

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Steel Industry Labor and Management

Mahoning Valley Labor

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DAN THOMAS

Interviewed

by

Emmett C. Shaffer

on

August 1, 1974

DAN THOMAS

Mr. Dan Thomas, a local labor leader, was born on June 18, 1915. He attended Rayen High School until his sophomore year. Mr. Thomas began his career in the labor movement in 1936, while working in the mason department of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company. Angered by the bad working conditions and the patronizing supervisors, Mr. Thomas signed up with the new local union. Becoming more imbued with labor activities, he began organizing and recruiting other steelworkers into the new union. During the Little Steel Strike of 1937, he was named picket captain of the main gate at the Brier Hill plant of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company. Later, he was named chairman of the grievance committee for Lodge [local] 1462.

From 1943 to 1945 Mr. Thomas served in the United States Army and upon his release, met with the great labor leader Philip Murray in Washington, D.C. Much impressed with Murray and his faith revitalized in the hopes of securing better conditions and more dignity for the steelworkers, Mr. Thomas returned to Youngstown. Soon afterward, he was elected president of the local union of the Brier Hill plant of the Sheet and Tube Company, a position he was to hold until February 20, 1960.

While he served as president of the local union, Mr. Thomas helped to eradicate racial discrimination in the Brier Hill plant by insisting upon job equality and common washrooms for both blacks and whites.

On August 1, 1974, Mr. Thomas was named Assistant Director of District 26 CIO. In honor of his distinguished career in labor, he was given the Italian Labor Award at the Trade Fair in Milan, Italy.

Today Mr. Thomas and his wife, Bessie, reside at 475 Crandall Avenue, in Youngstown, Ohio.

Silvia Pallotta
June 17, 1977

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INTERVIEWEE: DAN THOMAS

INTERVIEWER: Emmett C. Shaffer

SUBJECT: Mahoning Valley Labor

DATE: August 1, 1974

S: This is an interview with Mr. Danny Thomas, on August 1, 1974, conducted by Emmett C. Shaffer, at Mr. Thomas' office, at 10:00 a.m. The subject is labor relations in the steel industry during the 1930's.

S: Mr. Thomas, how did you get started in the labor movement?

T: I got started in the labor movement back in 1936. While I was an employee at the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company, I worked in the mason department. I was a helper and a slag digger, cleaning the slag out of the furnaces and rebuilding furnaces of all nature, blast furnaces and open hearths and whatever, anything that had to do with the brick of any heating furnaces. As a youngster, I worked alongside of old timers and we worked like, in those days, what we were referred to, jackasses. We had nothing to protect us, we were nothing but a number. We weren't even addressed by our full name or our first name; we were called either "You dago" or "You Hunkie" or "You black so and so". My check number was 11940 and they used to refer to me, "Check Number 11940" or "You Italian so and so, we want this done or that done." You were at the mercy, at the time, of the supervision of the plant.

I knew, at that time, as a youngster, that there had to be something done, that we just couldn't have

stuff like this prevail; I was seeking an organization. I ran across, at the time, a young coal miner who was organizing. He came in from Charleroi, Pennsylvania, Hugh Carsella, who is now our district director in District Seven, the United Steelworkers of America. Hugh signed me up under the old hole in the wall, the old trestle, when you entered into the old entrance going into the Brier Hill plant, back early in 1936. I believe I was the seventh man that he had recruited and from there, we started organizing and signing up people on cards to join the union.

What enthused me more was the first time I had the opportunity to meet and hear Philip Murray, who was our forefather and our first president of the United Steelworkers of America. I had the opportunity of meeting him and talking to him personally. I knew, at that time, that we were on the right track for a trade union and that we had a proper teacher. He had a charisma about him that drew you to him. He had an understanding of the problems of the human being and he sort of became an idol. I believe I loved him as second to my father, and I have followed him and his teachings and I've tried to imbed them in my mind of what the trade union was all about.

Then came along the infamous Little Steel strike. Phil Murray tried to talk us out of it at the old central auditorium in Youngstown, Ohio. He told us that we weren't ready, but being as we were green in those days, and we were seeking organization, we had him call the steel strike. That started a period of misery.

