

Steel's Frankenstein Monster

MARGUERITE YOUNG

THREE thousand United States Steel employees swinging over *en masse* to the industrial union—and from a company union!

Big steel is worried. Vice-President Arthur H. Young spoke to me ruefully of what is happening in the United States Steel company unions which he sired.

Did someone mention Frankenstein? . . .

"Certainly I don't like these developments. I deplore them."

Vice-President Young added wistfully, "I would like to see John L. Lewis off the map."

He figured at least 25 percent of his 962 employee representatives are pro-C.I.O. Worse, he lamented, the situation presents certain aspects about which there's just nothing he and his confreres can do.

Everywhere in the Pennsylvania-Ohio-West-Virginia area I found company-union leaders in on the organizing campaign. One or two, sometimes a majority, always a few at least were aiding the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. In what was known as Black Valley, where Fannie Sellins's skull was smithered by deputies in 1919, Allegheny Steel company-union men were coming around to the back door of union headquarters after the moon was down. They came sweating from their turns, in Homestead and Braddock and McKeesport and Aliquippa, to speak publicly for real unionism. More than a dozen of them marched into Pittsburgh's biggest hotel to join in the S.W.O.C.'s national stock-taking session. One bowed to Chairman Philip Murray, grinning, "We thank the C.I.O. for getting us vacations with pay." He referred to the concession, granted only upon the opening of the union drive, towards demands the company-union rebels raised last winter.

A few days later Bethlehem and Big Steel and Weirton and the rest played another trump that turned out to be a deuce. One by one they announced time and a half for overtime. But immediately came the answer. Not from any "agitator." From the Edgar Thompson Works company-union representatives themselves, and unanimously! They adopted a resolution conveying rather vital details. The first time they heard of their implied request for such a pay plan was when the super called them together and told them they could have it. In fact they didn't want overtime *after forty-eight hours*, thank you. That would mean a forty-eight-hour week. What they had sought was a *forty-hour* week, with time and a half for Saturday night work and double time for Sunday. "With that demand," they finished, "we are still in accord."

Company-union representatives in the Farrell-Sharon-New Castle mills drew another resolution which they thought would be adopted throughout their territory. A reso-

lution pledging themselves to fight for any worker discriminated against for joining the industrial union.

You can see why they joke about Arthur Young's plight. They say Big Steel's right wing—for even the Corporation has its right and left wings—has dubbed *him* a Red and is ready to attach the skids. Of course, it's just a joke. Steel will maintain its company unions till it signs on the dotted line of a real union contract. It will spare no stratagem to split them, isolate progressive elements, and exploit the rest. They may even deliberately encourage spurious militancy therein. The picture nationally is far from being of one color. However, the depth of the union's inroads is being demonstrated anew this week. Company-union representatives are meeting in Chicago to "revise" their plan. The labor press reports that United States Steel is sponsoring the gathering. Maybe it will seek an anti-union declaration. Maybe it will try to refurbish the company union to look more like the real thing. The company laughs this off, saying the meeting was arranged by the men. In either case the meeting may backfire. That's happened before.

I MET a company-union rebel in McKeesport. He was young, like most of the S.W.O.C.'s volunteer leadership. He was of the "American class," as steel saw to it a majority of its employee representatives were.

"They handed us our company union in 1933," he said. "We didn't understand what it was all about. We felt indifferent. We hoped maybe we'd get something from it. We didn't know how to try. How could we understand it? We had nothing to do with it. Company lawyers wrote it and spied it to us."

The workers knew enough, however, to join the Amalgamated Association when their organizer turned up. Then they believed Section 7a would protect them. Of 3000 in the plant 2500 signed up. Then—nothing happened. There was no struggle for recognition nor for improved conditions. Men began dropping out. Their charter was suspended. Yet a small group clung together, urged this man to help revive their lodge. He did.

"The whole department knew I was implicated in the outside union. Last June, fellows who'd been out of the union for months and some who never joined came and asked me to run for company-union representative. That was the first time I saw them really take an interest in the plan."

He campaigned for "real unionism," for "An honest deal for the workers. Put new blood into the representation plan." He won

the post of representative by a big majority.

"Before and afterwards, I said we could get nowhere with company unionism," said the company-union representative. "The idea was to try to get a little trade unionism into the company union. The plan provides meetings of the representatives, but not of the men. It gives us no treasury. It lets the bosses in on everything we do. We make demands—and in the minutes, always posted, they turn out to be 'requests.' That is, if they're not too popular, general demands, in which case they're just censored. If they get by, they go to committees. If the company wants to give in it does; if it don't, it just don't. That's all there is to it."

