

Scott Farwell

He is twenty-two. "My mother's family owned a large part of a large city. We had a summer home of twenty bedrooms. It was somewhat rough in the Thirties, but my sister went to a girls' school, where the tuition today is \$4,000 a year.

"I come from a WASP upper middle-class suburb and was raised on the myth that everybody can make it. In reality, everybody can't make it. If a guy makes a million dollars, he can do so only because another thousand people are making \$3,000 a year."

BOOKS TOLD US about guys jumping out of windows. But it didn't tell us GM made fantastic profits all those years. Our textbooks tell us everybody got fucked. That isn't true. A lot of guys, Joe Kennedy, for instance, made tremendous profits during that period. The vast majority got fucked up by the high guys. It's the textbooks that are fucked up.

My father talks a lot about his mistake in not going to college. If he didn't fuck off those four years in the steel mills, he could've gotten ahead and had more money than he has now. And he has plenty.

He's defensive about those four years as a worker. He sees it as a youthful folly, as he sees what I'm going through. But now he sees it's less and less of a youthful folly with me and that I'm totally ruined for the rest of my life.

He blamed himself. Instead of saying society was fucked up, he's really saying that he was fucked up. I don't think people were fucked up during the Depression. I think if given half a chance, they'd have really accomplished something. He never told me about the millions out of work. He talked about how fucked up he was and didn't work hard enough and he should have gone to school and got a doctorate.

When my father brings up these struggles, I manage to smash him down. He doesn't give me that argument any more. They're slowly ruining my sister, with clothes and all that shit. She's a groovy little girl. My brother is a nice liberal guy. He will never consciously screw somebody else. But that doesn't mean he won't. When he gets that job, he'll have to.

Mike Widman

THE BATTLE OF DETROIT

A Preface

Justin McCarthy quit college in 1933. He was working at a Ford assembly plant in an industrial suburb, near Chicago.

"I sandpapered all the right-hand fenders. I was paid \$5 a day. The parts were brought in from the River Rouge plant in Detroit. When I went to work in January, we were turning out 232 cars a day. When I was fired, four months later, we were turning out 535. Without any extra help and no increase in pay. It was the famous Ford Speed-up.

"The gates were locked when you came in at eight o'clock in the morning. They weren't opened again until five o'clock in the evening. People brought their own lunch. No commissary wagons were permitted on the grounds. Nobody bothered to tell me. So I didn't eat that first day. You were supposed to buy your own gloves. Nobody bothered to tell me that, either. Imagine my hands at five o'clock that first day.

"I was aware of men in plain clothes being around the plant, and the constant surveillance. I didn't learn till later these were the men of Ford's service department. Many of them, ex-cons.

"If you wanted to go to the toilet, you had to have permission of the foreman. He had to find a substitute for you on the assembly line, who could sandpaper those two right fenders as they went by. If he couldn't right away, you held it. (Laughs.)

"If you didn't punch that clock at 8:00, if you came in at 8:02, you were docked one hour's pay. There wasn't any excuse. If you did this two or three times, you got fired.

"I made the mistake of telling the foreman I had enrolled at Northwestern University night school. He said, 'Mr. Ford isn't paying people to go to college. You're through.'"

A long-time associate of John L. Lewis, Mike Widman was appointed director of the campaign to organize the Ford Motor Company, the automobile industry's last holdout against the UAWU.

WE STARTED OUT on the sixteenth day of October, 1940. The three plants in Detroit, Hamtramck and Dearborn had about a hundred thousand men. We immediately zoned the town and located the Ford workers. The milkmen helped. There were about seven hundred of them, members of the CIO. They told us who their Ford worker customers were. But we had to

shake the bushes to get them. There was great fear in the hearts of these men.

This was three years after Reuther and Frankenstein were beaten up by the service department.* This department was made up of men who served time in prison. They could be paroled to someone who insured them employment. Ford readily gave them jobs. It made him a fine espionage system. Bennett built it.†

As fast as the men signed application blanks, they were fired. We couldn't figure how the company found out so fast. So we tightened our security. I kept the cards in my safe until it got too small for all the cards coming in. There were hundreds of John Doe applications. They were just scared to death.

