

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Steel Industry Labor and Management

Labor and Union Experience

O. H. 8

CARL E. BECK

Interviewed

by

Emmett C. Shaffer

on

May 8, 1974

CARL E. BECK

Carl Edwin Beck (Jerry) was born on July 25, 1903 at Breckenridge, Pennsylvania, the son of Albert E. and Idawreathe Beck. He moved to Youngstown, Ohio in 1903. He graduated from Princeton Junior High School in 1918, whose principal was the venerable H. K. Rayen, known by many generations of city students. Mr. Beck also attended South High School and Boardman High School.

In 1920 he was employed as a dispatcher and locomotive fireman for the Pennsylvania Railroad continuing until 1929. During the winter months Mr. Beck was employed by the Republic Steel Corporation, obtaining regular employment by that company in 1929. During the "Little Steel Strike" of 1937 he served as the picket captain at the Bessemer Plant gate and was subsequently fired for his union activities, but through his personal efforts and the efforts of other "union-minded" men, the Republic Steelworkers successfully organized local 1331 at the plant. Mr. Beck and several other union men were sued by the Republic Steel Corporation for \$7,500,000 for their union activities. The workers obtained judgement and the National Labor Relations Board ordered the company to rehire Mr. Beck and the other union members. He was again fired for his union activities and was employed by the Struthers Furnace Company, working at the old "Anna" furnace in 1938 and subsequently fired for his union affiliations.

In 1939 as war clouds gathered in Europe, Mr. Beck obtained

employment as a stationary engineer with the Brier Hill Division of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company. He became a charter member of Local 1462 at that plant which he helped to organize and served as charter president for four years. He served on the Mahoning County C.I.O. Council from 1943 to 1947. In 1948 Mr. Beck was appointed by Philip Murray as a National Field Representative of the AFL-CIO and assisted in union organizing activities throughout the country. In 1956 Mr. Beck was appointed United Steel Workers Staff Representative of District 7 and 20 of the AFL-CIO. He retired from Brier Hill in 1968 and is currently employed by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees of the AFL-CIO. Mr. Beck has three sons and two daughters, Mrs. Donald Murray and Mrs. Gregory Crays. He also has sixteen grandchildren. He and his wife, Pauline, live at 445 Forest Avenue, Poland, Ohio.

Emmett Shaffer

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S: This is an interview with Carl E. Beck, better known to his friends as Jerry, conducted by Emmett C. Shaffer, on May 8, 1974. The subject is the Depression in Youngstown in 1933 and the labor movement from 1930 to 1938.

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

B: I started working on the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1920, at the age of sixteen. I began as a call boy calling engine crews and moved up to engine dispatcher, dispatching engine crews. From there I moved to locomotive fireman, wherein I joined the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen.

In 1920 we launched an organizing campaign to organize all railroad workers into one industrial union, the United Association of Railroad Employees. This new union was patterned after the United Railroad Workers, originally organized by Eugene V. Debbs. The organizing campaign failed because there were too many Brotherhoods, namely the Brotherhood of Locomotive Enginemen, the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, and the Order of Railroad Conductors. There were approximately thirty-two Brotherhoods organized on a craft basis. Most of these Brotherhoods had insurance policies covering their members

and the workers were reluctant to give up these benefits and join the United Association of Railroad Employees.

Having worked as a call boy for several years, I moved up to engine dispatcher and from there I became a locomotive fireman. I joined the locomotive firemen in 1926. I worked in that capacity on the E and A division of the Pennsylvania Railroad where we were assured of work in the summer months, while the lakes were open and the railroads could ship coal and ore. But when the lakes would freeze up in middle or late November, there would be massive furloughs and the youngest railroaders would be cut off. Each time I got furloughed from the railroad I got a job in the Republic Steel Company, working at similar work in engine rooms and such.

After the stock market crash in October of 1929, I was furloughed from the Pennsylvania Railroad two days before Christmas. Fortunately, on February 1, 1930, I went back to work at Republic Steel, not knowing that the crash of October, 1929, was going to bring about mass unemployment to the nature no one ever dreamed. Consequently, although I had a steady job in the blowing engine room of the Republic Steel Company, I only managed to get forty-four turns for the entire year of 1932. And work did not pick up until after the passage of NRA under Roosevelt.

At this time, however, nationally, there were some fifteen million men without employment. I have seen with my own eyes numerous families moved out of their homes, with their furniture sitting on the streets, in the city of Youngstown. I have seen with my own eyes plenty of soup lines.

The creation of the PWA by President Roosevelt made it possible for workers in the steel valleys to barely survive. Only fifteen dollars a week was what most of them received, but it was enough to buy the bare essentials needed to sustain life. As everyone knows, Hitler was then girding for war and we read and heard a lot of rumors about how work was so good in Germany and yet we had soup lines in the United States, principally in the industrial areas. But eventually, work did pick

up somewhat and the PWA enabled a lot of laid-off workers to survive. There was talk, very real talk, among those who were working, of the need of an organization to enable workers in this country to make a suitable wage not only in good times, but also in lean times.

At this time, wages had dropped in basic steel to the neighborhood of forty cents an hour. I was making forty-three cents an hour and continued to make that until the fall of 1935, when low and behold, the steel corporations suddenly decided to give United States steelworkers a five and one-half percent increase. This brought the wage rate up to fifty-two and one-half cents an hour. The steelworkers were not to be deterred because they knew that the only reason that the industry was giving them anything was because the CIO had been established and organized in Atlantic City in the winter of 1935.

