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## SJEČANJA

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Canonsburgh*

### A REVIEW OF AMERICAN LABOR

#### SUMMARY

This contribution briefly relates some of the personal experiences of its author, gained through participation in the labor movement of a multiethnic community near Pittsburgh. At the end of the contribution the author also gives his evaluations of some of the present problems in the labor movement of the United States.

I was a young school student when the Great Depression began in our nation. It was 1903.

It was during these years, I became interested in economics, the union movement, and of course, politics.

A few years before, when my father died, we moved from a farm in West Virginia to an industrial and mining community about 20 miles south of Pittsburgh.

We are in a separate county from Pittsburgh. Our county, named Washington, is a county of more than two hundred thousand people. The community that I live in, Canonsburg, has a population of 10,000.

Our county was and still is a coal mining and industrial area. In the late twenties, there were 20,000 coal miners in more than 40 mines, and some 15,000 steel, glass, pottery, and chemical workers in a dozen factories.

We live in a «league of nations» community. We had 18 district ethnic groups living in our county.

They include, besides the original Scotch-Irish and English, the native Scot and Irish, Slav groups including Slovenes, large numbers of Magyars, Italians, Spaniards, Greeks, Arabs, Jews, French, Letts and Negroes, as well as others. Coal mining was appealing to the Croats and Slovenes and Serbs, as well as for other Slavs.

The Slovenes, at least in our county, are the largest Yugo-Slav group. At present, the Slovene National Benefit Society has 16 lodges and 9 clubs (homes) in our county. The Croatian Fraternal Society also has a large and active membership, as well as Poles, Slovaks, Russians, Italians, Germans, and Hungarians who have lodge halls and grounds.

Incidentally, a few years ago when I was President of the Slovenska Narodna Podporna Jednota, my friend Bernard Luketich was President of the Hrvatska Bratska Zajednica, and Joseph Stefka was President of the National Slovak Society, three of the largest fraternal organizations in America were headed by the three of us who are residents of Washington County, Pennsylvania.

I'm giving you this background so that you will have a better mental picture of our area and its ethnic background.

Before I relate some of my experiences in the labor movement, I want to tell you a true story that happened in our county.

Leon Trotsky, back in 1905, participated in an incipient revolt against the Russian Czar. The revolt failed.

He escaped to France and then to America. He had friends in New York.

However, he knew about the large colony of Russians living in our country. A former friend invited him to come to the town of Cokeburg that a colony of Russians lived in.

It was a »company town«, the coal mine owned the mines, the houses, as well as the meat and grocery business. They also had their own police and spies.

Trotsky was determined to change the working conditions of the mines. The work was back-breaking, dirty, and dangerous. Mr. Trotsky was elected President of the local United Mine Workers Union that was organising the coal fields. Trotsky fought hard for the workers: and there was a strike or a threat of strike every other week.

The coal company complained to the Union Headquarters about Trotsky's activities.

The union had Trotsky removed from his position as President of the local. Trotsky left Cokeburg soon after his loss of the Presidency. He went back to Brooklyn, New York. All in all, Trotsky spent less than a year in American Mines. Perhaps this experience made him a better revolutionary.

Incidentally, Cokeburg, Pennsylvania is a quiet town. The Mayor of the town is Bernard Luketich, the President of the Croatian Fraternal Union.

My first labor experience was in 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression. I was a high school student. A friend of mine invited me to go to a United Mine Workers rally at a ball field. I agreed. It was summer, and I was barefooted - after all, the old pair of shoes had to be saved for the school days.

As we were going to the rally, we heard that a rival union, the National Miners Union, was also meeting at another ball field the same day. We heard rumors that there may be a confrontation.

In this period, the United Mine Workers, better known as the UMW of A was at its low ebb. Its President, John L. Lewis, was a constant target that he was anti-workers and too friendly with the coal operators.

