Oral History Project

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Interview with Irving Abrams
by Frank Ninkovich
1970

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Interviewer: Frank Ninkovich
Date: 1970

R. I was born in London seventy-nine years ago. I came to the United States in 1901, living in Rochester, New York. I first came in contact then with the Socialist Movement when I was about seventeen years of age, and then became very active in that period in the Socialist Movement. I was secretary of Seventh Ward Socialist Party of Rochester, New York, Eighth Ward Socialist Party, the Workman's Circle Branch 428 and also secretary of the Montero County, Rochester, New York.

I. About what period of time was this?

R. About 1906 or 7 about that period. I was at about sixteen years old -- seventeen years old.

I. Did you ever meet Eugene Debs or any of the other members of the Socialist Party?

R. When the Red Special came through with Eugene Debs, I was then secretary of Monroe County. In fact, I introduced him in the speech that he made that time, I forget the name of the hall. It was on Monroe Avenue. I was then the active person in the movement in Chicago.
It was shortly thereafter that in my reading I started to read anarchist literature. And I then came in contact with Emma Goldman, who came to speak in Rochester, New York, which was her home town. Her father lived across the street from where I lived. In fact, as a kid I ran many errands for him. He was in the business of repairing furniture and I would deliver some for him. Other members of the family lived across the block from there, across #9 School. She had another relative had a bookstore and school supplies by the name of Hochstein. And a half a block from there another relative, a hardware store, by the name of Klomek. I knew all of them and I met with Emma Goldman several times in groups together in later years.

I was drifting at that time already into anarchist philosophy and anarchist groups. And about that time I also become active in IWW and I helped to organize the first IWW local in Rochester, New York. In fact, we rented an upstairs for a hall, and we got a young fellow that time from Chicago as organizer. We were doing a lot of organizing work for the IWW, by street corner meetings and noon hour at factory gates, distributing IWW literature.

I. What were you organizing for particularly at that time?

R. The Clothing Worker's strike in 1910. There was a strike of the Clothing Workers and the strike was about to fizzle and some of us at the IWW thought we could step in and
revitalize the strike, which, of course, we failed. Once a thing was lost you don't bring the dead back to life. I stayed on then for two more years until the place where I was working as a clothing cutter, August Brothers, went on strike and I lost my job, and then came up to Chicago in December of 1911 or 1912. I don't remember exactly.

I . Didn't you participate in a strike in Little Falls, New York?
R . Prior to coming to Chicago, after I lost my job in Rochester, New York, I went down to Utica, New York. The strike broke out in Little Falls. And I, in my enthusiasm, decided to go down there and take over the leadership of the strike.

I . It was a spontaneous strike?
R . It was a spontaneous strike, walk-out, and it seemed that the elements there were most of them Italians. And this had been after other conflicts in the country, and the Italians seemed to be most sympathetic at that time to the IWW. The fact is that the other unions didn't attempt to do anything, so we were like Johnny-on-the-spot, walked in there, and we conducted a strike. Matter of fact Bill Haywood came down there while the strike was going on and we spent one evening with him at the
Italian Club at Utica, New York. I remember that night when Bill Haywood took off his big hat. Showed us the scars on his head, that he had been beaten when Moyer was arrested. He went into Union Station in Denver to shake hands with him, they knocked him down with butts of rifles on the floor of the station. I remember he said that night, "I hope to live to see the day when I can pay these bastards back every blow that I ever got."

I. Apparently that wasn't the time that he shot back at one of the --

R. No. Shortly thereafter the strike ended. It was a tough strike. We would meet at night in the hall and the hall would be surrounded by hired gunmen with their revolvers drawn. There was never any bloodshed, but it wasn't pleasant to think these people had to walk out surrounded with gunmen with drawn revolvers. It wasn't a pleasant situation. But, after the strike was over I had no job left because my boss had found out that I was spending half my time leading the strike in Little Falls. So, I went on to Chicago. Oh, one other thing -- just about the time I came to Chicago, the split had taken place between the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the United Garment
Workers (which was the old AFL Union) at Nashville, Tennessee. I had just come back to Rochester, I had come to visit my mother. They called a mass meeting of the tailors and they tried to get an English speaker. It seemed that none of the AFL people wanted to break with the AFL. So I was called in to speak. As a matter of fact, when the split took place in Nashville, they wanted Gust Strebal who had been a candidate for governor of the state of New York on the Socialist ticket wanted him to be the president of the Amalgamated. Strebal wouldn't break with the AFL, so they took Sydney Hillman and offered him the job, and he took the job. And here I was, an IWW, called on to speak to the first meeting of the tailors under the leadership of the Amalgamated. Then I came on back to Chicago. I had difficulty getting jobs, because at that time to get a job you had to go to the master tailor's office. And when you said you came from Rochester and you were on strike you couldn't get a job. But by a subterfuge I then managed to get a job at Ederheimer Stein and later on I got a job --