On June 17, 1936, in the Grant Building in Pittsburgh, John L. Lewis set up the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, under the chairmanship of Philip Murray. He immediately sent organizers, the vast majority of them being miners, mine representatives, into the coal and iron towns in the United States to organize workers into the steelworkers' organizing committee.

Less than two weeks after the launching of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, the steel corporations sent letters to all of their employees telling them that John L. Lewis only wanted their dollar-a-month dues. They said the workers should not join an organization which was run by people in far-off Washington and other cities away from the steel valleys.

But the steelworkers who had gone through the 1916 and the 1919 strikes and had seen their unions broken up in 1919 because of the promise of the corporations, no longer paid heed to the letters sent out by the corporations. In 1919 the workers believed the corporations would take care of them but the corporations failed. Having gone through the long depression, they all felt that they never had anything while they were working, so it was worth fighting for. So workers continued to organize up through the winter of 1936 and 1937.

While organizing, we could not get any place to meet because no one would rent a hall to the workers. However, we did meet. The following April, in 1937, after U.S. Steel had negotiated a contract with the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, Philip Murray came to Youngstown to address a group of steelworkers in the ball park at Idora Park. Due to heavy rain, we had to meet in the Old Theater Building, which had a very leaky roof. After listening to Phil Murray, there was a rededication of all steelworkers to implement the organizing committee. Everyone leaving that meeting was an organizer in his own right and we continued to organize the following month.

At this time, however, Philip Murray was attempting to meet with other corporations, namely those who banded together under the leadership of Tom Girdler, the president of the Republic Steel Corporation. Philip Murray no doubt had influenced Sheet and Tube, Bethlehem, and Inland, to follow suit. They refused to do what U.S. Steel had done, that is, negotiate a contract with the steelworkers. But, in turn, they refused and would not even send their top officers of the corporations to meet with the union. On May 26, 1937, Philip Murray came to Youngstown and all the union representatives of these four steel corporations met in the old Moose Hall on Boardman Street in Youngstown at two o'clock in the afternoon. By unanimous vote we voted to strike these four steel corporations, just for recognition, just so that they would throw out the old company unions and grant us, as American workers, a bonafide union of our own choosing, which the National Labor Relations Board had provided for us when the Supreme Court upheld it on April 12, 1937.

Having voted unanimously to strike the steel corporations, we immediately went to the Romanian Hall on South Avenue, where we who had attended the meeting with Phil Murray met with our members of the Republic Steel and Sheet and Tube and set up our picket lines. We organized them at this meeting. Immediately thereafter, we left this meeting for the plant gates of the Republic Steel Corporation and the Sheet and Tube Company located in Campbell, Struthers, Youngstown, Niles, Warren. The representatives who had come from Chicago, Pittsburgh, and other areas, had gone back to their respective

towns and established their picket lines. I set up the picket line at the Bessemer Plant of the Republic Steel Corporation under the Market Street Bridge at 9 p.m. on May 26.

We continued to maintain a picket line at each of the plants in the valley owned by the Sheet and Tube and Republic, and were carrying on a very peaceful strike.

They closed all the saloons in Youngstown, which is customary when men go on strike. The very first day, on May 27, under the Market Street Bridge, we active members signed up eight hundred people who had come down to the picket line in just a few hours. To those who had not joined, we gave a card and they all were willing to sign.

We continued our strike and, of course, President Roosevelt tried to get the parties together. Those who represented the corporations had no desire to ever bargain and negotiate a contract because Girdler, himself, had stated for the press and on the radio, for all the world to hear, that before he would recognize the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, he would go out on his farm and dig potatoes and pick apples. But to my knowledge, he never picked any apples or dug any potatoes because ultimately, he sat down and negotiated an agreement with the Steelworkers Organizing Committee.

Throughout May and June we were on strike. The press was anti-union. We did not have any support from anywhere. There was not one clergyman in the Mahoning Valley who would champion the cause of the steelworkers. Businesses, businessmen, and others were demanding their payments from the strikers. Landlords were demanding rents. But we still continued to strike despite all the organized opposition against us. We tried to maintain peaceful picket lines, and they were peaceful except for the disruption which was caused by agents of the steel corporations. But eventually, the governor of the state of Ohio, Governor Davey, at that time, sent in the militia to maintain the status quo. We on the picket line welcomed the militia at the time because we thought that their intent was to maintain peace, not knowing that they were going to be used to open the plants on the first, second, and third days of July.

Now, of course, they were able to get the plants started up through coercion and back-to-work movements. Although they could only get enough men to start a twelve-hour crew basis, they were able to stampede a lot of the workers back and for the first few weeks after the strike was broken, they worked twelve-hour shifts.

When the people who were active on the picket lines finally asked for their jobs back, they were told that they had no jobs. The companies had taken photographs of all of us pickets and had sent the pictures to all the corporations throughout the country. Insofar as getting jobs elsewhere, we were unable to do so.

The men who were turned down at the employment office and told they had no jobs and those who were told outright that they were fired because they were disloyal to the company all came to the union headquarters. The director of the headquarters, John L. Mayo, had summoned in agents of the National Labor Relations Board and they took affidavits and statements from all of us who had been discriminated against and fired. A petition was sent in by the Board containing an unfair labor charge against the corporations for their coercion, discrimination, and firing of the pickets. So the case went to the Board and through this long period of waiting, we unionists kept meeting regularly.

