



Brother Bill McKie

BUILDING THE UNION AT FORD

By PHILLIP BONOSKY

Henry Ford boasted that he would never let them unionize his plants—and for over 20 years he kept the union out of River Rouge with guns, blacklists, goons, and frame-ups. This is the thrilling story of how auto's rank and file, like "Brother" Bill McKie, fought this long and bloody struggle and how together they won.

BROTHER BILL McKIE

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Dedicated to the memory of Bess McKie,
and to those who fought Ford and won,
and to those who died in the fighting—

Joe York, Joe Bussell,
Coleman Leny, Joe DeBlasio . . .

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Foreword

THE ORGANIZATION of the trustified mass production industries during the 1930's constituted a tremendous step forward by the American working class. The great unionizing campaign smashed the main fortress of the open shop and placed a solid foundation under the whole structure of organized labor. As a result the labor movement, with enormously increased economic and political power, has advanced from some three million members twenty years ago to about 15 million today.

At the heart of this vast drive of the workers for unionization was the struggle in the automobile industry. In this great industry trustification was highly developed, the vast bulk of production centered in three immense concerns—General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. Mass production was the universal rule in the automobile industry. The union-smashing techniques of company unionism and the so-called welfare systems were at the maximum. Nowhere in the world were the workers exploited more systematically and heartlessly. The automobile kings ruled autocratically over their industrial empire with a million un-organized wage slaves.

This book, ably written by Phillip Bonosky, is the story of the conquest of this key industry by trade unionism—one of the most stirring social epics of our times. Specifically, it deals with the organization of the enormous Ford plant in Detroit, the biggest and strongest single open-shop fortress in the automobile industry. Henry Ford, autocratic dictator of this vast concern, had no peer in exploiting the workers to the last degree and in preventing them from developing a union with which to protect their vital interests.

This is no dry-as-dust official union history, written from the cold and abstract standpoint of the labor bureaucrat, and from a distance, outside the plant. It is a real, vivid, burning account of how the workers at the bench and on the assembly line felt and reacted during the whole historic struggle. It paints unforgettable pictures of the intense exploitation, the outrageous spy system, the brutal oppression, the systematic attempts to play off white against Negro workers, the terrors

of the great economic crisis, the long, bitter fight for unionization, the final victory—and all told in the realistic terms of a Ford worker, Bill McKie, who was a most important leader throughout the whole hard struggle.

One of the most instructive features of this book written out of the heart of industrial America, is the graphic way in which it outlines the key role of the Communist Party in the organization of the automobile industry. From way back in the early twenties—when the AFL leaders were hopelessly defeated with their obsolete system of craft unionism and their policies of class collaboration—it was the Communists, ardent fighters for industrial unionism, for unity between Negro and white workers, for a militant union policy, who led the bitter fight. And it was they, too, who were also on the front line during the stirring days of victory in the latter thirties. As it was in the automobile industry, so it was also in steel and the other mass production industries organized by the CIO. Bill McKie's book, portraying so vividly the heroic work of the Communist auto workers, is a devastating refutation of the slanders of those reactionary union leaders who assert that the Communist Party is an alien force among the workers, seeking selfishly to "exploit" their grievances.

Bill McKie, the central figure in this book, is a veritable symbol of the indomitable fighting spirit of the working class and of its determination eventually to emancipate itself. He is worlds apart from the Reuthers, Mazeys, and the like—trimmers, turncoats, and opportunists, who have wangled themselves into control of the auto workers' union and who, as "lieutenants of the employers in the ranks of the workers," are now busily striving to regiment the workers, to kill their militant spirit, and to ensnare them in the war program of aggressive Wall Street imperialism. Bill McKie is of the fine fighting stuff that Communists are made of. The whole logic of his life—his long fight for unionization and better conditions for the workers, and his unconquerable perspective for ultimate socialism—brought him inevitably into the ranks of the Communist Party, the true party of the working class and of the democratic masses of the American people.

William Z. Foster

CHAPTER ONE

This Is Ford, U.S.A.!

BEFORE HIM was an incredible sight. He stared, unable for a moment to make up his mind to enter. The field was as big as a city block. Penned behind high wire fences, and milling among the cinders and torn paper flying forlornly around the field, six thousand men stood or sat, squatted or slept on their feet, always moving restlessly like a gray army, dirty and tired as the dawn that came with no thunder over the factory stacks.

The cinder had been ground by their feet into a fine dust that rose and hung over them like a cloud. It mixed into their skins so that they all looked ashen gray. It sifted into their mouths and ground between their teeth. Some had waited in line all night; some had gone into a one-arm joint near by and nursed a cup of coffee into the bleak dawn.

Now they stood, red-eyed, padded with newspaper to keep out the sharp April cold. All strangers to each other, drawn to this bullpen from every state of the union, mysteriously united here, they waited patiently before a little closed gate. They had left homes and families and jobs. Soon, perhaps, someone would open the little gate; perhaps the skill they had learned over many years in mines and mills, and brought to this gate, would be wanted this day. They lifted their eyes to the lit horizon of the factory roof. Four gigantic blazing letters stared back at them. They spelled: F O R D .