Out of the Little Steel strike, out of the teachings that I had picked up in the plants, and working with older people who had more years of service and who had endured a lot more ill treatment than I did, this imbedded into me that something had to be done. A union had to be built for our own preservation, not because we needed better wages, but because we needed better conditions and respect. We were looking for dignity. This is why I, personally, got interested in the labor movement, for the self-preservation and dignity of the man, the working conditions in the plant, and the ill treatment

S: What offices have you held in the labor movement?

T: In those days when I was first signed up, we had what we called "lodges"; instead of Local Union 1462, we were considered "Lodge 1462." From the year of 1936, I was the first chairman of the committee to handle the grievances in our plant and in our Lodge 1462 at that time. Later, after the convention in 1942, we became Local Union 1462.

I was the chairman of the grievance committee from the first date that we had put our lodge together, which was in the year of 1936. From there, I became the vice-president of Local Union 1462 in the early part of 1940. Jerry Beck was my president, and I served as his vice-president for six years, until I was inducted into the service in 1945. When I returned from the service in 1946, I took over the helm of the local union. The local union, during that interim, was put under an administrator. They had a lot of turmoil during the war at the plant gates and Phil Murray was forced to name an administrator. When I came back, I took over the helm of the local union. I think it should be explained how this came about.

I stopped in Washington and had a discussion with Mr. Murray. I told him that I was on my way out of the service and I was heading home, but I was heavy of heart because my local union was under an administrator. He promised me that by the time I got home, the local union would receive orders that they could elect their own officers.

Actually, when I got off the train in the city of Youngstown and before I even went home, I went up to the local union where the nominations were [held], and as I walked into the hall, I was nominated as president. I had no opposition and I held that office until the day that I went on the staff on February 2, 1960. I was the chairman of the local union in the Brier Hill plant of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company.

S: What caused the turmoil at the Brier Hill steel plant during the war that made them appoint an administrator?

T: I was told that the company made a change in the schedule and in the assignment as scheduled in the blooming mill. The employees were a very militant group and they tried to get it corrected through

their officials, but the company was adamant and it brought about a work stoppage. Out of this turmoil came the suspension of some officers and an arbitration case that was held in Youngstown.

S: Did the national union put the local union under an administrator?

T: Yes. In order for the continuity of the contract and the benefits of the employees to continue, the international union president, after a hearing and commissions are set up, has the right to put a local union under an administrator.

S: Was it to the benefit of the workers to appoint an administrator over their own union?

T: I believe it was at that time

S: Why do you say that?

T: Because of the conditions that existed at the time and because there was no way that the problem could be resolved, the people had taken the action in their own hands. There were picket lines in front of the gate, which was impeding production, and there was a war on.

S: Was there any violence?

T: No, there was no violence.

S: Who were some of the early labor leaders that worked with you in organizing the steel plants?

T: We had Scotty Fagan, who had worked at the Republic; Archie Casanta, who was one of our staff representatives and is retired now; Jerry Carl E. Beck, Jim Mulidore, Rocco Greco, and Fred Lamb. We had Fred Dillard, who was my vice-president, chairman of my blast furnace division, and a militant black leader. Joseph Winchester, another black gentleman, was one of my first teachers of trade unionism. Gene Conley, who ran the charging machine in the open hearth, was one of our early presidents. We had Dominic Scarpine, Pier Mastropetro, who was our first local union president under the old Lodge 1462; and Pat Meley, who at that time, was our secretary-treasurer in the early days.

I was just fortunate enough to have worked among some of the outstanding people that helped build this union. Last but not least, and not to be forgotten, was John Mayo, who was the regional director of what they referred to as the Northeastern Division.

At that time, we were in regions instead of districts. John Mayo was assigned here by John L. Lewis and Philip Murray to further the organization of the trade union movement of the steelworkers in this valley. John was one of the first outstanding teachers of the trade union movement. He guided us to what we are today, one of the most powerful districts in the Steelworkers Union, District 26.

