Ford, The Last Mile

The River Rouge plant has taken on many aspects of a community in which martial law has been declared, and in which a huge military organization. . . has been superimposed upon the regular civil authorities.

National Labor Relations Board

Henry Ford, the famed engineer of the Model T car and the moving assembly line, had become by 1940 an infamous patron of a private army. His reputation for violent anti-unionism led many observers to believe he might still defy the revived UAW-CIO.

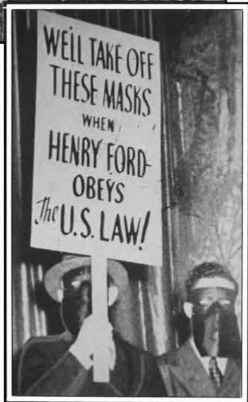
Ford's Service Department had grown to 3,000 men, making it, according to *The New York Times*, the largest privately run secret-service force in the world. As Henry Ford, recovering from strokes in 1938 and 1941, retired from the firm's day-to-day management, Harry Bennett used the backing of this small army to become the de facto chief of the Ford Motor Company, eclipsing even Henry's oldest son, Edsel. The atmosphere of dread and apprehension that pervaded the Rouge plant thereafter permeated every level of the company. "The feeling of the average person towards Bennett was fear," reported Frank Riecks, a Ford manager. Fear took many forms on the shop floor—fear of informers, fear of physical punishment, fear of sudden dismissal. And these were not solely blue-collar fears. "This included supervision," Riecks recalled. "They felt that if they hit Bennett head on, they might be out of a job."

CIO organizers, on the other hand, were afraid that if they *did not* hit Bennett "head on," his company's lower wages and non-union working conditions would allow Ford to undersell GM and Chrysler. Such competitive pressure, union supporters feared, would eventually undermine the UAW's position throughout the industry.

Ford, the bastion of Detroit's Open Shop, had to be organized if the city's labor movement was to consolidate its gains. As it happened, all the elements for such an organizing campaign fell into place after 1939, notwithstanding the National Labor Relations Board's (NLRB) grim assessment of the Rouge plant.

If nothing else, workers were back at work in the dozens of machine shops, assembly plants, foundries, steel and

"Unionism, Not Fascism"



Above: UAW demonstrators are holding a sign picturing Henry Ford, Sr. with a swastika.

Inset: When 1,000 Ford–UAW members marched in the 1937 Labor Day parade, they all wore masks to conceal their identities.

Preceding page: State Police confront UAW picketers, April, 1941.

Many Americans saw reason to equate the elder Ford with Germany's Nazi regime, which gave wide distribution to Ford's anti-Jewish writings. In 1938, Hitler's government expressed its high regard for Ford by sending the German Vice Consul to Dearborn and presenting him with the Grand Cross of the German Eagle. After the ceremony, Ford assured reporters that accepting the medal did not "involve any sympathy on my part with Nazism." Ford's UAW opponents were not convinced.

If Ford was, in fact, pro-Fascist, he was not alone. *Detroit Times* owner William Randolph Hearst, expressing only mild criticism of Nazi "excesses," advocated a German-U.S. alliance against "the onrushing hordes of Russian Communism," as the *Times* editorialized in 1939.

Hearst and Ford, like many employers, also saw a Red menace in the CIO, and Ford in particular instructed his managers to suppress this "alien" influence at all costs.

Union supporters were at risk even when they were far from the Rouge. "In 1939 when I was marching in the Labor Day parade," recalled Shelton Tappes, a young black worker in the Rouge foundry, "I had my Ford badge pinned to my lapel. And as I got to the Fox Theater, a man stepped out from the curb and took a good look at my badge.... The next day I found myself fired."

The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 prohibited the firing of workers solely for union membership, but Ford routinely ignored the law. In the fall of 1937, the Bill of Rights was also partially suspended in Dearborn when the company-controlled City Council banned all leafleting around the Rouge plant. Over 600 UAW leafleters were subsequently arrested in December and January for defying this denial of free speech.

rubber mills that made up the Rouge complex. During the 1937–38 recession, the Rouge's fulltime workforce had fallen from 87,000 to 11,000, and the UAW's dues-paying membership dropped accordingly—to a reported low of only 18 members at one point. By 1940, a modest economic recovery was underway in Detroit and nationally, spurred in part by the expanding production of military hardware. Ford's employment grew apace, even though Ford showed little interest in securing Pentagon contracts before 1940.