We still maintained a headquarters on Poland Avenue and, eventually, a good many of us got work with the WPA where we were able to make sixty dollars a month, from which we paid one dollar a month dues in order to hold the organization together. I was placed on WPA down in the city of Campbell where I broke rock with a sledge along with hundreds of other striking steelworkers. As I say, we paid our dollar dues from that sixty and maintained our union.

The recession which occurred in the late fall and winter of 1937 helped the birth of our union. A good many thousands of workers who were compelled to go back to work for economic reasons finally got laid off in those winter months and had to appeal for relief. They eventually came out on WPA, where they had to work with us who had fought the company and were blacklisted and blackballed all over the

country. Well, of course, a good many of those people had gone back to work with promises from the company that they were going to be the "fair-haired" boys and the company was going to take good care of them. When they came out to work and break rock along with the rest of us, they were ready to agree with us union people.

So we worked together, all colors, all nationalities; we were all poor. We all had the same problems and we knew that it was only through the united effort of all of us that we were ever going to build and establish a union. So we kept working on WPA and in the late fall of 1938, the National Labor Relations Board handed down its order to the Republic Steel Corporation that they must reinstate back on the job with all seniority rights every striker whom they had fired. I was ordered back prior to the date of the order because the Republic Steel Corporation had seen--through their attorneys no doubt--that the union was going to win and that they would have to take us back. So they immediately started calling the men who would have cost them the most in back wages, and I was called back on September 15, almost a month before the order came down.

Another reason for it was that the corporation did not want to order everybody back the same day because, had all of the thirteen hundred black-listed strikers in Republic gone back to work the same day, there would have been a holiday strike and we'd have turned the plant inside out. So they dribbled us back in, a dozen or so a day, and low and behold, there were many workers who never dreamed we would ever get back.

I can cite my own experience when I walked into the plant under the orders of the National Labor Relations Board. I walked down through the plant with my working clothes under my arm and my lunch under my other arm. Some of the workers in there and the bosses looked at me like they had seen a ghost. And in all modesty, I have to say I was pretty proud because I had made some brags that the day would come when the Board would uphold us and we would be vindicated and put back on our jobs. And that day had come about. As we came back to work, we started to build the union and, of course, for the first

time in the history of the labor movement in the United States, there was a law which enabled mistreated workers to ultimately get their jobs back.

I went back to work in the Blooming Mill of the Bessemer plant of the Republic where I was a floor engineer and swing operating engineer in the pulpit. I continued there for three months, then I was laid off for a week and was subsequently discharged. Knowing that it would be fruitless for me to go back to work with my union reputation even if they would take me, I got a job operating a powerhouse at the old Struthers Furnace in Struthers. I worked for several months, until they shut down. And, of course, at this time, a good many of the steel plants were slowing down, too. I did not return to work until the following summer of 1939 when the Struthers Furnace started up.

On September 1, 1939, while I was working at the Struthers Furnace operating a powerhouse, Hitler invaded Poland. All of the steel corporations started picking up and producing more steel, gearing for the war which was to come. Of course, they didn't work too long because they held a gun at Uncle Sam's head until they got a hike in the price of steel and things slowed down. Production slowed down until they got what they wanted and then the steel plants continued to roll.

I finally got a job at the Brier Hill steel plant of the Sheet and Tube on October 9, 1939. I became active with a good many men that I had known in the strike days and was eventually elected to office as charter president when we had our first constitution. We adopted the name of the United Steelworkers of America. I was elected for four terms, three of them unopposed, as president of Local Union 1462.

In the capacity of president of Local Union 1462, I was elected on the first negotiating committee to negotiate a contract for the Sheet and Tube locals, four of them in Youngstown, two of them in Chicago. At that time, the chairman of the union negotiating committee for Sheet and Tube was Clinton Golden, the vice-president of the United Steelworkers of America. One must understand that although the

Board had ordered the little steel corporations to recognize the union in October 16, 1938, the corporations had been dragging their feet and we were unable to negotiate and get a signed agreement with Sheet and Tube until August 13, 1942. And, of course, Republic, Inland, and Bethlehem signed practically within twenty-four hours of that time.

And then, for the first time, the little steel corporations had all signed an agreement, although the leaders of those corporations had said that they never would. We finally had contracts with these four corporations.

Now, the contracts only called for a maintenance of membership. We could not get a union shop and having a "maintenance of membership" clause required that the officers and the steward body of local unions had to be ever vigilant in maintaining their membership because we were into the war years. There were huge turnovers in the plants and we had to sign up every new employee because a lot of our employees were leaving for the armed services or defense work in other munition plants. So it put a special burden on officers. We had to collect dues and that was quite a job because the company had agreed to just check off those whom we had submitted to them.

So, as we went along in those years, taking up grievances in behalf of workers, usually a lot of workers would become lax in their dues until they had a grievance. Then they'd pay up their dues and file a grievance and sometimes after you settled their grievance, you wouldn't hear from them again until they had another one. But through continual efforts on behalf of the unionists in the plants and officers of the locals, we ultimately were able to get a union shop contract.

In the first agreement, we set up what was known as a Little Steel Formula, which provided for a five and one-half cent increase, which brought the labor rate up to seventy-eight cents an hour. We continued under this agreement for the rest of 1942 and throughout 1943, when the policy committee met and formulated their demands for a new agreement, because our agreement was to terminate on December 24, or Christmas Eve of 1943.