S: Was there any discrimination in the mills by the management over particular ethnic groups, possibly blacks?

T: Yes, there was. Blacks were only hired in the coke plants and for some jobs in the blast furnace. Blacks were hardly ever hired in any division where they could upgrade themselves. When they were hired in the mason department, they were hired as helpers and slag diggers, along with Italians and Slovaks. This was one of the issues over which I became a trade unionist. I realized that the time had come for this discrimination to cease. This is not too well known because history and records were not kept. We pride ourselves in Brier Hill that we were the first group, under my leadership as president and as chairman of the grievance committee, to ever penetrate the bricklayers' trade, where blacks were put on as apprentices and improvers and became bricklayers in the steel plants in this area. We were the first to do it and force it on the company.

Back in the early days, the blacks had separate washrooms. I'm not talking about integration or segregation when people didn't know how to spell the words, but they were separated. They had one side for the whites and one side for the blacks for changing clothes, even to the point that the bathrooms were separated along with the bathing house and the shower room.

We talked earnestly with the company to get this resolved and make them into one washroom in the different sections in the plant. They refused. I'm talking about the early 1940's

As chairman of the local union, along with Winchester and a few other loyal stewards and representatives, we picked up sledge hammers and we smashed down the walls that made the separation between the blacks and the whites and dared the company to fire us. The company, in return, promised us that we wouldn't have to do it, that they'd have the labor gang go out and do it and so it came about that separation and segregation was destroyed in the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company. Out of this came the pattern that followed throughout the other portions of the Sheet and Tube along with the other companies in the valley.

The first time that a black ever appeared on an open hearth floor, we forced the company to make him a third helper. You have to remember that back in those days, a black was not permitted to pick up a shovel on an open hearth floor. We forced the company that the black had the right to bid on the job.

Myself, and brother Dillard, God bless him, he's dead now, we tutored him to the position that he went on that floor and if he had to drop dead in his tracks that he would stay and swing that shovel and slag in the furnaces and keep up with the squirrel fashion of the other slagers to the point that he would be respected. He was making the first inroad for any black person that was ever going to be close to an open hearth furnace so that he could promote himself up. The day that they put him on the furnace, the open hearth people and the supervisor all quit working and went into the washroom. It was brought to my attention.

The company said that they had a work stoppage and I immediately appeared on the scene. They were all in the washroom with the pretense that nobody knew what it was all about. At the time, it was suicide to be considered a nigger lover and that's what you were branded in those days. But as the president, and believing that what I was doing was right, I stood up on the platform before the men there and I told the company superintendent to fire every last lying son of a gun in that room and we would replace them. We asked them if they were on strike, or if they were on a work stoppage because another fellow worker was progressing up through the progression line, regardless of his color, nationality, or origin. When they saw that I meant business, they turned

around and reversed their argument and told me that their biggest problem was the incentive system and this was what they were revolting about. We got it straightened out; we would get in their incentive system.

From that day on in the Brier Hill plant and eventually throughout the whole Sheet and Tube, we prided ourselves in being the pioneers of breaking the discrimination barrier lines into the open hearth. Our people could progress, according to their seniority and their ability to do the job, to the top paying jobs in the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company, regardless of whom they may be.

S: What year did you finally end segregation in the Briar Hill steel plant?

T: Well, I don't know if we ended it to the position that it was ended, but it was understood and we broke up the barrier lines. This would be in the latter part or the middle part of the 1940's, and strongly in the early part of the 1950's.

S: Was there any segregation or discrimination within the union ranks themselves?

T: In the early days, there possibly was. But we were the first local union in the area, to my recollection, to have the first black officer who was on our charter as an officer. One of the first recording secretaries of our local was a gentleman named Ted Wallace, who worked in the mason department as a helper alongside me, and who later became a supervisor of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company. Incidentally, Ted Wallace was the first black man to become a supervisor in the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company, to my recollection. This came about because we had put a resolution on the floor of the local union condemning the Sheet and Tube Company and its policies. The proof of the pudding was that no black man was ever a supervisor there. From that day on, Ted Wallace was offered the job as a supervisor and many more followed, out of the coke plant, blast furnaces, and what have you, throughout the plant.