The government's role in regulating labor relations also expanded tremendously after April, 1937, when the Supreme Court ruled the National Labor Relations Act constitutional. Government officials were especially inclined to intervene in cases where conflict might disrupt military production, and Detroit was already becoming the nation's "Arsenal of Democracy." In 1939 and 1940, the NLRB established itself as the final arbitrator of inter-union conflicts between the UAW–CIO and the UAW–AFL, conducting elections in scores of workplaces that established the UAW–CIO as the choice of Detroit's autoworkers.

Ford's lawyers, having made the preposterous claim their employer did not engage in interstate commerce, insisted that the company was exempt from federal labor law. The company thereafter concluded that NLRB rulings, including those ordering the company to reinstate union supporters it had illegally fired, were non-binding. Such blatant defiance of the law allowed Bennett to continue bullying UAW supporters, but a government-initiated suit was slowly closing in on Ford's "martial-law" rule.

So was the UAW–CIO, revitalized and emboldened by its strike victories in 1939 and its defeat of Homer Martin the same year. The factionalism that plagued the 1937–1938 organizing drive was now behind the union. To insure it stayed that way, UAW leaders agreed to put the Ford campaign under the direction of Michael Widman, an organizer loaned to the union by the United Mine Workers.

In 1940, Widman recruited 1,000 volunteers and a staff of 70 full-time organizers, including veteran Ford worker Bill McKie and young black activists Veal Clough and Shelton Tappes. Small neighborhood offices were opened far from the plants, and initial meetings were held in members' homes to reduce the likelihood of surveillance. Subcommittees were established for each of the major ethnic and racial groups represented at Ford. "We did the speaking on the Italian Hour," recalled Nick DiGaetano, a volunteer from Chrysler Local 7 who spoke frequently on radio broadcasts of the Italian Organizing Committee. Later, "we arranged meetings at Eastern High School and different halls in the Italian districts"—always tailed, he remembered, by "two of Bennett's racketeers."

It was, above all, the decade-long shift in the attitudes and politics of Detroit's black community that finally tipped the scales in favor of the union. By 1940–1941, a growing minority of black workers and professionals believed the UAW–CIO, not Henry Ford, was the best friend of black people.

The emergence of this pro-CIO constituency marked a fundamental realignment. Until the early 1930s, Detroit's blacks had been nearly unanimous in their praise of Henry Ford and their distrust of unions. There were multiple reasons for this attitude. Many black autoworkers, to begin with, had been raised in Southern farm communities, where tradition and deference regulated much of daily life. Once in Detroit, these migrants faced a degree of racial segregation and discrimination that made them doubly dependent on the city's conservative black leaders.

The small, relatively well-to-do black elite had little reason to trust the white labor movement. For men like Reverend William Peck of Bethel A.M.E. Church and Louis Blount of the Great Lakes Mutual Insurance Company, black capitalism was the only reliable means of self-help—and Henry Ford was the only reliable source of the jobs and wages making black business viable.

Black workers were also appreciative of Ford's more equitable hiring practices, and his highly publicized "rescue" of Inkster during the early-Depression years. Equally important, they had no more reason than their middle-class

Below: UAW appeals to black workers drew comparisons between union and non-union conditions in Detroit's auto industry. Hodges Mason, a local-union leader at Bohn Aluminum, here underlined the hourly wage increases at Briggs and Budd Wheel that ranged between 30 and 100 percent between 1936 and 1940.

Inset: The Negro Organizing Subcommittee for the Ford organizing campaign. Left to right: Joseph Billups, Walter Hardin, Chris Alston, Veal Clough, Clarence Bowman, Leon Bates, and John Conyers, Sr.

brethren to be immediately swayed by the UAW-CIO's formal commitment to integration.

