

Sadlowski: RANK AND FILE UNIONISM

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"The workers and the boss have nothing in common. It is a class question." Sounds like a soapbox speech from the 30's, right? Certainly it couldn't be an official from the Steelworkers' Union talking!

After all, labor statesman Abel forced the steelworkers in 1973 to swallow the Experimental Negotiating Agreement - an agreement by labor not to strike even if collective bargaining fails - and that hardly sounds like a class struggle approach! And yet that statement did come from a steelworkers' official - 38-year-old Edward Sadlowski.

Sadlowski isn't just talking to hear himself talk either. Currently director of District 31, covering the concentration of mills around the southern end of Lake Michigan from Chicago to Gary, Indiana, Sadlowski is challenging Lloyd McBride. Abel chose McBride personally to succeed him as international president of the 1.4 million member United Steelworkers of America, the largest union in the AFL-CIO. It's Sadlowski and his loosely organized army of rank and file supporters against Abel's well-oiled, professional machine - and the machine is worried about the outcome of the February election.

RANK AND FILE CHALLENGE

And it's not just Abel who's worried. Sadlowski represents today a new movement in the trade unions. He is the latest and perhaps one of the strongest to openly attack the iron grip of the class collaborationist labor bureaucracies. Sadlowski is just the tip of the iceberg, and the bureaucrats and the capitalists whose interests they represent are afraid of the rebellious rank and file movement he represents. The ruling class knows full well that a working class conscious of its own potential and its own strength can no longer be held back, and that is why a challenge such as Sadlowski's, however mild it may seem, is a very serious threat.

To the vast majority of Americans, Sadlowski is a real radical, and he and his campaign have been consistently red-baited. "You can make it sound like any kind of revolutionary rhetoric you want", he answers, "but the fact is it's the working class versus the coupon clipper. The boss is there for one damn purpose alone, and that is to make money, not to make steel, and it's going to come out of the worker's back."

The race is more than just a contest between two men. It is a test between two concepts of trade unionism. The difference between McBride and Sadlowski can best be illustrated by three main campaign issues: Sadlowski believes that the rank and file should have the right to ratify any and all contracts before they are approved by the union, while McBride believes as does Abel, that membership ratification in basic steel would weaken the union's ability to bargain with the major steel manufacturers. While McBride supports the ENA, Sadlowski has actively opposed it: "It is diametrically opposed to my views of what a labor agreement should be. . . . It strips labor of what it is all about. ENA removes the threat of a strike, which is often more powerful than even a strike itself." Finally, Sadlowski has opposed the recent dues hike and insists that it should have been submitted to the membership for approval, and McBride considers that such an impractical and pure sort of democracy could only end in chaos.

MILITANCY AND DEMOCRACY

As each campaign issue unfolds, Sadlowski and McBride fall on opposite sides of the fence around two basic principles: how much rank and file democracy is necessary, and how militant a union should be with respect to the manufacturers.

Sadlowski is fighting for a union leadership which is forced to be responsible to the base, while Abel's machine considers such a position to be idealistic and impractical -- a mere attempt to court votes by charisma and sweet-talk.

Sadlowski is looking for the union to return to the militancy of the thirties, a militancy which depended on the strength of the people united rather than on the sophisticated, statesman-like negotiations of today's labor bureaucrats. A good many of his followers take very seriously his stand for the six-hour day, an end to layoffs during the length of a contract, an end to compulsory overtime, and other such reforms.

Sadlowski's history as an independent and militant trade unionist goes much farther back than this particular campaign. At 25 years old he beat the incumbent of 25 years on the basis of his reputation as a fighter for the rights of rank and file workers. In 1968 he was an

active opponent of the Vietnam War, speaking against it in the union's convention as well as leafletting against it in the mills.

Even his recent election as director of District 31 came only as a result of a four year struggle which included petitioning the Labor Department for a new election in 1973 because of massive vote fraud. He was elected in 1974 by a large margin, despite active opposition from Abel's machine.

Clearly, Sadlowski's major weakness is his failure to put forward a consistent and strong program against racism and sexism. However, to the extent that his campaign and his strength is dependent on the support of the rank and file, to that extent he will be forced to develop this area.

He has made some advances: while Abel considered the consent decree a tremendous victory for minority workers in steel, Sadlowski has called for the struggle against racism to go further. He has supported the demand for a total reform of the seniority system, more bidding for jobs, and plant or corporation-wide seniority.

His slate includes both Black and Spanish-speaking candidates, while Abel included a Black member on his racist team only recently and as a result of pressures from the rank and file. These steps are only a beginning, however, and must be followed up by a more systematic program against discrimination if Sadlowski is truly to establish a new kind of unionism.

Sadlowski has also shown real weakness in his understanding of the need for a frontal attack on anti-communism. While he has consistently opposed red-baiting, he has not understood the need to defend the right of communists to play an active part in union politics. His vacillation around this issue leaves the door open for red-baiting to successfully silence union members, despite his insistence on his belief in the right of all members to voice their opinions.

