

# Diary Notes from a Steel Strike

JOHN MULLEN

AMBRIDGE, PA., 1933.

**T**HERE are four of us organizers sitting in the back office of our strike headquarters. Last night there was a stiff fight on the Spang-Chalfont picket line—and a few little clashes with strike-breakers around the other four steel mills on strike. Now we have come back to our office to talk over the next move.

Five minutes later comes a knock at the office door. We had told the strikers out in the hall not to disturb us unless it was for something important.

"Burgess Caul and a flock of his gunmen are out here . . . want to see Jimmy Egan," announces the striker who had interrupted us.

"Bring him in, but tell him to leave his thugs outside!" Jimmy replies.

Well, in walks his honor, Mr. Phil Caul, burgess of the steel town of Ambridge. He wastes no time in getting down to the point. Looking us all over with a hard stare, he says: "It's now two o'clock." We wonder what he's driving at. Jimmy looks at his watch and says to the burgess: "Right on the stroke of the gong, but what's that got to do with us, Caul?"

"Just this," snaps Caul. "We'll give you exactly one hour to get your pickets away from 'round those mills!"

"Who's *we*?" I ask Caul.

"The law abidin' element in this here community!" announces his honor. "You've just about been runnin' this town the last few days . . . it's gotta stop!"

Jimmy looks at me as if to say: there'll be hell popping soon! and then he says to Caul: "Well, Caul, if you think you're talking to a bunch of American Federation of Labor organizers, somebody's given you a bum steer! Our pickets are striking for higher wages . . . union recognition. They will continue picketing!"

I can see the hate burning in Caul's eyes as he watches Jimmy saying this. He's a mean-looking man and just as mean as he looks. A man's got to be a rat to be burgess in a steel town controlled by the U.S. Steel Corporation.

When running for re-election, Caul always boasted to the steel workers that he has been a member of the plasterers' union of the A.F. of L. for 25 years. He still carries his union card. But so do a lot of other gunmen among the leaders of the American Federation of Labor.

"Is that final?" says the burgess, looking at the other organizers. We all nod without answering. Then he turns on his heel and stalks right out of the office.

Jimmy turns to me and says: "We're in for some real hell on those picket lines . . . let's get movin'!"

The striker who knocked before comes in

again. "Somebody says there's a phone call for Egan at the corner store."

I tell Jimmy: "Answer it and hurry back, then we'll get out of here and down to the lines."

Jimmy left. That was the last I've seen of him since that day. He no sooner stepped out of the hall, when a carload of county dicks swept up and grabbed him. They were gone before any of the strikers could make a move. They came rushing into the hall, shouting: "They got Jimmy—a carload of them! They got Jimmy!" and then they told me about it.

That was a blow to us. Jimmy was the outstanding leader of the strike. He had come into town, sent by our union only six weeks before with the instructions: organize every mill in Ambridge! In a month and a half, he'd organized and struck five of the six steel mills. The workers looked to Jimmy almost with reverence. This snatching him right out of the strike at the most critical moment hit us hard.

I turned to Heinzman, Kalar and Cliff, the local organizers left with me. I said to the third: "Get to the picket lines as fast as you can, warn them, and then report to us at the emergency headquarters!" Cliff ran out.

Then we three started over to our emergency headquarters, which we had prepared for just such a crisis as this. It was the house of J——, right around the corner from the Spang-Chalfont picket line. Only four of us knew of it.

We were there a few minutes later. I began to tell the boys with me what to do in case of a bad attack and in case I was arrested or something.

Suddenly the door flung open and Franky almost staggered into the room. He was white with excitement: "Hurry," he yells at us. "All hell's breaking loose up at the first picket line. There's hundreds of armed thugs attacking and comin' right down Duss Avenue. Our lines are breaking up under it."

As he was saying this, I heard the first sounds of the battle. The other boys heard it too. One shot—another—long wailing screams away off.

We jumped up and made for the door. No time now for instructions. As we ran, I told Heinzman and Cliff to get over to the big Spang picket lines and get them ready. Kalar and I headed for Duss Avenue. As we crossed the lots, we could hear the growing roar of the fight. Masses of pickets, staggered by the murderous onslaught of the thugs, were reeling back. Some were dropping in their tracks. I couldn't tell whether it was from gas or bullets.

Then we got right into Duss Avenue. There was no chance for organizing the fight

now. It was just a bedlam of screams, shots and rolling clouds of gas.