I. What do you mean by subterfuge?

r. Well, I told them that I didn't know what the Master Association was. I had just come from another city.
I needed a job and I was a good cutter. I didn't mention I was ever in a strike. I didn't mention what a strike meant. You know, you just cover-up because you have to eat. And I was a married man at that time, too. So, then I got into Hart-Schaffner & Marx. During this time I'd been carrying on propaganda on the street corners of Chicago. At certain corners I would speak on certain nights on the IWW or anti-religion, atheism, every Sunday night there at State and Congress. Every Friday night I was at 12th and Marshfield. Every Saturday there I was at North and Tallman. Every Tuesday night I was at a certain other corner which I don't remember now. And, of course, we sold literature. Sometimes it's pretty tough. I spoke in Evanston one night and I got a case of eggs for nothing -- one by one. And I spoke once at Clark and Erie and a bunch of good Irish-Catholics had me down on the ground and were kicking the hell out of me till the police captain came along and saved my neck. In fact, he protected me until I got on a streetcar, and he says, "You'd better stay out of here because these bunch of hoodlums will kill you."

I. Good basis for your atheism lectures.

R. Yeah. That was a tough proposition. Well, you had it everywhere. For instance, I was speaking on the west
side of Chicago. The neighborhood was changing, originally had been Irish-Catholic and then changed to Jewish. There was still plenty of Irish-Catholics in that neighborhood and I was speaking against religion one night and a fellow threw a knife at me. It so happened that I had a fellow that worked with me at Hart-Schaffner & Marx, a fellow by the name of Moe Converher who knew me. He came over to me and said, "Keep talking." He went across the street and about a block from there was Dave and Bill's Pool Room, which was famous in Chicago -- the hangout for all hoodlums at that time. Dave Miller used to be a referee in prize fights and just about five minutes later you'd see the gang coming from Dave Miller's Pool Room. They didn't care who it was, what I talked about, except if they could have a fight with Irish; that was going to be a lot of fun for them. So they surrounded me and said, "Keep talking." Well, I modified my talking so I wouldn't antagonize them also, because talking about atheism I might antagonize them as much as the Irish, you know. But those were happy days. This continued until 1915 when I was working in Harts. The general strike of the Amalgamated was called in Chicago. Harts was a union shop. All the rest were non-union shops. And a strike was called and I was taken off the job as organizer without pay. I had charge of the south loop
there. All the big factories: Alred Decker and Cohen, Sheehan, Cohen, Kuppenheimer. That was the district that I had charge of in leading the strike. And as I think of it, every dollar of strike benefits was paid out, was paid out by me, through my hands. The pickets had to come to the Hod Carrier's hall at five o'clock in the morning and get their strike benefit to be assigned to strike duty. Well, after fifteen weeks of strike I went back to work, In fact, my union, which took me off the job for fifteen weeks without pay, made me sign an I.O.U. for three dollars they had to give me so I could go home and eat.

I. Is that the time you compiled this amazing records of arrests?

R. The arrests were prior to the end of the strike, during the strike. I think I had thirty-nine arrests during that strike. And one of them, the captain -- right in front of Ederheimer-Stein's corner of Franklin and Van Buren, the captain was bouncing my head against the sidewalk. I was the leader of the picket line, so he bounced my head on the sidewalk just to see if the sidewalk wouldn't break. But those are some of the experiences that you don't pay attention to.

Meantime, I drifted more and more into the anarchist
activity. I was a member of the Free Society Group in Chicago, and we also had at that time, it was known originally as the Anarchist Red Cross. Later on, when Berkman came out of Russia, the name was changed to A. Berkman Defense Fund for Political Prisoners, and in fact, I am still the secretary for the A. Berkman Defense Fund. I am also secretary for Emma Goldman Memorial Committee. Still hold that job, and still take care of her monument while I'm at the cemetery every year -- and I'm paying the bill for it. The last time I meet Emma Goldman, when she came from Russia, delivered a lecture at the Covenant Club in the City of Chicago. Anton Johannson, the labor leader of San Francisco, who had come to Chicago to raise funds for the Schmidt dynamiting case, was the chairman of that meeting. After that meeting Emma Goldman had a private meeting with the anarchist group to discuss the situation about Russia with us, and give us her personal impressions about Russia. One of the things I would like to emphasize now, she said, "You cannot trust Communists because they will not keep faith. They are in the same basis as the Catholic Church, building towards a thousand years from now, and human lives, individuals, don't count." In other words the Communists, she outlined, and I think fully agreed with it, the
Communist philosophy is based like the Catholic Church. The individual don't count, only the ultimate goal. If a million, ten million lives are lost to achieve the ultimate goal, it doesn't matter. My concept of the western philosophy is that the state exists for man. It's against the church and Communist's philosophy that man exists for the state. So, naturally we carried on many bitter fights.

