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Personal Histories
by Working-Class
Organizers

edited by
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with a new introduction



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and sees if that idea is workable and acceptable. We won that sit-down. We were opposed by the leadership of the local for doing that, and they tried to get us for it but we survived.

In all this I was learning from and being counseled by an old-time fighter who had led the sit-down strike at the Richmond Ford plant in the early '30s. His name was Luis Guido. He was one of the greatest men I have ever met—a true yet unsung hero. He would never take a union administrative job. For over thirty years as shop committeeman he fought the Ford and General Motors corporations to create a better life for himself and others. Who will ever record his name as a maker of history?

The second time the question of hiring blacks was going to come up, the men in my department said in effect, "We've got to forgive Red for his strange ideas," and "He needs help on this resolution." The speakers in favor of bringing blacks in were mainly Portuguese from my department and that won the rest of the Portuguese: "If you don't want to do it on a moral basis—the fact that everyone's got a right to eat and work—you damn sure better do it because if we have a strike they'll recruit scabs in West Oakland." It was only a matter of time after that that blacks were on the line and working everywhere in the plant.

I got married while I was working in auto. My wife came out of a West Virginia coal mining family and we had a lot of basic values in common from the first. In addition to developing a career and family, she found no insurmountable problems living a life whose routine was regularly broken by job crisis and economic insecurity.

It was in that period right after I met her that the Oakland general strike occurred. The Oakland general strike was called by no leader. It was unique, I think, in general strikes in this country. There was a strike of women who were the clerks at Kahn's and at Hastings' department stores and it had been going on for months. The Teamsters had begun to refuse to make deliveries to those department stores and the department stores needed commodities badly.

Not many people had cars right after the war and you took public transportation to work in the morning. You had to go downtown to the center of Oakland and then out in the direction of your work-

place. So thousands and thousands of people travelled through the heart of town every morning on the way to work, on public transportation. Very early one morning, here were the policemen of Oakland herding in a string of trucks, operated by a scab trucking firm in Los Angeles, with supplies for these department stores. Some truck driver or some bus driver or street car conductor asked some policeman about the trucks (this is now part of the mythology) and the policeman told him, "This is a scab trucking firm coming in from L.A. to take stuff to Kahn's and Hastings'." Well, that truck driver, that bus driver, or that street car conductor, didn't get back on his vehicle. Truck drivers got off their trucks and that increased till those trucks and those buses and those street cars just piled up and thousands of people were stranded in town.

In a small way it was a holiday. The normal criteria for what was acceptable conduct disappeared. No one knew what to do and there were no leaders. No one called it. Pretty soon the strikers began forming into committees on the street corners. Certain shopkeepers were told to shut down and drug stores to stay open. Bars could stay open if they didn't serve hard liquor, and they had to put their juke boxes out on the sidewalk. People were literally dancing in the streets in anticipation of some kind of new day. Soon the strikers began to direct traffic and only let union people into town and keep out those who it was feared might be against the strike. It lasted fifty-four hours.

I'll never forget an incident in that strike. Some Army recruiting truck came in town through that mass of strikers and the lieutenant on that truck said over a P. A. system, "Why aren't you all out fightin' for your country instead of striking?" Most of the bus drivers still had their Eisenhower jackets with the hash marks on because they could use their Army uniform as part of their bus driver's uniform. And some big ex-top sergeant said, "Where do you think we got these?" With that he sang out, "Fall in!" and about a hundred men lined up and he put them through close order drill. Pretty soon there were several hundred going through this close order drill. They marched on City Hall and demanded to see the mayor. He wasn't in, of course.

It was that vision and the experiences in that strike that I experi-

enced and which my wife saw, the vision in actual life of people determining their own destinies that sustains one and makes one stand fast for a long, long time. You don't have to so often go through all those doubts about, "Are the fundamental ideas of Marxism sound?" if you've been fortunate enough to have had those experiences. It's a matter of being advantaged or disadvantaged through your own life experience that sustains or drives one away from those basic ideas.

In 1951, my wife and I lived again in East Los Angeles, right near the high school where I had gone. I was in the Teamsters Union, freight handling. Some old friends of mine that I'd gone to school with and were from my neighborhood were officials in those unions. I was making a pretty good living. Then I began to realize I was getting a lot of work because the dispatchers were instructed by my friends to give me a lot of work. I went to them and I said, "Look, I want to shake square like anybody else." I immediately started getting only two days work a week. I quit and got a job driving a truck steady.

In that local, which was a local for industrial laundry wagon drivers, there was a terrible situation. The working conditions that had been built up by the membership of the local were slowly being sold each year, bit by bit, for nickel and dime wage increases. Rebellion in that local developed, which I led, and I became chairman of the Negotiating Committee. The secretary of the local, it turned out, colluded with management and I was fired on a flimsy pretext that couldn't hold water. While I was awaiting the arbitration, the men in the local, through collections each week, paid my full wages. What we didn't realize was that even the arbitration had been rigged. Instead of utilizing the American Arbitration Association, they got an arbitrator who was an employers' representative in the culinary industry and I went down the drain.

At first the men were going to strike to protect my job. I was part of the reason why they didn't strike, because I was agreeing to go through the mechanics of the grievance procedure. I really participated in my own undoing, and of the men, because I was simply a symbol by which to break the back of militancy in the

union. It was an extremely bitter experience for me. I learned that one does not always use official procedures in circumstances like that if one is going to survive.

This rebellion took place early in 1954, when no spotlight was on the labor movement on this question. I have an honorable withdrawal card from that union, however, because twenty members of that union walked into the secretary-treasurer's office and demanded, right then and there, that an honorable withdrawal card be given me. Their instincts told them that I would need it in the future.

I had at least a dozen jobs within the next year. I'd get a job and two or three days later the management would come to me and say, "We didn't know you were in trouble with the Teamsters Union. We have to let you go." I finally got a job as an apprentice grocery clerk for Safeway Stores. I made about \$1800 that year. I had one child and my wife was pregnant. I needed and wanted a steady job.

I saw in the newspaper that they were hiring at the General Motors plant in all departments. They hired me immediately and I was spray-painting again, like I had been for a time at Chevrolet. This time, instead of going into industry in part for political reasons, it was just for a job. The McCarthy period had disintegrated my political movement considerably. The people were not interested in doing anything much but surviving. So there was no movement telling me what to do. I was "just a worker."

I began to discover the subculture in the factory and that I was working in an informal work group with a life of its own, its own informal leadership, discipline, and activity. A whole new world opened up to me. I began to see that to approach any situation like this with a whole set of preconceived slogans was way off the beam. One first had simply to learn what the subculture was so that one's actions were understandable to everyone else, and not to violate what had been created. Because if you couldn't understand the individuals and the groups that they formed, you certainly weren't going to understand anything else.

Then it occurred to me that, by and large, the radicals' conception of the masses was a metaphysical one, an average, which didn't exist