S: Will you discuss the Little Steel strike of 1937?

T: You've got to realize that I was just a youngster, At the time, I was about twenty-one or twenty-two years old. I had come from a trade-union family. My dad had worked on the railroad and he had lost out in the big strike that they had on the railroad about 1919, but I believed in what I was doing. I was selected or elected picket captain on the second turn for the Brier Hill Division of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company. I normally had ten to twelve or fifteen people when we had settled down to regular picketing at the main gate in Brier Hill. Prior to this we had masses of them, and up at the Girard gate we always maintained five to ten people on the turn.

We were very vigilant and rugged. We were rough, but our thinking was guided by the old whispering, gray-headed gentleman called Phil Murray and his aide in Youngstown, John L. Mayo, who helped guide us through the strike to a position that taught me a great lesson: You can't win on picket lines when you have violence or when you permit hoodlums and others to penetrate your groups to bring about dissatisfaction. Although the weapon of strike is the greatest weapon I know to man, if it isn't used properly, it can be used against you. This was a great teaching to me.

Then when the governor of Ohio, Governor Davey, entered into the strike, and he sent in the National Guard and they had the reopening of the gates, I was disillusioned. I was heartbroken because I never dreamed that my fellow workers would return back to work. They penetrated it at the time that they thought we lost the strike. We actually did [lose] because they went back to work. Through the ingenuity and the guidance of Phil Murray, David McDonald, John L. Mayo, and men like Van Bitner, international vice-president who became vice-president later, we were guided into a position in the NLRB and the Wagner Act had been passed at the time.

Now the Wagner Act, at that time, was just an act. It hadn't been tested in court and we were all disillusioned. A group of us was blackballed and felt we probably were finished because these are the things that come out of a strike of this nature and because of what had happened in the past. But we have found through the new day of the Wagner Act,

that we had rights and our rights, at the time, were infringed upon by the company. We had hearings and discussions and we entered in filing lawsuits under the Wagner Act against the company. Out of that came a decision of a settlement, out of court, that reinstated us back to our former positions and the jobs and seniority that we were entitled to.

We got back into the plant and from that day on started a rebuilding and I believe the building of what we call the United Steelworkers or what was considered at the time, the Little Steel Strike Group. That had a big thing to do with organizing it because I know I became that much more dedicated and I made it my business to talk to and influence everybody within any hearing that I could get to join the union. My local participated in other places throughout the valley in organizing for the United Steelworkers. In those days, we were the Steelworkers Organizing Committee. We became the United Steelworkers later, under constitutional convention.

I want everybody to know that a steel strike, or any type of strike, is not a picnic. I probably was more fortunate than my father, who was working at the Republic at the time, and other gentlemen who had families. God bless the mine workers for the food lines that they had set up. I would turn my portion down because I was staying at home and my dad was working at the Republic and he was picking up his portion of food there. I didn't receive mine because I would turn it down so somebody else could have it.

As time went on, everybody returned to work. There was a group of us that was blackballed to the point that we couldn't secure any positions or work anywhere. No one would give us a job, credit, or anything. We were just led out to the position that we were lost. I wound up eventually ginny dancing on a railroad in Barberton, Ohio, for the Pennsylvania Railroad. I lasted there for a week or two, until they found out who I was and then I was out of work again.

I just struggled along and being that I was single it wasn't too much of a burden, although [sometimes] it was, and I can visualize what happened to married people. Scotty Fagan, who worked at the Republic, was in a position that he could never pay his rent. Every time that he moved into some place and his rent

was due on the month, we all banded together and moved Scotty again. At one time, I believe we moved him three times in four months because one landlord had already found out he couldn't pay the rent. This was one of the things that we had to go through, but I believe it was well worth it to bring about the birth of the United Steelworkers.

S: Was there any violence at the Brier Hill plant?

