

# On the White Collar Front

THERE has been a general pessimism over the possibility of organizing white collar workers, the most unstable and deluded class in our social system. This is giving way to class consciousness and confidence as the expanding influence of the Office Workers Union and the militancy of groups like the Interprofessional Association For Unemployment Insurance become known. In this fifth year of the capitalist breakdown the white collar classes have been stripped of many of their illusions. Their salaries have been cut to the code minimums. Their rise into the upper levels of industry is blocked by millions of jobless professionals who now compete with them for jobs. Their snobbery has worn off; they are no longer scornful of the word "union," though they may still be fearful of taking the first step, as are any workers in the first stages of organization. But that they can become class conscious and militant was spectacularly demonstrated by the Macaulay Company strike which ended in a victory for the strikers after four days of action. This was the first labor trouble in the history of book-publishing. To appreciate its implications it is necessary to know the character of this industry.

First of all, its status in American industry as a whole is insignificant. It can be compared to horse breeding, which has had to stand the shocks of all the advances in transportation and has degenerated into a snob-and-specialty industry. Similarly, the development of the periodical press, motion pictures, radio, and other misused achievements of the industrial era has reduced the range and volume of book publishing to a point where it is, almost like horse breeding, a snob-and-specialty industry. Not so long ago a publisher proposed that book publishing no longer operate as a business, but look for a subsidy like opera and symphony orchestras and other branches of culture. As a consequence, the industry has an aura of gentility which leads to self-deception on the part of many workers in it.

This does not mean that the book industry, in conducting its business, such as it is — and as a sort of scouting and proving ground for the big magazines and the movies it still earns occasional big money — is any more tender toward its workers than other industries. For

the most part the gentility ends in the reception room. The majority of the office workers are miserably paid; unpaid overtime work is general. And the psychological distress of the editorial, advertising and publicity workers is to some extent worse than that of their fellow-professionals in the overtly commercial fields — magazines, newspapers and advertising agencies — for in the latter lying is the rule and there is no uncertainty about it; but the professional worker in the book publishing industry must keep himself perpetually half-deceived, must knot himself up in subtle rationalizations, must somehow keep his good judgment, taste, and intellectual honor half alive while perpetually half killing them.

When the magnates of the book trade appeared in Washington in the hearings covering their proposed code, Mr. M. Lincon Schuster, president of the National Association of Book Publishers, made the opening speech. The gist of his remarks, which the other publishers approved of as masterly, was that there were no workers in the industry, only "collaborators," and there never had been, could not be, a labor problem.

The appearance of Laura Carmon, General Secretary of the Office Workers Union, as the representative of publishing house employees was a sensation. *The code authorities had forgotten to invite workers to the hearings affecting their working conditions, the publishers had never dreamed of inviting their "collaborators."* Miss Carmon startled all present by declaring that the publishing industry, like all other capitalist industries, has its labor problem. She referred specifically to the Macaulay Company and The Viking Press.

At that time workers of the Macaulay Company had presented six demands for improved working conditions, most of which had been but grudgingly granted. The atmosphere in the office, however, was tense; retaliatory action was expected. The employer used the following two weeks to intimidate individuals and underwrite the unity of the workers. All but one of the employees had signed the first group of demands. In the interval there were a few defections. The employers rejoiced.

They miscalculated. When they introduced an office manager and on the same day fired Dorothy Rimmer, the

worker who had acted as the union organizer, they met with resistance. A meeting called that night brought together a majority of the workers. This happened on Friday, June 1. On the following Monday the workers presented demands for reinstatement of Miss Rimmer, the recognition of their Union and a discussion with the shop committee to clear up the status and function of the office manager. The petition paper was scarcely given a glance by the president, L. S. Furman; the demands were rejected and the workers struck.

THE NEW MASSES gave its rooms to the strikers as picketing headquarters; turned over its office facilities to the strike committee; its workers and editors went on the picket line.

At first the workers were hesitant. Some of them were afraid to picket. But they were encouraged by the expression of solidarity from the workers who flocked to the picket line — employees of other publishers, bookstores, office workers sent by the Union, members of the John Reed Club, of THE NEW MASSES staff, of the cast of *Steve-dore*, of *Men in White*, and sympathizers including such writers as John L. Spivak, Dashiell Hammett, Morley Callaghan, Matthew Josephson, Malcolm Cowley, Tess Slesinger, Edward Dahlberg, William Rollins, Nathan Asch, and others. From hesitating to picket the first day, they advanced to such a pitch of militancy that on Thursday they defied the cops and were arrested.

Throughout, the distinctive feature of the strike was the solidarity of the office workers and the editorial and publicity workers. It baffled the employers. The two editors of the firm, Susan Jenkins and Frances Ellis, and the publicity man, Isidor Schneider, went out with them and went to jail with them. Furthermore, an increasing number of Macaulay authors, announcing that they considered themselves workers along with the regular Macaulay employees, joined the strike by withdrawing their books until the strike was settled. The authors on the picket line speaking to reporters, repeatedly stated that their interests lay with those of the workers. Thus the successful Macaulay strike was a victory not only for unionization in a white collar industry, but for the identity of interest between intellectual workers and all other workers.

# 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