I was a member of an organization called the Independent Workman's Circle, which was wrecked by the Communists who came in and captured control at one of the conventions, and rifled the treasury to an extent that we were practically broke. We then had to consolidate with the Workman's Circle because financially we were in a situation that those people that had paid the insurance all these years might lose everything. So, from time to time I delivered, maybe a hundred lectures on various topics, even on Lindsey's philosophy at that time, the companionate marriage, many of them on crazy subjects like the "Emancipated Woman in Chains."

I. You were lecturing on the emancipated woman in those days?
R. That was the subject in those days. I'll show you notes on it. I lectured on forgotten good books. And I delivered a lecture on "The Social Significance of Song." I'd like to write a book on that. I
think it's very interesting and a very, very important subject that nothing has been done on, except that it would require a couple years. And until I retire from this business, you can't do anything with it, just make notes.

During all these years I had occasion to meet people in the Labor Movement who I considered of importance. One of the first outstanding personalities I met was Vincent St. John, who was then the secretary of the IWW with headquarters here in Chicago. Vincent St. John was peculiarly a phenomenon in the IWW, in a sense that he was more of a Socialist than anything else. He was not called the revolutionary type. Incidentally, I have a letter here from a professor in California who has been trying to get data on Vincent St. John, and has been writing to me about it. That's Professor A.M. De Amendt of California State College, who's been writing to me, wants information on Vincent St. John as much as I can give him, background and personal recollections and reminiscences. Vincent St. John was interesting in the Labor Union in this respect: while I was here in Chicago, we had a Hungarian IWW Local who had a headquarters that they rented, a hall, a library we had meetings in. Then they decided to turn that over to the general organization and we had a meeting to take it over. Vincent St. John was there. At that time the IWW had a newspaper published by nam named
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Covington Hall, known as the Lumber Worker. The Lumber Worker's tone was more anarchistic in its philosophy. Vincent St. John fought us for an hour, objecting to the using funds of the Locals to subscribe for the paper. He says it's not an IWW newspaper, although it was. But, it didn't coincide or cohere to his approach of ideals. St. John was what we would call him in modern language, he was a yellow socialist, except non-political.

I. He was non-political?
R. Non-political! You see, you have to understand the split between the IWW and the DeLeonites. I don't know if you are familiar with that split. It was because the DeLeonites wanted to make a unity between the political arm and the labor arm at that time. In 1905 when the split took place, the IWW element that was split off from the IWW. The original organization was called --

I. The Socialist Trades and Labor Alliance.
R. Yeah, something like that --

I. Deleon's group.
R. DeLeon's group. The IWW split off, then, on the theory that they are opposing political actions, and you can find that all through their philosophy of leadership, except Vincent St. John. Vincent St. John also opposed
political action, but the ultimate overall picture that you find in that period when I was active, was the syndicalist approach.

I. The general strike?

R. The general trend was a syndicalist approach. Vincent St. John was not in favor of it, I can tell you. Vincent St. John's concept as I analyse it from my experience of meeting with him. I was in his home. My wife stayed in his home there for a while and I was very friendly with him. His approach was to build strong labor unions as rival unions to the AFL on the base of the IWW. The general tendency of the IWW was not to build unions -- just to bring a revolution. Strikes were merely a manifestation of the ultimate goal of the industrial revolution that was to take place. The average concept --

I. Well, he was more of a practical man.

R. Yes, more of a practical man in that sense. You see, the Lawrence strike ended. Nothing was left after it was over. Patterson strike, strike was over, nothing was left. Little Falls, nothing was left. No attempt was made to get an organization and stand up as a force in the industry. You were a minority, but to say that there is the union in that shop, that was not part of the general philosophy of the leadership at that time.
I. Was that done deliberately or was there a scarcity of funds and they could only devote so much to action in a particular place rather than organizing in some other place? Was it a question of priorities or was it a question of...