We came a little early to the United Miners rally. They had a small crowd made up of loyal supporters and district officials. According to the local papers and the radio announcers, the National Miners Union that was organized in a Slovene hall in our county a few years earlier was rapidly expanding and enrolling members. At that period they had more than 15,000 members and the United Mine Workers had less than 500. It seemed that the United Miners would be replaced. However, the NMU lost its momentum that Sunday when they marched some 5,000 strong including women and children. When they approached the UMA of A, their meeting was in full swing. The speakers were on a flat bed truck, and of all things, that had »loud speakers«. The amplifier for this primitive microphone was some 20 feet above the platform.

When the National Marchers reached near the speaker's platform, they drowned out the UMW of A's shouts and catcalls. This went on for a few minutes. Then it happened. A National Miner's loyalist threw a stone at the amplifier-and, by sheer luck, hit the contraption. The stone dropped in the midst of the dignitaries on the flat bed.

In a few seconds, as we say, »all 'hell' broke loose.« Fist fights began, clubs, chairs, and missiles were flying in all directions. Where was I? Well, when I saw the marchers coming, my friend and I went to higher grounds. Thus we had a bird's eye view of what went down in history as the Curry Field Riot.

In a few minutes, the police and the undercover men were all over the place arresting men and women. They seemed to know who to arrest. About a dozen United Minors, including their New York leader were arrested and taken to jail.

The next day, all the news media in America carried the story of the Curry Field Riot. The stories went something like this: »Communist Union broke a peaceful meeting, and the leader of the riot, a New York Communist leader, was jailed as well as local 'communists'.«

In retrospect, this event at Curry Field, Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, destroyed the National Miners Union. In recent years, I have been of the opinion that this was a »put up job« of the wily John L. Lewis and his able district President, Pat Fagan. For how can one explain the undercover men and the police knowing exactly who to arrest in a crowd of 5,000 people.

When I was in school, I was fortunate to have a summer job at the local tin mill. It made tops for the tin cans. The mill as booming - in the summer, they worked around the clock. The reason for this was that the Federal Government began to give food relief to the unemployed. A great deal of the relief food was packed in tin cans. That's where I came in.

When I graduated from high school, I could not afford to go to college - thus I went to work »permanently« in my summer job.

In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President. Under his administration in 1935, the Wagner—La Guardia law was passed, giving the right to working men and women to join unions of their choice.

At that time, I was working at my old job. We had many grievances. The wages were low, and at times, we had to work twelve-hour shifts - also on Saturdays and Sundays without extra pay. At canning time, the bosses were always speeding up the machines to get more production from us etc., etc., etc.

Well, when the Wagner—La Guardia bill became law, a few of us began talking union. A union drive began, and I was one of the first to join. When we had more than 50 percent of the workers joining, we had a meeting in a local hall. I was elected President of this fledging union of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers of America. This union was a small long-time union based on a craft structure.

When President John L. Lewis of the Mine Workers wanted to establish unions, not on craft basis, but on an industrial base, he created the CIO—the Committee For Industrial Organization. For the steel industry workers organized under the banner of the United Steel Workers of America. Today, it is one of the largest industrial unions in America.

The small Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers of which I was President of a 200 member local was absorbed by the Lewis' Steel Workers. I did not object.

I was offered a job to be an organizer for the new union. As I was involved in politics, as a social Democrat, I thought my interest lay in being elected to local offices, as well as, the State Legislature and perhaps Congress. So, I reluctantly declined the offer.

That ended my involvement as an official of a union group. However, in my long political life, I was in constant touch with the labor movement. I held elective political offices for thirty years, and I received organized labor's support whenever I ran for office.

I became a close friend of the United Mine Workers of America's local officials as well as the Steelworkers' leaders.

Perhaps some of you have heard of Joseph »Jock« Yablonski, the slain mine leader who was assassinated by his rival »Tony« Boyle, the President of the United Mine Workers Union.

As, Mr. Yablonski was a resident of my county, we became friends when I was President of the Steel Workers local. I want to say a few words about »Jock« Yablonski because in microcosm, it will give you an insight to the operations of some of the unions in our nation.

