 4 who campaigned to have the District join the IUE. He himself became the vendor of cracked Eggs.

J. Oh.

N. He and Archie, as a matter of fact. They buy these eggs that farmers couldn't sell because of some crack, and they'd sell them to bakeries.

J. Um-hum.

N. They were not ... They were okay,--I mean,--but they were reduced to stuff of that sort. It's a funny thing. Walter Barry had a son who later became developers of housing in Hackensack and became very wealthy;--sort of split away from Communist activities. But he ... he campaigned, as a Party official, for that. But some Party officials disavowed that kind of approach. And as I said, District 11 in Chicago, Gas Bay in California, the Local stayed. In the Cleveland area with Marie and Fred Howgue,--you might have read about them,--

J. Um-hum.

N. the District stayed. In Pittsburgh, despite our losses of 601, we had a big Westinghouse air brake plant, and that stayed.

J. Um-hum. Well, Schatz ends his book on the Electrical Workers in the '50s by saying that "characterizing the labor movement, at this point, as ..." and ?? continues, but "ideologically colorless," and that a once powerful, militant active movement had existed for a while, and Management, together with the National Association Of Manufacturers and the government, and the cooperation of the labor movement, turned that around.

N. That's true. Well, it was more than that. The ... The Union wasn't really colorless, but by virtue of the policies they adopted,--seeing things from the point of view of the companies,--they were the precursors of the disintegration of the trade Union movement that ... Not only were Communists kicked out, but militant trade Unionists who might disagree with the policies of the Trade Union leaders were also kicked out. Reby, for example, of the Textile Workers, was known for getting rid of militants, so that, as I say, it wasn't just colorless, it was--you could almost call it anti-working class. One of the Presidents of the UAW,--and I can't think of his name; he's still around and teaches at Wayne,--

J. Victor Ruther? No.

N. Well, Victor Ruther ...

J. Didn't ...

N. But this was somebody else. Victor Ruther never became ... got to be President,

J. Right.

N. ...but Victor Ruther sort of began to challenged the trade Union leadership, as you know. He spoke at one of our meetings and he admitted as much;--that "when we got rid of people like you, we got rid of the fighting spirit of the trade Union movement and we ... we laid the way for the companies to move in and have its ... have their way."

J. The UE prided itself on being democratic. Would you say that, in general, it was a democratic Union? Or is that ...

N. It was much more democratic than other Unions. The National Officers paid attention to Locals and their problems. Our Conventions consisted of elected representatives of the various Locals. Only a small percentage of delegates to our National Conventions were organizers. Most of them were rank and filers.

J. Um-hum.

N. It was easy to get the ear ... the ear of our Presidents ... of our officers. The staff could drop in and talk to them at any time. There was never any problem with that, and they usually paid attention to the gripes of the people in the field. Nobody ever said that we tolerated racketeers or mobsters. That was one criticism that nobody ever made of us because we didn't. And we had effective controls of the finances. Every once in a while, some Financial Secretary would use money that wasn't his, and we kept in touch with the Locals and prevented that from happening. But there was this criticism that I would make. We elected three officers, and when one of them would retire, he would want to replace himself with somebody from the Local that ... from one of the Locals that he could control. In other words, they didn't look for the best people. They looked for people that they could be friendly with and control.

J. Um-hum.

N. So Red Block,--Borus Block,--who's designated as Secretary-Treasurer when James Manlus ... to take his place. Manlus was retiring.

J. Um-hum.

N. Borus Block was a hell of an individual. He was a liar, a manipulator ... but he was friendly to Naplus. Unfortunately, Matlus died at the Convention that Morus Block was

J. Installed.

N. elected. He could never have been elected if Maplus had died six months earlier?? Actually, when Maplus designated Borus Block as his successor, FitzGerald cleaned out his office and went back to ??

J. Wow! What year was that about?

N. I'm not sure. We could find that out by looking through the ??

J. Well, it wasn't ...

N. I remember Marie Madison died. See,--Julius started in 1962, and that was ??, I guess. And ... and I remember it was just a bluff because then Fitz came back.

J. (laughs)

N. Unfortunately, some of us were saddled with MacGluck.

J. Okay. Well, next time we'll ...

N. That's not the best President we ??

J. Well, next time, we'll talk about the '60s and the resurgence of political activity with the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. And perhaps you'll want to say something about the '60s and the civil rights movement in the UE.

N. Well, let's ... You know,--there's Korea

J. Right.

N. happened in the early '50s.

J. ?? Right. Yes.

N. And we didn't take a National position on it, but some of our District Presidents did. Manny DaMayo was ?? And in addition to everything else, the orgy of ?? that Korea engendered must be added to the other things I mentioned earlier ...

J. Yeah, sure. America's fighting troops and ...

N. Let's see. What else would have happened in the '50s that ...

J. Well, there ... there was a civil rights movement in the sense of--you know--Brown vs. Board Of Education, 1954, and sit-ins, and the Little Rock and Eisenhower ??

N. Well, we did ... One of the big campaigns we had,--and I think it was in the '50s,--was this. General Electric ... Westinghouse was,--especially Westinghouse,--was backward in hiring black workers. So we carried on a campaign to embarrass the company into to doing it. And we got Jackie Robinson,--who, by that time, had retired, I think was working for Choc Full Of Nuts

J. Um.

N. to write a letter to us in support of our campaign, and a letter to, I guess it was ??, who was President at the time of Westinghouse Company. Another thing ... Another aspect of civil rights was this. I think I had spoken about the War Labor Board decision that found that GE and Westinghouse were guilty of exploiting their women. And in the negotiations that followed in the '50s, we always made that an issue. And we did, from time to time, negotiate a special fund, like five cents per person, to go to eliminating inequalities in ??. That's another place where the IUE was very weak.