

**Stan Weir**

**The Informal Work  
Group**

## Introduction by Staughton Lynd

During more than twenty years as an industrial worker, unionist, and organizer among seamen, auto workers, teamsters and construction workers, Stan Weir became impressed by the importance of informal work groups. The informal or primary work group is:

*that team which works together daily in face-to-face communication with one another, placed by technology and pushed into socialization by the needs of production. It is literally a family at work torn by hate and love, conflict and common interest. It disciplines its members most commonly by social isolation and ridicule, it has a naturally selected leadership, makes decisions in the immediate work area, and can affect the flow of production.*

Searching industrial relations libraries, Weir found much literature on primary work groups but only one study that was partisan to workers (Loren Baritz, *Servants of Power*), and he learned for the first time of the Hawthorne experiments. Weir sees the informal work group as the only organizational form opposed to formal bureaucracies which cannot be captured by them.

This account does not present the cumulative life experience of Stan Weir, being highly condensed and

ending in 1956. In the late 1950s, Weir went back into maritime as a San Francisco Bay Area longshoreman. Together with a thousand others hired in 1959, he was part of a new class of registered longshoremen called B-men. B-men paid a special form of dues but were not permitted membership in the union and were allowed only the work that was left over after the union members or A-men took the work that they wanted. As one of the elected leaders of the B-men, Weir became involved in a sharp and protracted dispute with the leadership of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) headed by the union's president, Harry Bridges.

After four years of agitation and after a large number of A-men had retired, the union and the employers decided to take the 1959 B-men into what almost amounted to full membership. All were investigated and all were promoted but a group of eighty-two which contained those who had taken the lead in criticizing Bridges' policies affecting the B-men. The eighty-two, Weir among them, were fired after a secret trial which was opposed by the local union. Accusations against them involved late payment of dues for which they had paid fines, and chiseling in accepting work assignments out of turn. Ten years later a number of those who were

deregistered were still attempting to get a hearing and reinstatement to their jobs via the courts.

Stan Weir is at present an instructor at the University of Illinois. He has written several influential essays based on his experience, including "USA—the Labor Revolt," first published in the International Socialist Journal (Rome, Italy), April and June 1967 (reprinted in American Society, Inc., Maurice Zeitlin, ed., 1970, and in American Labor Radicalism, Staughton Lynd, ed., 1973); and "Class Forces in the 1970's," Radical America, May-June 1972. His articles on longshore have appeared in New Politics. There are substantial similarities in the life events of Stan Weir and Harvey Swados' fictional character Joe Link in Standing Fast.

[The above was written by Staughton Lynd as an introduction to the following article in the book he edited called Rank and File: Personal Histories of Working-Class Organizers (Beacon Press, 1973)]

## **Part I**

The whole early part of my life was dominated by the idea that solutions to all that's wrong lie in individual morality. But my life experience, like that of most people, sent me messages which constantly contradicted this idea. I came to have a different idea, that you had to have a cause that was bigger than you because that was the only real freedom—living at one with a total society rather than just for oneself. It's impossible to know precisely where one gets that idea, but I came to know that the corruption of individual humans is the result of corrupt and outdated institutions.

My grandmother was a scrubwoman in office buildings in downtown Los Angeles. My mother quit high school in the tenth grade and became an apprentice dressmaker at fifty cents a week. She met my father when she was working at the Post Office. A year later they married and I was born a year after that, in 1921, the year that women got the vote.

I didn't know my father. That marriage lasted five months after my birth. Both my great grandfather and grandfather died in the early '20s. That left me with a family that was female-dominated. My uncle was an important member of our household but due to the Depression, his unemployment and resulting alcoholism,

he was constantly held up as an example of what not to be. My block in East Los Angeles was made up of close and long-time neighbors. They worked hard. They were poor, generous, warm and at the same time petty and suspicious of anyone not like themselves; that is, not of English, Scotch, Irish, or German stock. Most of all they wanted the happiness they felt could come from obtaining "a steady job." When two Armenian families moved in at the bottom of the block there was a temporary but noticeable resistance. Real socialization and integration did not materialize. In 1944, a freeway cut through and made the separation of the lower part of the block permanent.

All through school there were not more than three teachers who related to me on my own terms—really only one, a young Armenian substitute teacher. I was to give one of the speeches at the graduation ceremony from junior high school. My speech was called, "Our Flag, the Star Spangled Banner." In rehearsal, I walked up onto the stage to give the speech in a very sloppy manner. The teacher in charge of the ceremony had a fit of anger and in front of everybody told me off and said, "If ever I see you walk up there like that again, that's the end. You're not going to give the speech."

One of the big tough ball players on the team that I played second base on came to me at noontime and said, "Mr. Dingilian was talking about you. He said you did that because you didn't want to lose touch with us regular guys."