We presented our demands and attempted to get meetings with the steel corporations, but they refused to meet. We held a policy meeting in the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh, in mid-December, 1943, and we all stood firm in our demands and the companies had failed to renegotiate the terminating agreements. The Sheet and Tube struck at midnight on Christmas Eve. U.S. Steel and others, whose terminating date was sometime in January, did not shut down. But President Roosevelt intervened and ordered the steel corporations to negotiate. Thereupon we renewed our agreements which provided for the first time a shift differential to be paid in the steel plant. It called for four cents on the afternoon shift and six cents on the evening shift, and a good many other benefits which are a matter of record.

We continued to work and build our unions and to produce war arms throughout these years until the termination of hostilities in 1945, when we demanded a substantial wage increase. Although we met with the companies, they still refused to grant anything near our demands. During this period, especially in November, 1945, the auto workers employed in General Motors plants and under the leadership of Walter Reuther, struck General Motors and were out for approximately one hundred and six or seven days. R. J. Thomas was the international president of the auto workers at this time, and he had put Reuther in charge of the negotiating committee negotiating with General Motors. In that time, President Truman had recommended to the steel corporations that they should grant eighteen and one-half cents an hour. The corporations still stubbornly refused. So there was no other alternative; there was nothing left for the unions to do but to strike, and strike they did.

Sometime in February--I can't recall the date--the corporations granted the eighteen and a half cents an hour and also settled the General Motors strike in autumn.

I might say as well that in these negotiations, the companies had finally agreed to launch, under our request, a program to eliminate the inequities which existed in the steelworker classifications, which have been a bone of contention since the

first year. And after a long four-year study, all the thousands of different wage classifications were hammered down to thirty-two job classifications.

In a very limited and condensed time, I have given a brief summary of the creation and founding and the early struggles of the steelworkers union. I would like now to conclude my abbreviated remarks by stating that in subsequent years, the United Steelworkers of America have been in the forefront, in the vanguard, in plowing new ground, for all the benefits which are enjoyed today by workers throughout the land. They went on, of course, to bring about the best pension plan in industry, a sub-payment plan. In fact, in the short history of this union, wages have risen from four dollars and twenty cents a day to now where the average steelworker makes better than five dollars per hour.

- S: Mr. Beck, would you discuss the steel strike in 1937 in more detail?
- B: When we voted on the afternoon of May 26, 1937, to strike the little steel plants, namely, the Youngstown Sheet and Tube, Republic Steel, Inland Steel, and the Bethlehem Steel, we immediately went from the meeting to the Romanian Hall. We met there with approximately a thousand of our members and from that meeting, made immediate arrangements for our picket lines, picking our picket captains, and for those who volunteered for picket duty. Of course, this was done on the spur of the moment, and we had to have numerous meetings in the following days and weeks to really get our picket machinery set up properly so that we could picket on a twenty-four hour basis.

I was the head picket captain at the Bessemer Plant of the Republic Steel Corporation in charge of all three shifts. The Lansingville Plant of the Republic Steel was manned by the local union president, Tommy White, and Scotty Fagan was in charge of that gate. Curly Johnson, who has just recently passed away, was in charge of the Coke Plant gate. Jim and Joe Gallagher were very active at Stop 14, on the Poland Avenue side of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube. On the Campbell side at the Twelfth Street entry, Earnie Kinesky was very active. Going down to Struthers, we had Paul Langley, who was active at the Bridge Street entrance of the

Rod and Wire, and was later elected sheriff of Mahoning County. Going up the river to the Briar Hill plant of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube, Jim Mulladore, Dan Thomas, Rocco Greco, Dominic Scarpine and numerous others whom I can't recall at this moment, were in charge at that gate.

At the Republic in Niles and in Warren, I can't recall, at this moment, who the active picket captains were. They did not have as effective a strike in the Niles plant and in the Warren plant of Republic that we had in Youngstown because they still had enough manpower and continued to operate. When the pickets denied access of all trucks, food trucks, and what have you to the plant, the Republic Steel Corporation resorted to dropping food and other supplies by airplane into those stricken plants.

Some of the active pickets in that area with whom I got acquainted were Earnie Webb, Harry Wines, A. D. Dadasman, and numerous others whose names I can't recall now.

All of the plants in little steel that were on strike within the state of Ohio, came under the jurisdiction and leadership of John Owens, who was then the secretary-treasurer of the United Mine Workers or maybe he had not moved up to that position as yet and was still director of District Six of the United Mine Workers. But nevertheless, he was in charge of the strike throughout the state of Ohio.

In our district, we had the sub-regional director, John L. Mayo, who was in full and complete charge of all of the plants in the Youngstown, Canton, and Massillon areas, in which I am somewhat acquainted.

From the very outset, we, the pickets on the plant gates of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube and the Republic plants, attempted and endeavored to carry out a peaceful strike. And our strike would have been peaceable for every day of the duration of the strike, if it had been left up to the pickets who were handling the picket lines.

But the company or some powers that wanted to create a disruption, in devious ways, decided to get the

public sentiment against the strikers. They would have to create some kind of confusion and violence which they would be able to use through the medium of the newspaper to turn public sentiment against the strikers.

After several weeks of striking, even though we had all heard of the riot in Chicago on Memorial Day, in which the Republic police slaughtered ten strikers at that plant gate and wounded numerous others, including men and women, we still continued to have a peaceful strike in Youngstown. But one Saturday afternoon, in the middle of June, the police came down to the picket line at Stop Five of the Republic at Lansingville, and attempted to move the women who were picketing on this particular Saturday. When I say "the women," I mean the wives of the strikers who supported their husbands and were on the picket line. When they did not move as fast as Captain Richmond of the Youngstown police force would have liked them to move, they fired a couple of tear gas cannisters. When this eruption occurred, the pickets, in defense of their wives, attacked the police force. I shouldn't say attacked them, because it is almost impossible for unarmed strikers to oppose police with side arms and guns and tear gas. But nevertheless, violence did erupt and from that Saturday evening fiasco, two male pickets at Stop Five were killed and numerous others were wounded.

