

IT'S NOT THE JUNGLE ANY MORE

By **HOWARD FAST**

Chicago.

YOU will remember how, in *The Jungle*, Jurgis, the indomitable, is beaten down by the Chicago stockyards, conquered by them; you will remember how death was the final answer the yards gave his people. It is two generations since Upton Sinclair wrote that fine study of the Chicago meatpacking industry, and even at that time, in 1905, there were thirty years of struggle in the stockyards' past.

I would ask you to keep that in mind when you read about the current developments in packing. The United Packinghouse Workers of America, CIO, did not come of nothing; this splendid and militant industrial union did not just happen: three-quarters of a century of struggle went into the making of it. How many lives went into the making of it, no one can estimate—any more than one can estimate the suffering, the unrecorded and ungilded heroism, the incredible organizational patience, and the amount of major as well as minor tragedy.

But today the union is there, the fact and the result of this epic struggle; and the union has called a strike. The reasons for the strike were most simple and most uncomplicated; they can be stated in one sentence: that the average packinghouse worker, within the price framework of today, does not earn enough money to keep himself and his family free from the menace of hunger and cold. That is all. Regardless of what you have been reading in your paper, this—and this alone—is the reason for the strike.

I have just returned from Chicago; I saw the strike on the first day—and for the five days which followed, I watched the picket lines, spoke to the workers, prowled through the soup kitchens, and sat in on strike meetings. It was something to see and something

to remember; it was also something to line up with the past.

The last great strike of the Chicago packing industry was in 1921. Before that there had been forty-five years of unspeakable working conditions, unorganized and uncoordinated strikes, depressed wages; taken all together, a local and infamous hell on earth. The "yards" was a place where a man could usually find work, and where, after more or less time, a man would lose his soul as well as his body. So evil was the reputation of the place that it became an accepted policy with the packers to advertise, in the most fraudulent terms, in foreign countries, and to import foreign workers by the thousands. As

Eugene Debs said at the time, "The place is a stink and an abomination in the nostrils of the world." Along with this, the "yards" gave premium work to the Pinkertons, developed an unparalleled blacklist, and along with that methods of violence which the steel and mine operators hardly matched.

By 1921 some of these conditions had changed; many remained unchanged. When the workers went out on strike then, they had no large industrial union and they had no basic concept of unity. They were rent by factional struggle, and finally, thousands of Negroes were brought in to break the strike.

Today, many of those same Negroes and many of their children are the most militant members of the new UPWA. Sixty percent of the UPWA in Chicago is colored—and no packing strike in Chicago will be broken again by pitting black against white.

NOWHERE have I seen such firm and consistent unity of Negro and white as out there in Chicago, in the yards. Both races are in the leadership as well as in the rank and file, and white men take Negro leadership as willingly and as wholly as Negroes take the leadership of whites. I talked to at least twenty white workers about Sam Parks, Negro, president of Local 25 and finance secretary of District I; they did not merely praise him; they spoke of him in all the terms men use

The Knife

(For a Veteran Not Yet Home)

Your name is in me like a knife
I turn at twilight to our former paths:
evening cuts me.

Or lie throughout the rigid night
blind to all we knew:
the blade is wide awake as pain.

Broad noon, the sanity of shops and job:
knife's narrow edge a precipice
to hurl me screaming down.

Only the anaesthesia of your touch
can soften this sharpest terror,
and later draw it out

knife, neat, useful:
bread to eat, house to build, fresh flowers plucked
like rain in the arid air.

EVE MERRIAM.

Professionals And Picket Lines

- The Newspaper Guild at "Billboard," magazine of the theatrical trade, is locked out over the renewal of its contract, which contains demands for a twenty percent increase. Its chairman, Paul Ross, was arrested on charges of disorderly conduct for yelling "Scab." "Billboard" strikers have launched a paper of their own, the "Billboard Guildsman," servicing the theatrical trade during the strike.

- Fifty doctors and dentists in Manhattan volunteered their services free to the striking ACA workers out at Western Union.

- Two hundred artists and writers from the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Professions joined the Western Union line on January 26. Representatives from the committee will march every day on the line thereafter.

- The ICC also purchased a half page in the New York "Times" answering its co-conspirators, headed, "Is the public, anyway?"

- The Newspaper Guild volunteered to supply and pay for a full-time expert to assist the ACA at Western Union in publicity and putting out their strike paper. The first issue is already out.

