

Interview with a Veteran Communist

Much of the history of workers' struggles of the 1930's, including active organizing by the Communist Party U.S.A. of that time, provides valuable lessons for the struggle today. The following text is excerpted from an interview with a supporter of the CPUSA/ML who lived through this period.

Question: The 1930's marked the beginning of the most tumultuous labor history of California with San Francisco being the focal point. How did this begin?

Answer: My recollections begin with the 1934 strike of 40,000 maritime workers on the San Francisco waterfront on May 9th. This strike produced improved working conditions and two working class martyrs — Howard Sperry and Nick Bordoise, shot down by police bullets on July 5, 1934, and commemorated on July 9, 1934 when 40,000 men, women and children paraded up Market Street in the most dramatic demonstration in San Francisco labor history.

The answer of organized labor to this attack on its members was a general strike in support of maritime brothers. Not a wheel moved in San Francisco. Two weeks later the maritime unions returned to work. Scab halls were discontinued and negotiations started that brought increased wages, shorter hours and a hiring hall system.

Q: What was the major lesson of this struggle?

A: The separate unions of sailors, firemen, cooks, engineers, radio operators, masters and mates, longshoremen, machinists, boiler-makers, fishermen, ship builders and others in the maritime transportation industry had to act together in order to win decent wages and working conditions. Their slogan was "An injury to one is an injury to all."

So, in April, 1935, the unions combined to form the Maritime Federation of the Pacific, following lines of genuine democracy. In the Federation were 13 major unions on a coastwide basis and many smaller ones — more than 40,000 militant men in all.

Q: How did the shipping monopolies react?

A: On April 14, 1936, the maritime unions were locked out by an ultimatum from the Waterfront Employers Association addressed to the International Longshoremen's Association Local 36-79 which read: "You are advised that all relations with your unions have been suspended and will not be resumed." This ultimatum was an attempt to create chaos and eliminate union hiring halls. This attempt failed after a ten-day deadlock. The coastwide marine agreement expired in September, 1936 and on October 29, 1936, at midnight, a strike was called.



Longshoremen battle San Francisco Cops, July 15, 1934

"The future must be built on the past."

Ships of all classes, worth millions of dollars, lay idle alongside piers and rode at anchor in San Francisco harbor. Represented among the 237 strike-bound vessels in Pacific Coast and Hawaiian ports were flags of 12 nations — the U.S., Canada, Denmark, Holland, France, Greece, Great Britain, Mexico, Sweden, Japan, Norway and Panama. On the Eastern and Gulf ports similar conditions prevailed. Among the ships lying at anchor were three of the Dollar Steamship Company's passenger liners. The company owed the U.S. government more than \$14,000,000 for ships purchased by them far below construction cost. They were one of the "Big Three" that not only provoked but prolonged the strike.

"Unity of all crafts and all coasts" was the goal of all maritime workers, East and West. It was realized that this goal could only be achieved by rank-and-file-controlled unions joined together in a National Maritime Federation that could encompass the entire industry. This goal was realized and after 99 days of bitter, relentless tirade against the membership and its leaders by the ship owners and the intervention of the National Guard, the Maritime Federation of the Pacific was born on February 4, 1937.

Q: What role did the old Communist Party play in the maritime struggle?

A: There can be no doubt that this victory could not have been won without the major involvement and support of the Communist Party, whose membership was widely represented in the rank and file and in leadership of the various unions represented by the Maritime Federation. The Communist Party also participated in the organization of the many

auxiliaries which furnished food to the strikers, relief to strikers' families and financial assistance to the Joint Strike Committee.

Q: What other labor struggles were there during the 1930's?

A: Prior to 1929 many attempts had been made to organize farm and cannery labor without success. In 1931 the Communist Party organized the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union. Under the leadership of this organization, in 1933 strikes of pea pickers in the De Coto-Hayward section occurred, cherry pickers at Mountain View and Sunnyvale, and in the Santa Clara Valley. This new militancy of farm workers brought forth violent reactions from the growers in the form of National Guard units, special deputies, State Highway police and guards. As related above, the unions in San Francisco called a general strike on July 19, 1934, which was broken by the intervention of the National Guard.

The post-World War I inflation had resulted in a marked expansion of California agriculture. This expansion resulted in the establishment of such monopolies as the Sun-Maid Raisin Growers Association which established control over the entire industry with control of wage scales through the operation of central labor agencies. The post-World War I decade saw the introduction of new crops in California such as sugar beets but particularly cotton in the decade from 1920 to 1930. Between 1935 and 1937, cotton acreage increased from 400,000 acres to 600,000. The increase in cotton acreage naturally increased the demand for transient labor. For example,

30,000 workers were required to harvest the 1936 crop, but by 1937, this number had increased to 50,000. Those who were able to obtain work made from 75 cents to \$1.15 a day. Family earnings in some cases were as low as \$3.00 a week in 1937. The family often had to camp along the roadside and live in tents.