They'd come into our office when it first opened, they'd walk three, four times around the vestibule, look in all directions. Finally, they'd jump in the door and ask you to take them in the back room.

The life of a Ford worker was quite miserable. These service men were everywhere. The way they'd throw men out . . . today, anybody that wore a blue shirt got laid off. Tomorrow, if you had brown hair, black hair, anything. No recourse.

If they caught some of our people on the street, they slapped 'em around. When some of our boys first wore union buttons or UAW baseball caps, they were given the works. Some of our boys got fed up, and next thing a couple of service men were slightly hurt. That ended their parading in public. But this was later. . . .

Within sixty days after the campaign started, we challenged Ford, through Bennett, to have an election. Bennett refused to meet any "outsider," but he agreed to meet with employees on grievances. Bennett and I exchanged blasts through Jim Dewey, the federal conciliator, who acted as go-between. We blasted each other in newspapers. The more stories got in, the more cards we signed. It was \$1 initiation fee and \$1 dues. In February, we took in \$88,000 plus.

The first meeting I addressed, some thirty days after my arrival, had a grand total of twenty-three in the audience. Now we were having meetings of more than thirty thousand at the fairgrounds. We had broken down this fear.

We had forty organizers on the outside. Those were the men Ford had fired, so we put 'em on the staff. But the real secret of our success were the ones Ford paid for himself—the six thousand volunteers inside the plant.

We bought an old abandoned school building. This was lined up as our

* Shortly after GM had signed with the UAWU, Walter Reuther and Dick Frankenstein were assaulted at the overpass, near Detroit's River Rouge plant, while in the act of passing out union handbills. The La Follette Civil Liberties Committee confirmed the charge that the assailants were members of Ford's service department.

† Harry Bennett, chief of the service department.

soup kitchen. We didn't want any strike, but we knew sooner or later, Ford would force us into one. We were prepared just in case. . . .

On April 1, it happened. The five men on our grievance committee had permission from the foreman to leave their job and see the division superintendent. He said, "Talk to the employment office." At the employment office, they were told, "You left your jobs. You're fired."

We asked the company, through the conciliator, to arbitrate this matter. The answer was: They're fired, and we don't care what you do. The word spread in the plant like wildfire. . . .

We called the strike for 12:15, just after midnight. The boys on the day shift stayed in the plant until four o'clock. Now both shifts were inside. We were still trying to get the five men reinstated. Again the company refused. So we let the midnight shift come in. Ford had about eighty-nine thousand workers in that plant all at the same time. What everybody said was impossible was about to happen.

We had organized a band.* The boys came marching out to the sound of music. We had surveyed the fourteen highways that led into the plant. It would take at least two thousand cars on each of 'em as a picket line to tie things up. One of the boys got the idea: We'll pull the trolley pole off the first streetcar coming in from Detroit. So we had the streetcars clear downtown for about six miles all stopped. The boys stacked up rubbish and cars and anything they could find. Everything was tied up.

Word came from the Governor. He wanted the highways opened up. We agreed, if Ford would keep the plant shut down while mediation was going on. At the insistence of the Governor, Ford agreed. We had fourteen picket lines, and I made fourteen speeches that morning. I explained what was happening. We opened up the highways and set up skeleton picket lines.

All the workers were out, except about five thousand Negroes. Ford was lenient in hiring Negroes at that time.† This was their first chance to work in the industry, and they were fearful of losing their jobs. They weren't really scabbing. It was just fear. They weren't doing any work. They were sitting there making all kinds of homemade weapons, short pieces of iron and rubber pipe. They were afraid somebody was gonna come in and get 'em. But we weren't trying to get them out. Ford was keeping them in there twenty-four hours a day. They never went home. Keeping them around the clock for five or six days was costing him a pretty penny.

* Efforts were made from the beginning by the UAWU to interest the young workers. Bowling leagues, baseball teams and bands were organized. "We hoped for about eight teams, we ended up with ninety." There were five hundred applicants for the eighty-piece band. Uniforms, caps and shirts with UAWU insignia were issued.