R. The priority at that time was agitation. That's what it was. The priority was let's bring a storm. We tried free speech, which was meaningless perhaps. You take try clearing a free speech fight in San Diego. San Diego is a middle-class high brow town; the workers were comparatively -- you did not have wage-slaves there, it's a different class of worker you have. The worker there was petit bourgeois. So you bring free speech. The idea was as long as you can have the foot loose rebels travel from one place to another, go to jail, and you could make a big noise. That was the theory that was underlined at the time, more than anything else, in my opinion. It wasn't the idea to build a labor organization as such, per se. The organizing was purely into general membership. While we talked about unions, while we talked about industries, ultimately at that time, the slogan was, "Bring the Revolution." Get all the workers in and we'll bring the revolution. Now when Vincent St. John quit, Bill Haywood came in. Well, Bill Haywood was not a good secretary. Bill Haywood was not a good organizer. Bill Haywood was good as a rabble rouser. But during his
secretary ship in the IWW he did not make the organization grow, I'll tell you that.

I. Do you mean it grew in spite of him, because there was a membership increase during those years?

R. That was in spite of him. It was in spite of him, and not because of his efforts. Haywood was not the type of man that carried out organizational activities in a sense like Vincent St. John. Vincent St. John was primarily interested in keeping the locals, keeping in contact with locals, checking on membership. All that to Vincent St. John was important. To Haywood that wasn't so important. It was only that that was a period where there was a tremendous influx. Bear in mind that during that period Bill Haywood was secretary, if you wanted to ride a freight car, bum a ride, unless you had a red card in your pocket you'd be thrown off that train. Even the breaky from the AFL Union would throw you off if you didn't carry a red card. You couldn't go into a harvest field or a lumber camp, despite the fact that there wasn't any strict organization, unless you had a red card. That was the heyday of the IWW which culminated with World War I. After the World War came you know what happened. IWW halls were smashed. Leaders, Bill Haywood, others were arrested. And the organization then was cut to pieces.
In many organizations such strikes took place. It went to pieces. Haywood then was on trial, then left and went to Russia. And, from there on the organization, of course, never recovered.

Why it is still in existence, why it is still functioning? And I want to tell you. Two years ago I was to a memorial meeting for Joe Hill, and I was amazed. I don't think outside of myself there were three people in that hall over the age of thirty. All young people. The hall was packed. Young people all enthusiastic and all seemed to be familiar with the IWW song, and it was a very orderly, fine conducted meeting. So, you do find, much to my surprise, there is a growth of sentiment towards the IWW, and young people are flocking in. The only objection I have is the same objection I have to the hippie movement: this idea of organization just causing disturbance, causing noise, without a program to me is a waste of energy. Like I talked to some hippie friends of mine, why do you want the revolution? Fine, now the revolution is here, now what are you going to do? "Well, we'll worry about that later." You have to have a program. Any revolution must have a program, it winds up in chaos. And we've had revolutions that wound up in chaos. You can take down the line, I don't have to mention--French
Revolution. Certain outbursts, without proper constructive programs in leadership will end up in turmoil, end up in massacres, what-not. So, you see you can go clown the line and find this thing that's bothering me and perhaps bothered other people. All our activity must be constructive. You know, let me tell you this, I've delivered hundreds of lectures, can show you that book, notes, hundreds of them, and my anarchist friends never let me talk on anarchism. I could talk on any subject I wanted to, literature, books, name it, but never -- and I'll tell you why, because I was never orthodox in my anarchism. And what I mean by that --

I. Do you have a program?

R. I mean that I have a right. In a letter once Ibsen wrote to Brandio, Gerng Brandio, and Ibsen said, "Tie yourself to a star and sail with it." We must have ideals. A person without an ideal is nothing, but people must be practical, keep their feet on the ground. Sure, I can believe that I have a dream. You know when the Paris commune failed Ephisen wrote to Brandos, "What we need is not a change in externals, but in the soul of man." Unless people are ready and have a concept of what right and wrong, what justice is, a hungry empty stomach revolution is worthless. So we come to the
proposition that I could never speak on anarchism to my people, because they were only going to bring the revolution tomorrow. I couldn't see it, I'd say, "You have a right to preach. Uplift the mind of man. Give man a concept of justice and right. Lift him up, but don't tell him it's going to be tomorrow because if that dream is shattered tomorrow, where is he?" And, that we have today. So many people that were radicals shouted socialism from treetops. Today you find them back in all the conservative organizations. You'll find them in the churches, you'll find them in the temples, you'll find them in the Republican Party, because their concept was based on nothing. It was merely a momentary flux that they went into, nothing to back it up. And there comes the tragedy that we find, where ideals must have a concrete basis that you carry out with. I have been faced with that problem again and again. Nothing succeeds unless it has a structure of basis in your mind. You know, if I go back it reminds me about -- I have a copy of it home.