The lean, long-faced man with mild blue eyes, a foreign cut to his dark suit, his hat squarely on his head, took his place in that thick writhing line of workers, and glanced curiously and anxiously around. They

were all ages here—even as old as he was, in his early fifties—all colors, all national groups. They were all workers. They came in working clothes—in the peaked cap of the miner, the dungarees of the sailor, the steel-toed shoes of the steelworker, the railroadman's jacket. They were all working faces. Their hands were workers' hands. Their talk was the talk of workers hoping to be hired. "What's he taking today?" they asked. "What's hiring?" "I hear they ain't taking assembly men today!" "They need men in the foundry." "Ford said he'll take everybody who wants a job!"

He, too, found himself anxiously snatching at each rumor as it went by, searching faces, edging up to little groups gathered around the latest authority. What was hiring today? Bricklayers? Diemakers? Drill-punch operators? They had come from Pennsylvania's hills, from the plantations of Mississippi, from the plains of Missouri; they had come from Mexico, from South America; they had come from Europe. And at least one of them, this lean fellow with the austere but friendly face, had come all the way from Scotland, where the word had also penetrated that an American auto manufacturer, Henry Ford—that homespun American industrialist who had never forgotten the common man from whom he came—would pay common laborers six dollars a day to work for him.

It was strange to be standing here tasting the dust, to see a man collapse on the spot he had jealously guarded all night; strange to see men wrapped in newspapers to keep out the morning cold. They were enclosed there like animals in a field, he felt. There was a fence around them, but it wasn't this fence that was keeping them here, that had kept them waiting all night, that put a stamp of hope-and-dread on their faces. There was a tremendous power in this field; he sensed it. He felt it run up and down the ragged ranks of men, cutting through his own body like sudden electricity. They leaned toward that little gate as though they would crush it. In spite of himself he felt a small wind of fright.

Then, suddenly, without warning, that small gate opened. He couldn't see, he didn't know; but before he could think of it, or ask a question, he felt himself bodily picked up and dragged forward by the enormous galvanic push of the men. A terrifying power ignited that gray army, and he was propelled by it helplessly ahead. A kind of panic took hold of him, and he fought the drive, only to be tossed ahead like a cork. There was no stopping it; his struggles against it helped only to intensify it.

He never knew how he got there. But suddenly he was standing before Saint Peter himself at the gate. The line had miraculously deposited him right there.

"I'm a sheet-metal worker," he was able to gasp.

It was the right thing to say!

"Go inside," the voice directed.

The gate was open. He stumbled through. He was in!

Behind him the word flew that sheet-metal workers were being hired that day. Every man in the line suddenly became a sheet-metal worker.

What happened that first day he would never remember too well. It was a nightmare worse than any he had ever had. They gave him a badge, his identification number, and he was turned over to a guide who took him behind the actual walls of that assembly plant so famous the world over and already the slogan of a new philosophy. He was still stunned as he passed through, and saw for the first time that great assembly belt from which a new Model-T Ford rolled every fourteen minutes. It moved in a relentless way, but not, it seemed to him then in his simplicity, too fast; except when he looked at the faces of the men swarming over the unfinished bodies, twisting a bolt, fitting in a steering wheel—jumping from one to the next, on and on, without a pause—he saw, for the first time in his life, the Ford Face.

It was a human mask. There was no expression on it except extreme concentration. The eyes looked at nothing but the job. They showed nothing—no feeling, no thought. Each man stood alone, isolated, at bay, surrounded by possible enemies. He had the strange feeling of looking at walking dead men. His eyes traveled from face to face; none lit up, none returned his asking glance. Like an endless mirror they gave him back only this dead-set expression all down the line.

Along with the Ford Face was the Ford Silence. The shop, except for the triumphant grind and screech of the belt, was as quiet as a church. No human voice was raised here. No man spoke to fellow man. For the eight hours they ran along this never-ending line they gave up the power of speech. There was a Ford Whisper—but he didn't hear it that day. Silence like glass lay over the vast yard.

He arrived at the tin shop. There he met a man who not only looked at him but opened his mouth and—spoke!

"I'm Bill McKie," the new worker answered, shaking hands.

He was shaking hands with a fellow countryman, an Englishman, lately from Newcastle-on-Tyne.

"Yes," said Bill. "I've been to Newcastle."

The Englishman talked as though speech were a great privilege. Finding they were countrymen, they exchanged a few nostalgic memories, and the natural sound of a human voice for a moment made Bill forget the silent men on the assembly line and he said spontaneously: "By the way, what kind of a union do you have here?"

He had asked this simple question for thirty-two years in Scotland and England. When the answer was "None," his next step was to start organizing.

But this man's reaction startled him. At first, it seemed that the Englishman hadn't heard Bill at all—as though such thoughts had never been put to sound. He stared blankly at him for a moment.