In the first year of high school I completely stopped attempting to participate in official school activities that were connected with the administrative establishment. I began to see that they were part of a system of favoritism and I was one of the beneficiaries of that system. However, I was opposing it individually, without organization, not effectively. I can remember I cut school one day, left the school grounds in my '29 Model A Ford with five others. We drove to the beach and spent a great day body surfing. The next morning I had to face up to the fact that I had been seen ditching. I walked in to get my demerits with everyone else and I was told by the registrar to report immediately to the vice principal's office. The vice principal explained to me that he couldn't give me, one of the leaders in the school, demerits like anyone else. That was impossible. "Just watch your step and don't get caught like that again. Get back in class." That had a great deal to do with opening my eyes.

Out of 323 seniors graduating in February 1940, the same man (who thought he was doing us a great favor)

invited the five boys who were known to be going on to college to his house for dinner. He explained to us how to get a commission in the Armed Forces when the U. S. finally got into the war. He told how he had gotten a commission in the Army as a young man in World War I and how we could do the same, that we should not get caught being privates in the Army. He told us how to work the angles through Congressmen.

It was very oppressive for us to know that the war was going on in Europe. I think this is one of the reasons why we threw ourselves into the "swing era" so hard. That was a big part of my life. Dancing and listening to the swingbands, and the security of the group that was doing it, was a way of putting behind the thought of that oncoming war. We all knew one another and all the males wore suits that were at least slightly zoot.

I always thought in grammar school that it would be different in junior high—we'd start learning the truth. In junior high I thought it would be in high school. And in high school I thought it would be in college. I went to Los Angeles Junior College in February 1940, and it appeared to me that that was finally going to be so. I had a professor of English named Richard Lillard. He was a liberal from the John Dewey tradition and he provided an analysis of society and the world around us that made

sense to me. It was liberating and I listened hard to every word he spoke. But toward the end of the semester I asked him, "This is all fine but where does one go to put into practice these ideas?"

The following semester I went to UCLA. I was in the Westgard Co-op. It was a co-op eating group. I was introduced to it by a friend of mine I had gone to high school with named John Slevin. He was a Molokan, a member of a fundamentalist Christian pacifist sect from the Ukraine near Armenia. His pacifism hadn't had a great effect on me until the war got very close. Then it became apparent that he was going to be a conscientious objector. He was in conscientious objector camps for four years and he led a strike as a CO. That made him a felon and for life he has literally been blackballed out of any career because of it—and he is a great human. I didn't finish my third semester at college. I could see no point in it. I had had a philosophy course in which the professor effectively tore down what he called the metaphysical temple and philosophically destroyed any basis for my belief in God, and I went with Professor Piatt every step of the way. But he had nothing to supplant it with. At this point I was developing a lot of cynicism about the world around me. I was despairing about ever finding a way to pursue a good life.

I seriously considered being a CO myself and I went and talked to Richard Lillard about it. He said, "Well, there's just one thing about being a conscientious objector. With your particular bent, your personality, it seems to me that you would like to live the social experience of your generation. And if you become a CO you won't, not directly." I wanted to find a way to do that without at the same time becoming a victim of the discipline in the Armed Services. It appeared to me that while the risk to life was greater on merchant ships during the war, if I became a merchant seaman I could then get the best of both worlds.

I became an apprentice seaman in the Merchant Marine. I was then accepted as a U. S. Merchant Marine cadet and midshipman in the Naval Reserve, went into training, and went out on a merchant ship as a deck cadet. Living with the officers' topside, I saw that this was an aristocracy. The contempt that the officers had for the men in the foc'sle (forecastle) was a fact of life. The first day on that ship I appeared on the boat deck with my midshipman's uniform on. The deckhands looked up at me and I saw in their faces that look of pity for the worthlessness of the contribution that anyone could make who would be wearing such an outfit. To them, that uniform symbolized useless activity.

They knew something about the ability they had to make that ship go from port to port with or possibly even without officers. They were a highly conscious group of men from the strikes of the '30s, an experience which was still fresh in their minds. They were involved, even on that ship, in job actions from time to time. Several among them were ex-IWWs; they believed in direct action.

Within three months, I was working on deck with them as a seaman, wearing the same clothes they were wearing which I got out of the slop chest. They saw that I was interested. They went out of their way to teach me all of the skills, the wire and line (rope) splices, the knots and hitches, and to make a deck sailor out of me. They wanted to win me away from the "topside" for good. So they started telling me the history of the strikes to win the hiring hall; the fights to destroy the "fink hall" and the "fink book," which had been parts of the government-employer controlled hiring system. Prior to 1934 on the West Coast, when you got off a ship, if the skipper wrote anything other than "VG," very well, in your continuous discharge or fink book, then you were marked and couldn't get another American ship. Carrying the continuous discharge book meant you carried your own blackball in your pocket.

