

Middletown Today

The "typical American city" of the Lynds' famous study is sloughing off its traditional individualism and going C.I.O.

By Paul Kelso

WHEN labor in Muncie, Ind., the typical American city of the Lynds' *Middletown*, shows signs of sloughing off its traditional individualism for collective action, it is something for progressives to note. For if Muncie even approximates the "typical American city," what goes on there is of more than passing significance to the whole nation. And Middletown's labor is definitely overcoming the hookworm of individualism and the chills and fevers of the 100-percent Americanism preached by the propertied classes and their prophet, the Liberty League. Under the banner of the C.I.O., it is organizing into militant industrial unions that are making a valiant effort to obtain fatter pay checks and better working conditions.

Organized labor's new strength was revealed in the mass Labor Day demonstration, Middletown's first in nineteen years. The city mayor and the circuit court judge took part in the program. It proved that politicians, weather vanes of current trends, have heard the tremor of marching feet, in unison at last, and are scrambling aboard the labor bandwagon.

Middletown labor is definitely awakening, and the individualism it brought from the farms of the hinterland is vanishing in the face of the urgent necessity for a united labor front. Today labor in Middletown is far from its inert position of two years ago. In the spring of 1935 labor organization was at the lowest point in years. The N.R.A. had stimulated a brief spurt in organization, but internecine disputes between industrial and craft unions, and among the leaders of the two groups, coupled with the ruthless attack on the movement by industrialists, spread confusion in the ranks of labor. Only sixteen unions, embracing a scant 500 members, existed in Muncie in 1935. Depression and the disappointments following in the wake of the N.R.A. seemingly had struck disastrous blows at unionism, leaving it exhausted for years to come.

No wonder the Lynds, in *Middletown in Transition*, were prompted to write, in light of available data, that labor in Muncie's automotive and glass industries probably would lack both the fortitude and leadership to challenge seriously the dominance of the reigning industrialists in the near future. As the Lynds saw it then, and justifiably so, the labor movement, if and when it reached Middletown, would be the backwash of a more virile trend in the larger industrial centers. Thus in 1935 they could envision only a

dark outlook for organized labor in the nation's so-called typical American city.

But if they returned today, they would find that the eastern Indiana farm boys and the hill folk from Tennessee—the 100-percent Americans, if you please—have exchanged their one-time individualism for membership cards in growing and lusty industrial unions. Membership in these groups, according to the leaders, now totals approximately six thousand men and women. A. F. of L. unions, more numerous than in 1935, have increased their rolls to approximately two thousand and five hundred, a gain whose merit is qualified by the fact that bosses are prone to regard the A. F. of L. as a lesser evil than the C.I.O.

What is responsible for this sudden, almost

overnight change from the apathy of 1935 to the militancy of today's labor in Middletown? Undoubtedly the sweeping victory of President Roosevelt in 1936 revived the flagging spirits of the workers, who remember the chief executive's radio broadsides assailing the economic royalists and upholding the rights of the workers to a greater share in the good things of America. The Supreme Court decisions upholding the Wagner Act further encouraged them to turn to collective action for a greater share of industry's profits. In his daily newspapers the worker read about the struggles of his fellows in other cities, struggles often ending in higher wages and better working conditions. As a consequence, he became dissatisfied with the low wages charac-



Colin

"As soon as you've typed these letters, Miss Squirm, and rearranged our files from A to M inclusive, checked and rechecked discrepancies in this month's billings, unpacked these shipments, and straightened up the office, you may take the afternoon off, if you've cleared up today's mail. . . . And as you go through the picket line, yell 'Phooey!'"

terized by the Lynds as Middletown's chief asset in the national industrial market, and resolved to translate his unrest into action.

It was in February 1937 that workers took the first positive step toward industrial unionization. Workers at the Warner Gear Co., a division of the Borg-Warner Corp., notorious for low wages and general exploitation of employees, mustered courage to send a delegation to Anderson, then the United Auto Workers' headquarters in eastern Indiana, to petition for an organizer. Elmer Davis, twenty-six-year-old organizer (who became conscious of the needs of labor while working in the Baker-Rauling shops at Cleveland and who has the distinction of having been fired from the Briggs Manufacturing Co. at Detroit in 1934 for union activity) answered the call.