Mr. Yablonski was also active in the political field. He was the President of our county's »Labors Non-Partisan League«. This was a catch-all political active group composed of the various unions in our county. They were a deciding factor in our Democratic Party primaries. In other words, candidates that were supported would win the primary elections and go ahead as the Democratic candidates for the various offices in the November general election in a Democrat County.

Mr. Yablonski wielded his political powers, as the President of the political Labors Non-Partisan League, and as the District President of the United Mine workers in our county. He personally never wanted an elective office.

However he was elected as a delegate to many National Democratic Conventions. In 1968, Yablonski and I were elected as two of the four delegates to the four delegates to the National Convention from our county.

I was elected as a »rebel« to the convention, as I opposed our involvement in Viet Nam.

Prior to the opening of the Convention, our Pennsylvania delegation invited Vice President Hubert Humphrey to address our meeting at our local hotel.

Mr. Yablonski and I were sitting on wooden chairs next to each other. Before the Vice President began his speech, I asked »Jock« to ask him what was his position on the bombing of North Viet Nam. Yablonski agreed, but a few minutes before Humphrey would have a brief »ask and answer« period, Jock leaned over and told me he could not go through with it.

I asked, »Why?« He whispered, »Tony Boyle would find out, and it would give him a good excuse to fire (dismiss) me«. I forgot Mr. Yablonski was no longer a district President, but a union lobbyist at the National Capitol. He was instrumental in having legislation enacted benefiting miners who contacted the »black lung« disease that cripples and eventually kills miners who develop silicosis.

»Okay.« I said. »I'll ask Humphrey the question.« I did. After the meeting, I was the center of the National TV cameramen and reporters who were plying me with questions.

I became an instant national celebrity because the issue whether to bomb North Viet Nam or to stop it was crucial as to whether we were going to continue the war. The answer that the Vice President gave me was evasive and insignificant.

A year later, Mr. Yablonski was dead. And, Mr. Humphrey lost the election. I often wonder! If Mr. Yablonski had asked the question instead of me, he would have lost his job, pronto, but perhaps not his life a year later.

And, if Vice President Humphrey had had the courage of his inner convictions, and answered that when elected President, he would attempt to have a negotiated settlement of the conflict, he would have been elected President.

Enough of that, I have given you a few personal experiences in the labor movement and on American politics.

Unfortunately, the labor movement in the United States is at the lowest level since the pre-depression days of the Coolidge and Hoover Administration.

After World War II, 35 percent of all workers employed were unionized. The union membership was nearly 20 million. Today the membership is in the low teens, and only 15 percent of the work force are union members.

The union movement has three major obstacles to overcome in our present economy.

1. The number 1 problem is that the right-wing Reagan Administration is hostile and anti-labor. This was evident when he dismissed the Airplane Controllers Union when they went on strike. They have never been re-hired.

2. A trade deficit in our nation. There is a flood of goods coming from Japan and other Eastern countries as well as from Europe. The loss of jobs weakens the union's bargaining powers.

3. Japan and European nations buying companies or building factories in our nation. These factories usually operate »open shop«; that is non-union.

4. Indifference and hostility of young workers who are imbued with the idea that they can »hack it« without union help. This view is highly prevalent in the new technology industries.

5. The loss of »class conscious« in the prevalent *laissez faire* atmosphere. The lack of union leadership (with a few exceptions), to educate their membership in recognizing that even in today's America, there is a vast difference between those that own and those that do not. They are unaware of the class struggle.

6. Corruption in Unions. We still have several major unions that are riddled with corruption. Many union leaders act as they have a fiefdom and that they have no accountability to the rank and file. Not only do they create a bad image of the unions to the public, but they also make it more difficult for the other unions to obtain new members.

7. A majority of the states have laws that prohibit the »union shops«. Which means that workers in a unionized shop are not compelled to join the union. This weakens the bargaining power of the unions.

## PREGLED AMERIČKOG RADNIČKOG POKRETA

### SAŽETAK

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