So they pumped all this history into me. And then they would quiz me. "What happened on such-and-such a date?" "What's Bloody Thursday?" "What were the big demands?" "What was the 1934 award?" "Why were we able to win victories before getting a collective bargaining contract?" "Who's Lunchbox?" (That was Harry Lundeberg, the secretary-treasurer of the Sailors' Union of the Pacific.) "What's a Lunchbox Stetson?" (That was the sailors' name for the traditional white cap of the West Coast maritime workers.)

On that ship I had finally found a cause and a vehicle for pursuing it. These guys were involved, day to day, in establishing dignity for themselves and thousands of others, and policing all the things that they had done to obtain that dignity. I saw the boatswain tell the chief mate on that ship, "Get off the deck while we're working. Come and see me before 8:00 in the morning and tell me what to do. Come out here after we quit at 5:00 in the evening and find out what we didn't do right, if you think so, and tell me what's wrong. But don't come and stand on this deck while we're at work, Get off the deck and back on the bridge where you belong." I was very impressed with that power. He got away with it. I was amazed he could do that. I knew I wanted to be able to do that too. And I did! The time came when I sailed

boatswain and I told the mate, "Get off this deck. Don't stand around us and watch us or else there's going to be no work going on while you're here. Hold everything, fellows!"

When I left that ship I had learned the loophole in Naval Reserve law on how to resign as a midshipman without any penalty, just to get out. So I did that and I went immediately to San Pedro and reported to the port agent at the Sailors Union of the Pacific hall. (We didn't have "presidents" in the Sailors Union—it was a syndicalist tradition—they were "agents.") I went with a letter from the boatswain saying, "This here is to introduce Red Weir. He wants to come up through the forecastle like a regular and he knows the work. Give him a trip card." So I was in the foc'sle as opposed to the "topside" where the officers bunked.

Within a year's time I became a person who was usually elected the deck delegate on any ship that I would hire onto. They don't have union stewards on deck crews because the word "steward" means the person who is head of the food department. So you have "delegates" from the deck gang, black or engine room gang, and steward department. I was extremely and youthfully militant against the officers on every ship, to protect the gains of 1934 to 1937, like I'd been taught on my first

ship by that gang of strike men and ex-Wobblies. When the food was not good or the mattresses were bad, and the ship got ready to sail, I several times had the crew standing on the docks and saying, "Until those mattresses come aboard . . ."

We were being trampled on because of the no-strike pledge. We were losing the gains of the 1930s because of the war, and that in particular kept me in political opposition to the war throughout the war. World War II was being used by employers to wipe out the gains made by labor a few years earlier and the democratic gains previously won by the general citizenry. When I finally became political it was through the only socialist organization that maintained political opposition to World War II. This was the Workers Party, later renamed the Independent Socialist League, whose leading personality was Max Shachtman.

One day, still early in the war, I came out on the deck of a Moore-McCormack ship on which I was deck delegate and I spotted a small broad man walking down the dock under a seabag that almost hid him from view. We were short one skilled deck hand [AB] and I figured that had to be him, the last man to fill out the crew so that we could sail. He came up the gangplank and I asked him, was he the AB from the hall? He said yes. I introduced myself,

learned his name, showed him where to stow his gear and took him forward and introduced him to the whole gang by name. That kind of impressed him because he was a Jew and there weren't many Jews sailing, on deck in particular, and he had expected a little harder time. We rapidly became close friends. Within two weeks after we left port, he was the authority on almost all subjects in arguments on almost any question.

This man, who introduced me to socialism, was a visionary and had created in his mind a vision of a better society. He was a developed intellectual. He knew music, art and literature and a lot about natural sciences, and he was able to apply all those things to a vision of a better society. That was very attractive to me and many of the men on that ship.

When we got to Australia, he visited one of the famous rank-and-file organizers of the Australian labor movement. From that old man, who was retired, he got a number of copies of The New International, The Fourth International, The Militant, and Labor Action. He told me to read them, see what I thought. So I read them. I wasn't tremendously impressed with any of them, but there were some good things in them I thought. Trotsky was raising the whole question of democratic ideas and the necessity of democracy, which I was very much

interested in. But the Russian experiment did not seem important to me at that time.

It was in the Sailors Union and while going to sea that society at least in part began to become understandable to me. Marxism facilitated that. The term "cause," instead of just being an emotional and simplistic thing where you got an identifiable enemy figure in "the boss," became part of a whole world view. I could see that the great contribution of Marx was that he was paying attention to what people were doing rather than trying to impose a Utopia upon them. He had analyzed the French Revolutions, the communes and the forms that people themselves had produced and was trying to systematize it in some democratic way so that they would have some control of their own destiny. Being a militant delegate began to take on new meanings.