"The whole thing about it," according to Joseph Billups, who became a UAW organizer, "was they had been, I call it gypped, so many times in joining the union. . . . They figured they would be used, used by white people and then kicked out." Positive action was required of the union, and the UAW's record, though better than any other Detroit union, was mixed. Black UAW activists like Sam Fanroy at Chrysler-Jefferson, Oscar Oden at Midland Steel, and Leonard Newman at Briggs had won elective office in their locals, but they remained isolated cases. At the same time, white workers at Chevrolet Gear and Axle had excluded black co-workers from a union-sponsored dance.

Black ministers were especially inclined to see the well-being of their congregation as dependent upon the good graces of the Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford gave financial support to many black churches, and his company routinely hired job applicants from favored congregations. Donald Marshall, the former policeman hired by Bennett to head Ford's "black" Service Department, underlined this close relationship by frequently appearing in these same churches as a guest speaker.

When black ministers occasionally deviated from the "Ford Gospel," Marshall turned the screws. The Reverend Horace White of the Plymouth Congregational Church, a well-known UAW supporter, found every pulpit on the

Violent confrontations on Miller Road during the 1941 strike pitted UAW picketers (top) against a much smaller force of predominantly black strikebreakers (middle). Black union supporters helped ease the racial tension by circling the plant in a sound car (bottom), urging the strikebreakers to leave the plant and side with the UAW.

West Side closed to him in 1938 when a neighborhood group invited him to deliver the annual Emancipation Day speech. The pro-union President of Howard University, Dr. Mordecai Johnson, was similarly barred from the Bethel A.M.E. Church after Marshall applied pressure on Reverend Peck.

Even the YMCA felt the weight of Marshall's influence. When the Con-

ference of Negro Trade Unionists sought permission in 1940 to hold a public meeting at the all-black YMCA on St. Antoine Street, director Wilbur Woodson turned them down. "I'm in favor of unions," Woodson later remarked privately, "but I couldn't let them hold that meeting here. If I had, the next day Marshall would have been down here to know why. That would have meant I couldn't recommend any more men to Ford's. I've got to be an opportunist."

Woodson's logic made sense to an older generation of blacks who saw the Republican Party and the Booker T. Washington Trade Association as the traditional standard-bearers of black emancipation. That conservative generation still dominated Detroit's black elite in the mid-1930s—but they were rapidly losing their grip.

The younger blacks who now challenged this leadership were weaned on a far different political and social culture. They were more accustomed to industrial work, urban life, and trade unions, and a minority had even gained an intensive apprenticeship in direct-action politics through the Communist Party. "Every time a Negro would pick up a piece of Communist literature," Frank Marquart remembered, "he would always find something that pertained to the problems of Negroes." The Unemployed Councils, the League of Struggle For Negro Rights, and the campaign to prevent the execution of the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama appealed to young blacks impatient with the "go-slow" approach of the middle-class elite.

By 1936, winds of change were gusting through Detroit's black community. For the first time since Emancipation, black voters abandoned the Republican Party and cast their ballots in record numbers for New Deal Democrats, electing Charles Diggs, Sr., a prominent supporter of the CIO, to the Michigan Senate. The *Michigan Chronicle* was also founded by Louis Martin as a liberal counter to the black-owned Republican weekly, the *Detroit Tribune*. Both the national NAACP and Urban League endorsed the CIO, even as the Detroit chapters of both organizations continued to support the Open Shop.

When the Detroit chapter of the National Negro Congress (NNC) was founded in 1936, however, it had no qualms about industrial unionism. Indeed, the NNC was partly funded by the CIO, and made support of the UAW central to its program. (Among its early activists, the NNC counted a young man named Coleman Young—the city's future mayor.)

Ford, the Last Mile: Picketers at Gate 4 and pro-UAW women.