Fifty years ago I picked up a book written by Noani, Eli Richards of Boston called it, "The Cause of Kadowski, "in which he pictures a Jewish radical on the east side of New York. Shows how this man and his radicalism comes a Jewish Holiday, he's torn to that
Jewish Holiday. He had one essay in particular, "Why I Decided to Leave the Social Problem Unsolved." He goes on, he says, from the materialist conception of history to our own historical conception of it at 10 cents a pamphlet; lo and behold we see the host of the proletarian march beyond to victory. The poor have consented. All we have to do is convince the rich. Then, he goes on to say, then comes the socialist state. We're hit over the head with a few red clubs and we find, he says, no solution out there. Then when, he said we go to the anarchist philosophy. Beautiful dream but, he says, so elusive. And the problem is so real I've decided to leave the problem unsolved. I'll remember that. Even as a youngster at that time, it hit me very hard because to me it brought home one concept: whatever you do must have a purpose. Unless you have that purpose, merely to shout from the treetops and get up on a ladder and shout -- you may cause a riot by shouting, but unless your shout has a significance it's an absolute waste of energy, and only a menace to people.

I. Is this the way eventually you felt about the IWW?

R. Well, the IWW today is, I don't know where it stands today. To be frank with you, it is today attempting to go back to the days of St. John. Today it is attempting to
formulate itself into a labor organization, much more so than it had in the last twenty-five years. It is my opinion that the leadership of the IWW today, not only in Chicago but in other cities, is more constructive. And the fact is that we have in two or three places where they have organized shops, organized industry, places where they are establishing a union in the particular spot. Now they had a strike in, I think it was a San Francisco Restaurant there, restaurant workers. They had a strike out here in some factory in the middle east here, I don't remember the spot right now, where they actually entered into agreement with the employer, as an IWW organization. So you see today the tendency -- all movements have flux. There came a change, and I'm firmly of the opinion that for a while there was an influx, until 1915, until the war period, into the IWW. It was not the type of organization that meant building futures. It was purely a mass organization, drifting away from the Vincent St. John concept of building unions. Slowly enough and only I say in recent years that concept of then changed back. In my opinion the IWW leadership today is attempting to do that which Vincent St. John had in mind, attempted to bring to the organization in his period -- constructive labor organization.
I. On the other hand, it's much more difficult today.

R. There's two reasons why it's more difficult, because the CIO, when they came in captured the slogan of the IWW, "One big union," and they have worked in that theory. One big union in many industries, the stockyards and others. They've worked the "One big union" idea. They have taken some of the thunder away from the IWW because one of the things we used to talk about when we used to get on a soap box or address the people was that the cutter goes on strike and the tailor works scabbing on. The tailor strikes, and the cutter is scabbing on, the presser is scabbing on him. The division of work into fourteen different locals in one industry. "One big union!"

Well, the CIO has taken a lot and as a result of it is the consolidation of the AFL and CIO. Them it is breaking down more, still they have craft unions. But, one of the things that is more developing is the solidarity between these different locals. Like the railroad workers say, if these people go on strike, we will not cross the picket line, which is a solidarity while they are not organized in one local. There is a solidarity and that is perhaps one of the big factors that will hinder the IWW in constructive organization, cause all now they have left is one thing and that is ultimate revolution. The working class, the employing class have nothing in
common. These two classes, the struggle must go on until the workers take over. Well, you see already when you approach with that proposition only, you must have built a socialist mind or the collective thinker who thinks with a social concept. The average working man is not interested in that. That which is working is interested in his selfish job.

I. How much was socialism a factor in a union, like say, the Amalgamated?

R. The split between the United Garment Workers and, the Amalgamated at Nashville, Tennessee was ninety-nine per cent inspired through socialist philosophy. And the early basis of the Amalgamated was socialism. Bear in mind a few years after the Amalgamated started, the first of May was a holiday for the Amalgamated. Every clothing factory shut down and there was a parade. It may have been 1913, or 14. I don’t remember what year it was. I sat with Mother Jones in the automobile leading the first of May that year, the city of Chicago, for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Today there is no more first of May. Today all the leadership, that socialist background is out. Today there's a pure and simple labor organization. As a matter of fact, you wouldn't get five dollars out of the Amalgamated for any
liberal cause today. In New York indirectly, directly, never. In Chicago you couldn't get -- we cannot even get the civil rights.

