75th anniversary of the Toledo Auto-Lite strike

Historic 1934 struggle

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This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Toledo, Ohio, Auto-Lite strike. From February until June 1934, the city of Toledo, Ohio—a major industrial city on Lake Erie—was gripped by the workers' struggle against the auto parts manufacturer, Electric Auto-Lite.

The struggle was led by socialist-minded workers and won broad support from the city's working class, a large portion of whom were unemployed due to the Great Depression. The strike ultimately prevailed in spite of vicious opposition and violence from the corporation and state authorities.

The Toledo Auto-Lite strike was quickly followed by two more major strikes led by socialist-minded workers, the Minneapolis Teamsters' and San Francisco longshoremen's strikes. The three battles announced social upheaval in the United States in response to the capitalist breakdown of 1929 and the mass suffering that it produced.

These strikes launched the proto-insurrectionary organization of industrial workers in the US. Prior to 1934, the American Federation of Labor (AFL)—comprised primarily of skilled workers—had ignored or opposed the strivings of such workers. The three great strikes of 1934 exposed the bankruptcy of the class collaborationist line of the AFL—which in the midst of the Great Depression had been unable to achieve a single victory for workers—and served as the catalyst for the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

The militant upsurge of the 1930s was prepared by a financial and economic crisis. The stock market collapse in October 1929 was followed by an unprecedented economic decline. By 1932 US national income had shrunk from $81 billion in 1929 to $39 billion, industrial production had fallen by 48.7 percent, and unemployment had risen to its apex in 1933, with estimates ranging from 13,300,000 by the National Industrial Conference Board to 17,920,000 by the National Research League. Some 25 percent of all workers and 37 percent of all nonfarm workers were unemployed.

By 1934 Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" had done little to ease the crisis confronting the working class. Toledo, Ohio, a once vibrant industrial city of 275,000, had been devastated by the Depression. Automaker Willys-Overland, an employer of 29,000 people in 1929, declared bankruptcy. Four banks had closed their doors, and one out of every three Toledo citizens was on relief. The unemployment rate stood at over 50 percent.

Roosevelt's first major act as president was not aimed at this social misery. His so-called "bank holiday" aimed to save big banks and their big depositors at the expense of smaller banks and depositors at a time when many believed both the Congress and the country were ready to support nationalization of the banks. If there was a New Deal, it was this fresh deck Roosevelt dealt to the "money changers" he had railed against during his campaign.

For workers, Roosevelt offered modest concessions. The Emergency Relief Act (ERA) of 1933 provided the states with $500 million, far less than the social crisis demanded. Roosevelt's works programs never created jobs for more than 25 percent of the unemployed. Wages for the first of these programs, the Civil Works Administration (CWA), initiated in late 1933 (which lasted for only three months), ranged from 40 cents an hour in the South to 45 cents an hour in the Midwest and 60 cents an hour in the Northwest.

Wages in Roosevelt's best-known program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), peaked at only $45.91 a month for skilled, professional, and administrative workers. Even these figures must be qualified, for the greatest increases in relief jobs and highest wages coincided with the largest incidence of unemployed demonstrations and relief works strikes, actions that took place during the first two terms of the Roosevelt era.

Roosevelt's most famous "gift" to the working class, the right to organize, must also be qualified. This right, found in Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NRA), enacted in June 1933, was not part of the first draft of the legislation and was only added "to suit labor leaders," according to Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, especially AFL leader William Green. Furthermore, the right to organize had already been sanctioned in the Norris-LaGuardia Anti-injunction Act of 1932, during the Hoover administration.

The NRA's codes on fair competition, minimum wages, and maximum hours had major loopholes. Those companies which agreed to the codes were no longer required to observe the anti-trust laws, and the code authorities, dominated by employers, fixed hours and wages—often without input from employees. Roosevelt himself approved the merit clauses for the auto industry codes, which, according to Art Preis in *Labor's Giant Step*, gave auto employers like Auto-Lite the "right to select, retain, and advance employees on the basis of individual merit." In other words, the merit clauses granted employers the right to establish open shops and discriminate against militants.