The bosses aren't nearly so confused about what Sadlowski represents. They know that the campaign around him has the potential of unleashing years of worker discontent and militancy, and as the president of Illinois Slag and Ballast Co. said, negotiations with him would be "a new ball game".

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The Sadlowski movement could indeed force a whole new ball game, but the future of their program depends much less on the man himself than on the strength of the rank and file movement. The Sadlowski campaign has initiated the formation of a network of fightback committees based in the shops and mills and run by rank and file dissidents. It is these committees and others like them that can force the success of the rank and file movement behind Sadlowski. It is these committees which, if they remain organized and active even after a Sadlowski victory, can force the new administration not only to carry through on already defined goals, but also to expand its understanding to class struggle unionism.

DOGMATISTS DENOUNCE SADLOWSKI

Sadlowski isn't a communist, he isn't a socialist, and his program definitely suffers from real inconsistencies. His weaknesses have so outraged the dogmatists like the October League that they have even called for a boycott of the elections.

"Ed Sadlowski in the USWA... has latched onto and even developed caucuses as instruments for derailing and suppressing the genuine rank and file rebellion at the same time that they promote themselves into positions in the trade union bureaucracy", argues OL. Sadlowski, they argue, hopes "to turn rank and file anger away from its developing revolutionary directions." For the first time in many years the class collaborationist Abel machine is being forced to face a serious challenge to its policies, spontaneous discontent is being organized and is finding a voice, and the OL calls for a boycott of the elections to protect the purity of some mythical "pure" revolutionary workers movement!

Instead of looking for reasons to boycott this tremendously important mass movement, communists and radicals must join actively in the Sadlowski campaign. They must dedicate themselves to the task of consolidating rank and file organizations spontaneously formed around the campaign, and they must fight for the adoption of ever more advanced programs by these same committees.

The rank and file organization must provide both the basis of support necessary to Sadlowski to carry out his promises and the pressure to insure that he remembers them. As Sadlowski himself has pointed out repeatedly to his supporters, the only way to insure that the membership will receive honest and responsible union leadership is to "keep your foot up my butt"! It is up to the activists and the left wing to make sure that the rank and file makes this suggestion a reality.

Bruce Bodner is a worker and activist at the Budd Co. Red Lion Plant. He is a member of the steering committee of the Blue Ribbon Group, a rank and file caucus within UAW Local 92.

Bruce's answers to the Organizer's questions reflect his own views, and are not the official views of the Blue Ribbon Group.

Organizer: What is the Blue Ribbon Group?

Bruce: Well, the Blue Ribbon Group is a rank and file caucus within the UAW at the Budd Red Lion plant. Actually, the caucus got started in September of 1973, a year in which our union was negotiating a contract. A small group of workers came together and tried to influence the demands that our local would fight for in that contract. At that time we were called the Concerned Members of Local 92. This was the beginning of the rank and file movement at Red Lion.

The Blue Ribbon Group came into existence two years later when there was a plant wide election for union office. All of the Concerned Members of Local 92 merged or allied themselves with a number of other workers who were interested in running in that election. So we changed the name of the caucus to the Blue Ribbon Group.

Organizer: What does the name stand for? How did you choose that name?

Bruce: Well, the name was chosen by one of our members and I think that his logic for calling it the Blue Ribbon Group was because it was the name of a winner.

Organizer: Number one.

Bruce: Yes, number one.

Organizer: Were you involved with this from the beginning?

Bruce: Yeah, I was involved from the beginning. I was hired at the Budd Co. in May of 1973, but prior to having worked at the Budd Co. I was involved in the anti-war movement and to some degree with the civil rights movement. I was influenced a good deal by those two

struggles—one fighting against an unjust war and the other against inequality and social injustice. And prior to working at the Budd Co., I did do some work for another union.

Organizer: Did you get involved in unions because you felt they could produce some of these changes?

Bruce: Yes, my involvement in the local was not just because of the particular problems that workers face at Red Lion, of which there are many. Like I said, prior to having been hired at Budd, I was involved with these other movements and I had come to realize, I think, that the only way to really end war, eliminate poverty, and end the inequality which exists in our society, it was necessary for the working people, who are after all the victims of these injustices, to take a stronger role in these movements. And a natural way for them to do this would be through strengthening their labor movement.

Organizer: I know that the BRG has been involved in the basic shop struggles, for more democracy, better working conditions, and a better contract. In what ways do you feel it has contributed to the development of these broader political movements?

Bruce: Well I think that at this point, we've only been around for three years, our caucus has not yet been able to develop a program that speaks to these broader issues in our society. I think that our focus up til now has been to deal with the particular problems faced by autoworkers in the U.S. Of course now, even within this limited framework, we are organizing against racism, which is very prevalent in the auto industry.

Organizer: How do you go about doing this? What has the caucus done to build the fight against racism?

Bruce: In our first effort to organize at Red Lion, around the '73 contract, we thought that we had to develop some kind of program that would speak to the basic needs of Red Lion workers. We got together about ten people who had recognized from their own experience that the