However, he promised to fight, and does. He immediately announced he would receive—of all things previously unheard of—written rank-and-file demands, without names attached. Another curse of company unionism was that representatives who dared speak up, alone, felt the whip. This was something different. This company-union representative soon received a written notice, "We catchers ask the same wages per ton as the roughers get." Instead of trekking to the management, alone, he asked for a committee of his constituents, including men from each turn. This done, he asked them where they wanted to meet to talk things over—in the mill? They chorused, "Hell, no!" They drew a petition to be signed by every worker involved. *That* would go to the management, not merely the lone representative's "request" on behalf of individuals.

"Say!" one catcher called out as they concluded, "Where are them C.I.O. cards? We want to sign up." The company-union representative hadn't half enough to meet the demand.

For a couple of reasons these men are safe in their jobs. The company can't fire all its catchers. It did warn the representative, "Watch your step. You can't carry water on both shoulders." This lad, however, is punctilious on the job at which he's recognized as one of the plant's best workers, in his conventional company-union chores. His recent activities have trebled his prestige—as the management learned when its threat evoked a swarm of protest leaflets.

The lid's been popping around the edges for over a year.

Last summer the employee representatives of fourteen plants in the Chicago area formed a district council, the Associated Iron and Steel Representatives of the Chicago Wage District. It was fantastic, incredible. Company-union representatives ignoring the essence of company unionism. Getting together to compare wage scales among companies that always alibied by claiming some competitor paid less. Announcing they would

fight together for higher wages, meeting every month, alone. Men from Carnegie-Illinois, Youngstown Sheet and Tube, Inland, and others.

The thing spread. Representatives of twelve American Sheet and Tin Plate plants held a convention at New Castle, Pa. They had faced the usual strangler—no money. They had saved from their classic activity, picnics, and the management, seeing that they would finally meet anyway, agreed to pitch in. So the officials presented themselves, headed by Arthur Young. The men listened. But next day they voted to exclude the official gentlemen, and laid down a program: elimination of management's arbitrary authority to hire and fire; assured reference of grievances to an umpire following stalemate under the plan's elaborate rigmarole; increases in company pensions; above all, a companywide 15 percent wage increase. These were presented to the company the next month. And turned down cold.

BUT rebellion mounted. Jones & Laughlin, Republic, National Tube, and Carnegie-Illinois plants in Pennsylvania saw the same demands articulated. Gary — which officials now call the "raw meat" spot—witnessed an assemblage of the representatives of 48,000 Carnegie-Illinois mill hands. Republic fired a leading rebel, but its Cleveland workers merely doubled their defiance. They sent delegates to other centers to confer on action. This idea also traveled the grapevine, and was adopted widely in the now seething Pittsburgh-Illinois districts. Spontaneously representatives began to do such things as vote to call in the superintendent and charge him directly with a blast furnace death.

Sometimes the men won wage increases for small groups in a plant, but when it came to general improvements they got the same old cold shoulder. And still they fought on. In November every Carnegie-Illinois representative received a letter from John Mullen, Chairman at Clairton, inviting them to a get-together in Pittsburgh. Mullen, who was to become the star witness of the LaFollette labor-spy investigation by taking a job to get the evidence under a government detective's surveillance, welcomed some fifty fellows informally. They discussed demands, pretty much the same as had been voiced at New Castle, and decided upon a formal delegate assembly. These in turn elected a Central Committee. They went to President Benjamin Fairless on June 1. Fairless simply said no. Recognize the Central Committee? Management wouldn't even print ballots for a referendum on it. "Which," Johnny Mullen perceived, "is the tipoff." So he became an S.W.O.C. organizer.

Meanwhile another hoydenish movement had been generated. In plant after plant appeared a drive to put union men into the company union leadership! And everywhere they garnered big majorities. One or more

swept through in Rankin, Braddock, Homestead, the McKeesport Tin Plate mill. Gary, the "raw meat" spot, turned in twenty out of twenty-two such candidates. Gary, where first the strike front was broken in 1919 by regular army troops!

Soon other company-union representatives presented themselves as volunteers for industrial organization in Duquesne, Jones and Laughlin's Pittsburgh plant, Youngstown, Cleveland, and elsewhere.

Facing an ever more impoverished life, the steel workers yet would not give up—that's all. Particularly not the class-conscious ones. These were sought out, down deep in the ranks in Chicago. Some people in the field said the original impulse came from members of the Amalgamated Association who had been expelled for the rank-and-file organizing drive following the 1934 strike fiasco. At any rate the most militant of those soon were active with the company-union representatives. The latter needed advice—their constituents, despite the lack of a channel for so much as organized expression, were pressing for action. Many of the company-union leaders themselves were restive. When they took the first step in Chicago, they discovered that even men who had been paralyzed by fear, by "American class" superiority notions nurtured by the bosses' divide-and-rule technique, and by bitter trade-union experience under reactionary leadership, suddenly came alive.

The then projected C.I.O. drive was another catalyzer. And John L. Lewis in turn found himself in a tide of letters, wires, delegations.