We were being backed with the crowd toward the Spang lines. I jumped up on a barrel or something, I forget now what it was—I looked up and down the avenue. A sickening sight lay ahead of me. Spread across the width of the street were the marching thugs. In the front steel-helmeted deputies, and the man on each corner armed with sub-machine-guns. The others in between had shotguns and rifles. The men with the machine-guns were crouched over, coming forward and letting go short blasts every few steps. The shotguns blazed away, the rifles were making funny little clipping sounds. The air was buzzing over our heads with the slugs from the guns. In back of the first row of the steel helmets were at least three or four hundred more thugs, hurling gas bombs over the heads of the leaders, firing automatics and yelling like maniacs. Strikers who dropped wounded in the face of this attack were being ruthlessly clubbed by deputies leaping out of the march to "mop up," as the papers put it later.

Our pickets were fighting back with an almost unbelievable militancy in the face of this slaughter. Bricks were flying through the air and finding their mark. More than one thug reeled and staggered out of march.

But the thugs came on. We had only one chance: if we could only hold our ranks at the big Spang-Chalfont lines and break up the march by a smashing charge.

We ran back to the Spang lines. Everywhere along the avenue men and women were rolling barrels out into the streets. Some were frantically trying to dig up blocks of sidewalk cement to erect barricades. Others were turning parked cars over and swinging them around. Here and there, women in the workers' houses along the street were hurling chairs, mattresses and the most surprising things out the windows; anything that could be thrown or used as a barricade.

As we ran up to the Spang lines, Frank Cliff was speaking from the top of an auto to the several thousand strikers waiting there for the oncoming murder march.

"If we go down, we'll go down fighting. Get the women outa here!" he was yelling. One big steel worker's wife, armed with a potato masher filled with lead, screamed back: "We won't go. We stay here and fight!" The other women shouted back agreement. Across the street, Heinzman was speaking. We couldn't hear him above the noise. Then I saw him sway and fall over into the hands of the strikers nearest him. He'd been hit by shotgun slugs.

In another minute, the thugs were on us. First came a series of dull "plops" and then

a wave of gas. I thought it was crying gas but the first whiff—it was like being hit in the stomach with a brick. Vomiting gas! The front ranks of our strikers crumpled and went down retching, twisting in agony. Then our pickets charged. It was just slaughter. They fell by the dozens. The thugs cut loose with their guns and the screams of the wounded rose above the smashing bedlam.

They drove our ranks back time and again. Each time a dozen more of our boys dropped. Some of the pickets tried to pick up the wounded, but most of them ended by being stretched out with those already vomiting and bleeding on the ground.

From then on it was chaos. But it took forty-five minutes to break our lines. Some of the pickets were so enraged that they were crying as they ran in retreat. One of them bawling with fury, collared me as we backed up and shouted: "The right to organize! The Blue Eagle! Oh them bastards!" As if I didn't know what he was trying to tell me!

#### GREENSBURG, PA.

I see some queer things happen during strikes. Just little things, but interesting.

Today, about two o'clock, walking around the picket line at the foundry, I find things are kind of slow. Most of the pickets are sitting around out of the hot sun; some playing cards and others just talking in little bunches. The State Police are up in their barracks about a mile from the foundry—I guess it's too hot even for them today.

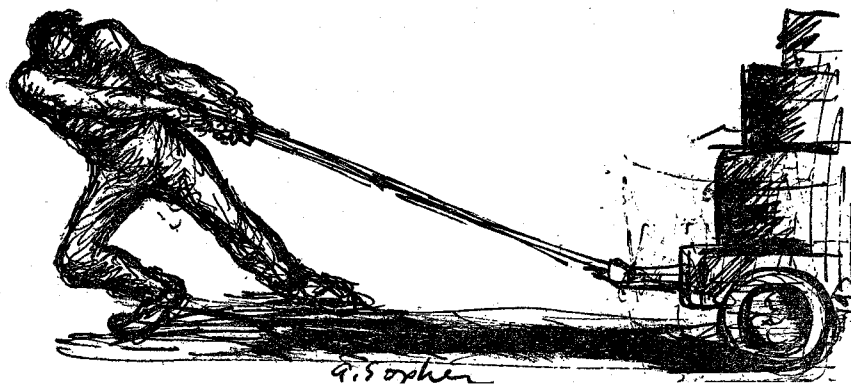
Jimmy Romola and I are walking slowly, returning the smiling nods of the pickets as we pass them and as we come to the east side of the plant, the side that faces the highway, Jimmy says:

"Here's the department I worked in before the strike," and he points to a row of wire-meshed windows, all blackened from the inside by the heat and dust. We walk over to the windows and start looking for a crack or something to see through to the inside. Jimmy is anxious to see what his department looks like after being idle through the strike for over a month. As we try to find a peephole, he says:

"I bet it'll look funny, with the sand blow-



A. Sopher



A. Sopher

ers just sittin' there and not kickin' up that racket; with the place all quiet and no heavy dust flying around like it used to."