The LaFollette Committee came to Youngstown later on after the riot at Stop Five and reached a decision. After a thorough investigation, they stated--and it has never been refuted--that the two men, the two pickets, one of them whose name was Eperjese, and the other whose name slips my mind at this time, were shot from machine guns, which were mounted on cranes in the old tube mill. The angle of the bullets and their projectory, proved beyond a doubt, that the bullets that had penetrated a gas station and other buildings across Poland Avenue, in the region where the pickets were, had all come from an elevation the height of the cranes in the old tube mill.

Of course, during that trouble, a lot of people other than pickets had rushed down to Stop Five and engaged in this melee. After this was over, the

Republic Steel Company, bought the land right out to the sidewalk of the entrance to Stop Five and put a fence up and denied the men the right to picket there any longer.

So this riot at Stop Five created by the Youngstown police force and Sheriff Elser and his deputies, was very instrumental in bringing about the governor's order to bring National Guard into the Mahoning Valley.

Our strike was successful in spite of the trouble at Stop Five. The Pennsylvania Railroad, at the request of the steel corporations no doubt had brought in about five hundred railroad police, who denied us the right to cross the tracks to picket. They had been attempting to ship in food to the plant in boxcars on these tracks. The railroaders on the Pennsylvania Railroad, most of whom I knew from my former employment on the railroad, had refused to put cars into the Republic plant honoring our picket lines. A good many of them used to come down to my picket line and tell me when they were called to put cars into the plant. The railroad police would not permit us to picket the track leading into the plant.

One picket who had been a seaman in the British Navy, although he was an American citizen, used to climb the girders on the South Avenue Bridge and drop down to the track leading into the Republic. He would wave his hand and signal the railroad crews who would then refuse to enter the plant. In this way, we were successful in maintaining a very good strike without undue violence.

This, however, brought about some hardships to many of the scabs who had stayed in the plant. They were getting very tired of it and on occasions, left the plant. I might say, however, that some of those who left the plant were denied their jobs after the strike was broken and they, along with the strikers, filed cases with the National Labor Relations Board. And those people, especially the yard masters and yard clerks, came out two weeks after the strike had started, and were denied their jobs back. They had nowhere else to go because the company had told them they were unfaithful to the company, that they had no jobs. They finally filed

with the Board and lo and behold, some of them received as high as two thousand dollars in back pay. A lot of the good pickets did not approve of that because the only pickets that were paid, under the Board order, were those that were fired prior to the strike which occurred on May 26.

As the strike continued throughout June, picket lines were maintained at all of the plant gates of the four little steel corporations. Our picket lines under the Market Street Bridge on Poland Avenue, in Briar Hill, in Niles, and in Warren, were complete. Of course, daily in the newspapers and on the radio, the forces were building against us. Attempts were made to start back-to-work movements. There were appeals to the housewives of the striking steelworkers stating, "What were they striking for?" That phrase became one of the by-words of the newspaper, police, businessmen, bankers, and the established order. "Why are the steelworkers striking?" "They got a ten cent an hour increase, the same as the workers in U.S. Steel and other plants." "Why are they striking?"

Our answer was that under the National Labor Relations Act, we were afforded the right to organize into a union of our own choosing and we had the right to appeal for recognition. This was refused us, and therefore we had to strike.

That's what the strike was all about. In the little steel strike of 1937, we were just striking for the dignity of being able to belong to a union of our own choosing, which had been denied to us, to our parents and to our grandparents throughout the history of the steel industry in the United States.

They attempted and were successful to a great degree in organizing back-to-work meetings. One of them was called at the Central Auditorium, and a lot of the timid people who had been talked into returning to work, attended this meeting. We pickets and strikers went into this meeting and took it over. I say we took it over but when the leaders of the back-to-work movement saw us strikers, they adjourned the meeting and left. I recall leaving one such meeting at Central Auditorium along with a couple of the staff representatives, Bobby Burke and Joe Gallagher. A good many of us pickets went

over to the Dollar Bank, where they were registering people to pledge to go back to work and we broke that up.

With all the forces against us, with no church championing our cause, with no public officers except Vagnozzi, a councilman in the city of Youngstown, and an attorney, Forrest Cavalier, and Bill Spagnola, we had no friends in the city administration. After five long weeks of striking, and all these forces arrayed against us, Governor Davey said that he was going to send in the National Guard and maintain the status quo. Most of us thought that that would be our real chance to show all the powers that be that we were determined to win a strike.

So when the troops came in on, I think, the last day of June, most of us picket captains greeted them with the belief that they were going to maintain order. Little did we know that the troops were going to be used to protect the scabs, whom the companies had duped into going back to work. So we had to stand idly by on the second and third of July and watch the National Guard become a full fledged strikebreaking force, enabling and protecting scabs and everyone that the companies could get to enter a plant and go through our picket lines. This was one of the most heart rending things to us strikers, who had maintained an effective strike and finally were crushed by a militia whose salaries were paid by us taxpaying strikers.

I recall, on July 3, Philip Murray came to town. All of us picket captains went into a meeting. Philip Murray told us that although they had broken our strike to the point of working strikebreakers twelve hours or more a turn, he was more certain of winning this strike through the courts than he was the day that we had called it.