Writing against the commonly held perception of Roosevelt's intentions in the creation of the NRA, Preis argues that "what followed the signing of the NRA was not the recognition of labor's rights but the most ferocious assault on American labor in its history." Yet at the same time, the NRA and Roosevelt's labor-friendly declarations had the effect of encouraging one of the most far-reaching organizational drives in history.

The stage was set for conflict. In the five years that followed the signing of the NRA, hundreds of striking workers would be killed and thousands would be injured in confrontations with company goons and state authorities. The American Civil Liberties Union noted in February of 1934 that "only where labor has been well organized and struck with determination have its rights been respected."

The AFL did little to organize the unorganized. When the AFL Executive Council was "prevailed upon to issue charters for so-called federal locals" (local unions directly attached to the AFL rather than a federated union), AFL President William Green assured union bureaucrats that "such federal unions would be of a temporary nature and ultimately would be divided among the numerous craft unions claiming jurisdiction over the various types of work done by members of the same shop."

In the first years of the Depression workers were stunned by developments and clung to jobs, fearing that any militant action would result in unemployment. By March 1934, there had been no increase in real wages and only a small proportion of employees were organized, but a modest uptick in industrial output and profits had occurred. The result of these trends was a wave of strike activity. With the slight economic improvement, "workers gained new confidence in themselves," writes James P. Cannon in *The History of American Trotskyism*, "and began a movement to wrest back some of those things which had been taken away from them in the depths of the depression."

Toledo workers walk out

On February 23, 1934, the Toledo Auto-Lite workers, who had been organized as AFL Federal Local 18384 the year before, went on strike. The AFL leaders used their authority to call for a truce agreement through the National Labor Board of the NRA to bring a rapid end to the strike. Refusing to be defeated through such back channels, workers struck again on April 13, and the company followed the industry pattern by finding a friendly judge to issue a court injunction against picketing.

The strike would have ended then and there had it not been for the actions of a committee of Auto-Lite workers who asked for assistance from the Unemployed League. The Unemployed League, affiliated with the socialist American Workers Party (AWP), had formed in 1933 to organize mass actions by Toledo unemployed workers to obtain cash relief. More important for the fate of the Auto-Lite striking workers, the League's policy was to unify the employed and unemployed.

A.J. Muste led the AWP, which would join with the Trotskyist Communist League in December of 1934 to form the Workers Party. Cannon later wrote of Muste that he "was an able and energetic man, obviously sincere and devoted to the cause, to his work." While Cannon recognized the handicap that Muste's background as a preacher would represent to a leader of a Marxist party, he also recognized that "Muste gave promise of becoming a real force as a leader in the new party."

Cannon had greater doubts about Louis F. Budenz, another leader of the AWP. While admitting that Budenz had "considerable talents" for organizing mass movements, Cannon, at the time of the debate over the unification of the AWP and the Communist League, found Budenz to be "three fourths a Stalinist," a claim vindicated by Budenz's later rise to the editorship of the Communist Party's *Daily Worker*.

At the time of the Auto-Lite strike, however, Budenz was still under Muste's influence and was, according to Preis, "an outstanding fighter for labor's rights and civil liberties." Budenz suggested the tactic for breaking the court injunction against picketing, carried out by Ted Selander and Sam Pollock of the Lucas County Unemployed League. Selander and Pollock informed the judge that they would violate the injunction by encouraging the workers to picket. When they did so, the court arrested, tried, and released Selander and Pollock, who then led the workers back to the picket line.

By their actions the pair of leaders delivered a clear message concerning the real nature of the capitalist courts, and the picket lines grew. This tactic would prove equally successful in the industrial strikes that followed. At the time, Budenz saw the tactics promoted by the AWP as proof that only through an independent, revolutionary workers organization could workers hope to succeed in their struggle. "The officials in the Federal Automobile Union," he wrote, "would have lost their strike if left to their own resources."