I. What's responsible for the change?
R. It got into people who become what we call labor cats. People who are merely jobites, controlling labor for selfish interests, for monetary gains and not for any ultimate progress. Take here, why aren't we connected with the Civil Rights movement and Jewish Labor Committee? I'm going tonight for a dinner honoring this colored labor leader. Now, you can't get the Amalgamated in this. There will be today dozens and dozens of representatives, (I represent the Jewish Labor Committee), a dozen representatives of various unions there. And I will write you a ticket now that the Amalgamated will not have a representation.

I. Well, apparently changes of this sort don't take place by themselves. Has there been any change in attitude of the membership, also?
R. Well, sure. You see, let me say one other thing. Back before 1915 (I'll let you even up to 1920) the membership of the Amalgamated was about sixty to seventy per cent Jewish. The membership of the Amalgamated today is maybe three per cent Jewish. The leadership like in the Amalgamated International today is ninety-nine per cent
Jewish. The leadership still is Jewish, because they realize that these people are capable, know the organization. They keep many of them there, although they have many Italians and others in the Amalgamated International. The leadership is Jewish, but the membership isn't.

I. The membership doesn't care a thing for social progress anymore as long as they can --

R. Not than the second element. In the clothing industry, men's and women's, most of the workers today are women, except the cutters, the trimmers. In the shops themselves mostly are women who are not social minded, who have never received any indoctrination of social philosophy --

I. The Emancipated Woman in Chains huh?

R. And as a result of it you'll find that they're not interested. Now I'll give you a simple illustration; I called Mr. Bialis of Internationsl Ladies Garment Workers some time ago and asked for a contribution for their Berkman Aid Fund. He said to me, "You know, I'd like to give it to you, but I can't. You know, when a church comes to us for a donation we're happy, because then we can justify giving to some liberal organization." But these people say, Why give it to the organizations?" They're not
part and parcel of us. We don't owe them, we're not interested in them."

The membership today and that's one of perhaps my great criteria of the labor movement. The labor movement has not developed a conscious approach to its problems, pure and simple job trusts. Of course, as a result of it, what has developed? Leadership, many of them corrupt, many of them selfish and most of them having no concept except the immediate day by day problem before them, no ultimate motive and no broader concept of anything else.

Now, I'll give you a couple of illustrations: my brother-in-law worked at the Link Belt Company when it was organized during the Roosevelt Administration, you know. They had that voting that time. Until he retired a couple of years ago, he never once attended a union meeting. One of the things I always opposed is a check-off system, where the boss deducts your union dues to turn over to the union business agent. If I am not conscious enough to pay my dues to my union then it's something wrong. What happens when this situation, a few dishonest, sometimes corrupt people, are able to take leadership because the rank and file isn't there. I remember a number of years ago there was a business meeting of the Electrical Workers Local, (can't think of his name now). Gelderman, some name like that, called
and he says, "Irving, we're going to have a meeting in Masicraus Hall, about eight hundred members, tonight, five o'clock. Important question. I would like you to boost them up a little bit and give them a little talk." All right. I came to the hall and there's eighty people there. He got up and he said, "Look, we're here today to make an important decision, I can't bawl you out, but tomorrow those seven hundred are likely to sell your soul and you down the river. How do you think that Harpers and Recks and these others got control of the union? By active leadership in the rank and file staying home and not participating. When I was in the Amalgamated, up 'till 1920 when I became a lawyer, every meeting was a fight. And let me tell you something, right after the 1915 Strike, '16, '17, when the leadership started taking over, I began getting rumors that people who criticized some of the leaders, that criticized what was going on, were being fired from their job. I made an open statement in my Local, I challenged it. The Trial Board was appointed. We had a record of public hearings -- that thick. When it came in final, had a meeting -- the hall was packed. Sam Levin, dead now, was the head of the District Trial Board of Chicago. That's the man who organized the Amalgamated Bank, Sam Levin. He got up and made a motion to throw
me out of the organization, to take my job away. When he got through I said, "May I be allowed to speak?"
"Yes." I started reading from that record. Grandinetti, Farnpinky, Fallow, each one admitted it. When I got through there was one vote against me, and he has to have that vote registered, Sam Levin.

1917 when the war was on I was arrested for anti-war activity. At a picnic I got drunk and talked too much and was arrested. Well, it came up before the Commissioner. He said, "Look what you said was wrong, but you were drunk."

So, I was charged.