T: There was minor violence, but we did not have any mass herding. The sheriff, at that time, Sheriff Elser, and the company started a back-to-work movement that formulated among thugs, those people who had just gotten out of prison and who had records. They penetrated into our lines and they tried to create hysteria and problems. We refused to fall for it and we singled them out many times. Yes, we had some violence in eliminating this type of people from our lines so there wouldn't be any violence on the picket line. No, we didn't get much in the Brier Hill plant.

There was nothing in the Sheet and Tube portion, but there was at the Republic. The night that we were being addressed by Mrs. Jasher, a national committee-woman of the Democratic party, we were standing there and then the Republic police, along with what we used to call Elser's Cowboys, thugs, and the like that were recruited to help break up the strike, opened up with tear gas and brought about a catastrophe in the Republic. Although I was in the vicinity, there are people that worked down there, and I think you'd be better off discussing that with Jerry Beck, Tommy White, and those people because they were right there at the front line.

S: Who were the major adversaries of the strike employed by the company?

T: During the 1937 steel strike, while I was acting as picket on the second turn, a report came in explaining that there were people working up at the scrap pile on the north end of the plant toward the Girard gate. We got in the cars and went up and made a scant review and we saw that there was activity around the scrap piled in that area; there was loaded scrap on cars. As the picket captain, I had a discussion with our pickets. We said we would take a trip through the Erie Railroad property, cross

over it, and go into the plant, and if there was anybody that we knew doing any work there, we'd influence them to quit working and get out of there. And this we did.

When we got in there, there were five individuals working two separate cranes loading scrap. Mind you, this is after the strike had been on for a month or two. We turned around and we got them out of the plant. While we were seeking one more person, the Sheet and Tube police came in, armed, and five of us were held at bay by gun. The rest had gone.

We were taken down into the headquarters of the Brier Hill plant, in front of the superintendent, and we discussed the problem of what had happened. I, acting as a spokesman, explained to him that we had told him that things were being done; they had agreed that we'd have a peaceful strike, but they were undermining it and they wouldn't do anything about it. They worked the ore bridge when we told them not to work it and there were other incidents, and they refused to live up to a peaceful strike. This is the reason we took it into our own hands at the time to put a stop to it. He guaranteed me that this would never happen again, would never be used on our records, that we were still workers of the Sheet and Tube and when it was all over, not to worry about it.

At that time, strikers had massed out at the gate and word got out that the Sheet and Tube was working over some strikers and were beating them up. And workers had come in with pick axes, hoes, and what-have-you from their fields and their homes. There was a howling crowd at the old hole in the wall, but after Mr. Carsella explained everything to everybody there was peacefulness again and we all dispersed back to our homes. These are the kind of incidents that happened during the steel strike.

S: Do you recall who the superintendent was?

T: The open hearth superintendent was Tom Cleary. Turn foreman at the time was a guy named Tom Rearden, who we always referred to as "Peanuts Rearden." He is dead now, but Rearden, the first helper during the 1937 strike, was a member of our union. He was in good standing until he became a turn foreman and went on to supervision later on. He was one of the

pioneers in the open hearth along with Gene Collin and others that helped organize the open hearth in the Brier Hill plant.

S: Was there any communist influence in the steel strike in 1937?

T: I don't believe there was any influence, but there were some communists who I found out later were in the steel strike in 1937. You have to remember that I was a lad of about twenty-one years old and I had been out of school and had participated working in the plant. I always thought, when I was in school, that anybody could become president. I didn't know anything about discrimination until I went into the plant and found out what was going on. I knew nothing about "isms". This is why I say that I've been thankful that I had some super teachers that guided me properly.

In those days it was very easy to get a militant person like myself and have a smart, intelligent communist leader boost him along to the position that he could sway his thinking. In my thoughts, I would do anything to organize and bring about the dignity of the individual because of the treatment that we received in the plants. Yes, I know Gus Hall. Gus Hall organized up through this area. I knew him when I was a youngster. I heard him speak; he never influenced me too much. I never knew at the time I first met him that he was a commie or a member of the Commie party, but I knew him and I knew several others. I was well-schooled, as I told you, by John Mayo, Carsella and others.