- Stage for Action presented Canada Lee, Kenneth Spencer, Josh White, Gordon Heath and others as picket line entertainment at Western Union.

- In East Boston eleven ministers, Episcopalian, Unitarian, Methodist and others joined the line of UE workers picketing the GE plant; in Chicago three Catholic priests picketed for the striking Packinghouse workers; in Brooklyn a rabbi joined the line.

And as for you: Add to these random notes that everywhere everyone who can, and this includes professionals, is digging into his pockets to build the strike funds, to keep those pantries and soup kitchens supplied for the army of the people. **NEW MASSES READERS:** bring your contributions to New Masses' office, 104 East Ninth Street, New York 3, N. Y., or go to your local Industrial Union Council if you live outside New York. New Masses has sent over five hundred dollars worth of food, but it takes a lot of food to feed a million and a half people. Have you done your share?

to describe another man they love. I listened to and watched local Negro leaders reporting to Herb March, head of the over-all strategy committee; it took just a little while for the difference in skin color to become meaningless—this was man in relation to man, pure and simple.

In the Chicago of today and in the America of today, a situation like this is no small achievement. It is an indication of the health of the UPWA, and it must be examined against the background of organizational struggle this union has waged. It must also be examined in relation to such men as Sam Parks and Herb March, to name only two of many fine leaders in packing. Otherwise, it could be considered a miracle, and could be approached with as little understanding as that with which one sometimes approaches a so-called miracle.

Men like these built the union. They built it, from the very first, with Negroes, Poles, Mexicans, Lithuanians, Croats—any many other national minority groups as an integral part of its structure. They built it as an honest, fighting industrial union, with the needs of its membership as the first item on the agenda at all times. Most of the union leaders still work in the shops; the rest of them came from the shops. They aren't career men. They are amazingly straight-forward in both their demands and their concept of strike action; they don't equivocate, and their strategy is fully comprehensible to the rank and file.

If I seem to harp on the subject of Negro-white unity, I do so because it is not only a basic test in terms of trade unionism, but one of the pivotal factors in this America we live in. The fact that the UPWA soup kitchens, whether on South Racine, or on McDowell, or on South Halsted, had Negroes along with whites working in the pantries, as well as Negroes and whites sitting together at the long board tables, should be the national norm; but it is not the national norm, and we must take note of the fact in terms of a real democratic achievement. And it is in the light of such facts that Negro and white veterans marched shoulder to shoulder on the packinghouse picket lines. Unity is an oft-used and very often misused word, but it is only out of an understanding of the word and all it implies that the leaders of the UPWA were able to build the kind of a union they have.

They did not merely organize the packinghouse workers; they educated

them. They taught them the full dignity of work in an industry so needful to the good of the nation. A job in packing became a permanent and respected worker's place, instead of the bottom rung on a ladder going down. Today, the men in packing are proud; and it was with that pride that they marched onto the picket lines. They struck with discipline and a full realization of their responsibilities; and it was not they but the employers who committed the act against the nation, who refused to discuss terms, closed down the supply of meat, and told the American people to go to the devil and be damned.

Recognition of the justice of the UPWA demands was given by the broadest citizens' coalition ever gathered to support a Chicago strike. Two hundred thousand people joined in the Back of the Yards Council, to support the strikers, to give them both money and food. Two Catholic priests, Father Ambrose Ondrak of St. Michael's Church and Father Edward Plawinski of St. John of God's Church, walked on at least half of the picket lines, along with the workers. As the Guardian Angel Nursery, the Franciscan Sisters set up a soup kitchen and fed hundreds of strikers, as well as their children. And dozens of local merchants displayed signs in their windows, proclaiming their solidarity with the strikers.

Such things as these are not accidents, either; they are a manifestation of the union's relation to its membership and to the community. And if our government has, as the President so loudly and hollowly proclaims, any honorable intentions toward labor, these facts must be taken into consideration. To take over the plants at present wage levels and face the workers with federal bayonets is simply to revert to the murderous situation which Grover Cleveland promoted in Chicago in the nineties, when he used federal troops to shoot down the Pullman workers. He was called "Honest Grover," a name which has an empty sound down through the years, and he too was a Democratic President.

There can be only one evidence of governmental good faith in taking the plants—and that is the granting of a wage raise sufficient to enable the workers to live—and the size of that raise *must* be determined by the union as well as the companies, in fair bargaining. Otherwise, President Truman becomes the overt ally of the meat trusts—against the American people, to whom he appealed so blatantly, and divisively.