I would like to say, in regards to the breaking of the strike by the National Guard, that the Campbell plant of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube managed to get started up first because they were able to get strikebreakers to come through the picket lines. They succeeded in the same thing at the Lansingville plant of the Republic Steel, but the Bessemer plant in which I worked was the last plant to be able to get enough people to start up. This is the plant

that I referred to earlier where I told about taking some of my pickets up to the meeting conducted by Philip Murray. From that meeting, some of those pickets, even after hearing the words of Phil Murray, encouraging words that he knew that we would win in the end, went back to work.

So the strike was broken by the National Guard and by a good many of the workers who went back to work. A lot of them had been pickets, good union members, but through all these economic forces of coercion, they were forced back to work. We who were still out found ourselves in a very sorry state. We could not get jobs because we were marked men and I was unable to get any work at all from May 26 until after Labor Day.

I did, however, through a friend of mine who was running a steam shovel, get a job oiling on the steam shovel, out at Lansdowne Airport. We were digging trenches and burying city garbage. Since they had the garbage disposal plant down, they were hauling the garbage out to Lansdowne and we buried it. I worked at that job for a couple of weeks until one of the policemen, who had been on my picket line, came out and told the supervisor on the job that I was one of those radical picket captains. He accosted me and we got into an argument and I was fired.

Later on, in November, I managed to get a job under an alias working for the city, in which I got a couple of weeks' work until they found out who I was. Then I got a job digging post holes for the Youngstown Municipal Railway on Poland Avenue, but that only lasted nine days because too many foremen from the Republic Steel recognized me and I lost that job. So eventually, most of us got on WPA. I was placed on WPA on December 27 of that year in which I made sixty dollars a month until I was recalled by the Republic under the National Labor Relations Board order.

- S: Were the communists very active in the strike?
- B: I personally knew Bobby Burke, who had been thrown out of Columbia University and was called a communist, but he had worked in the open hearth of the steel mills and was an organizer for the CIO. Shorty Stuben, alias Stephens was accused of being

a communist. Of course, no doubt about Gus Hall, but I did not see Gus Hall in the Youngstown area until long after the steel strike was over. I believe, however, he was active up in the Warren area. As to knowing anyone who was actually a communist, I could not prove any of them were. I only knew what was charged against them.

S: Who furnished the money for the strike?

B: The United Mine Workers of America paid all of the organizers of the steelworkers organizing committee and later on, after the strike was broken, furnished food. This was supplemented by the auto workers, the clothing workers, rubber workers, and others who sent monies and foods into our commissaries located in the old Romanian Hall on Poland Avenue.

S: Were the pickets paid?

B: There were no pickets paid and I still have my picket card showing that I had picketed throughout the length of the strike. It was the only card which enabled pickets to get relief at the food store at the Romanian Hall. Those having a picket card were able to get food, but no one was paid.

S: Besides food bills, how did the pickets handle their rent and electric bills, et cetera?

B: Some of us who probably had a few dollars ahead were able to maintain our heat and light. We didn't need any heat at that time, but we did need to pay rents. A good many people lost their homes. A lot of people like myself, when I finally couldn't pay my rent, had to move into a cheaper place. However, in late July and early August, for a period of four weeks, the Steelworkers Organizing Committee paid me, along with a good many of the other picket captains, three dollars a day. I was paid for approximately thirty days, and all together I drew ninety dollars. The director did pay my rent for one month in October of 1937, when I was going to be evicted. I know of other cases where many strikers were being evicted and the director would pay for the truck and the gasoline, and us pickets who were still out of work, would help everybody move from time to time.

- S: Who were some of the major adversaries against the labor movement in Youngstown during this period?
- B: Speaking of the Republic plant which I was from, old R. N. McCoy, who had been supervisor of industrial relations for some time, and who incidentally held honorary membership in several different unions, was still the one outstanding adversary of the union. With all the power of the Republic, he was, to us Republic workers on strike, the same as Harry Bennett was to the Ford workers in Detroit.

Another adversary who was very instrumental in aiding the corporations in the defeat of the union was Ray Thomas, a former luminary in the city of Youngstown.

I think I should not overlook the fact that one of the staunchest and most effective adversaries of all workers involved in the little steel strike was none other than William F. Maag, Jr. Through the power of the Youngstown Vindicator, he was able to throw most of the blame on the striking steelworkers.

- S: Would you give some relationship as to the number of the members of the union at the beginning of the strike as opposed to the end of the strike, compared to the number totally employed in Republic or the Youngstown steel industry?
- B: I cannot give an actuarial figure. I can, however, say that I signed a union card in September of 1936, and from September through the winter months and until the strike in May of 1937, I was able to sign up my own department in the Bessemer plant of the Republic almost one hundred percent. I was able, through other active people in that plant, such as Stu McDonald and others, to sign up a majority of the twenty-five hundred employees in the Bessemer plant. Through my experience in meeting with the organizers of the Lansingville plant of the Republic and the large plants of the Sheet and Tube, I will say that most of them were at least around the fifty percent mark. On the first days of the strike, May 26 and May 27, we were able to sign up people by the hundreds. As to just what the extent of the membership was, I cannot readily say. But out of the total amount of employees eligible, at least ninety percent of the people wanted a union.