I got to understand by talking with Jerry Beck and he handed me different books to read. I began to understand that there are "isms" and were "isms" in this country. I got to the point where I could almost pinpoint, through the years of experience, by a person's discussions and expressions, to what "ism" he belonged. This is an education you learn in the trade union movement.

Gus Hall caused us a lot of turmoil during the little steel strike by bringing about walkouts in other plants that we had organized which had nothing to do with the steel strike and [this] dissolved the relationship that we had in these companies. One of

them was the old Van Huffel Company. We had a good contract in there and a working agreement during that time. Gus Hall pulled them out on strike on sympathy, although it didn't help the cause at all. It wound up that Mr. Van Huffel tore up the contract and from that day on, he said there would never be another agreement there as long as he lived. He made those words stick and finally, years later, we organized them back into the steelworkers. These are some of the things that went about during the days of "isms " Yes, there were some "isms," communism, or whatever you want to call it, back in 1936 and 1937.

- S: In 1937, what was the ratio of union members as opposed to the total employees in the Brier Hill Sheet and Tube plant?
- T: Well, you have to realize we had a voluntary dues-paying plan at the time, a dollar a month. It all depended on the militance of the office. We had to keep following the members around in different beer gardens or other places where they'd go for a sandwich or a drink to make sure that they had their dues paid, especially on payday. According to the militancy of the officers and the people who had some reflection of how it is to build an organization --and it takes finances--this told you how great your membership was.
- I don't mind telling you it was at a very low ebb many times because there wasn't any consistency in dues paying. It was just, well, as fast as you caught them, you had to make them pay their dues. People would only make sure that their dues were paid when they had the possibility of a little trouble with the company, but when they were relieved of any problem, they forgot their dues. Many times we were at fifty percent, sometimes at twenty-five percent of the people. We had at Brier Hill in those days, a potential membership of thirty-one hundred people or better. If we ever got a thousand dollars a month dues for a thousand members, we thought that was almost a hundred percent.
- S: Who were the groups or the individuals in Youngstown that were against the strike?
- T: Well, they were numerous. We found ourselves in many situations where we thought we had friends, and

we found we had enemies. You have to remember that the steel companies have always been the dominant factor in this valley. They were what was called the "power structure." Whatever they said, went, even to the point that they controlled the thinking of the churches. I don't mind telling you--it's a matter of history--that all you have to do is go back and pick up The Vindicator. There appeared one time an editorial written by the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic organization of which I've been a part of and was raised in. At that point, I started getting disillusioned that my church was against me. The Vindicator was a powerful newspaper and Maag, the editor, who was a big controlling factor in the thinking of the people in this valley, ran constant stories against us.

We had a sheriff who was a political bigot, who belonged to the powers, although he was a Democrat. He hired thugs and some mobsters as private detectives and sheriffs and sheriff's deputies to come in among us and create problems for us. They imported weapons, bombs, and what-have-you and had them all set through the plants with mounted machine guns, threatening, in case something would happen so that they could have killed thousands of us.

Besides that, we had the chief of police against us. The city prosecutor, R. J. Thomas, Ray Thomas, as he was known, no relation, was the spokesman behind the scenes, setting up the back-to-work [movement] and breaking the strike efforts of the steelworkers. We had a ring of steel that we had to fight and a powerful chain that they had rung around us, but we came out of it and we surmounted to the point that today we're a well-respected organization. I'm proud to be a member of it.

- S: The steel strike was broken in 1937, and you finally received the contract in 1942. Could you discuss the main reason why the companies suddenly decided to negotiate and sign a Maintenance of Agreement contract during those five years?
- T: As I told you, there was an act passed due to the influence of the mine workers under John L. Lewis' leadership and Phil Murray on the President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. This was called the Wagner Act which gave the employees of

this nation a right to belong to a union of their own choice.

