

Labor unions - Attitudes of members. ✓

# THE YOUNG WORKER CHALLENGES THE UNION ESTABLISHMENT;



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Excerpts from a lecture delivered by UE General Secretary-Treasurer James J. Matles to a class for shop stewards and local union officers at Latrobe, Pennsylvania, November, 1968. //



**JAMES J. MATLES**

**T**HE labor movement is faced with the most serious challenge since the 1930's. It comes from the young, the blacks and the other minorities.

I would like to discuss tonight only one phase of this challenge. It involves the young people in the organized shops.

We have been witnessing a growing rebellion among students in the universities and colleges. They are challenging the *status quo* and the Establishment. They are doing this not because they are economically deprived or because they don't know where their next meal is coming from. Most of these young people in the leading universities and colleges come from well-to-do and middle-class families who are paying for their education.

These young men and women have reached an ideological conviction that there is something basically wrong with our society and our system. As we watch TV and read the newspapers and see this revolt spreading, the question is being asked—how about the workingclass youth in the shops? Why don't they participate with the students in this revolt?

The answer to this question is simple. The young people in the shops are involved in a revolt of their own, which is growing day by day. It is not based on ideology. It is not political in character. It expresses itself today solely in economic terms, but as it develops it is bound to have far-reaching political consequences.

## ***Shop Rules Ignored***

The young worker doesn't give a damn for the company's shop rules and he drives the foremen crazy. He comes to work when he feels like it and quits his job at the drop of a hat without knowing where his next day's pay will come from.

Young workers are storming membership meetings and voting down a constantly growing

number of settlements negotiated by their union leaders. They are the most militant fighters on the picket lines. They spark the work stoppages in the shops in protest against grievances and contract violations by management, while the union leadership wrings its hands and runs around publicly denouncing the stoppages as wildcat, unauthorized and illegal. These young workers are in revolt against the company Establishment in the shop and they are challenging the union Establishment as well.

All of you here are UE shop stewards and local officers working in the shop and it is encouraging to see such a fine representation of young leaders among you.

While the condition I have just described is the common everyday occurrence in shops in most other unions, you know from your own experience that this general feeling of rebellion, cynicism and disgust among the young workers finds expression in our own shops as well. It is only the rank-and-file democratic nature of our Union and the day-to-day work of our shop stewards and local officers that have so far prevented these young workers and minority groups from openly breaking with us as is happening in so many other unions.

As you know, during the past two years, we have been having widespread discussion in our Union on this subject. We are seeking to determine the cause of this revolt and trying to find some trade union answers to it.

Now, let's examine the reason why these young workers, coming into the shops today, feel and act as they do.

When a young worker comes to the employment office of a General Electric plant to hire in, the personnel man sits him down and goes into a big song and dance. The young man is told that he is about to embark on a new experience and career with the best company in America. In addition, he is given a whole kit of company pamphlets,

leaflets and literature which tells him that he will be receiving the best wages, best vacations, paid holidays, hospitalization and insurance, and many other benefits that the company has waiting for him. He is led to believe that all these goodies are given to him by a compassionate company from the goodness of its heart.

Nowhere is there even the slightest hint that the Union had anything to do with squeezing a little compassion out of them, although for 32 years they had to be dragged, kicking, screaming and scratching all the time.

## *Pay Check Looks Bad*

When this young guy starts getting his weekly pay check it looks pretty good, but not for long. Soon he buys a house with a 30-year mortgage. He puts some furniture in the house. He buys a car, a refrigerator, washer and dryer, a TV—most likely a color TV. On top of all that, his young wife is pregnant again. As the monthly bills start piling up his pay envelope looks ridiculous. He is frustrated, he is mad, and he is ready to fight the Establishment that fails to give him what he needs.

He considers the union contract as a strait-jacket instead of a source of security and protection. He sees a better job on the floor and he wants it, but the seniority clause in the contract is against him. He is ready to dump seniority and to scuttle other basic contractual working conditions that union men and women struck, fought and bled for. Even though this is not going to do a thing to solve his problems, like a drowning man he grabs at any straw in the hope of saving himself.

**W**HEN he starts raising hell with the shop steward or local officer in the shop, what answers does he get? We usually tell him that he doesn't know how bad things were when we started 30 years ago. But he doesn't give a damn how bad things were because they are plenty bad for him right now.

We try to impress him with the fact that he

doesn't really appreciate the great sacrifices that we have made in order to get where we are, but he is bored and wants to know not what we did yesterday, but what we are going to do today to get him out of the fix he is in right now. We then begin giving him some of the "Father knows best" stuff about his poor judgment. He is told that when we were his age we didn't go into hock to the tune of many thousands of dollars; that it took us years before we got some of the things that he got in one swoop.