I began to understand that the reason why merchant seamen were often in the forefront of militant labor activity or revolutionary activity throughout the world was because, as citizens of a ship after it left the dock, they were really citizens of a molecular state, a total state in which the captain is the dictator. There is the middle class—licensed officers. And then there's the "lower class," the unlicensed seamen. It's a reflection of a class society. Once one can make an analysis of a small

state like a ship, one can transmit that analysis to the larger state without even fully realizing it. There's a carry-over. At first I thought that merchant seamen were militant because they traveled and read a lot. But later I was to see that the informal social groups that develop on a ship at sea are in the main created by the formal and official division of labor which operates the ship; that is, the informal and formal work groups are identical so that the social and technological powers of the seamen are merged, thus revealing to them the importance of their role and enlarging the consciousness of their strength.

One of my deepest concerns when I first met a Marxian socialist was the whole question of violence and terrorism, sabotage, all those things I'd read about that radicals are supposed to be "guilty" of. The answers given me were that there is nothing radical or revolutionary about terrorism or any kind of super-militancy. It's essentially a reformist activity in its attempt to change society without changing institutions, merely by removing a person or group of people or terrorizing people through violent methods. Someone who is revolutionary, in the literal sense of the term, is someone who is for changing society's institutions. Socialism, if it's good, is finally for everyone's benefit. A

way of saving the souls (if I can use the term) of all, including those who are managers or owners of the forces of production, is to create a society in which no one ever has to make that terrible decision to exploit others.

The question then came up to me immediately, well then why aren't we pacifists? It was explained to me that we cannot be pacifists because at a certain point that is irresponsibility. One has to be prepared, if attacked, to fight to defend oneself, and maintain the right to meet, to talk, to picket, whatever, and carry one's rights as a citizen to full conclusion. But if one ever has to do that, one should be as thrifty as possible, for not only do you want to not take a life but you want to create as few bitter enemies as possible. Those in power always have more arms than you. Those who work, who operate society, make it move, whether they dig coal or write poetry or keep books or file bills, have to be the answer to that brute force. Because that brute force can't stand up finally' against the threat of the withdrawal of labor and economic and political power by those who, "from below" so to speak, operate and make the society function in all its ways.

In late '43 or early '44, the Sailors Union of the Pacific, in conjunction with the Seafarers International Union,

decided to organize the tankers belonging to Standard Oil of California. [The Seafarers International Union was an industrial union founded by the Sailors Union of the Pacific which was a craft union. The SUP then became an affiliate of the SIU.] The only men who could get hired by Standard with any ease were those that looked young enough not to have had union experience. I was easily hired and I went out to Point Richmond, to the dockside refinery, to get on a ship. The practice was to hire seamen and let them work on the dock, servicing incoming ships, until they were assigned to a crew. I became a member of the relief gang and I was made assistant dock boatswain. That put me in a key position and I soon became head of the campaign on the job. I would assign rank-and-file SUP organizers so that they were not all concentrated on a few ships.

At a point midway in the campaign SUP men began to appear at work who were giving Jim Crow messages to the seamen we were trying to win over. Our opponent was the National Maritime Union (NMU). Their organizers were preoccupied with winning the war, Russia, and maintaining labor's no-strike pledge into the post-war period, rather than improving conditions for seamen in the here and now. We had been doing a good job by openly comparing our contracts with those of the

NMU. I could prove to anyone who was white that we had the best union because we had the best contract. I hadn't thought through the whole racial issue but I could see that I couldn't give uncritical support to either [the sup or the NMU] and neither side would abide criticism of any kind.

The men coming out now from the Sailors Union were saying, "We got to get a white union in here." On that dock, the messmen in the cafeteria and the room stewards in the hotel were Filipinos who were bitterly anti-union because of the experience that they'd had in the original union organization campaigns years before when the union had rejected them as members. I grabbed one of the men who had made some Jim Crow statements and pulled him behind a shed and demanded to know, who sent him out? It turned out that he had been sent, not from the Sailors Union hall but from the SIU tanker office in Richmond, headed by Hal Banks, a man who was later to get into the news as a strikebreaker in Canada for the American SIU. He was open about his bigotry. Some among those he worked closely with said he boasted membership in the Ku Klux Klan and was often armed. I phoned the head of the SUP, Harry Lundeberg. He had been challenged about Banks before and to me, like to the others, he said, "Well, Red,

the man's doing a good job for us over there and we have to overlook some of his faults you know."

I immediately got myself shipped out on one of Standard's tankers. Two months later the NLRB representation election took place. I piled off the ship the same day. Eighty-five per cent voted for the SUP-SIU. Lundeberg signed a contract allowing Standard to hire forty-nine per cent non-union seamen, but by that time I had been sent to Canada as a special representative to the British Columbia Seamen's Union to clear up a bad situation created by the man heading it up.

I hit all the ships as they came in and organized the ranks to take control. After several months I learned that Lundeberg had armed the British Columbia union's president with a telegram stating I was a "Trotskyite," with the idea in mind that this could be used to keep me from cleaning house too thoroughly. I had learned a lesson about how control is maintained by bureaucracies. I stayed on until I had maximum insurance that the ranks could sustain an opposition. I returned to the states and got the first ship available to the East Coast.