In the early days, no one knew what this meant until the Little Steel strike. Then it was tested in court and the Supreme Court ruled that the Wagner Act was constitutional and thereafter began negotiating with the small steel companies agreements of settlement to return back to work and give the rights to the employees. In the year of 1941, the document which gave us our reinstatement was completed and the company agreed to destroy all company union activities and to recognize the Steelworkers Organizing Committee as a bargaining agent. We received our first contract on August 13, 1942, with the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company.

- S: Did Phil Murray's personality influence steel management in assigning a strike? If so, in what way?
- T: Yes, Phil Murray had a charisma about his personality and a belief in what he stood for, that even his enemies admired him. The proof of the pudding was that the United States Steel Company recognized the Steelworkers Organizing Committee as a bargaining agent and they signed an agreement on March 17, 1937, which was an historical agreement. Phil Murray, I believe, had more to do in getting a peaceful settlement with U.S. Steel than any other human being because Ben Feerless, the president of the company at that time, later made many statements saying he admired Phil Murray and his ability and statesmanship. Yes, you have to say that Phil Murray was the father of this organization and he's always been looked upon as our leader and the instrument that helped build it.
- S: Has the steel industry ever tried to control the labor market in the Mahoning Valley?
- T: Yes, the steel industry did try and did control it. You have to go back thirty-some years and check the history of the industry in this valley. You must remember that the Mahoning Valley, what we call the river valley, starts in Pittsburgh and ends up in Gary, Indiana, and Chicago. In this valley lie some of the outstanding skills of the world's workers, semi-skilled workers, skilled workers, and engineers and what have you. Some of the best brains

in the world lie here. Take a look at our Mahoning Valley, where I can speak of and research your history. The steel industry kept other industries from coming into the valley. Other groups that wanted to move into the valley were not too well received. The steel industry controlled the powers at the time of the administrations that were in offices in the city or in the county, and whoever tried to penetrate this valley and participate in the labor market, was given a cold shoulder.

It has been quite some time since this thing has finally been broken and I would say that in the last ten or fifteen years, through the instrument of organized labor, and because of the powers being shifted somewhat, we've penetrated it now. We have what we call diversified industry moving into our valley. This had hurt us for many years, but it's now coming to our benefit.

S: What have been the major accomplishments of the steel labor movement in Youngstown?

T: Well, the labor movement, I have to state to you, gave the working man a place in the sun. It brought about respect and understanding. It gave him a right to discuss and participate in his place of work. Not only did it make him the highest paid skilled and semi-skilled worker in the world, but it changed his whole lifeline and conditions.

If you participated in a steel plant back in the days when we did, you [would have] thought you worked in a mean jungle of animals and wild savages. Today, it has changed because of the participation of the union. The work tables are different. Everything is under consideration a lot different than what it was before. The benefits were given to the children of the workers in the educational system. It changed the political structure in the city of Youngstown and other cities in the valley. At one time, Trumbull County, I recall when I was a youngster, was the hub and the home of the Ku Klux Klan. Organized labor brought about better understanding and broke most of this thinking up and today all types of groups are recognized in politics and what-have-you. This is organized labor and I've been proud to be a part of it.

S: What is your reaction, Mr. Thomas, to the statement that American labor is producing less, resulting in higher prices?

T: I'm not an economist. I'm not swayed by slogans or statements by individuals. I do not think that the statement is fair; I don't believe that it is a true statement. I know, and everybody in this land knows, that organized labor is the highest producing element in the world. All you have to do is judge it against other countries. In its participation in work and where we have organized plants, the quality and quantity of production is increased. Now, if organized labor has been blamed and all of the time becomes the whipping dog because of the cost of living, this is an old trick. The hogs on the top steal everything and then blame the bottom for causing it.

Organized labor or the working man does not set the price. The prices are set by the corporations or by the industries of the companies and their profits are set in such a way that it puts us in a dilemma--trying to catch up all the time. All we keep doing in organized labor, as far as I see it, is constantly trying to reach for the bone that they keep raising higher. The day is going to come when good heads are going to be settling this thing and I don't think that the steel or the labor groups will be recognized as the people it's created. I think the American people are too brilliant and too smart to be kidded by that fact.