"There's *no* union here!" he said finally, catching his breath. A faint red spot had risen in his cheeks. Now he looked at Bill sharply: Was this new man a spy coming to trap him? It was a look Bill had never seen before, but was to see so often again! Then he glanced around the tin shop cautiously.

"What's the matter?" Bill asked anxiously, and he, too, peered around the shop.

"Taboo," the poor Englishman whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

Bill stared at him. The man had almost collapsed with fear. What was wrong with him, he wondered. But something told him he had better drop the subject. He remembered those dead-set faces and those lips that never opened. A small chill crept across his back.

The Englishman toured him around the shop then, and instructed him in his duties in an official, crisp voice, never looking him in the eye. Then, abruptly, he left.

Hardly had he picked up a tool to start to work, when a tall, lanky German—his foreman whose name was Deutsch—took him aside and leaned against his ear.

"I hear you've been asking about a union?"

Bill nodded.

The German looked about the shop and dropped his voice even lower.

"Look, my friend," he said, "if you want to keep your job here, you'd better close your mouth shut about that!"

Bill looked at him with his blue eyes wide. "Jesus Christ," he whispered—and his voice too had dropped into a whisper—staring

deep into the narrowed eyes of the German.

He mulled this over for the rest of the morning as they took him from job to job and further explained his work. He was a sheet-metal man, had been one as a boy—even before his voice had cracked he had been able to fashion copper pots and kettles, to solder the parts together, roll and shape them. He made twenty-four a day—a record for a boy apprentice. They sold for a shilling apiece, and his wages were three shillings a week. But that was long ago. Queen Victoria was still alive, and in the little town of Carlisle—on the border between England and Scotland—handicraftsmanship was still something of an art and still a matter of pride.

But here now, so many decades later, in the brutal gigantic city of Detroit (which was just beginning to come into existence when he was born), his craftsmanship was employed to fix airshafts, tin guards for machines, screens; and he traveled throughout the shop wherever repairs had to be made or new machinery installed.

Learning his way about absorbed most of his thoughts, and he was surprised when lunchtime arrived.

But, then—well—lunch! It was the time when you relaxed, talked with your buddies, maybe even snatched forty winks before going back to the job. In England you sent the boy out for hot tea.

He was unprepared for lunchtime, Ford style.

When the whistle blew the men broke for the lunch wagon which had meanwhile come up to the gates. They milled around spilling coffee and milk on each other; and then they stood and poked their sandwiches down their throats. There were no lockers. Some of the men brought their own padlocks to chain down their coats and dinner pails. They stood swallowing rapidly, their eyes fixed in a stare, among the dirt and dust and open barrels of cyanide. The same general silence prevailed here as well—only the sound of munching and chewing, of the hasty slopping of coffee down a choked throat; and then suddenly it was over, and they were rushing back to the line which had started agonizingly up again, their food like rock in their stomachs.

Nevertheless, before the fifteen minutes were up, Bill—still unable to believe what he had heard and seen—brought the subject up again.

"Don't you know," one of the men answered, "that you're getting higher pay here than anywhere else in the city?"

It had been this promise of high pay that had brought them all here.

But Bill thought of the faces on the line and the look of terror that had come over the Englishman.

"That may be so," he said—in a whisper, "but what Ford gives, he can also take away."

But the men needed only to glance out of the windows at the huge bullpen of workers churning there, waiting for an opportunity to take their jobs; and *that* was a more profound answer than anything else they could think of.

All afternoon the work rushed on. Not a pause, not a moment to catch a breath. Men left the line unattended for no reason whatsoever. They postponed every natural need or function until work was over.

Men of the next shift began to arrive before 3:30. Others whose jobs were idled because of lost parts or broken machinery also waited—waited on their own time, at their own expense, until work was resumed.

The men of the new shift entered the plant like convicts; already the death mask of the Ford Silence was settled over their faces. No one paid them any attention. The men on the assembly line felt through their backs the shadows passing them. Their nerves tightened; their muscles tightened. This was now the most dangerous moment of the worker's day—the point of absolute exhaustion when accidents began to happen.

It is now 3:25. The new men stand behind the men still working on the line. At a signal, and without missing a motion, the new men step into the shoes of the old men. On goes the line.

But now the workers of the first shift are free. The mask of their faces has now turned into complete exhaustion. As they are, greasy and dirty, they make for the gates.

Then, once outside the gates, a fantastic thing happens. Everybody suddenly breaks into a run—a run that grows wildly into an onrushing stampede; and in a moment thousands of them are running as though some madman was behind them. They run until the shadow of the factory is off their backs, until they cannot hear or see Ford. They run for the streetcars, for the buses, for their autos. They pile in, and they go; they can't wait; they must put distance between them and Ford. They race down Miller Road, they fly down Michigan Avenue, they swirl past Dix, until they are lost and hidden in the gray heart of Detroit.