- S: Mr. Beck, did the steel companies take any action against you and other union organizers because of the steel strike?
- B: Yes, they certainly did, and I'm convinced, as well as our leaders were convinced, that Tom Girdler, thinking that he would crush the union once and for all in one bold stroke, filed a suit amounting to seven and one-half million dollars against the Steelworkers Organizing Committee. His contention was that the organization and the strikers had cost his corporation seven and one-half million dollars and he wanted to be reimbursed. John L. Lewis, Phil Murray, Van Bittner, Jim Carey, John Mayo, all the directors of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, and all of us picket captains, were named in the suit. I, myself, was served [a subpoena] by a deputy U.S. marshal in the winter of 1937 and 1938, when I had been reduced to living in three rooms, and I didn't have a dime in my pocket. I might say that although we were penniless, we were quite proud to know that we had done something which had brought about a suit of seven and one-half million dollars.

To answer your question in full, I cannot specifically relate exactly what was contained in the original suit. I can only say that Tom Girdler, on behalf of the Republic Steel Corporation, in Cleveland, Ohio, brought suit against the Congress of Industrial Organization and others, Number 19,864 on the docket of the District Court. The principal demand of the suit was that the Congress of Industrial Organization reimburse the Republic Steel Corporation to the tune of seven and one-half million dollars. The suit went to the courts and eventually Harrison and Marshman, attorneys-at-law in Cleveland, Ohio, sent me a notice, dated September 27, 1941, telling me that Tom Girdler had lost his case and that I would not have to pay one penny of the seven and one-half million dollars. This was quite a relief to me.

I would like to state that even though strikes are very serious and bring about severe hardships to those involved, they still are not without some laughs now and then. I am referring to that winter day in 1937-1938, when a deputy U.S. marshal served me with papers of this suit. In presenting it to me, he laughed outright. Seeing me in the poor place where I lived, and knowing the contents of

a suit of seven and one-half million dollars, he had to laugh and even though I was very poor at the time, I enjoyed a good laugh with him.

S: Did the steel industry, at any time during your memory, attempt to control the labor market in the Mahoning Valley?

B: I can answer you in this way, by asking a question first. Why, in the thirty miles paralleling the Mahoning River Valley, is there very little diversified industry? From Youngstown to Lowellville, outside of basic steel and some fabrication which is fully dependent on the basic steel, there is no other diversified industry such as you will find in a good many industrial centers in the United States.

To be specific, we have in the area, Briar Hill Steel, which belongs to the Youngstown Sheet and Tube. Going down river, we have the McDonald Plant of the U.S. Steel, the Ohio Works of U.S. Steel, and the Bessemer plant of the Republic Steel. Of course, I forgot to mention the upper and lower Carnegie Mills, but they have since been removed. Then we have the Lansingville plant of the Republic, the Campbell works of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube, the Rod and Wire plant of the Sheet and Tube in Struthers and the Sharon Steel at Lowellville.

The only thing other than steel and fabrication in the Youngstown area was the little rubber plant out on Albert Street employing approximately eight hundred to a thousand people, the little Mazda lamp owned by General Electric on Hughes Street employing about seven hundred people, the Moyer pants factory and the raincoat factory employing another couple of hundred, and the leather works at Girard employing a few hundred. That is all of the diversified industry that we had in the Youngstown area.

Dozens of old timers in the valley have told me over the years--and I have seen a lot of it myself --that the steel industry in Youngstown, wanting to control the labor market, would never permit any other industry to come into Youngstown. They did this through their control of the Chamber of Commerce.

With my knowledge of the steel corporations and their operations, I believe that one reason for

this control was that years ago, when the steel industry was called a "prince and pauper industry," the mills would work and men enjoyed wages but they had to safeguard for that lean period when the plants shut down. After the plants were shut down for many months--I can recall as a child when my dad would be laid off for months at a time--the steel-workers were always willing to go back to work for the wages which the steel plants would pay.

So the steel plants would never permit any other industry to come into the valley. If any other industry, even though it paid less wages, worked steady throughout the year, men would drift into these plants. They could be guaranteed work the year round and would not be so eager to work for the steel corporations. The steel captains knew this. Consequently, in Youngstown, Campbell, and adjoining towns with the exception of Warren, the steel captains have been able to control the labor market long before I came to the valley in 1910. I have seen this with my own eyes since that time. I have seen when some men would come to Youngstown and try to woo and induce other industry to locate here. The steel corporations would gobble them up and put them on the payroll and consequently, there would be no new industry coming here.

Now Warren invited other industry to its town. And consequently, in that city, they have the Packard Electric Company and numerous other industries which are not associated with steel. I think this was due to the fact that the offices of the steel moguls were not located in that town.

S: Would you discuss the interrelationship between Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John L. Lewis, and Philip Murray?

B: Well, in 1936, the CIO had what they called labor's non-partisan league. John L. Lewis openly gave to the Democratic campaign five hundred thousand dollars in 1936. The CIO and its entire membership went all out in its support of FDR in 1936 and it's a matter of history that Alf Landon was crushed in that election, only taking two states.

The CIO, after the election of FDR for the second term, launched an all-out organizing campaign and

of course, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was considered a friend of all of the working men of the land.

On October 25, 1940, John L. Lewis, feeling that the administration had not given him enough for the financial support and voting support of the labor movement, went on nationwide radio and came out in support of Wendell Wilkie. I recall that date as well as yesterday because my Local Union 1462, was meeting at Briar Hill, and we recessed the meeting at nine o'clock to listen to John L. Lewis' speech.

