

The Revitalization of Organized Labor in Youngstown

by John Russo

On October 2, 1982, more than 3,000 people attended a local Solidarity Day II rally in economically depressed Youngstown, Ohio. Organized by the local labor community, the rally's motto was "Every Day is Labor Day." While the attendance at the rally itself was impressive, more significant was that it marked another major step in the revitalization of Youngstown's once proud labor movement: A revitalization that has already included resistance to concessions, running labor's own congressional candidate, the development of nontraditional labor organizations, and mass picketing.

From the Little Steel strikes of the 1930's to the industrial strike at General Motor's Lordstown complex in the early 1970's, organized labor in the Youngstown area has been a force to be reckoned with in its efforts to protect its membership and improve the quality of life of working people. Yet, throughout the late 1960's and 1970's, the labor community increasingly suffered the ill-effects of business unionism. Business unionism's preoccupation with economism and sectionalism caused the local labor movement to narrow its social focus and to become increasingly fragmented, insular and directionless. These inherent weaknesses became painfully obvious as corporate America systematically disinvested in the Youngstown area.

The labor community of Youngstown and the surrounding metropolitan district is in the midst of a social and economic nightmare from which it has yet to awake. In the last decade, non-agricultural employment in the Youngstown-Warren metropolitan

Table I
Employment: Youngstown-Warren Metro Area

	Non-Agricultural Employment	Manufacturing Employment
1973	211,600	93,000
1982	<u>187,100</u>	<u>55,900</u>
Change	-24,500	-37,100

Table II
Impact of Manufacturing Job Losses

\$24,772.80	Avg. Year's Wage (2080 hrs.)	Dec. '82 Avg. Wage
x <u>37,100</u>	Manufacturing Jobs Lost	in Manufacturing
\$919,070,880	Annual Lost Payroll in Manufacturing	\$11.91/hr.

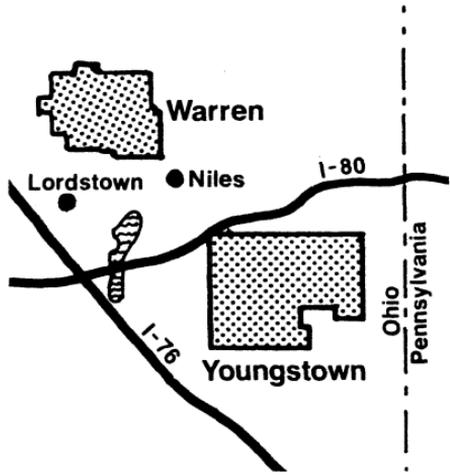
Source: "Employment, Hours, and Earnings in Ohio" (1973-1982), Ohio Bureau of Employment Services-Research and Statistics.

district has declined by 24,500. While the decline is significant, these figures obscure the fact that 37,100 manufacturing jobs have been lost. Despite their partial replacement by low-paying service and retail jobs, the decline in manufacturing employment translates into almost a billion dollars annually in lost wages to the local economy. (See Tables 1 and 2.) The majority of the decline in manufacturing jobs has been in the basic metal industries which traditionally have been heavily unionized. While it is difficult to get an accurate reading, it is estimated that union rolls in Youngstown have declined by over 20,000.

The plant closings have exacted an enormous social cost. Over the last five years the local newspaper, the *Youngstown Vindicator*, has reported drastic increases in alcoholism, marital problems, depression, child and wife abuse, and juvenile delinquency despite a declining population. At the same time, the social agencies responsible for dealing with these problems have been understaffed and inadequately funded to deal with the staggering caseload. So widespread is the economic and social devastation that after spending a week in the Youngstown-Warren area, James Perry, the long-time political correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, was moved to say, "It is a 'necropolis.' "

For its part, organized labor was totally unprepared to deal with an economic and social crisis of this proportion. Its years of

preoccupation with economism, as exemplified by the steelworkers' Experimental Negotiating Agreement (ENA) in 1973, has resulted in a preoccupation with economic issues and a decline of militancy and social focus that seriously undermined the unions' effectiveness and limited their response to the issues surrounding disinvestment and plant closings. Subsequently, displaced workers, especially steelworkers, were unable to



receive sustained help from the International Union headquarters or from other local unions, who, using traditional business union logic, saw the closings as part of the natural economic order.

To make matters worse, rivalries and jurisdictional disputes had undermined local union solidarity and consequently another source of support for displaced workers. Interunion animosity stemming from the UAW's withdrawal from the AFL-CIO in 1968, for example, meant that displaced steelworkers in the Youngstown area received only marginal assistance from the area's most powerful and politically active unions—UAW Local 1112 (GM Lordstown) and UAW Local 1714 (Fisher Body, Lordstown).