Over the next three years, black participation in Detroit's labor movement slowly grew. The AFL's Waiters and Waitresses Union opened its ranks to black workers in 1938, and in February of 1939 black maids at the Reid Hotel initiated a walkout to win a $15-a-week minimum wage. Five hundred black sanitation workers also signed union cards, making their public-employee local the largest all-black union in Michigan. Black progressives led by Diggs and White meanwhile established firm links with the UAW-CIO during the Dodge strike in the fall of 1939.

Two prominent black ministers, Reverend Malcolm Dade of St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church, and Reverend Charles Hill of the Hartford Avenue Baptist Church (site 62), also joined the UAW's Ford organizing campaign. At considerable risk, Hill endorsed the UAW-CIO and made his church available for union meetings. "If they met in a regular union hall," Hill explained, "then some of the spies from Ford would take their automobile license numbers and they lost their job. By holding it in a church, it would be difficult for them to prove that we were just discussing union matters."

Some in his congregation, however, would not risk worshipping in a pro-UAW church. "When I took a stand for the union," Hill remembered, "100 of them left." But for those who remained, and for a growing number of black workers throughout Detroit, the UAW's organizing campaign began to make some telling points.

Ford, the union acknowledged, did hire more black workers than any other employer. But the Service Department also abused them as roughly as white workers, and blacks at Ford were concentrated in the most dangerous and unhealthy jobs. Particularly for black foundrymen at Ford, the intense heat, thick clouds of soot, and repeated gas explosions all made death and lung disease far too common.

Black organizers like John Conyers Sr., Walter Hardin, Leon Bates, William Bowman, and Paul Kirk gave tangible evidence to Ford workers that the UAW was not a "Whites Only" union. The same message was conveyed by the integrated Women's Auxiliary as it helped sign up union supporters. "The Negro women. . . [each] used to bring in one member, two members," recalled Auxiliary-leader Rose Billups, "because I promised that no one would know but myself. I used to go to the saloon, in the alleys, to meet the Negroes [who worked at Ford]. They gave me their dues, and I used to bring them to Mike Widman."

The pace of organization began to accelerate in the fall of 1940. In September, the small UAW-AFL committee at Ford voted to dissolve and join the UAW-CIO. In October, Judge Lila Neuenfelt of Dearborn bucked the Ford political machine and declared the anti-leafleting ordinance unconstitutional. Hundreds of leafleters now regularly gathered at the plant gates to handbill workers and, every two weeks, pass out 50,000 copies of the UAW's *Ford Facts*.

Early the following year, Ford's bid on a $10 million defense contract to build trucks was rejected by the government because of the company's poor labor record. In February, 1941, an even heavier blow fell when the Supreme Court upheld the NLRB and ordered Ford to rehire the workers it had illegally fired.

As the banished union supporters re-entered the plants, the last veil of fear lifted. Ford workers now openly wore union buttons and plastered UAW stickers on their machines. "I was signing guys up at the rate of hundreds a day after that," recalled Percy Llewellyn, first president of the UAW Rouge local and one of the reinstated workers in the Motor Building. His superintendent, Al Smith, remembered the same sudden leap in the number of union supporters. "They just popped up all at once, started blooming all over the place; regular men, who had been working

Clean Sweep

You worked on the assumption that this thing [the union] was going to come about and that it couldn't fail. . . . "Now, if they organize Fords [I told others], the whole country is going to go, and you might as well get in on this thing right from the start."

Henry Hanson, steelworker and union activist

Hanson's prophecy exaggerated the national impact of the UAW's Ford campaign, but not its local impact at Great Lakes Steel. As the UAW organizing drive rolled towards victory in the spring of 1941, steel-union organizers in Great Lakes' strip mill began a strike in June that spread through the entire Ecorse complex (site 31).

Coming at a time when war-related business was improving and profits rising, the union's success in forcing a halt to operations brought management to a painful realization. "It was clear," recalled Joseph Jeffrey, then a rising executive in Great Lakes Steel, "that we just couldn't afford to have all that turmoil all the time." Stable and profitable production operations required stable and predictable labor relations. Collective bargaining seemed the only way to insure such stability, so the company agreed to recognize the CIO's Steel Workers Organizing Commitee (SWOC).