Pretty soon I find a spot on a window through which I can get a fairly good view of the inside. I say to Jimmy:

"Here—you'd better look instead of me. I can't make much out—it's kind of dark in there."

Jimmy looks. He seems anxious to see the old place he used to work in, even though he did strike along with everybody else against the fierce conditions. But I know how he feels. You sometimes get to like certain shops—that is, you get to like some of the smells, some of the machines and some of the noises, even though you hate the bosses' guts and often cuss the whole company.

Jimmy takes my peephole, squints through it for a minute until he gets used to the dark inside and then begins to sort of talk to himself.

"Yeah—there's my shakin' machine. Yep, that's it, and it looks funny as hell standing there dumb like instead of bangin' and raisin' a fuss." He keeps on looking, discovering machines, benches and so on as if he were running into a bunch of acquaintances he hadn't seen for years. He keeps looking, chuckles once in a while, clucks his tongue, having a good time.

"They're standing there—all of them—just as helpless as the company. Jesus, we got some power, us workers, when we make up our mind to use it!"

All of a sudden he presses his nose harder against the glass through the mesh and lets out a low whistle. I get excited and say—what is it? For a minute I think he sees somebody in the plant—maybe even some scabs—and am wondering how the devil they got in. Our pickets have kept this plant closed tighter than a new rivet on a tank-plate.

Jimmy straightens up and says to me:

"Take a peek in there, as far over to the left as you can see." I do and then he says:

"Now look on the ground floor all around those pits and moulds—what do you see?" I look, but it's pretty dark over on that side and I can't make things out for a minute. But soon I begin to see that the floor is covered with a whole lot of little dirty gray bumps in clusters. I look closer and then it begins to dawn on me.

The whole foundry floor is lousy with

mushrooms, growing in the damp, blue-black dirt! Jimmy looks again to make sure and then starts to laugh until tears run down his face.

He runs off to tell the pickets and they start coming. You'd think the way they fought to get at that little peephole in the foundry window that there was a naked woman in there posing. They laugh, slap each other on the back and some go back to take a second look.

Some company stool must have got alarmed and tipped off the police, as a squad car soon drives up and the cops start shoving us away from the windows. They didn't shove long. One of our boys, a big pit man, shoved back at a cop and for a second it looks like a battle. But more pickets are coming up, thinking there's trouble, and the cops decide they ought to go home and eat or something. Anyway, they left after warning us not to destroy any property.

#### GREENSBURG, PA.

Twelve hundred men and women on strike here. You get to know people better during a strike than at any other time. When we first struck, it was just twelve hundred workers—we against the company in a showdown. In a long drawn out fight, when things get tougher every day, and a can of beans begins to look like a banquet, when relief starts running low, the best in the crowd come to the front. Take our strike committee chairman, John Hatfield, for instance. Who would ever think, say the day before the strike, that he was a leader and a fighter? that soon the whole local would look up to him as they do now, a month later?

Then there's such a comrade as Donati, who was often called a "wop" by the high-skilled American workers of the plant before the strike. When Donati walks down the picket lines now they all smile and greet him respectfully. We all know now he's got iron in his blood. There's many more, like Mike Zaloste, Mary Evans and so on. All of these strikers have now become local leaders.

But in every strike I've been in there are always those men and women who kind of stand back; fighters whose names you may never hear mentioned and who have very little to say. But they are the solid rock on which the whole strike is anchored, especially when the going gets rough.

I met one today. I didn't get his name so



I'll just put him in the diary as the Picket on No. 8. I'll never forget him.

I was walking around the far side of the plant to No. 8 where it is the loneliest by day and the coldest by night. It's a single track freight entrance to the plant. As I walked toward No. 8 I saw a tall rusty-mustached worker of about fifty standing there, sort of stooped over in a slouch. Suddenly I realized that every damned time I passed No. 8, morning or night, I always saw him there. Other pickets come and go and get their captains to shift them around to other posts, but this worker is always there. And I've passed No. 8 many times these last four weeks.

I walked up to him. He smiled and nodded, as if politely asking me to have a chair in his house, or something. He asked me the usual question—how things looked for our strike—and I told him we thought from all reports

in the strike committee this morning that the company couldn't hold out much longer.

I could tell by the droop of his right shoulder that he had been a core-maker for many years; his fingers were bent and calloused. I said to him:

"Don't you ever get relieved? I see you here every time I pass. Come to think of it, I saw you here the night of the storm, too."

He tilted his worn felt hat back and his hair is the same rusty color as his mustache, only streaked with gray.

"Yes," he said. "I been here pretty steady since the walkout. I like it here kind of—and then it's best that somebody is always at this post—they might try and move a car in or out."