The low point for this once proud labor community was the fall of 1980. In that election year, so disorganized and ineffectual had the labor movement in Youngstown become that it could only garner 50 trade unionists to a Save-Our-Jobs Rally. Furthermore, in this overwhelmingly Democratic area (Democrats outnumber Republicans three to one), the labor movement was unable to elect the most effective and pro-labor representative in the State legislature. Harry Meschel's crushing defeat at the hands of Lyle Williams, the first Republican in forty years to hold the district seat, was indicative of the ineffectiveness of labor's political action programs and its weakness and lack of support within the community.

By the end of 1980, the labor movement in Youngstown was frustrated and disorganized. Unsure of membership support, unable to organize itself and others, and without a political or economic program, the labor movement was reeling.

A New Beginning

Ronald Reagan, through his economic programs and his decimation of the air traffic controllers, initiated the revitalization of the labor movement in Youngstown. The momentum started to change slowly in October of 1981 when members of the labor community began to meet with community groups to organize picketing at Congressman Williams' birthday party (\$5,000/plate). The featured speaker there was none other than David Stockman, who was repaying the Administration's political debt owed for Mr. Williams' votes on Reagan's economic program. While the number of pickets (300) was relatively modest, its composition was significant. Unions had brought together welfare workers and recipients, senior citizens, the VFW, minorities, women's groups, members of the Ohio Public Interest Campaign, and even some academics.

While the picketing of Williams' party was an important first step, the concerted actions of UAW Local 1112 (Lordstown) against concessions in the GM-UAW agreement gave the local labor movement a much needed lift. In the midst of the pressure for concessions (for example, Timken Company in nearby Akron had extracted a 10-year moratorium on striking and grievances over work assignments from the USW), Local 1112's vigorous stand against concessions (4 to 1 against) was seen as an act of defiance.

The militancy at Lordstown carried over into the construction industry. For the most part, the local building trades unions had achieved little (and in some instances granted substantial concessions) in late 1981 and the beginning of 1982. However, the Structural Ironworkers of Local 207 representing Western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio decided to fight against concessions. Local 207's members had worked at Lordstown during the changeover to the J-Car and drew from UAW Local 1112's militancy. Led by a newly elected business agent, Lanny Burton, Ironworkers Local 207 conducted a successful two-week strike that resulted in improvements in salary and work rules.

In March of 1982, organized labor decided to move in another direction. Dissatisfied with the primary candidates pushed by the local Democratic establishment, a group of labor leaders decided at the last minute to enter their own candidate, Michael Beckes. Beckes was a business agent for the carpenters and campaigned openly on the AFL-CIO's economic platform for the 1980's. Starting with almost no recognition and little organization, Beckes ran a strong campaign and placed second behind the endorsed candidate in a field of six.



Picketing the Second National Bank in Warren.

Valley to become more belligerent in dealing with unions. As elsewhere in the country, local unions in Youngstown have increasingly encountered union-busting employers and tactics.

At Trumbull Memorial Hospital (TMH), AFSCME Local 2404 had begun formal negotiations in June 1982. Local 2404 is composed of service and maintenance workers (predominantly women) who earn between \$4 and \$6 an hour and have no history of any militancy. After weeks of paper shuffling and delays on the part of TMH and Local 2404, the major issue came down to the elimination of the union security provision in the contract. A forced strike ensued (August 1, 1982) and as is now common practice, video cameras were immediately in place and replacements (scabs) imported.

But rather than the hospital workers fighting the battle alone, local labor leaders (notably the UAW and the IUE) together with a grassroots organization (Workers Solidarity Club) led by a former local steelworker's president, Ed Mann, and labor activist,

While Beckes lost the primary election, the campaign once again brought members of the labor movement into a close working relationship. The defunct Northeast Ohio Labor Council was reconstituted after five years of inactivity; it held regular meetings that involved both AFL-CIO unions and unaffiliated unions such as the UAW (unaffiliated at the local level), Ohio Educational Association and the Teamsters. From this group emerged a new sense of solidarity and commitment to action. This commitment was to find focus in the fight against union-busting at Trumbull Memorial Hospital in Warren and the organization of a local Solidarity Day.

