

A portrait of life in America's Rust Belt: Part Three

Part Three

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1937: The sit-down strike wave hits Indiana

Young people were not the only ones who raised historical questions in conversations with WSWs reporters. A common theme in discussions with autoworkers was the transformation of the trade unions from organizations that previously fought to advance the interests of workers into management organizations.

As one Marion stamping autoworker, Steve, told the WSWs, “In ’36 and ’37 the union wasn’t part of management!”

Another Indiana autoworker said: “Why was the union established in the first place? If you’re going to go along with the company, what’s the point of having a union? Now they say it’s ‘shared sacrifice.’ Years ago it wasn’t shared. Working conditions, health and safety, they were all put into play. We need someone to speak up for the workers. The point was to have someone for our side.”

Such sentiments were broadly expressed. Indeed, most autoworkers have a general understanding that the establishment of the UAW in 1935 and its recognition by the major auto companies in 1937 was the product of mass social struggles that often involved open class war.

Workers in Indiana played their own role in these struggles. When autoworkers in the central Indiana town of Anderson got wind that their fellow workers in Flint, Michigan had begun a sit-down strike in late 1936 against General Motors, support for joining the strike in the small town spread. On December 31, 400 workers occupied and stopped production at the Guide Lamp plant. Many autoworkers did not initially join the occupation, but most refused to reenter the plant out of sympathy with the strikers. GM locked its workers out the following day.

The local ruling elite had formed themselves into a right-wing “Citizens’ League” to crush the strike. On January 25, 1937, a crowd of several thousand was mobilized by GM and the Citizens’ League at the Granada Theater to attack strikers and their families. As the thugs spread through the town, GM personnel directors distributed liquor while police handed out clubs and rocks.

The mob came upon a union organizer named Charles Kramer and gave him a severe beating on the courthouse square while police officers stood by and watched. Once the mob had done a number on Kramer, the police carted him to jail.

Some time later, the company succeeded in reopening the GM plant, but with the auto industry shut down by the national strike, the scab workers had no reason to make car parts. Instead, workers learned that the scabs

were producing blackjacks, long daggers and buttons that read “loyal employee.”

On February 11, the Citizens’ League mobilized its mob once more to attack a meeting of 1,000 autoworkers that was being held at the Crystal Theater to celebrate GM’s capitulation and the recognition of the UAW as the exclusive bargaining agent for workers. With autoworkers and their wives and children inside, the mob of vigilantes fired bullets through the windows of the theater. The implication was that the mob was prepared to massacre hundreds of workers and their families. Such events took place with some regularity.

Police stood by and watched the mob gather, refusing a request that the autoworkers’ children be escorted to safety. The workers gathered to discuss what to do next. Most were fed up with the treatment they had received by the company, the thugs and the police. Their suggestion was that the workers get their hunting rifles and shotguns and send a message of their own. Future UAW President Walter Reuther was at the meeting and intervened to prevent the workers from fighting back.

The workers decided that they were not going to let the mob ruin their celebration and the band played until the early morning hours. Eventually, the mob thinned out and no workers were harmed.

The great strike wave of the 1930s was a milestone in the development of the class struggle in the United States. Workers made important gains in living standards through the semi-insurrectionary sit-down plant occupations involving 140,000 autoworkers nationally.

The sit-down strikes took place in direct opposition to the old, craft-based American Federation of Labor (AFL). In fact, it was the workers themselves that initiated the auto sit-down strikes, not only against the orders of the AFL, but also against the leadership of the AFL’s rival union organization, the CIO. As Harvard economist and CIO official J. Raymond Walsh writes in his book *C.I.O.—Industrial Unionism in Action*, “The CIO high command...tried in vain to prevent the strike; it was fed by deep springs of resentment among thousands of men against a corporation grossly derelict in its obligations.”

The period in which trade unions like the UAW (which became a part of the CIO) could serve as a vehicle to advance the interests of workers has long passed. The workers built the unions through heroic struggle, but today they have been transformed into organs of management used to police the workers and enforce the demands of the companies.

This process can be explained not by individual “bad” union leaders at the local or international level, but by underlying changes in the organization of the capitalist system. While the sit-down strikes had been spearheaded by socialists, the union movement as a whole was dominated by a right-wing bureaucracy that cemented a political alliance with the Democratic Party. This alliance was based on an acceptance of capitalist property relations—i.e., the exploitation of the working class by the owners

of capital.

During the postwar period, under conditions of economic growth and the global domination of American capitalism, workers were still able to win significant gains through bitter social struggle, despite the anticommunism of the union leadership, which organized a purge of the most militant workers.

Beginning in the 1960s and 70s, the world economy underwent an unprecedented process of globalization, and American capitalism entered a period of economic decline. The nationalist and pro-capitalist trade union organizations responded by deepening their alliance with the corporations and with the capitalist system. To preserve the profits of the companies, they have collaborated in the destruction of wages and benefits, while suppressing all opposition among the workers they claim to represent.

The struggle to unite the working class internationally must take place on the basis of the repudiation of capitalism and in opposition to the nationalist trade unions. Only through the international unity of the working class do workers stand a chance of defeating the alliance of the multinational corporations and their trade union cronies.

