

Steel Workers Carry Struggle to Convention

The 18th Constitutional Convention of the 1.4 million member United Steelworkers of America (USWA) assembled in Las Vegas, Nevada in the first week of September. The last two years since the previous convention, held in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1974, have seen the struggle of the steel workers intensify and sharpen considerably. Because of this, the steel bosses were looking to this convention and to their agents within the top leadership within the USWA to diffuse and set back a growing movement of the rank and file. Still, organized forces of the rank and file began this year to carry the fight even into this tightly controlled arena.

The upsurge on the part of steel workers in the last couple of years has been in response to the increasing attacks on the part of the steel monopolies. "Productivity drives" have meant massive layoffs of thousands, while the jobs of the laid off workers have been thrown on the backs of those still working, using job combinations, speedup, forced overtime and even putting foremen to work. On top of these outrages is the Experimental Negotiating Agreement (ENA)—a no-strike deal between the Abel leadership and the ten major basic steel companies. It takes away the weapon of a national strike until 1980. The agreement, which hits the steel workers directly, is aimed at the whole working class, and is being pushed as a "model for the future" by the capitalists, their spokesmen in the bourgeois media and many of their partners at the top of the major unions.

The convention was supposed to take up and prepare for the contract fight coming up next year, to make necessary changes in the constitution and by-laws of the USWA, and to take up other resolutions put forward from locals around the country. Three of the main targets for steel workers around the country at this convention were dumping the ENA, winning the right to ratify contracts—this for the first time for the more than 360,000 workers in basic steel—and to turn back the dues increase the Abel machine rammed through at the last convention.

This convention, like others, was held far away from the battles and demands of the rank and file, in body and spirit. This year, even though many more delegates came on the basis of their locals sending them there with a program to fight the steel companies as a result of the rank and file upsurge, the convention was generally a well-orchestrated affair run by the International leadership.

So instead of being a place to marshal and unite the forces of the rank and file for the battles ahead, the convention was used to attack the growing movement of the rank and file. It was used to run away from the most important issues facing steel workers today. It was used to promote the theme of "common interests" between the capitalists and the working class. This is the same class collaboration that has stolen the steel workers' right to strike through the ENA under the lie that the conflict between the working class and the capitalists is "old fashioned and out of step with today's realities." This "common interests" scheme goes on to add that today fighting the companies is useless, and only through cooperation and producing more for the capitalists do the workers have a hope of winning a decent life.

Opening Remarks

In his opening remarks to the convention, I. W. Abel spoke not a word about fighting the steel companies. Instead he spoke for them, setting the terms for the convention by throwing down the gauntlet to the rank and file while pretending he was attacking a "small group." "A number of people are trying to undermine the United Steelworkers of America," he said. "This attack on our union is unmatched in its harshness and intensity. It is based on charges so absurd as to defy rational comment...One can overlook some things that are said by people who are fools and don't know any better. But you can't overlook the things that are said by people who know the truth, yet deliberately lie. I say to them, we don't want you, we can't afford you, and we are not about to surrender this union to you."

Well, there *are* people trying to undermine the union. Only it is not the rank and file. Instead, Abel and his



Steelworkers from around the country caught I.W. Abel among the one-armed bandits in a Las Vegas casino and handed him the Open Letter drawn up by the Steelworker rank and file newspaper.

machine, who work side by side with the companies to shackle the workers, who want to continue policies like the joint union-management productivity commissions, the ENA sellout, are themselves carrying out that dirty work.

Abel was forced to attack the rank and file steel workers openly and sharply. The growing rebelliousness of the workers has been reflected in sharpening struggle against the companies, with wildcats, walkouts and job assignment refusals on the increase. The resistance has been carried out within the union, too. Recent local elections saw a number of Abel men being thrown from union office. All this is weakening the Abel machine and has pushed Abel into taking more drastic measures to try and keep his grip on the union.

So it was not out of strength that Abel chose to unleash his attack, but out of a worsening position on the part of the capitalists and the necessity to turn back and diffuse the rank and file movement. The Abel attack combined with the determination of the rank and file to use the convention to advance their struggle made the convention itself a battleground in the class struggle.

Isolated Malcontents?

The strategy of Abel's machine was to shut down and silence any resistance, trying to make it appear to millions of workers around the country that steel workers were united with their leadership and stood behind their program of sacrificing more and more to the companies. Whatever resistance did surface they would try to pass off as "a little band of malcontents" and speak as though it was coming almost entirely from one source—from District 31 (Chicago-Gary area) and in particular, from Ed Sadlowski, District 31 director.