I. It was under the Sedition Act?

R. Yeah. Next day I got to go back to work. So I had a Professor Howard, who was then the head of the Labor Department of the Hart, Schaffner and Marx. A friend of mine made arrangements for me to go up to see Professor Howard. And I went up to see him. Professor Howard said to me that morning, "I am not here to criticize your ideas, you have a right to your opinions as much as I have to mine, but we cannot afford to have the FBI running through our shops and causing disturbances, causing investigations. That interferes with the morale of the shop. If you will give me a promise that you will not carry on any propaganda in the shop, you can go back
to work." I go back to work in my union; my socialist union makes a stoppage not to put me back to work! Of course, You know the stoppage made for an hour then it's got to be called off. They called a meeting that night of the Local. I got a hundred per cent vote in my favor. But my socialist union tried to keep me off the job. Socialism was already gone, the leadership. You see that the rankers follow with me, because they knew what work I had done in the 1915 strike for nothing. They knew, in the Local, I fought against everything that was wrong. In fact, that I beat Frank Rosenblum, who's now the General Secretary, who wanted to be president after Hillman, but they wouldn't give it to him. They gave it to Jake Potofsky. I beat him for delegate to the first convention in Rochester, New York, after the National Convention. Then another time I was elected as Secretary, but they recounted the votes at three o'clock in the morning and counted me out by three votes. You see, I happen to know the background of this organization. I know the details. The answer is when an organization loses the very principle upon which it was founded, it loses its concepts, it becomes just another job trust. I've said unions are good. If there were no unions in this country today, or in the world over, working men would be slaves today. But, at the same time,
union leaders should not be grafters and not be bosses over the people. And people should be conscious of their needs and elect their leaders, and run the organization -- not permit the organization to be led by a handful.

I remember a man sat in my office bought a building. He was a trustee of the Milk Drivers Pension Fund and he bought a building from my client and my client took back the mortgage. We walked over to Chicago Title and he said, "Look, you tell your client to take five thousand less, it was a fifty-five thousand mortgage. I can get the fifty thousand from the Milk Driver's Union and don't have to pay any interest. He said, "One time I could go in and take two hundred thousand without interest." Here's a man bragging of the fact that he could steal and misuse union funds. Such a man, in my opinion, has no place in the Labor Movement. Such a man doesn't belong in the Labor Movement. He's nothing but a grafter corrupting the very organization which gives him a living. Now, I read in the paper yesterday they may re-elect Hoffa. The president gets a hundred thousand dollar a year salary, more than the president of the United States.

I. Oh, now Nixon got a raise, two hundred thousand.
What justification is there for a president of a Labor Union for that kind of salary? Why? You know, what wages Bill Haywood was getting when he was Secretary? Twenty-five dollars a week. Of course, money values were different then—but in concept. I don't say that that's right. Let me tell you any place—I happen to be connected with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. I was president. First thing I came in and said was to the director, "You're not getting sufficient pay." I increased his pay. I just had a fight, I increased the pay. Take the executive director of the Jewish Labor Committee. I had just become president. I increased his salary fifty dollars a week because he was underpaid. I don't believe in underpaying people. I believe a person who does a job should be paid, but what is pay? No one will convince me that Humphrey goes to jail, and while he's in jail he draws his salary from a union. Remember Big Tim Murphy.

Murphy was a business agent of the Street Cleaners Union, of Chicago. He's arrested for mail robbery. While he's in jail serving time for mail robbery his wife draws his salary from the Street Cleaners Union. He comes out of jail, goes back on the job. He then lived on
Lunt Avenue. About four, five weeks after he came out, one morning they blasted him on the street and killed him. Man is in jail for mail robbery and his union pays him salary? When Labor Unions' leadership sink to that level we're in bad shape my friend, bad shape. Conscious people must be conscious of what's right or wrong and when we lose that distinction, then we are in bad shape.

I. There's also been more of a tendency for the Labor Union itself to co-operate with the employer and take more of the employer's ideals and attitudes to their own. I think last time I spoke with you you gave me the illustration of how Sidney Hillman made the bargain to organize the entire industry there.

R. Well, it is a debatable concept. When Hart-Schaffner and Marx at one time claimed on the verge of going broke, the Amalgamated union made a loan to Hart, Schaffner and Marx of two million dollars.

I. The union made a loan to Hart, Schaffner and Marx?

R. Yes, two million dollars. At that time to save their neck from the loss of jobs, to save their neck. Now there are times when we say co-operation. There are situations I can see where, as a union, we make unjust demands
upon an employer that cannot be met and force the employer out of business. Which I think is a poor situation sometimes, when the demands are so that it is not in the cards to meet them. On the other hand, we're confronted with the situation today that the small man is practically stepping out because he's being grabbed up and forced out by the large corporations. Today the small groceryman has no place. The small clothing store has no place. The small butcher shop has no place because the Jewel can undersell it right and left.