Indiana as a hotbed of socialism

The foundations of the workers' militancy and resolve in the strikes of the 1930s were laid by socialists and communists. In fact, central Indiana was a hotbed of socialist agitation. Mass meetings of thousands of workers greeted Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs at his regular appearances in the area in the first decades of the century.

Local historian William F. Munn spoke to the WSWS and provided newspaper clippings reporting on Debs' speeches. In 1900, Debs spoke to a crowd of 3,000 people in Marion as part of his campaign for president.

In an article that appeared in the Marion-based *Chronicle Tribune* on November 5, 2004, Munn wrote that "Debs was a return visitor to the city. A Hoosier from Terre Haute, Debs had formed close ties in Marion through local Socialist leader John Kelley. Kelley, a prosperous local furniture dealer, had been instrumental in organizing the Marion Social Democratic Party."

Munn writes that upon taking the stage before the throng of supporters, Debs "wasted no time in attacking his opposition." He then quotes Debs, who told the audience, "Labor is bought and sold. Emancipate labor, and the badge of labor is dignity. The machine then will be the only slave."

Debs went on to denounce the US government and President William McKinley for the brutal invasion of the Philippines during the Spanish-American war.

"War is the product of capitalism. What are we over in the Philippines for? We have committed enough murder in the name of civilization. I would say to the Filipino: we don't want your islands. Set up your government."

Debs and his socialist program received 21,374 votes in Indiana in the 1900 election. By 1912, Debs' total had increased to 36,931. In 1912, socialists were elected to local office in the Indiana towns of Staunton, Shirley, Millersburg, Shelburn, Farmersburg, Spencer, Normal City and Diamond. Socialist newspapers like *The Social Advance*, *The Issue*, *Indiana Socialist*, *The Marion Socialist*, *Free Press*, and *The Social Educator* were published in cities and towns across the state with circulations in the thousands.

Debs spoke more than once in Marion during the 1900 campaign. On another occasion, the local bourgeois paper printed the headline: "Against the system—E.V. Debs makes the usual attack upon the competitive idea—pictures an ideal future—speaks to big audience."

The paper then published much of Debs' speech, which he delivered to a crowd of 1,300.

"The vital issue springs from private ownership of sources of production," Debs said. "The hand tool of a century ago has expanded to a great machine. This tool is in the hands of the capitalist class which doesn't use it. It is used by the working class which doesn't own it. The capitalist demands his profit. Labor demands his wage. When profits are large, wages must be small. When wages are big, profits must be small. The capitalist and worker are apart. Their interests conflict."

Later in the same speech, Debs told the crowd in Marion, "If I had the ownership of the sun and could shut it off, you'd die at my whim. The corporation that controls the workingman's means of living controls the workingman. We have monopolies. We must either leave them and continue them for our masters, or we must take possession of them and operate them for the benefit of the people. The Republican Party proposes measures, but does not touch the burning issue. The Democratic Party puts forward ideas that are perfectly preposterous. It is either private ownership and slavery or collective ownership and freedom. I would rather vote for freedom and fail, than to vote for slavery and get it."

Readers may be surprised to learn of the deep current of class struggle and revolutionary socialist politics that runs beneath the surface of social life in small town Indiana. But the history of places like Anderson and Marion are not exceptions—they are the rule, both in the United States and around the world.

The ruling class knows that the maintenance of its privileged existence depends on its ability to prevent workers and youth from learning about the history of the class struggle and drawing revolutionary socialist conclusions. The television channels, newspapers, universities—all controlled by the ruling elite—put forward an image of the United States as a country of social peace where the main divisions in society are not based on class, but race, gender and sexual orientation.

This conception is put forward most forcefully by the Democratic Party and the various organizations that support it. The pseudo-left backers of the Democrats, comprised largely of satisfied members of the upper-middle class, view the American working class—and in particular white workers—as backwards, racist and homophobic.

Roughly 90 percent of people in north-central Indiana happen to have white skin, which makes them no better and no worse than people whose skin happens to be a different color. What is clear from visiting the area and speaking to its residents is that the capitalists and financial speculators that have wreaked havoc on this area for a better part of the last half-century do not ask what race a worker is before shutting down his factory.

The overbearing stress and pressure that the working people of Kokomo, Muncie, Marion, and Anderson wake up to face on a daily basis are the products of an economic system—capitalism—whose sole purpose is to exploit their labor power for private profit.

Yet in the face of relentless personal and financial difficulties, there exists among broad sections of the population a very powerful and healthy sentiment that speaks volumes to the objectively revolutionary character of the working class in the United States and around the world.

On the one hand there is a profound anger—anger at the ruling class and their unions for profiting off of poverty, social misery and war. There is also a sense of yearning for something new—for a mass social movement that will rock bourgeois officialdom at its foundations and sweep tens of millions into a struggle for social equality.

Beneath all of this there exists a sentiment that has often proven deadly for the status quo and its defenders throughout history: There is a strong sense of impatience felt by the residents of Central Indiana and a conviction that things cannot remain the same. In all likelihood, these quiet towns will not remain quiet much longer.

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