The great weakness of the company-union rebellion was the continuing absence of alert, active constituencies, and of organic connection with the labor movement. Some groups of representatives did mobilize masses by sponsoring workers' meetings—and the result was that these masses immediately called for formal, independent organization. It was the first of these mass organizations, one formed under employee representatives' sponsorship in the South Works at Chicago, that made the first mass bolt into the industrial union!

IT will take many more like it, both in and outside the company-union framework, to bring the S.W.O.C. drive to victory. Its first six weeks saw solid foundations laid. It gathered more than 1500 volunteer organizers to work with the sixty-five full-time and thirty part-time C.I.O. crew. It produced the beginning of agitation for, and some organizational steps toward, backstopping the steel workers with community-wide support. Special efforts were launched to form women's auxiliaries to blot out forever the kitchen-scab hazard that unorganized wives and sisters and sweethearts once were. A few youth committees were formed—how important, I saw when columns of striplings filed through the mill gates beside veteran union men who said the boys were hired

recently because, lacking experience, they might be more easily kept in tow. Attention was focused upon Negro steel workers, the S.W.O.C. taking the initiative in assuring equality, large Negro organizations responding actively—something else strategic because the Negro population has increased enormously, in some centers as much as 200 percent, since the companies deliberately imported Negro strikebreakers by tens of thousands in 1919.

What the drive lacks, strikingly, is tempo. That will come with the adoption and popularization of specific demands, such as the company-union rebels raise, such as workers continually raise with any stranger who listens to them five minutes. It will come with experience among the organizers who seem to have difficulty now in executing the policy of combining bold, open agitation with that secret organizing which is imperative in the spy-ridden, terrorized towns of steel. It will come with swifter, surer mobilization of the railroad allies who in some mill yards already have come forward on their own to aid the steel drive. It will come with less dependence upon Democratic administrations for the protection of civil rights, and more aggressive exposure and mass protests against the denial of them.

COMING out of this country, we passed Calico Hill. My friend, the driver, glanced to the right, where workers' shacks clambered up the hillside as close and drab as faded calico checks; and to the left, where the Weirton plant stretched out in black magnificence.

"To think what a society," he said, "when the people on our right enjoy something like the material advancement on our left. Nice rich country we have here. Such advanced industrial technique. Nice rolling hills too, just back there beyond Calico Hill. We could have homes tucked in among them, and here and there a school and library and theatre, and—"

This is the contradiction that stares out of every valley filled with the infernal beauty of the mills at night. Their great vase-like Bessemers open iron lips and emit flame and fiery spray, and smoke pillars into the sky; and the converters make a sighing roar, Oommoommoomm, and pour out pure steel. Black stacks soar. An overhead crane whines through the humming of motors whirling the rolls down below, near the ground. The red blooms slide out of their soaking pits, against the rolls, and clack through, a shower of iridescent points marking their elongation into still-glowing sliding lines, ingots. Making and rolling steel—at the world's richest rate of productivity. Just beside such a spectacle one night I saw a row of mill hands' houses. In an open doorway a young worker slept. How many lived in that hot little black house I could not tell. But on the windowsill of the front room I noticed a row of shoes—man's, woman's, boy's, girl's—four pairs of shoes.

Cuban Labor Underground

JOHN L. SPIVAK

TWO years ago Cuban labor held a Congress with delegates representing 426,000 workers. Under the terror which followed the general strike in March 1935, labor leaders were arrested, imprisoned, tortured; many were killed. Today some 3,000 labor and political leaders are in various dungeons built by the Spaniards and the once powerful labor movement, which had been able to paralyze Cuban industry by folding its arms, has in a large measure disintegrated.

I heard, however, that the most militant labor body, the National Confederation of Labor of Cuba, which had been driven underground, was secretly reorganizing despite the tremendous difficulties. Though it has only a fraction of its former strength, its influence is spreading. Since dissatisfaction is widespread and the workers are extremely restless, the possibilities of the Federation taking an important part in Cuban affairs in the near future are excellent. Through contacts in the United States arrangements were made for me to see the secretary of the organization.

I knew, of course, that the organization was an underground one and that the secretary was hunted high and low by Batista's secret police, but it was difficult to realize that leaders of labor unions not approved by the government were hunted in the same way they are in Italy or Germany and that this was happening in a land virtually controlled by the United States. The caution I was urged to exercise and the details of the secret arrangements for the meeting brought home forcibly the similarity to underground activities in terror-stricken fascist countries. During all of these preparations the thought kept constantly recurring that the American financial interests, working through our state department, were in a large measure responsible for the situation that prevails in Cuba.