I would no longer be a staff organizer for the Sailors Union, I could no longer see my official union as a viable instrument for qualitative social change. I was now a

militant but without legitimization from the union. In 1945, when it appeared that the war was going to be over, the Coastwise Committee in the Sailors Union of the Pacific held a meeting and came up with a post-war program in which they said that, "This union does not checkerboard ships," in other words, ship blacks or accept blacks into the union, "because checkerboarding causes racial friction. But we are still a democratic union because the day the membership wants blacks in we will allow it."

I took the floor of the meeting and pointed out that the report of the Coastwise Committee "solved nothing," that it was true that the unions that were in any way Communist-line did utilize blacks as political footballs by patronizing them and then using them, but that no member of the Sailors Union could tell that to a black man and be heard because blacks were allowed some kind of citizenship in CIO unions and not in the AFL unions on the waterfront, and were totally barred from the Sailors Union. And therefore the crisis continued for us as long as we were an all-white union. (We had minority groups in the Sailors Union with darker skins than many American blacks. To this day I believe the bar against American blacks is more political, in the small "p"

sense of the word, than it is racial. Confrontation with guilt is feared.)

I was interrupted by the chairman who said, "What would you do, Brother Weir, if you were on the Coastwise Committee . . ." but he never finished his sentence because I believe he realized it would be opening up a discussion on the floor about the whole basis of racism to the ranks present. They had visibly shifted during even that brief exchange on the floor of the meeting. I think most people were seriously pondering the problem in that key meeting. But bureaucratically the discussion was avoided. One did not pursue questions after the gavel had come down. In those days it meant having to face up to violence and unless you had a caucus or organized muscle going you couldn't stand up to it. I had no caucus. Like all the other dissenters in those war days, I was very much an individual, isolated and alone in that union at that time.

I decided after the war was over that I no longer wanted to go to sea. I no longer was able to do what seamen do when they first start going to sea and that is to "ball it up" in foreign ports, carousing in bars and whorehouses, because finally one sees that the women are only there because of their abject poverty. As a man of twenty-five, and like most seamen, I had become divorced from

mainstream shoreside society and I wanted a broader social life. I remember one night I was in Port Avila on a tanker and the moon came up over those California foothills in the east. It was New Year's Eve and I realized how many guys my age were ashore having a good time and here I was with my ass on a cold tank top watching nothing but the moon come up. So I got a ship, a Grace Line run, and paid off in New York. That was the last time I ever shipped offshore.

## **Part II**

I went to the national office of the Workers Party and Max Shachtman asked me, "What are you going to do now. Red?" I said, "Well, I'm going to go to San Pedro and I'm going to spend three months on the beach in the sun on the sand and in the surf, see my friends, get a job longshoring, work three days a week and do what I want to do"

Shachtman said, "Red, we don't want to miss the boat in auto. A lot of important things are happening. You could do a lot of good in auto." That wasn't what I wanted to do but I realized that I would no longer have legitimization in the Party if I didn't do that. So I went back to the Bay Area, got myself a little apartment in

West Berkeley, went out to Point Richmond to the Ford plant, and got hired on the assembly line.

It was chaotic. In those early days after the war they couldn't keep anyone working there. People'd hire in in the morning and quit by noon. Some of them never even got far enough down the line to report to the foreman when they saw what it was like. So every day you'd start off with almost the full complement of personnel and by noon you were already taking over half another man's job. The work was really oppressive. Those who worked any length of time on the Ford line called the place "the prison." I would come home every night battered by the violence of the work.

Every day at quitting time, at the five-minute whistle for clean-up, the men would all line up waiting for the second bell to ring, like at the line in a race. When the second bell would ring they would run, as fast as they could go, down the aisles to the time clocks. During the first few days I thought they were out of their minds. A week later, I was butting them out of line to get my place at the starting point too.

We were always in the hole on that line. One of my operations was to put two bronze screws into the frame of the car that would hold on the hydraulic brake linings

or tubings that run to each wheel brake cylinder. One day I was so far, in the hole (the man next to me couldn't complete his task because his partner on the other side had put him in the hole) I couldn't reach my electric wrench. And so, not wanting the inspector to spot loose screws, I hit them all the way in with a ballpeen hammer and learned that they would stay in. No one would suspect. I had found a shortcut in the work. Those brake linings would stay on the frame of that car probably for several thousand miles without loosening. But I quit looking at Fords after that when they drove down the street past me because of my guilt and because I knew everyone in that plant was taking shortcuts; in some way.

One day they transferred me to another job. A man working near me lifted the motors off the motor line on a hoist and then lowered them into the chassis of the car. He couldn't lift the motors high enough into the air to clear the other men's heads if he was going to make the drop into the car at the right time, so he had to move them horizontally over the men's heads at about a five foot height. He had to yell constantly, all day long, "Watch your head...Heads up, heads up." The man was a nervous wreck. He would say after work, talking to himself, "Well, I only hit three men today. Why don't the

dummies get out of my way? They know I have to do it this way to make it on the job."