"When do you go home?" I asked him. "Got a family?"

"Just me and the old woman. I ain't been

home much, but she don't mind. You see, brother, I've got to win—I mean *we've* got to win this strike. It means a little more to me than the rest of the boys."

"Yes," I replied, "we've got to win. But it means everything to all of us."

"I'm getting to be an old man," he answered. "For nigh on to thirty-two years come this September I worked in this plant. If we lose, I'm too old to move to other parts. I'm not so young any more."

Suddenly I see what he means. I'm just a kid compared to him. I haven't put thirty-two years in the dust of a foundry. I've been blacklisted—then pulled out and got another job.

I intended to go home and get some sleep last night before I talked with the Picket on No. 8. I'm tired these days. But somehow I didn't just get around to going home.

# A Challenge to a Misleader

## An Open Letter on Toledo to A. J. Muste

DETROIT.

**I**N THE June 6 issue of *The Nation* you have an article on the Toledo strike. In the same number of *The New Republic* there is an editorial on the strike. *The New Republic* states its editorial is based on a report "derived from the personal observation of a reliable informant." The facts and interpretation presented in your article and in *The New Republic* editorial tally almost 100 percent. This may be only a coincidence. And then again, one is entitled to a guess as to the identity of *The New Republic's* "reliable informant."

You and I were both in Toledo at about the same time. We saw approximately the same things. Perhaps I got a somewhat more intimate view of the scene since I had the advantage of being marched at the point of a bayonet with about thirty others to military headquarters. We were both in the courtroom on Monday, May 28, when Louis Budenz—and others—came up for trial on a charge of violating the injunction against mass picketing. You wrote an article for *The Nation*, I for *THE NEW MASSES*, and by coincidence we wrote them the same day, May 27, at a time when the situation in Toledo was still at its height.

It is the difference in these two articles, the difference both in facts and interpretation, that prompts me to write this letter.

First, as to facts. You deal with the first Electric Auto-Lite strike which I, for lack of space, had to omit. You write:

"In February the union demanded from the employers recognition, a 10 percent wage increase, and the establishment of a seniority system. There was a five-day strike at the

end of February and the beginning of March. It ended when an immediate 5 percent increase was given in addition to the promise that by April 1 a contract with the union would be negotiated."

*The New Republic* tells substantially the same story, adding that "shop committees were recognized" and saying what is implicit in your account, that "early in March the company capitulated." (Emphasis mine—A.B.M.)

If what you and *The New Republic* say is true, it becomes a mystery why the second Auto-Lite strike took place at all. The workers won a victory, even their shop committees were recognized (which in practice amounts to union recognition)—but lo and behold, a few weeks later they are induced to go out again and fight bitterly for weeks merely in order to get the company to sign a contract with the union!

There are important misstatements and omissions in your and *The New Republic's* account. Permit me to correct and complete the picture.

The workers of the Electric Auto-Lite and three other plants, which were involved in the first strike, demanded an increase in wages from the minimum of 40 cents to 65 cents. Is this 10 percent, Mr. Muste?

Let me remind you that no less than William Collins, national organizer in the auto industry of the American Federation of Labor, pleaded with the strikers to lower their demand to 20 percent.

Let me remind you also that when the strike ended February 28, the workers voted to accept the very settlement that two days before they had overwhelmingly rejected. This they did as a result of the unparalleled demagoguery

of Mr. Thomas Ramsey, business agent of the A. F. of L., United Automotive Workers Union, the very Mr. Ramsey whom you and others of your American Workers Party and Unemployed League have been hobnobbing with in Toledo. Mr. Ramsey was ably assisted by the sub-Regional Labor Board, which was compelled, however, because of the militancy of the strikers, to remain somewhat in the background.

Ramsey put just three questions to the strikers at that Feb. 28 meeting. They were:

1. Who has confidence in the American government?
2. Who has confidence in President Roosevelt?
3. Who has confidence in the leaders of your union?

The strike was over.

The workers got, instead of the over 50 percent increase that they had demanded, 5 percent—2 cents an hour. They got the kind of shop committee recognition that did not prevent the Electric Auto-Lite Co. from establishing a company union and refusing to deal with the workers. And they got a promise.

Are you really unaware of these facts, Mr. Muste? If you are, you have no business writing on the Toledo situation or presuming to give leadership to the Toledo workers. If you are not, *why have you concealed them?*

There are other significant omissions in your article. Both you and *The New Republic* give the impression that the American Workers Party and the Unemployed League, which the A.W.P. controls, were leading all the opposition in Toledo. And *The New Republic* speaks of "the dramatic defiance of the injunction by the American Workers Party." You