At least 10,000 employed and unemployed workers had joined the Auto-Lite picket lines by May 23. Lucas County sheriff's deputies and company goons threw gas bombs into the crowd from the roof of the factory. At the street level, more company thugs, armed with iron bars and clubs, and using a fire hose as a water cannon to disperse the crowd, tried to escort scabs through the lines at the shift-change.

Broken windows in the plant

In response, the striking workers and sympathizers showed courage and solidarity. Those on the picket line fought back with bricks until, ironically, the tear gas fired from the plant made the police give up. At this point, the workers besieged the factory by using giant slingshots made from inner tubes to hurl whole bricks through the windows. Deputies and scabs inside the plant hid in the dark until 900 National Guardsmen arrived, 15 hours later.

What followed, according to Preis, was "one of the most amazing battles in U.S. labor history": a six-day struggle between the workers and the National Guard in the streets of Toledo. The workers fought with their fists and bricks, but they also educated the Guardsmen. Speakers and World War I veterans explained to the young men what the strike was about. Many of the Guardsmen were reported to have been visibly affected by the speeches, a point taken up by Auto-Lite striker Emaline Stykerman when *The* [Toledo] *Blade* interviewed her in 1998. She recalled some of the Guardsmen "with tears in their eyes as they pulled out of the area. These were boys who didn't even want to be there. They were upset about the killings."

National Guardsmen charge the picket line

Click to view some rare footage of the strikers battling the National Guard.

The day after their arrival, Guardsmen opened fire on a crowd of striking workers, killing two strike sympathizers. Numbering about 6,000, the workers fought back, forcing the troops back into the plant. They were ordered withdrawn on May 31 after the company agreed to keep the plant closed.

On June 1 approximately 40,000 workers held a rally in the Lucas County Courthouse Square. But this show of strength, following the victory over the company goons and Guardsmen, only served to further frighten the AFL leaders who tried to calm the workers by telling them that Roosevelt would come to their aid. The AFL leaders' efforts to defuse the situation proved fruitless. By June 4 the entire community of Toledo was livid over the treatment of the striking workers, and Auto-Lite had no choice but to sign a six-month contract guaranteeing a 5 percent wage increase and agree to recognize the local as the sole bargaining agent in the struck plants, thus setting a precedent for the organization of the entire automobile industry.

One of the most important strikes in US history, the Toledo Auto-Lite struggle is full of lessons for workers today. Toledo's workers showed that it was necessary to fight independently of the policies and sanction of the national AFL bureaucracy, and to pioneer new forms of struggle that could rally the support of an entire community. Likewise, today the resurgence of labor struggles cannot be built on reforms to the existing organizations. Far more than even the AFL of the 1920s and early 1930s, today's AFL-CIO is a union in name only, bitterly opposed to militant labor struggle. Not a single step forward can be taken under its banner.

In the 1930s workers learned that to secure any advance, entire industries would have to be organized into one single union, rather than breaking workers up into this or that craft within a single factory. This breakthrough in working class organization corresponded to the enormous development of industry in the decades that preceded it. Today, working class struggle will have to be organized on a global and *socialist* basis that corresponds to the character of transnational production and the current worldwide capitalist crisis.

The Toledo strike did not achieve victory by attempting to apply pressure on the Roosevelt administration. The strike was an independent struggle, in which the influence of socialist workers played the crucial role. Strike leaders appealed not to politicians, but to unemployed workers and the whole working class.

However, the militant labor struggles in the 1930s did not lead to working class political independence from capitalist politics. The three strikes of 1934 jolted Roosevelt into adopting a more far-reaching program of social reforms, what historians have called "the second New Deal." Without reform, Roosevelt feared revolution was in the offing. Those reforms helped cement a political alliance with the trade union bureaucrats and the Stalinist Communist Party, which in turn worked to subordinate working class struggle to the Democratic Party.

The failure of the US working class to build an independent political movement in the 1930s limited the efficacy of their strikes and organizing drives, no matter how militant. The price paid for the subordination of the labor movement to capitalist politics and the free market finds one finished expression in the destruction, over the past three decades, of the trade unions as working class organizations.