But then came the day when one of the pneumatic air wrenches hit me on the side of the jaw, because of a faulty clutch, and knocked off half a tooth. I walked out. That was my last day at Ford's.

There I was without a job in auto. The very next morning I went and got a job at Chevrolet in East Oakland where I stayed for two years. Most of the people in that local were Portuguese-Americans from East Oakland. There was a great deal of Jim Crow amongst them because American society was constantly trying to put them in the position of the American blacks. Their way of avoiding that situation had been to say, "Look, we're not American blacks. We're American Portuguese. We have our own Latin culture and we're proud of that culture." So for both good and bad reasons, to express their own culture, they were Jim Crow. The East Oakland, California plant and the Atlanta, Georgia plant of Chevrolet were the last two all-white GM plants in the country.

I pushed a resolution on the floor of the union that we should go to management to bring blacks into the plant. There was opposition to it in the rank and file and the leadership of the shop unit (which was mostly from the

then dominant section of the left) went along with those Jim Crow sentiments in order to maintain their hold on the leadership. But then they were in the position of being in violation of the United Automobile Workers constitution. That couldn't go on for too long and I realized that it would come up again.

When I was transferred to another department, everyone in that department was Jim Crow and they wanted me to be the shop steward. I had the choice of either rejecting them because they were Jim Crow or accepting them and dealing with a life situation as it came up. I chose the latter.

We won a lot of conditions in that shop. As a matter of fact, we had a sit-down strike in order to retain the right of having gloves supplied by management. We wore out three pair a week on that particular job. We won gloves in a grievance and then management began to renege on the supply of gloves. The men came to me and said, "We got to do something about this," and half of them were going to the time clock. I got them all back and said, "Look, any man who clocks out . . ." I didn't get to finish my sentence because someone else in that group of about forty men said, "We'll never get back in the plant again." And someone else said, "But if we stay here . . ."

and someone else said, "Available to work when they supply the tools to work with, we'll be OK."

It was an outcrop of an idea I'd laid on them very early. They came to me saying, "Look at the holes in our gloves. They're renegeing on the supply." I said to them, "Well, gloves are tools, aren't they?" and walked away. I learned that an efficient agitator is not one who talks and lectures a lot, but who simply throws out an idea and sees if that idea is workable and acceptable. We won that sit-down. We were opposed by the leadership of the local for doing that, and they tried to get us for it but we survived.

In all this I was learning from and being counseled by an old-time fighter who had led the sit-down strike at the Richmond Ford plant in the early '30s. His name was Luis Guido. He was one of the greatest men I have ever met—a true yet unsung hero. He would never take a union administrative job. For over thirty years as shop committeeman he fought the Ford and General Motors corporations to create a better life for himself and others. Who will ever record his name as a maker of history?

The second time the question of hiring blacks was going to come up, the men in my department said in effect,

"We've got to forgive Red for his strange ideas," and "He needs help on this resolution." The speakers in favor of bringing blacks in were mainly Portuguese from my department and that won the rest of the Portuguese: "If you don't want to do it on a moral basis—the fact that everyone's got a right to eat and work—you damn sure better do it because if we have a strike they'll recruit scabs in West Oakland." It was only a matter of time after that that blacks were on the line and working everywhere in the plant.

I got married while I was working in auto. My wife came out of a West Virginia coal mining family and we had a lot of basic values in common from the first. In addition to developing a career and family, she found no insurmountable problems living a life whose routine was regularly broken by job crisis and economic insecurity.

It was in that period right after I met her that the Oakland general strike occurred. The Oakland general strike was called by no leader. It was unique, I think, in general strikes in this country. There was a strike of women who were the clerks at Kahn's and at Hastings' department stores and it had been going on for months. The Teamsters had begun to refuse to make deliveries to those department stores and the department stores needed commodities badly.

Not many people had cars right after the war and you took public transportation to work in the morning. You had to go downtown to the center of Oakland and then out in the direction of your work- place. So thousands and thousands of people traveled through the heart of town every morning on the way to work, on public transportation. Very early one morning, here were the policemen of Oakland herding in a string of trucks, operated by a scab trucking firm in Los Angeles, with supplies for these department stores. Some truck driver or some bus driver or street car conductor asked some policeman about the trucks (this is now part of the mythology) and the policeman told him, "This is a scab trucking firm coming in from L.A. to take stuff to Kahn's and Hastings'." Well, that truck driver, that bus driver, or that street car conductor, didn't get back on his vehicle. Truck drivers got off their trucks and that increased till those trucks and those buses and those street cars just piled up and thousands of people were stranded in town.