† "I think he brought them in to show a philanthropic attitude. He also brought in a lot of deaf and dumb people and other handicapped. I signed up a good number of them. We had somebody who could talk on his fingers to them."

Bennett went to the conciliator and said, "We want those fellows out of the plant." I called my pickets over to the east side. Dewey, the conciliator, had arranged with Bennett to get the Negroes on city buses, on the west side of the plant. So that's how it worked. There was no trouble.

Then comes the A F of L sticking their nose in, at Ford's insistence. I happened to meet their director, a teamster from Boston. I said, "Where the hell are you goin'?" He said, "I'm goin' to compete with you." I said, "You're too damn late. I've got the barn door locked." He said, "I've been ordered to do it."

Do you think Ford made a deal with the A F of L to keep the CIO out?

Exactly. They had never touched this place before. They weren't interested. They opened up six offices: One for white workers, who numbered more than seven thousand; and five in Negro areas with less than ten thousand workers. With one purpose: If they couldn't win, they'd create a race riot or damage the CIO. Among our militants were many southern white workers, who were incensed. But they were disciplined.

The strike continued until the eleventh of April. It lasted about nine or ten days. When the company consented to the election, the boys all went back, without discrimination. But Ford wouldn't put those five men back. Rather than delay the return of the workers, I put 'em on my staff.

On May 21, 1941, we had the election. It took that long to get things straightened out. We carried seventy-two percent of the vote. We were certified. So negotiations started. They went on for about thirty days.

Ford, through Bennett and Capizzi, his lawyer, agreed to just about everything we asked for. He'd match what the rival companies were paying, and more. He was out to top them. He suspected—in his wild imagination—that they had put us up to this strike. (Laughs.)

I was dumbfounded when Capizzi said, "Mr. Ford doesn't want any dues collection in the plant. Would you accept the check-off?" We said, "That could be arranged." (Laughs.) He asked if we'd take in, without recrimination, the twenty percent who voted against us. We said, of course. They'll all be treated alike. He asked, "Do you have a union label you could put on the cars?" We offered to get one designed. For a while we put 'em on, but didn't keep it up.

Bennett surprised me by going completely overboard. He gave workers the right to vote on who they wanted as their foreman. (Laughs.) When I found this out, I hit the roof. "What the hell are you doing?" He said, "Your boys are gonna work for the foreman they like and won't work for the one they won't like." This was his reasoning. I said, "Do you think we'd let you appoint our committeemen? Appoint your own damn foremen." There'd be no stability. If the foreman says, "Hey, you're not performing your end of the work," the guy could say, "We'll vote you out at noon."

My union experience taught me that the direction of the working force is vested in management. The union shall not abridge the right, so long as there is no discrimination or unfairness. Ford was abridging his own right.

How do you explain this 180-degree turn in the attitude of Ford and Bennett?

I think Bennett was a realist. He saw he couldn't fight us any more. He told me: "I want to see this thing work out, and Mr. Ford wants me to make it work." I've a hunch Ford put him on trial: make this work or get out. And that was the end of the Ford service department.

It was a little tough for some of the fellows to accept at first. They were suspicious. There was a rash of wildcat strikes. I think it came out of this newborn freedom. Each little thing, they'd pull the pin in that department until the grievance was settled. I got a call. Bennett offered to send over a chauffeured car for me. That's all I needed was a car with a chauffeur, provided by the Ford Motor Company. (Laughs.) For a while, I handled each of the grievances.

From a very tough anti-union position, the company now tries to get along. In the old days, every time we saw a Ford go by, we'd say, "There's another tin lizzie." After the strike, we said, "Doggone, isn't that a nice little buggie?"

Howard

He was born in Detroit in 1947.

MY GRANDFATHER never mentioned strikes to me.

The Ford strike?

No.

John L. Lewis?

No. You see, he was really anti-union. He didn't want Negroes to come into the plant. That's why he wanted it unionized, to keep his job and keep them out. On the other hand, he was against unions.