

Wisconsin Labor History Society

Darryl Holter

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The fifth annual conference of the Wisconsin Labor History Society brought together more than a hundred current and retired union leaders, rank-and-file activists, teachers, and labor historians. The meeting took place on May 10, 1986, at the Racine Labor Center. This year's conference saluted the 50-year anniversary of the CIO by focusing on "Industrial Unionism in Wisconsin."

WLHS President Darryl Holter provided an overview of the success of industrial unionism in Wisconsin during the 1930s. Although local AFL groups had initiated industrial organizing efforts in the early years of the depression, it was the CIO's meteoric rise and success that brought tens of thousands of industrial workers into the ranks of organized labor and increased union membership in Wisconsin from about 25,000 in 1932 to more than 200,000 in 1945.

Five veterans who had led organizing efforts in the 1930s commented on Holter's overview. Victor Cooks, who co-founded the Racine County Workers' Committee in 1932, explained why the great organizing drives succeeded. "We depended upon the rank and file workers in the shops. We educated them. We got them involved in politics. We made them militant." Called back to work at the large J. I. Case plant in 1934, Cooks and other activists in the Workers' Committee formed an independent union, the Wisconsin Industrial Union, Local 1. After a sit-down strike to win recognition, the new union joined with a federal labor union to form UAW 180. Cooks credited the Socialist party for much of the early success in industrial organizing.

Charles Heymanns, elected president of FLU 18545 at the large Kohler works in 1933, pointed out that a great deal of industrial organizing occurred before the CIO was established. The struggle for a union at Kohler led to a strike and violent police repression in 1934. Two strikers were killed, and 47 were injured by police bullets. After the strike was defeated, Heymanns worked as an organizer and helped establish dozens of federal labor unions in Wisconsin in 1934 and 1935.

After forming a UAW local in the Line Material electrical plant in West Bend in 1937, Carl Griepentrog and other young unionists assisted organizing drives throughout the area. "We didn't need organizers," said Griepentrog. "We organized ourselves. Most employers recognized that the workers were going to organize regardless of what the bosses did." He worked with successful campaigns at the large Briggs and Stratton engine plant and at Harley-

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Davidson. Caught in the CIO-AFL split, Griepentrog's local, along with several others, decided to remain with the AFL. In the 1940s, he led successful organizing efforts in dozens of cookware manufacturing and electrical plants north of Milwaukee. With the failure of the UAW-AFL to win key auto plants, the organization retreated to its stronghold in Milwaukee and later became the Allied Industrial Workers.

As a young boy, Kenneth Clark moved to Milwaukee in 1929. He experienced his first taste of a labor dispute while working as a caddie. At the half-way house, the young golfers often remained in the bar and talked, sometimes for more than two hours. The caddies struck for 25 cents an hour for waiting. They won their demand. In high school, Clark participated in strike support when several big strikes erupted in Milwaukee in 1934 and 1935. During the steel workers' organizing drives in 1937 and 1938, Clark was involved in more than a dozen such drives. On a picket line one day, he was arrested with Meyer Adelman, the first Regional Director of District 32 of the United Steel Workers. A life-long Socialist, Clark reflected: "We all thought we were building a better world for the workers. It sure makes me sad to see what we've got now."

Conference participants presented awards to two winners of the high school Labor History Essay Contest. Tamara Poff of Muskego, Wisconsin won \$350 for a first prize essay. She described her experiences while spending a summer on the picket line with her grandfather, a teamster, who was on strike. Third prize winner, Micki McCartney of Green Bay, focused her essay on Arnold Zander, the founder of AFSCME, who was a Green Bay native. AFSCME was first started in Madison, Wisconsin in 1936.

Kelly Sparks, president of UAW Local 180 at the J. I. Case plant, provided the audience with a brief history of his union. Sparks, who also serves as the secretary of the WLHS, paid a moving tribute to his friend Art Rohan. A founding member of the old Automobile, Carriage, and Wagon Workers' Union and a UAW activist, Rohan died at the age of 95.

Closing out the meeting, labor songwriter-singer Larry Penn performed his most recent composition, "The Ghosts of Bay View." The song was written to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the shooting of seven striking workers outside the Bay View Rolling Mills in Milwaukee. Occurring the day following the Haymarket events, the conflict in Bay View had resulted from a mass strike by skilled and unskilled workers who demanded the eight-hour day. The conference ended, as always, with several verses of "Solidarity Forever."

The Wisconsin Labor History Society was founded on May 1, 1982. It includes about two hundred individual members. Fifty labor unions are also members. A newsletter is edited by Harry Miller, director of manuscripts and

special collections at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. The society's main activities include the annual conference, a high school essay contest, and a "Labor in the Schools" project. Individual memberships cost \$5. To join, write to the Wisconsin Labor History Society, c/o Darryl Holter, Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, 6333 W. Blue Mound Rd., Milwaukee, WI 53213.