Plant closings and concessions have caused some local employers in the Mahoning

On October 2, 1982, following the Solidarity Day II rally, a crowd of 1,500 returned to TMH and held a protest march. This was the first march since the TMH negotiators had refused to sit down with the hospital workers' bargaining team that now included two members of Solidarity Day II—Lanny Burton and Bob Catlin, President of Trumbull County AFL-CIO. Burton and Catlin had been invited by AFSCME to assist in the negotiations. TMH's refusal to allow them to participate was an obvious unfair labor practice with the purpose of further undermining the negotiations.

Although the march was largely peaceful, violence did erupt. After circling the hospital, the picketers broke a newly constructed fence guarding the employees' parking lot, overturned a car (a Toyota), and broke windows in several others. A contingent of 150 police equipped with flack jackets and billy clubs were called to break up the demonstration. With the aid of the union leaders, a semblance of order was attained, but only after the marchers broke the windows of a Cadillac dealership and the Second National Bank. Both the owners of the dealership and the president of the bank sit on the TMH Board of Directors. The march ended with two



Patricia Neal

TMH strikers.

Patricia Neal



arrests but without unnecessary force by police or additional violence. The marchers vowed to continue their vigil.

That vigil lasted until late December 1982 when AFSCME staff convinced rank-and-file members that despite the demonstrations the strike was lost. An agreement was reached with the hospital administration that was similar to the one that had been rejected twice during the strike. Consequently, strikers will be called back systematically over the next three years. After having been on strike almost six months, with record levels of unemployment in the area and without the support by the AFSCME staffers, rank-and-file unionists felt they had little choice but to ratify the agreement. Since it was something less than a total victory, many labor and community groups who had supported the strike abhorred the settlement agreement and the AFSCME staff's handling of the final stages of the strike.

The militancy and resolve associated with the TMH strike carried over into the organization of Solidarity Day II in October 1982. Solidarity Day II was a completely spontaneous and local event. No edicts had been received from the upper echelons of international unions or of the AFL-CIO. In fact, there were rumors that the state AFL-CIO was not in favor of the rally since it might detract from their campaign activities in support of Senator Howard Metzenbaum and gubernatorial candidate Richard Celeste.

After the Beckes campaign, members of the labor community had feared that their budding resurgence might be shortlived. Rather than becoming actively involved in the local Congressional race, a small contingent decided to organize the grassroots Solidarity Day. A steering committee was formed that included representation from the local skilled trades, public sector, and industrial unions—Lanny Burton (chairperson), representing the building trades; Bill Malone, vice-president of IUE Local 717; Connie Hall, staff representative of the Ohio Education Association; Rudy Gasparek, president and Al Alli, shop chairman, UAW Local 1112; and Les Johnson, president of UAW Local 1714 (Fisher Body, Lordstown).

The steering committee decided that the rally's purpose should cut across the broad range of labor and community concerns, in order not to be perceived as the action of a narrow interest group. What emerged, after some debate, was a distinctly progressive statement of purpose that articulated both unions' specific and working peoples' general concerns. The more general demands made by the Solidarity Day group included the need for a rational

full employment program; plant closing legislation; increased unemployment compensation; reduction in utility rates, interest, and taxes; increased government spending on infrastructure and less on nuclear weapons; and a more responsive political representation of working-class concerns. The more specific labor demands called for the rejection of contract concessions; protection against unrestricted foreign trade and the passage of an auto local content law; increased funding of vital public service such as education; and the need for a public employee bargaining law in Ohio.

The Steering Committee hoped that leading figures from the labor movement, such as Lane Kirkland, could be coaxed into coming to Youngstown to speak at the rally. This proved impossible, so the steering committee decided to feature Senator Metzenbaum and the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, Richard Celeste. This became a source of contention since many unionists did not want Solidarity Day II turned into a campaign stop. Nevertheless, Solidarity Day II was successful on all accounts. Its 3,000 participants included a diverse group of labor unionists, women, civil rights groups, and a variety of liberal and progressive organizations.

Conclusion

In Youngstown and elsewhere, the labor movement is attempting to renew and redefine its role as a social force. Presently, it is a movement in search of itself. In some instances, its renewal is taking the form of campaigns for greater worker control and workplace democracy. In other instances, like Youngstown, it has taken the form of 1930's-style labor activism, challenging the business unionism of the intervening decades. Unsure of its ultimate direction and even of the loyalty of its rank-and-file, it remains problematic that the labor movement can transcend its immediate past, resist politics as usual, and reemerge as a progressive social force. Without a clear sense of social and political purpose, the potential for progressive labor leadership in the 1980's will be stunted, or worse yet, turned toward a right-wing populism. But if the revitalization of organized labor in Youngstown is any indication, the labor movement seems to be showing signs that it is ready to awaken from its long sleep and claim its position of leadership among the progressive elements of American society.