To carry out this strategy, Abel had to come into this convention with every bit of power and organization he could muster. An army of 800 staff men—delegates accountable only to the International leadership—tried to control the action on the convention floor. They grabbed microphones out of the hands of delegates who were making speeches exposing the collaboration between Abel and the steel capitalists. They compiled lists of names of delegates who were speaking up so they could threaten them later. On signal, they would line up at the mikes and praise the "great wisdom" of the International Executive Board.

On the opening day of the convention Abel made a big show of force and threw one delegation from Local 65, U.S. Steel South Works in Chicago, out of the convention, refusing to seat them. The excuse was a protest by Frank Mirocha, the Abel machine local president of Local 65 who had been voted out of office during the summer.

Local 65 election procedures were hardly the issue. First, the delegation had been sent with a mandate from the local to fight the ENA, fight for ratification and to turn back the dues increase, among other things. Also, this was Sadlowski's "home local." Kicking it out of the convention was supposed to show, right from the start, who was running the show. During the same morning a District 31 delegate was beaten up by Abel staff men when he caught them forging delegate credentials to further pack the convention.

These tactics were able to intimidate some delegates for a time, partially because the anti-Abel forces were not well enough organized before the convention. At the same time, the use of such tactics further exposed the growing weakness of the Abel machine.

A significant advance was made by the working class at this convention. Rank and file steel workers from

around the country were brought together in Las Vegas by *The Steelworker*, a national newsletter aimed at building the struggle against the steel companies as part of the overall battle of the working class. These workers were not in Vegas to drink and dine and drop nickels in the slot machines but to represent the rank and file back in the mills and plants, to break through Abel's lies and further build the growing resistance. In at least one case in Los Angeles, a plant collection had raised funds for these workers to come to the union convention.

This was very important because it represented taking the actual battles and demands of the steel workers at the present time and being able to pull that together into a nationwide force within the steel industry that would go directly into the convention and challenge the domination of the companies. During convention week these workers put out something from *The Steelworker* on a daily basis, hitting at the major issues at the convention, the major questions that were coming up, and pointing toward what had to be done.

Workers around *The Steelworker* met with individuals and groups of delegates who had come to the convention to represent ongoing battles, wanted to fight Abel and saw the need for the rank and file to organize nationwide, and not to allow themselves to be broken up, local by local or district by district, by the companies or the union hacks.

By the second night of the convention there was a lot of demoralization among anti-Abel delegates. The Abel machine had been able to defeat any proposal that spoke to the demands of the rank and file. Two of the main issues, right of ratification and the ENA, were buried in a blanket resolution that had many different parts to it, many of them pretty good, such as a big wage increase for the next contract. In order to vote against the ENA and for contract ratification a delegate would have had to vote against the whole thing, including the big wage increase, etc. Abel would not allow either issue to get taken up on its own.

Had to Fight

The big question that was taken up at that time was: should we make a fight of it or should we pack it up and go home and wait for another day to fight. At a meeting called by Sadlowski forces some disagreements surfaced. Some of Sadlowski's supporters argued that if you can't win a vote, it's silly to try to fight. Workers from *The Steelworker*, including members of the Revolutionary Communist Party, took that up and pointed out that the rank and file didn't really have the choice not to fight. If there was no fight on the part of the rank and file, they explained, Abel would get over with his aim of creating the image of happy, contented members, who really had nothing to complain about. He would use a quiet, peaceful convention to further isolate rank and file fighters as a small band of "malcontents," and set back the struggle.

By fighting, even if the Abel machine was able to win the vote, a clear message would be sent across the country that would more reflect the actual situation, the battles going on in the mills and plants and mines across the country. This would lay the basis to better carry on the fight after the convention. The terms of the fight had to be to lay the issues right on Abel's doorstep and make clear what was going on at the convention—the selling out of the rank and file to the companies.

The next day *The Steelworker* followed through and circulated "An Open Letter to I. W. Abel." The open letter, which reached over 3000 delegates, responded to

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of their loyalty to Pak, and symbolic of the masses love for him.

Crossing the 38th parallel into the north is like entering another world. There are no foreign troops there—the last Chinese soldiers left 21 years ago. The DPRK was devastated by U.S. bombing raids during the Korean War, to the extent that only a tiny handful of buildings in Pyongyang, the capital city, had even their frames left standing. But today there is no sign of this. In the years since the war, the DPRK has gone from a poor agricultural nation to an industrial power, producing from its own resources practically everything the country needs from food to locomotives.

The working people of the DPRK made and continue to make great sacrifices to build their country up, yet they live far better than the masses in the south. In fact, the workers of the DPRK, who have never stopped working for the reunification of their country, have said that the wealth they have produced belongs to all the Korean people and offered to bring unemployed and street waifs from the ROK to give them a decent life—even offered to send food and other aid to the needy in the south. All these offers have been refused and hushed up by the gangsters who rule in the ROK, fearing the exposure of their system and the misery it causes.