His first act was to confer with the city mayor and police chief, who previously had been enthusiastic proponents of the idea that the police exist for the protection of vested interests. The police department more than once had placed organizers, known locally as "outside agitators," under "protective" arrest until they could be unceremoniously put on the next train from town. But this time, sensitive to the growing strength of labor, and with a primary election only a year distant, they pledged a policy of neutrality as between labor and capital. That was enough for Davis who immediately began an active recruiting campaign.

Despite a vicious program of intimidation and discrimination by class-minded officials of local industry, the U.A.W.A. chartered five locals, four with memberships running into the hundreds, and obtained a contract calling for substantial wage increases and better working conditions at the Warner Gear Co. At the time of this writing, the U.A.W.A. is negotiating for contracts for the other four locals.

In addition to the U.A.W.A. locals, the C.I.O. has formed a United Cutlery Workers' local, and a local has been organized at a

steel and wire factory under the ægis of the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee. Water-company employees have been combined with one of the smaller U.A.W.A. locals, presumably on the theory that much of the water they filter goes into automobile radiators.

A majority of the editorial workers on one of the Middletown newspapers have been chartered as an American Newspaper Guild local. And they are employed by the newspaper which the Lynds, in *Middletown in Transition*, said had made little progress since 1925.

Sixty-two employees of the city park and street departments have tested the sincerity of the mayor's stand by organizing as a C.I.O. local. To date the mayor has been eloquently silent on the matter.

To counter the C.I.O. thrust, bosses are employing tactics that range from intimidation to the outright discharge of key union men. The threat, "We'll move our plants

from the city," has been one method of intimidation in common use. However, the manager of the Muncie Chevrolet division of General Motors retracted this threat when he announced several weeks ago that plant facilities were being enlarged for an increased production schedule. Until this announcement the threat had carried weight, for the workers remembered the dark days in 1933 following the removal of the plant from the city. It was returned during the G.M.C. strike at Toledo, O., in the spring of 1935.

Industrialists also are embracing the once hated A. F. of L., using it to block the more effective industrial unions. The Ball brothers, manufacturers of mason jars and "beverage bottles," whose control of Middletown has earned them the title of "feudal barons," welcomed the Green Glass Bottle Blowers' Association and the Flint Glass Workers' Association, both A. F. of L. affiliates. They have closed-shop agreements with the unions. A growing awareness that the A. F. of L. unions are little more than disguised company unions is driving workers to press Davis for an industrial group to represent their interests, not the management's. At the Acme-Lees division of the John Serrick Corp., the International Machinists' Union, another A. F. of L. affiliate, provoked U.A.W.A. workers to strike by refusing consent to a National Labor Relations Board election. The U.A.W.A. local at Acme-Lees charged the company with collusion with the A. F. of L., and supported its accusation by more than a score of notarized affidavits from workers approached by petty functionaries in behalf of the A. F. of L. The strike ended when Judge L. A. Guthrie of the Delaware Circuit Court, hearing the company's petition for a temporary restraining order, proposed a truce which both sides accepted. The company agreed to recognize the U.A.W.A. as the bargaining agency for its own members and to abide by the results of a Labor Board election. This victory would seem to signalize the advent of a significant new era in the life of Middletown.



Woodcut by Dan Rico

★ ★ ★

Georgia Chain Gangs

Atlanta, Ga., August 7.—Governor E. D. Rivers ordered the state legal department to evoke the "full faith and credit" clause of the federal constitution to compel other states to extradite fugitives from Georgia chain gangs.—*News item.*

Please Bossman tell me what has I done
How come you lock me 'way from the light of the sun
Oh Lawd
Ain' no standin' place heah no set or lay me down
Double iron shackles from mah head on down to the groun'
Oh Lawd
Locked in mah coffin long afo' mah time
Great God a mercy, ain' commit no hangin' crime
Oh Lawd
Jerge gi' me short time sentence, thirty days an' five
Ain' heah 'em sayin' nothin' 'bout no buryin' me 'live
Oh Lawd

Ast mean old Captain, could he stan' to see me cry
He say you low down nigger ruther see you die
Oh Lawd
That's all right, Mister Captain, that's all right fo' you
I'm under yo' arrest, anything you say I must do
Oh Lawd
Please cool kind Captain, drink of water afo' I choke
He say go ast old Devil, hell's fire yo' gonta stoke
Oh Lawd
Po' nigger in the graveyard, where he never wake up
Captain in the barroom drinkin' out of silver cup
Oh Lawd

LAWRENCE GELLERT.

(From a forthcoming book of songs of southern chain gangs)