It is at this point that we are losing him altogether.

All he sees is the company bragging about how good it is, and the union patting itself on the back about its past accomplishments—a couple of smug defenders of *status quo*. He sees no reason at all why America, the richest country in the world, can't give him a job that will provide him with all the necessities and some of the luxuries of life, and what's wrong with that?

## ***Annual Pay Still Low***

Isn't it a fact that 30 years ago we dedicated ourselves to the building of a fighting union not only for ourselves, but to make sure that our sons and daughters will not have to go through what we did? Isn't it a fact that the average annual pay in our industry today, after 30 years of struggle, is still \$3,000 less than the \$9,191 provided for by the Labor Department's moderate budget for a worker's family of four?

These are some of the basic reasons why the young people are often so critical of the union.

Another factor that greatly contributes to this feeling is the public image of the big-shot union leader. Unfortunately, in too many instances the image reflects the truth.

What is this public image? The big labor leader pulls down from \$25,000 to \$100,000 a year and has an unlimited expense account. He rides in a un-

ion limousine — sometimes chauffeur-driven. He has a fancy home, sometimes two homes—one in Florida. He plays the stock market and plays golf with the company official he negotiates the contract with. In short, he has made it, he has achieved the status, he lives the life and has acquired all the virtues of the successful company executive. Is it any wonder that the young worker is suspicious and mistrusts his union?

When we in UE tell him that the fundamental principle embodied in our Constitution provides that UE officers and organizers receive salaries in line with the pay of the skilled workers in our shops, most of them refuse to believe it, and those that do think that we are a bunch of fanatics or just plain nuts.

Our society has become so corrupt that a sound trade union principle under which union officers must lead the lives of the workers they represent is either unbelievable or considered crazy.

We complain that the young people are not interested in the union, that they are just standing on the sidelines and throwing bricks at us. But isn't it a fact that in too many instances when a young member wants to get into the leadership of the Union he has to fight his way in? Isn't it a fact that our experienced leadership, in too many instances, fails to reach out and make room for young people in responsible positions of leadership? Is it not a fact that all over the country, in union after union, old experienced shop stewards and union officers are being swept out of office by young people, in many instances only after bitter struggles?

## *Old Steward Ousted*

I recently came across a case of that kind where an old, devoted chief steward was challenged by a young member with only a couple of years' service in the shop and, to the surprise of many, the young man got elected. The oldtimer was shaken. He was bitter, he was resentful, and he

felt that the people he had fought for through the years did not appreciate what he had done for them. As far as he was concerned, they could go to hell and so could the young guy whom they elected. But right after the election the young shop steward came to the oldtimer and asked, "What do I do next?" He was asking for help. Let us think about that one for a minute.

**T**HE most important single thing we must do to meet this challenge in the organized shops is for the oldtimers to go out of their way, to bring along the most promising and militant young people in the shop with the potential for leadership, without their having to break down the doors to get in. If we combine the experience of the oldtimers with the militancy of the young, we will have an unbeatable combination.

As a matter of fact, if Coca Cola could bottle this marvelous formula I am certain it would sell big.

Once the young people are part of the union leadership and they meet the boss eyeball-to-eyeball we shall have taken the first and biggest step toward putting our movement on the right track again. Once the young leader begins to see what it takes to settle even the smallest grievance he will learn that it is the boss and not his fellow workers who is holding him down. He will learn that it takes the unity of all, the skilled and unskilled, the young and the old, the men and women, the white, the black, and the other minority groups, to win a better life for all.

The young leaders who are here tonight with us are now ready for the next step, and that is basic trade union education. To be able to meet each day's challenge of leadership in the struggle for a better America, the experience of the past will be invaluable to him.

When he was on the outside looking in, he couldn't care less about our past struggles, suffer-



ings and achievements. Now that he is a leader on the firing line, the lessons of the past from our own union and from the rest of the trade union movement becomes a priceless guide in the battles to meet the challenge of today.

The young leader and all the rest of us must learn that the objective of a rank-and-file, fighting union goes way beyond a dime-an-hour raise in pay.

***" . . . We form an organization which unites all workers in our industry on an industrial basis, and rank and file control, regardless of craft, age, sex, nationality, race, creed or political beliefs, and pursue at all times a policy of aggressive struggle to improve our conditions."***

**From the Preamble to the  
UE Constitution**

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