Censorship. Lies. Terror. None of it has succeeded in convincing the people of south Korea to accept the misery in which they live or in ridding them of the desire to see the country reunified once again. None of it has been able to crush their struggle.

Teachers and bakery workers, journalists and agricultural laborers have all struck in recent years demanding not only better pay but also democratic rights. At the beginning of the last school year the Pak government had 800 college professors fired, hoping thus to quell dissent among students. Yet all the repression, all Pak's "Emergency Decrees" mandating jail or death for anyone criticizing the government have only bred new fighters.

Many are joining the People's Revolutionary Party, a Marxist-Leninist party with ties to the Korean Workers Party of the DPRK. The Party organizes the day to day struggle of the people in the ROK and aims it at the U.S. imperialists and their puppets. Its goal is revolution and, when victorious, moving to reunite the country on the basis of nationwide general elections for a unified central government.

Korean Proposal

The U.S.-provoked tree cutting incident last month proves once again that, just as it was in Vietnam, the main question facing the Korean people north and south is the defeat of U.S. imperialism. Not only is the U.S. ruling class responsible for the prolonged division of the country and the suffering of the 36 million people of the south, but it could plunge Korea into a war—even a nuclear war—at any time as a result of its occupation.

Without the political, military and economic support of the U.S. ruling class, Pak Jung Hi would be scurrying for safety in Hawaii like Thieu and Lon Nol before him and Korea would be on the road to reunification and a society free of exploitation and misery.

The U.S. is no longer unqualified king of the imperialist dung heap. Its capitalists have been battered by liberation struggles around the world, like that of the people of the ROK, and by competition from rival bandits like the up and coming Soviet Union. But these developments have only made the U.S. imperialists more desperate to hold onto and squeeze what they have left, using any means they think they can get away with.

One major obstacle to their efforts is the American people, who learned many lessons about the nature of their rulers and the wars they waged during Vietnam. The ruling class tried to get maximum mileage out of the fight in the truce zone, waving the flag and beating war drums, but they're meeting resistance and questioning when they try to whip up public opinion for their adventures. It is an important task to expose their real motives and mobilize against their war plans. The potential was shown by demonstrations called on short notice in a number of cities by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War to protest the U.S. ruling class provocation. Though small, these actions were met with real enthusiasm by passersby, some of whom even joined up.

The DPRK has not withdrawn its August 5th statement and even though tensions at the truce zone have relaxed since the beginning of September the threat of war is still grave. It will remain until the U.S. ruling class drops the pretense of being the U.N. in Korea, withdraws its troops from the country and its backing from Pak Jung Hi and his like, signs a peace treaty to replace the truce agreement and thus leaves the whole Korean people free to build their future united. ■



Steel...

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the attack Abel and his machine had made on the rank and file and turned it back on Abel and the steel bosses. The open letter ended by taking up the gauntlet Abel had thrown down on opening night:

"We know that our problem doesn't lie with 'outsiders' but with the way our union is being run on the inside by company men like yourself—while tens of thousands of jobs are being eliminated our top leadership talks of the 'successes gained by union/management cooperation'..."

"You can't show your face in a lot of plants across the country because the workers wouldn't let you get too far. And here, in the territory you want to claim as yours, the sentiment against you is growing. It'll continue to grow and get better organized.

"...You're sitting on a powder keg...That powder keg is the rank and file."

Later that night a delegation of steel workers went to present the letter to Abel himself at his headquarters in the Las Vegas Hilton. They found him in the casino among the one-armed bandits. As the steel workers denounced Abel and his sabotaging of the struggle, a crowd began to gather around the confrontation as the workers demanded a reply.

The only thing Abel could say for himself was that he was president of the union and no one else and that he was too busy to respond because he was on union business. He ran out a side door of the casino and yelled for guards to eject the rank and filers.

The next day *The Steelworker* held a press conference outside the convention to demand that Abel come out from hiding and answer the open letter. A USWA staff man, posing as a rank and file delegate, broke into the press conference to claim that almost everybody in the union loved Abel and what he was doing and, in fact, that Abel was one of the greatest leaders in the history of the working class.

His scheme was exposed when someone yelled out, "Where do you work, brother?" Reluctantly, he answered that he worked for Abel. Then he attacked some of the workers for being "observers" and not "delegates," saying that the workers were "outsiders." But this ploy was turned around and exposed for what it was. "How dare you say we don't belong here," one steel worker responded. "We're union members who've paid our own expenses to travel halfway across the country to be here. And you say we shouldn't be here? Why is this convention being held in the middle of the desert as far away as possible from the major steel centers and the masses of steel workers? We think more of our brothers

should be here, not less. And we'd much rather have them be here than someone like you, someone who bows and scrapes for I. W. Abel and turns his back on the workers!"