For some executives, recognizing SWOC was an unpleasant necessity. But for Jeffrey, who now took over the company's newly-formed Labor Relations Department, the union was a potentially good thing—not simply because his family in Pennsylvania counted four generations of active membership in the United Mine Workers, but because a union contract could help Jeffrey and other young executives "modernize" Great Lakes Steel.

When the company's forerunner, Michigan Steel, began operations as a small, family-owned mill in 1922, its departments had been run along traditional lines. Superintendents, foremen, and even skilled workers hired their immediate subordinates—usually from their family and nationality group —and set pay scales as they pleased. Even after the company quadrupled in size, there was no company-wide hiring or management policy. Individual supervisors ruled their separate (and frequently antagonistic) "kingdoms" within Great Lakes Steel, giving many departments and occupations a distinctive religious, racial, or ethnic identity. Irish Catholics were concentrated in the open-hearth furnaces; English and Germans in the rolling mills; Scotsmen in the machine shops; and Poles in lower-level jobs throughout the company. While some departments were ethnically diverse, blacks were only hired at the Zug Island blast furnaces, where Italians otherwise predominated. All the chippers in the Ecorse mills were Greek.

In 1935, top management concluded that in-group favoritism was not worth the resentment it created among excluded workers. These self-contained kingdoms also cost the company money, since skilled workers and foremen habitually padded production figures to improve their standing and income, and supervisors routinely submitted the inflated payroll claims of favored employees.

The company therefore began to dismantle these kingdoms. Top management first took control over hiring, transfers, and promotions, undermining the supervisors' control over jobs. When SWOC again began to attract a sizeable following in the mills after 1938, management extended the modernization campaign even further, establishing a seniority system to govern job security and promotions in a more even-handed way. Foremen, under orders to behave "as if" there was a union at Great Lakes Steel, were expected to take workers' grievances seriously, even if they did not always act on them. By 1940, there were noticeably fewer firings for union activity.

"The union is looking over our shoulder," one executive remembered the company telling its foremen, "[and] we don't want to give them anything to shoot at." This new policy gave SWOC organizers considerably more freedom in the plants. The gradual breakup of the departmental kingdoms weakened the hold supervisors previously exercised over their work crews. And since foremen were now behaving "as if" there was a union, SWOC activists were able to claim—with good reason—that they were the union, not the company's nearly defunct Employee Representation Plan.

More and more workers looked to SWOC activists as people who could "get the job done" when it came to arguing grievances with foremen. When the autoworkers struck Ford in the spring of 1941, a majority of steelworkers concluded the time had come for SWOC to do the same at Great Lakes Steel.

Their confidence was rewarded when a June strike forced the company to recognize their union. For some, however, the first contract negotiated that summer and fall was a disappointment. Company executives like Joseph Jeffrey were prepared to accept the union as a potential ally in establishing standardized work relations in a giant corporation, but they refused to raise wages any higher than prevailing rates in competing companies.

Many SWOC recruits expected more, and SWOC organizers saw no reason to moderate their high expectations while the union fought for recognition. When the first contract brought less than many had hoped for, the dissidents temporarily shut down the mills in an unauthorized "wildcat" strike against both the company and the union.

Detroit was indeed a Union Town—but it was not at all clear what that meant in practice.

These steelworkers, unhappy with the first contract negotiated at Great Lakes Steel, walked out on strike without union authorization in October, 1941. They hung an effigy of union official Orval Kincaid from a lamppost on Jefferson Avenue after he suspended some of the "wildcat" leaders from the union. Walter Reuther of the UAW and Gus Scholle of the Metro CIO intervened and arranged to have the suspended members reinstated; Kincaid was replaced shortly afterwards.

Government-supervised elections brought final victory for the UAW–CIO.

there for years."

Bennett's Servicemen redoubled their coercive tactics. Men were fired, beaten, demoted, or transferred in an effort to stem the tide. But Ford workers now had an acute sense of their collective power, and the rebounding economy dramatically reduced anxieties about job security. When Bennett fired several union stewards from the Rolling Mill in March, 3,000 workers sat down and won their reinstatement within an hour. Over the next two weeks, some 15,000 workers sat down in a dozen brief work stoppages.