At the appointed day and hour I was picked up in a café in Havana by a man who spoke perfect English and who acted as translator for the secretary, who spoke only Spanish. We drove through deserted streets for half an hour with the driver turning around repeatedly to be sure, apparently, that no one was following us. When he was convinced that it was safe he made for a typical one-story Cuban house in the middle-class section of the city. In the living-room, immediately off the low porch, three men and two women sat, two of the couples playing dominoes, apparently a national pastime, for wherever I went they were almost always playing this game.

"This is the Secretary of the Confederation of Labor," he said, introducing me to

the odd man who smiled and welcomed me as an old friend.

"We will go into the kitchen," the translator said, "and the others will go on with their game."

"Do you mind if I take notes?" I asked when we were seated around a little wooden table.

"Not at all," said the secretary, "but don't carry them on your person or leave them around in your hotel room. If they should be found on you or in your room—" He shrugged his shoulders.

"What would happen?"

Another shrug. "Maybe they'd send you out of the country; maybe to *Principe* (an ancient Spanish castle in Havana where labor and political prisoners are kept). I doubt whether it would make much difference that you are an American. If I were you I'd mail the notes to New York or some other place in the States. I think it would be safer."

I had an odd feeling that I was back in Nazi Germany. Somehow you expected this sort of stuff in fascist countries, but this was Cuba whose internal affairs were dominated by the Roosevelt administration, the great upholder of democracy and the right of labor to organize!

"What we want to know most in America," I began, "is what happened to the trade-union movement since it was driven underground. In the States, the newspapers are publishing stories that everything is now calm and peaceful here—"

"Not so peaceful," said the secretary.

"How many organized workers were there

in Cuba before they were driven underground?"

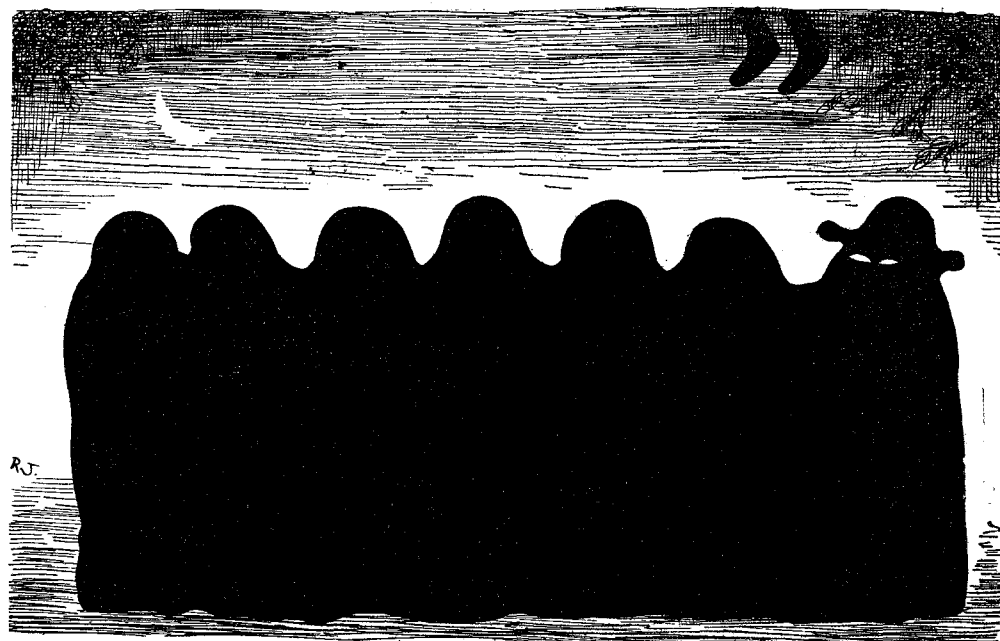
"The Fourth National Labor Convention held in 1934 was attended by delegates representing 426,000 workers. Later in 1934, many of the sugar unions were driven underground. When the general strike occurred in 1935 the membership dropped terrifically because of the government terror. Union men were simply afraid to belong to a union."

"Were these unions influenced by any particular political party?"

"Most of the unions were led by the Communist Party through its various fractions within the unions. The second largest control was exercised by the Cuban Revolutionary Party or the *Autenticos*. The *Autenticos* controlled specific unions like the Havana streetcar men and the Railroad Brotherhood of Cuba. These two parties were the chief controlling and influencing elements. Then there were a number of unions which were not controlled politically by any one group."

"Were the agricultural areas organized?"

"The Third Convention of the National Union of Sugar Workers, also held in January 1934, had delegates representing 100,000 persons. Since the March 1934 strike this figure has pretty much dwindled. In March 1935 there were not more than 10,000 organized workers through all Cuba in the sugar industry and these were hunted and persecuted with a greater intensity than was used against union men in the cities. Membership naturally dropped because the terror in the sugar areas was very great." He



"Come on, boys, let's duck out of here. These radicals have been eavesdropping on us for six weeks now."

R. Joyce