Here to give you an illustration: I had a friend of mine who was in the liquor business, wholesale liquor. He says, "I pay more wholesale than Zimmerman sells it resale." I say, "Why?" "Well," he says, "I'll buy two cases, let's say, of scotch. And I go to the Saloon owner and say give me two bottles of this, give me three bottles of that, and I have to peddle it outright. Zimmerman goes in and buys a hundred cases of scotch. He gets ten cases free because he buys a hundred cases. He can go and sell it for less than the ordinary small wholesaler buys it and still make money. So you see the small man is being drowned out and the big fellows are making more money. When you take figures, income tax figures mean nothing to me. When you tell me this
corporation is in trouble, but back of it you see a report where they just spent two hundred million dollars for expansion which came out of profits. So you see it all becomes relative. Sure, I will agree with you that in some instances I think the unions have overstepped in the sense that they have jeopardized their own security and their own righteousness. You just don’t take and put a firm out of business because you want to do it or because you’re arbitrary.

I. Oh, I was thinking more in terms of the reverse. Like for instance, supposedly the deal that Hillman made in organizing the Chicago area during the war. Could you go into that somewhat? Do you think that reflects the willingness to bargain with industry at the expense of ideals? I think there are instances in the 1920’s at Hart, Shaffner and Marx where the union, I believe, decided to take over shop rules and they thought that they could run the shop more efficiently than employers could, and apparently they did so.

R. I can’t answer except to say the employer in the large corporation runs the industry through working men, employees, call them what you want, management. So, whether it’s run by this management or labor management it solves this other question of “What are you trying
to accomplish and how competent are you to accomplish it?" You can take a man that, let's say, he's employed by the employer of a large corporation. He may, if he's conscious of his job, feel that it's important to keep the workers in harmony, keep them satisfied, maintain a good standard of wages and conditions, and at the same time find that the profits of the corporation will not sink to such an extent that--

I. Barry Goldwater is one of those.

R. But there you see you have to -- it goes back to perhaps one of the earliest things I've said here today. It goes back to the proposition of meeting the challenge. What is necessary today in a collective society? We are not individuals. We are a collective society. Our morals are not individual. Our morals, our ethics, are collective ethics. Everything we do must have a collective sense and unless we have labor unions, if they lose sight of their social responsibility then they are wrong as much as an employer.

I. Well, don't you think there has been a tendency between labor and management to coalesce, to more or less adopt the same point of view, the middle ground so to speak, as they're so fond of talking about. Don't you think that in itself tends to make labor lose its ideal?
R. If it can be accomplished I will say, of course, there is also the danger, from my point of view --

I. They call this practicality, I guess--

R. You see, from my point of view there's one date I still have in mind that I want the worker to be class conscious. I want the worker to have an idea that ultimately this society ought to be changed and that private property has no place in a real just society. But, I come back to you. We are living today and this ultimate dream of mine will not be accomplished maybe in a thousand years, who knows? Today any co-operation of that kind that will insure stability in industry, do away with unnecessary strikes, because the worker who goes on strike and strikes for two months --he's going to have a hell of a job making it up. All of these things are practiced. Sure, if labor and management and union management would sit down and work out a collective policy in any industry, what is to the benefit of the overall picture I think would be wonderful. But, the trouble is it's so hard to get the two forces to agree what is best for each one or what is best collectively. Naturally, every employer corporation is represented to management. And a management that wants to show success to the other may lose his job. He wants
to show the stockholders a directive at the end of the year, I made X dollar profit. In fact, I made ten per cent more than last year or my predecessor last year. So he's interested in showing results on his books. Labor leader, on the other hand, is interested in bettering the condition of his worker. He wants more wages, cost of living is going up. Like my wife said to me this morning, "Look, this item cost $1.27 yesterday. I paid $1.47 for the same item." Cost of living is going up and he's trying to show his people that he's keeping their standard within that raising of cost. And there are many union cost of living clauses. That the cost goes up two, four, five per cent, the wages go up that per cent. So between those two is this constant struggle. No employer wants to let loose on profits. Every worker wants to get the most that he can. And whether we like it or not. I want to close with you with one old IWW phrase: "I wish that maybe in this day of ours when we're living in a turmoil, in a struggle, things could be different. But, the fact remains that the working class and the employing class have nothing in common."
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