The final explosion came on April 1. When Bennett fired eight men that night from the Rolling Mill, 1,500 workers sat down, sparking a general work stoppage that eventually paralyzed the entire complex. The UAW had hoped to win recognition at Ford through government-supervised elections, but Ford had refused to cooperate with the NLRB. With some 50,000 members now refusing to work, the die was cast for a general strike of Ford Rouge. It would not, however, be a sitdown. Because the Supreme Court had declared the tactic illegal in 1939, UAW leaders feared a sitdown might alienate public opinion and weaken government support. In addition, a sitdown would most certainly provoke a violent response from the Service Department. Some time before 1 a.m. on April 2, the union therefore called upon the strikers to march out of the Rouge.

"It was a thrilling moment," recalled UAW supporter John Fitzgerald, "a wonderful experience, to walk out along with all those men determined on one thing, through Gate 4, with Servicemen standing there looking at us and not daring to say a word. No supervisor, no officer of the Ford Motor Company, neither Harry Bennett, nor any Servicemen dared say us nay." Early that morning, union members set up picket lines and built barricades of automobiles and railroad ties across nearby highways. An estimated 10,000 picketers massed at strategic points, while another 1,000 waited in reserve at union headquarters.

With his Servicemen outnumbered, Bennett joined Dearborn Police Chief Carl Brooks, a former Ford detective, in calling upon both the President and the Governor to send troops. The plants, they announced, were being occupied by "7,000 to 8,000" sitdowners, led by "Communistic terrorists" whose single goal was to sabotage the nation's defense program. Government observers on the scene, however, noted that there was no sitdown and that Ford did virtually no defense work at the Rouge. Democratic Governor Murray Van Waggoner sent the State Police to Dearborn, but ordered them only to clear the barricades on Miller Road and replace the Dearborn police around the plant.

As Bennett's red scare fizzled, he set in motion a more credible threat: race riot.

The overwhelming majority of black workers joined the walkout on April 2—some enthusiastically, others with mixed or lukewarm feelings toward the UAW–CIO. Only about 1,500 to 2,000 stayed inside the plant as strikebreakers, most of them recently hired by Bennett, and a large number just arrived from the South. If these were Bennett's "sitdowners," he now decided to put them on their feet and send them out of the plant to attack the UAW's picket lines. A race riot might bring out the National Guard even if a bogus sitdown could not.

On April 2nd and 3rd, violent melees broke out on Miller Road between black strikebreakers under Bennett's orders, and the largely white picketers. Simultaneously, Homer Martin and Don Marshall went into the black community to address "back-to-work" rallies. The heightened racial tension, however, had unexpected results. Bennett's reckless tactics, by threatening a race war that black Detroiters could only lose, horrified many of the company's supporters. The Detroit Urban League dropped its vocal support of the company and fell silent, while the Detroit NAACP came out in favor of the UAW–CIO. Only the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance continued to support Ford.

On the picket lines, the Reverends White, Dade, and Hill encouraged black strikebreakers to abandon the plant, and after Michael Widman and Emil Mazey of the UAW assured their safety, over 1,000 came out between April 2 and 4. On April 3, tension was further reduced when Horace Sheffield and other union supporters in the NAACP's Youth Council circled the plant in a UAW sound car, directing appeals to the remaining strikebreakers to abandon Bennett's divisive tactics.

A week later, Ford finally capitulated and agreed to an NLRB election. It was now just a matter of time for the UAW–CIO, which had only a revived and discredited UAW–AFL to deal with in the upcoming May election. Editor Chris Alston directed numerous Negro Editions of *Ford Facts* at black workers in the weeks before the balloting, and a rally of 60,000 in Cadillac Square heard Paul Robeson, the celebrated singer and actor, endorse the CIO.

On May 21, 1941, the UAW–CIO won 70 percent of the vote, the UAW–AFL only 28 percent. Barely 2 percent voted for no union. Scarcely one century after the city's carpenters first organized for better wages and working conditions, Detroit had become a Union Town.