Q: It is 46 years later now. How do you see the course of class struggle for U.S. workers in the future?

A: The future must build itself upon the past. Workers must learn from their predecessors.

The present recession is not of the same severity as that of 1929 to 1934, but economic and political attacks are on the rise. Workers today must fight to hold on to past victories. Plant closings, inflation, unemployment are all increasing. There is still much oppression and exploitation of U.S. workers. This is inherent in the capitalist system.

The fight for holding on to past reforms and new reforms, the fight for a better standard of living, the fight against the divide and rule tactics of the police and groups like the KKK, the fight against the current mobilization for imperialist war and fascism, all must be heightened and linked together.

All these struggles must also be clearly linked to the only logical settlement which will offer a final solution to the workers in the fields and factories — when workers themselves control the fields and factories directly. This means clearly linking struggles now to socialist revolution and the building of socialism leading to communism. ■

No End to the Economic Crisis

The same capitalist mouthpieces, the press, the TV and so on, that spend months prior to elections trying to instill hope and confidence in the capitalist system, find full-time employment during capitalism's economic crisis, predicting that its end is "just around the corner".

These fortune-tellers who try to convince the millions of unemployed and laid off, the millions whose savings and paychecks have been ravaged by inflation, swung fully into action last month predicting that the economic crisis of 1980 was over. They cited figure after figure. A rise in auto production, a rise in steel production, a rise in the Gross National Product, a rise in employment. But while auto production has risen, auto sales for September were lower than for August, boding a new bout with overproduction. This week, Chrysler announced it will be closing six more plants. The rise in the GNP was a mere 1% if figured annually, while the capitalists expect 3% in their "good" years. And while the unemployment rolls may have shrunk, because benefits have begun to run out for many laid-off workers, the shift from 7.6% to 7.5% unemployment is hardly Recovery.

One of the more curious signs of that tall, dark stranger, Prosperity, came from the Bu-

reau of Labor Statistics. As vindication of President Carter's murderous plan of using unemployment to slow inflation, the Bureau announced that the price index actually fell in the last two months! But on closer investigation, it was discovered that for the first time in history the Bureau figured in price rebates and special sales of autos, thus artificially lowering their price, lowering the price index for the period and creating an illusion of "recovery". When the increased price of the 1981 models is figured in at the next reporting, the price index (inflation) will surge forward again... but hopefully for Carter, after November 4th.

The unused capacity of the plants, the still slipping output of capital goods, the lines at the unemployment office are better indications that there is yet no recovery. The economic crisis of '80 will also be the crisis of '81. While it can be expected that the economy will drag along at this listless pace for some time, some figures moving up and some moving down, the winter slump in construction and other industries and the once-again-soaring interest rates, may bring the crisis to new lows in '81.

But the voice of doom is no more productive than the voice of rosy predictions for the future. What is important is a voice that can bring understanding of

the capitalist crisis. Understanding that because of its inner logic the capitalist system will suffer these crises over and over again. Just as we have seen them three times in the seventies, the crises are coming more and more frequently, each one worse than the one before. And in each crisis while the mouthpieces of capitalism are predicting "limited suffering", the capitalist class will be working overtime to make sure that the burden of the crisis falls on us, the working class, and not on them.

This understanding is important because it lays out the tasks of the working class movement. In the short run we have the task of defending our standard of living against the attacks of the capitalist class, against their attempts to make us suffer for their crisis. In the longer run we have the task of replacing the capitalist system with a socialist system which does not have that inner logic of overproduction, economic crisis and exploitation of the working people. To accomplish both of these tasks we have to pursue the independent political interests of the working class to build independent revolutionary workers' organizations and to throw aside the rosy predictions and outright lies of those Wall Street and Madison Avenue hucksters who want to sell confidence in the capitalist political and economic system. ■

Defend Our Living Standards!

Fight for Full Democratic Rights!

No to Imperialist War and Fascism!

NO VOTE NOV. 4

Socialist Revolution Is the Only Road Out of the Crisis!

In November 1979, the Communist Party U.S.A./Marxist-Leninist issued a call for a NO VOTE ON NOVEMBER 4th! The aim is to organize and mobilize the working people to boycott all the imperialist and revisionist candidates, to give U.S. imperialism a vote of no confidence, and strike a blow at sham democracy.

The swelling popular sentiment against the bourgeois candidates must be directed not just toward a rejection of imperialist politicians, but against U.S. imperialism itself. Whether Carter or Reagan, Anderson or Commoner, Hall or Pulley — all stand for the continuation of U.S. imperialism and reaction.