



## LOOKING BACK *Moving Forward*



Photos: Walter P. Reuther Library

**Above, women joined men in passing out union leaflets to workers outside the Ford Rouge plant in Dearborn, before company thugs began beating them, left. On the overpass to the plant, below left, Ford security personnel approach Walter Reuther and other organizers before punching and kicking them, resulting in serious injuries and one death.**

## Ford Takes on the Union: The Battle of the Overpass

The year 1937 was a turning point in the effort by Michigan's autoworkers to organize unions. By April of that year, successful sit-down strikes had led to agreements with General Motors and Chrysler to recognize the United Auto Workers and to negotiate contracts. But workers at the Ford Motor Co.

would have to wait. Henry Ford remained strongly opposed to unions, and his 2,000-strong Ford Service Department kept close watch on workers at the Ford Rouge plant, roughing up or firing anyone they deemed sympathetic to unions. Workers were watched and followed in their neighborhoods as well as in the plant. Harry Bennett, an ex-prizefighter who ran the Service Department, had built connections with the FBI, local police, and organized crime figures.

His network sought to collect information on the 90,000 plant workers and he had the authority to hire, fire, demote, or

transfer just about anyone on the payroll. Workers who talked with each other on the assembly line were suspect, and had to use the "Ford whisper" — talking from the sides of their mouths — to communicate with each other.

Nevertheless, the newly energized UAW kept up its efforts. On May 26, 1937, union organizers planned a mass distribution of leaflets to workers outside the gates to the Ford Rouge plant during the 2 p.m. shift change. Although UAW organizer (and later president) Walter Reuther had obtained a permit for leafleting, many worried that violence would break out. So, the UAW brought volunteers from the union's Women's Auxiliary to help distribute the leaflets, believing (wrongly, as it turned out) that Bennett's force wouldn't rough up women. The union had also invited local clergy, staff members of a Senate Committee on Civil Liberties, and reporters to witness the distribution.

As the women arrived at the Schaefer Road side of the Rouge complex, Ford Servicemen met them, pushing, shoving, and punching, forcing them back on to the streetcars they'd arrived on, while beating several of the men who accompanied them. Meanwhile, reporters and photographers described being accosted by men in sunglasses who had emerged from 25 parked cars nearby and who told the reporters to leave.

On the other side of the Rouge plant, facing Miller Road, Reuther, Richard Frankenstein, and other union organizers walked up the stairs of the overpass that connected the plant with streetcar tracks and a parking lot on the other side of Miller Road. As they stood, with

### 'I Saw Days I Didn't Have a Loaf of Bread'

**My husband was a Ford worker, first at Highland Park, then at the Rouge. In 1932, when Ford's plant was built in Ypsilanti, he was sent there.** He had been making \$6 a day, but when we got to Ypsilanti, the unskilled workers were cut to \$2.80 a day. They said the Chamber of Commerce said Ford couldn't come to Ypsilanti and pay \$6 a day because the small shops there could not compete with him. Ypsilanti had a paper mill, a stove works, a small foundry. Maybe more I don't know about.

We had two children, and I saw days I didn't have the price of a loaf of bread. An old black man had a little store near us and he would trust me until payday. We found a "decent" little house for \$10 a month. I can't remember how long he worked for \$2.80, but they would get a 40-cent-a-day raise now and then. By the time my twins were born in April, 1934, he was getting \$4.40 a day.

We had a 1928 Chevy. At \$6 a day we thought we could buy a new Ford, so in the summer before we went to Ypsilanti, we bought one, traded in our old car, of course. Then when they cut us to \$2.80 a day, we just took the Ford back to the dealer and told him we could not pay for it. So we lost all of it. The dealer gave us an old Ford for \$100, to pay \$10 a month. Even that was a struggle. And I can't remember when his pay did get back to \$6.

My husband used to tell me about the Ford Service Department men sneaking around. He used to say when we get the union we'll put a uniform on them, and we will know them. I am now 88 years old."

— Carrie Smith in "We Make Our Own History" (UAW, 1986)