After the press conference a number of delegates came up to the steel workers and expressed their support for what they had done. They talked about what was happening to the men back in the mills and plants and exchanged addresses for getting together after the convention. During the last days of the convention more delegates began arising from the floor and challenging Abel's railroading.

Much of the convention was spent on strangling the workers' struggle against attacks on their living standards and working conditions. At the same time, the capitalists and their agents in union leadership used the convention to attack the workers politically, to tie them up to one or another wing of the bourgeoisie. They tooted the Bicentennial horn and praised the rule of the bourgeoisie, they paraded a long battalion of Democratic politicians including "Fritz" Mondale, and they passed resolutions supporting the rule of south Korean despot Pak Jung Hi. These weasels left no stone unturned. *The Steelworker* took this up, too, with a leaflet titled "Jimmy or Jerry? Neither's for Us...Victory Through Struggle!"

Sadlowski Candidacy

Shortly after the convention Ed Sadlowski announced he was going to run for the USWA presidency against the retiring Abel's picked successor, Lloyd McBride. Sadlowski's candidacy poses some questions for the rank and file. He has taken a stand against many of the bad policies of the Abel clique but in practice, for example at the convention, he has tended to slide backwards.

Rank and file forces within the USWA will have to determine what stand to take on Sadlowski. The key question is whether a victory for Sadlowski, or even a strong campaign, could contribute to further developing the initiative of the rank and file by helping to break the stranglehold of the Abel machine and its class collaborationist policies over the union. The main thing for the rank and file, in this as in any battle, is to build their own struggle and initiative and, at all times, maintain their independence. In any case, the workers must not let the election become a "superpower contention" between the Abel clique and the Sadlowski forces, where the rank and file gets left in the backwash.

The next period of time offers many opportunities for the rank and file to wage sharper struggle and build broader organization in taking on the steel companies. The election campaign for USWA president opens the door for further blows against the Abel machine, a task that must be taken on with or without Sadlowski. The contract for the workers in basic steel comes up next August. Although it's already clear that Abel and the steel capitalists are planning a sellout and with the ENA the workers don't have a "legal" right to strike, the contract can be made a real battleground for the rank and file and victories can be won.

The 18th Constitutional Convention made a couple of things clearer. Abel and the company machinery within the union will not wither away and die by itself. Abel wasn't joking when he said on the first day he had no intention of surrendering the union to the rank and file. But because of the struggle waged at the convention and the contacts made there were some advances for the workers. All this increases the basis for intensifying the struggle that is already taking place and building it as a more conscious struggle against the capitalist class. ■

come more frantic. With their treachery threatened by the struggle and organization of the rank and file, there is no step they won't resort to, even to the point of taking up arms on behalf of the capitalists.

In recent years not many local labor traitors have had their members shot in an open union meeting, and this is precisely why the experience of the rank and file in Dayton is so important. The national publicity it has been given by Auto Workers United to Fight in '76 and the various *Workers* around the country has spread lessons to thousands of workers who are actively fighting the two-headed monster, the capitalists and their henchmen in the unions. As their battles develop, they too must be prepared for any degree of treachery and viciousness from those they are fighting, including gangland style assaults.

But, of course, most of these traitors today don't acclaim and defend actions like those of Palmer. So the more light is shined on the foul tactics of the Palmer mob, the more difficult it makes it for others of his like to carry out such attacks in the future. This, too, is part of the contribution of the courage of the rank and file in Dayton in building their fight against—and despite—the Palmer gang, and of the support they have received from workers around the country.

The beating of Erik Larsen and the shooting of Charles Wheeler was a desperate act. Palmer is working to take advantage of it on behalf of GM, but the final advantage will belong to the masses of workers, as the attack helps to deepen their understanding and fuel their hatred of Palmer, GM and the system in which they flourish. ■

Assault...

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to know what was happening in negotiations, an immediate union meeting (for which they had the number of petition signatures required by the local constitution), and an open vote on any proposed contract.

Like the picket at the Union office before it, this demonstration was an important step for the rank and file in regrouping its forces. It served notice on GM and their bought-and-paid-for union hacks that just as the workers fought back after having been lied to and robbed in 1971, they will continue to build their strength and struggle.

The recent events at Frigidaire/Delco Air can provide an even firmer foundation to advance the struggle there by unmasking further the real class nature of traitors like Cassel Palmer and his predecessors. They do not serve the bourgeoisie inadvertently or in part. They use their comfortable positions to sell the rank and file through all kinds of fancy talk and pressure tactics to those who exploit them. As workers come to see that caving in to the company leads not to job security or whatever other advantages are promised but only to company demands for further surrenders, the hacks be-