Every worker in this land who was a supporter of John L. Lewis and Franklin Delano Roosevelt was disappointed and heartsick at the labor leader whom they all respected opposing the respected president of their country. So, in that famous speech, John L. Lewis told all of the unions and all of his directors in the field that he wanted them to support Wendell Wilkie, and he said, "If I am repudiated at the polls, I will resign as president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations." Of course, FDR was a winner the following week and in the convention a couple of weeks later, John L. Lewis, true to his promise, resigned as president of the CIO. The convention, thereupon, in its annual election of officers, elected Philip Murray to the presidency left vacant by John L. Lewis' resignation.

From that time on, there was a definite growing apart of John L. Lewis and his United Mine Workers and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and I believe it was in the convention in Detroit the following year, 1941, that the United Mine Workers withdrew from the CIO.

Having withdrawn from the CIO in the early part of 1942, Philip Murray, who still remained a vice-president of the United Mine Workers of America, was removed by John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers. On May 19, 1942, the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, with Phil Murray as its chairman, convened in Cleveland and held its first constitutional convention.

John L. Lewis had broken wide open with Franklin Roosevelt, but Philip Murray, as head of the CIO and head of the steelworkers, along with William

Green, president of the AFL, enjoyed a very close relationship with the administration. In July of 1942, I was present in the labor building in Washington, D. C. at the week-long hearings whose outcome was the little steel formula. I believe it was established on July 14 of that year. It brought labor from seventy-two and one-half cents to seventy-eight cents an hour. Of course, it is now history that John L. Lewis was able to break the little steel formula in the midst of WWII.

S: What has been your most enjoyable satisfaction of your activities in the labor movement?

B: I have come from a long line of steelworkers; my Grandfather Beck lost out in the Homestead strike of 1892 and was unable to get employment in a steel plant after that although he was not in Homestead. He was on strike in the Appollo Steel Plant in Appollo, Pennsylvania. I don't know whether it was Appollo or Vandergrift, Pennsylvania, but he lost out and had to dig coal for the balance of his days. My father was unable to go back to work after the 1919 strike. Men of his age whom I worked with and who had gone through the 1919 strike were with us union men but would not take an active part because they were afraid that the same thing would happen in 1937 that had happened in 1919.

The one outstanding feature of joining the steelworkers' union was that our organization was able to force the steel corporations to sit down and negotiate a contract recognizing us as the sole collective bargaining agent in regards to wages and conditions of work.

Second, we negotiated a contract and improved it from time to time. We negotiated a pension plan in 1950, which, for the first time in the history of steel, provided for the workers, an income for when they got too old to work and too young to die so that they were not thrown out on the human scrap heap as the steel corporations had done over the years. In addition to that, we were able to follow through on the first proposal that Phil Murray made at a policy committee in 1943, when he first proposed the guaranteed annual wage. This eventually became the SUB benefits, which today enables a steelworker to take home almost as much through

unemployment compensation and supplemental benefits as he makes while working for a period of a year or more.

But the most outstanding thing to me, in addition to all these benefits, was the position I held as a CIO field representative. This job took me to most of the industrial states in the United States of America on organizing campaigns. In the capacity of a CIO representative, I went on campaigns which organized the CWA, the Communications Workers of America. I was on campaigns for the Chemical Workers of America, and helped organize chemical plants such as the atomic workers at Paducah, Kentucky, and chemical plants at Calvert City, Kentucky. I helped organize one of the largest electric plants for the IUE in Buechel, Kentucky, located a few miles south of Louisville. On October 8, 1953, I, along with a southern organizer, organized the first industrial plant in Selma, Alabama. That was a peculiar situation.

The sheriff who gave the civil rights leaders trouble a few years later, wouldn't permit the workers and me to meet in a meeting hall in the city of Selma, so we met out in the woods. We were able to win that election and if it had not been for the Taft-Hartley Act, we would have experienced no difficulty at all. The biggest order that this independent lock plant had was with the Ford Motor Company, making locks for Ford automobiles. Had we been able to use the secondary boycott of the [Taft-Hartley] Act, the automobile workers could have refused to take the product and we could have forced the company to recognize us. We had to go through an election process, which we won and were able to negotiate a contract in the city of Selma.

I was able in various assignments, to assist most of the unions that were affiliated with the CIO in the years prior to 1955, when the CIO and the AFL merged in the armory in the city of New York in December of 1955.

I have had a vast experience and a lot of enjoyment and can look back with pride over the organizing campaigns in which I was engaged from Maine to California and from the Great Lakes to the gulf.

- S: Could you suggest some other local individuals in the labor movement who might consent to a similar interview?
- B: Well, most of those who would have been really helpful have passed on. But one of them who was outstanding in the early days was Thomas White. He was the first president of Local 1331. We elected him president, I think, on a Friday night and he was fired from work on the following Monday. I would highly recommend Dan Thomas, my vice-president at Local 1462 and president there for some fourteen years before becoming a staff man. I would also recommend Earnest Kinesky, who was very active in the organizing of Local 1418, and who happened to be a local president there in the early days and was later a staff representative of the steel-workers. One of the outstanding black trade unionists, still alive, from 1331 is J. R. Moore. Curly Jackson, who was the original organizer of the coke plant of the Republic, just passed away a few weeks ago. Now I'm quite sure that Harry Wines and Hank Dively in Warren could help you or could give you the history of their areas in Warren and Niles. These are all whom I can think of at this time because most of them have passed away.
- S: May the Oral History Department of Youngstown State University use this interview in their research project?
- B: They surely can.
- S: Thank you, Mr. Beck, for a very enlightening interview.
- B: Better known as Jerry.

END OF INTERVIEW