In a small way it was a holiday. The normal criteria for what was acceptable conduct disappeared. No one knew what to do and there were no leaders. No one called it. Pretty soon the strikers began forming into committees on the street comers. Certain shopkeepers were told to shut down and drug stores to stay open. Bars could stay

open if they didn't serve hard liquor, and they had to put their juke boxes out on the sidewalk. People were literally dancing in the streets in anticipation of some kind of new day. Soon the strikers began to direct traffic and only let union people into town and keep out those who it was feared might be against the strike. It lasted fifty-four hours.

I'll never forget an incident in that strike. Some Army recruiting truck came in town through that mass of strikers and the lieutenant on that truck said over a P. A. system, "Why aren't you all out fightin' for your country instead of striking?" Most of the bus drivers still had their Eisenhower jackets with the hash marks on because they could use their Army uniform as part of their bus driver's uniform. And some big ex-top sergeant said, "Where do you think we got these?" With that he sang out, "Fall in!" and about a hundred men lined up and he put them through close order drill. Pretty soon there were several hundred going through this close order drill. They marched on City Hall and demanded to see the mayor. He wasn't in, of course.

It was that vision and the experiences in that strike that I experienced and which my wife saw, the vision in actual life of people determining their own destinies that sustains one and makes one stand fast for a long, long

time. You don't have to so often go through all those doubts about, "Are the fundamental ideas of Marxism sound?" if you've been fortunate enough to have had those experiences. It's a matter of being advantaged or disadvantaged through your own life experience that sustains or drives one away from those basic ideas.

In 1951, my wife and I lived again in East Los Angeles, right near the high school where I had gone. I was in the Teamsters Union, freight handling. Some old friends of mine that I'd gone to school with and were from my neighborhood were officials in those unions. I was making a pretty good living. Then I began to realize I was getting a lot of work because the dispatchers were instructed by my friends to give me a lot of work. I went to them and I said, "Look, I want to shake square like anybody else." I immediately started getting only two days' work a week. I quit and got a job driving a truck steady.

In that local, which was a local for industrial laundry wagon drivers, there was a terrible situation. The working conditions that had been built up by the membership of the local were slowly being sold each year, bit by bit, for nickel and dime wage increases.

Rebellion in that local developed, which I led, and I became chairman of the Negotiating Committee. The secretary of the local, it turned out, colluded with management and I was fired on a flimsy pretext that couldn't hold water. While I was awaiting the arbitration, the men in the local, through collections each week, paid my full wages. What we didn't realize was that even the arbitration had been rigged. Instead of utilizing the American Arbitration Association, they got an arbitrator who was an employers' representative in the culinary industry and I went down the drain.

At first the men were going to strike to protect my job. I was part of the reason why they didn't strike, because I was agreeing to go through the mechanics of the grievance procedure. I really participated in my own undoing, and of the men, because I was simply a symbol by which to break the back of militancy in the union. It was an extremely bitter experience for me. I learned that one does not always use official procedures in circumstances like that if one is going to survive.

This rebellion took place early in 1954, when no spotlight was on the labor movement on this question. I have an honorable withdrawal card from that union, however, because twenty members of that union walked into the secretary-treasurer's office and demanded, right then

and there, that an honorable withdrawal card be given me. Their instincts told them that I would need it in the future.

I had at least a dozen jobs within the next year. I'd get a job and two or three days later the management would come to me and say, "We didn't know you were in trouble with the Teamsters Union. We have to let you go." I finally got a job as an apprentice grocery clerk for Safeway Stores. I made about \$1800 that year. I had one child and my wife was pregnant. I needed and wanted a steady job.

I saw in the newspaper that they were hiring at the General Motors plant in all departments. They hired me immediately and I was spray-painting again, like I had been for a time at Chevrolet. This time, instead of going into industry in part for political reasons, it was just for a job. The McCarthy period had disintegrated my political movement considerably. The people were not interested in doing anything much but surviving. So there was no movement telling me what to do. I was "just a worker."

I began to discover the subculture in the factory and that I was working in an informal work group with a life of its own, its own informal leadership, discipline, and activity. A whole new world opened up to me. I began to see that

to approach any situation like this with a whole set of preconceived slogans was way off the beam. One first had simply to learn what the subculture was so that one's actions were understandable to everyone else, and not to violate what had been created. Because if you couldn't understand the individuals and the groups that they formed, you certainly weren't going to understand anything else.

Then it occurred to me that, by and large, the radicals' conception of the masses was a metaphysical one, an average, which didn't exist except in our minds. Really, the mass was a conglomerate of millions of workers in their subcultures, and rarely were there issues which were real mass issues. One had to try to find common denominators but, even more than that, had to speak to the reality of the people's lives as individuals and in their groups and in the subcultures, in each place of work.

I made friends with the people around me the way you normally do. Most of them were Chicanos from my side of town. We soon had a ride group going. We were on swing shift and one night we'd go to the black community where part of our work group lived and have ribs and the next night we'd go up and have tamales, enchiladas, tacos or burritos, and the next night we'd go and have spaghetti—here and there to each one's house.