S: Danny, what have been the major changes in the procedures of organizing and negotiating in the early days, as opposed to organizing and negotiating today?

T: There has been tremendous change. In the early days, under the old Steelworkers Organizing Committee, when we were organizing as I explained to you at the beginning, in some of these talks, we were crude, rough. All we believed in was social justice and we demanded it one way or the other. We did it by showing our strength and flexing our muscles. We organized ourselves so that we were always ready to bring about a work stoppage if we had to.

As time went on, and the union and the company bargained into agreements, the closer understanding

is becoming between them. No more do the people on one side consider the company [people] with the briefcases as the intelligent and respected people of the community, which is how it used to be. Now the briefcases are on both sides and the people on the labor side in many instances are a lot brighter and smarter, economically-wise and negotiation-wise, and in understanding.

Do you realize that if I start into a contract negotiations today with a company, all I have to do is call or write a letter to the research department of the United Steelworkers of America in Pittsburgh, and I will receive a concise and complete summation of that company: its profits, what it's worth, how it's guided, and where it's heading. I will know more about that company than the people that are sitting across from me, who are subordinates of the officials of the company, which were sent in to negotiate. Many times I will give them the reports so they'll know what they're talking about because they can't receive it. Once you're put into this category, you understand the problems. You know the financial picture and you'll be able to guide your committee and your membership, which you're privileged to represent, in the understanding of what you can and can't do, what would be good or what would be bad.

What good is it to get a contract and then can't get it administered because the company's out of business. This is why today it's a lot different. We are more on an even keel and as I said, sometimes beyond the knowledge of the people that we're supposed to be combating with on agreements.

S: As a young man, what was your reaction to the depression in 1932?

T: Well, now we're talking about the years gone by; this is 1974. I was what they called a depression baby, young fellow; it was a hardship. Dad was not working, nothing was coming in, but we survived. The little WPA, the little CWA, and what have you [helped]. We moved into the country. We thought possibly, we could toil with the soil and we found that we lost money there. I had to leave school; I couldn't further my education in high school because of the conditions. I went to school up to the second grade

in high school. I did return later to go to Youngstown College to take a couple of courses in economics, through the guidance and help of Dean Smith, wonderful gentleman, who was a good friend of mine.

It was horrible to see people, standing in lines, trying to eke out a little bit of food to take home to their families. I hope that this condition will never again blight our nation, but I'll say one thing for it; it taught us how to unite and help each other. In the days of the depression, it wasn't everybody trying to live like the Jones'. In the days of the depression, all the Jones' were living together. We helped each other. Whoever had something would divide it amongst others in the neighborhood.

If a neighbor was sick, Mom made sure that there was something done for the family or vice versa. There was a good human understanding. Maybe these kinds of catastrophes bring this about, such as the year of the big snow in 1950. But I wouldn't want to wish it on anybody. There were a lot of people and a lot of children deprived of the rightful food in life. I think the answer to that is to take a look at our generation during the depression and then take a look at the generation of my children and grandchildren. There's a vast difference in their knowledge, in their structure, and everything in everyday life. I wouldn't want to bless this on anybody.

S: Do you think the younger generation would accept the depression today?

D: No, I don't think that this country can stand a depression. I don't think that the younger generation, with the knowledge and understanding its members have from their schooling, knows the answers to these things. They know that depressions are man-made by the misguiding of officials in the capacity of high offices. There should never be a depression. There is no call for a depression and if it does come about, I don't think that the next generation will permit them to do to us what they did to us back in the depression of 1932.

They'll never put these kids in the lines to go out and beg money for something to eat. I don't think

this will ever come about. This is why I'm sure that this country of ours has a cushion of something with compensation and what-have-you to get us over the blight years of a recession. No, I've got to answer you, I don't think the young generation would take it.

S: May the Youngstown State University Oral History Program use this recording in their research program?

T: Yes, you can and if the Youngstown State Oral History Program would want some more information, when I have more time I'd be more than willing to grant it, or go down and give it to them formally, in person.

END OF INTERVIEW