One guy's mother'd make a big feed and my wife'd make a big feed and so on. We created our own social life, which you have to do on the swing shift, when you work from four in the afternoon until midnight. And the politics that I injected into that group? I didn't even have to try. It came in the natural course of life.

One night when one guy stole something fairly big (from the plant) I told him off. By stealing he was risking his job and he risked us losing a valuable member of our group. And that was irresponsible not only to his family, but to us who were his family-at-work. It was the most meaningful kind of politics that one could talk and be involved in. Because we were into that kind of politics we could very easily get into other kinds of politics. Just being me was being political. I was helping politicalize those around me without trying to design anything special for a mass.

In 1955, our plant struck against the contract the minute its conditions were announced and before a meeting could be called to ratify that agreement. I'll never forget. I was in the men's locker room on my break. One of my friends up the line came in on his break; he was livid with rage. He had heard the conditions of the contract announced on a news broadcast and he was saying, "Man, he must have really got us something!" I said, "I

don't understand. What do you mean?" What he meant was that the settlement must be damn good, for Walter Reuther had sacrificed an opportunity in which the ranks were willing to give their full energies to a fight for working conditions, just to get that improvement in the economic package.

In 1956, I got laid off in a cutback of 1700 men because the boom in auto was over. And by the time they called me back on the basis of seniority I was already back in the Bay Area. But it was in that period, 1955 and 1956, probably the biggest auto years in the postwar period, that some of the insights into the future began to occur to me. I knew from my experience in auto at this point that the next outbreak would be about the nature of the work, the oppressive nature of life in the plants, about the humanization of working conditions.

### **Part III**

Rank and file revolts today remain isolated and localized. They'll begin to develop to a new plateau once it's discovered how to create an organizational vehicle whereby they can merge and no longer be isolated. But that means a new form of organization, and if that new organization doesn't change existing institutions, particularly of unions and collective bargaining, it will re-bureaucratize rapidly. Rank-and-file movements are

already having the experience of sending good rank and filers into the bureaucracy and losing them as fast as they send them in, because the institutions aren't being changed. And, if we don't find a way to avoid rapid bureaucratization, we'll merely create more cynicism.

The only organizational means that I know of that cannot be taken over by a union bureaucracy are the informal work groups in the workplaces. The greatest enemies the groups have are unemployment or any change in the technology that destroys the group's life continuity, internal relationships and group-culture. Industries that don't have these groups, like the teamsters who drive alone on a truck, are at a natural disadvantage. But if informal work groups are the only form of organization that can't be taken over by a bureaucracy, then anti-bureaucratic organizational vehicles have to be based in them. The only way I have been able to think of it is to obtain a ratio of stewards or committeemen representation of about 1-to-15 or 1-to-25. That would mean that every steward would be a working steward, working within the vision of, in direct contact with, these informal work groups—something like the way it used to be in Chrysler before 1955 when Reuther allowed that corporation to adopt GM patterns. In effect, the work day is a full day of meeting within each one of these

groups. And if the representative gets out of line, he or she is on the job and can be disciplined by the threat of chill-treatment, ridicule, and worse. If stewards' committees at that representation level were to be pyramided into councils on an area level and finally into congresses on a national level, then the people involved in that pyramiding would still come under some kind of disciplinary hold of people on the job. If the American working class could get an appreciably shorter work week, which is technologically possible, then no matter to how high an office a person went he or she would still be working representatives. The representation time it would take would come out of leisure time as well as work time.

The labor movement in this country has never done a thing with the whole primary work group concept. And that's where the muscle of the workers is and where the union's strength should be. A work-place isn't a collection of individuals so much as a collection of informal groups. Until you recognize that, you're not really into utilizing the power of people in the workplace.

At no time in our society has there ever been a serious discussion of work. The workplace is where most of a human's waking hours are spent. For the first time we have to examine the total oppressiveness of the

individual's life. Workers in large numbers can have a fairly good life economically. But the total life experience is a very oppressive one and this goes for all levels of the working class in this country. People seek new solutions to that oppressiveness each day of their lives rather than just in terms of the next union contract or the next strike, and that is not being spoken to, whether it be in terms of heavy industrial, white collar, or professional work. I recently quoted a humorous Big Bill Haywood story to a carpenter with the remark, "Nothing's too good for the workers." He answered, "Yeah, until they get on the job."

The combination of a long period of relative full employment and automation has to a considerable extent destroyed the old values and work ethic at all levels of our labor force. In their desperation to lift morale, eliminate sabotage and increase production, employers are doing dabbling experiments involving piddling amounts of worker control. The official labor leadership fails to grasp the opening this provides to win some real controls. Their piecemeal approach looks to earlier retirements rather than humanizing the work. For the rank and file, life is supposed to begin with pension qualification in the autumn of existence. The view "from below" is quite different and that is the only place where

real force generates to bring satisfaction, dignity and creativity to the work process.