

## Reflections on the SWP's 1970s Turn to Industry

The Socialist Workers Party was organized in 1938 as a democratic centralist cadre organization. Standards and expectations of membership were high. Coming out of the 1950s witch-hunt, party membership—which peaked at two thousand during the post-war strike wave—was down to only four hundred. Once concentrated in the industrial trade unions, few party members still worked there, the political conditions and prospects for recruitment considered so unpromising. Growing again in the late 1960s during a period of worldwide youth radicalization—and in response to the Cuban Revolution and civil rights and antiwar movements—the organization had by the early 1970s a substantial presence in the public sector unions, particularly the teachers. Though about a quarter of party members were in unions, the only organized party groupings in industry were a few small local concentrations—the building trades in San Francisco, rail in Chicago.

In the early seventies an insurgent movement developed in the Chicago-Gary district of the United Steelworkers led by Ed Sadlowski, president of the ten thousand member local union at the South Chicago works of U. S. Steel. There were then 128,000 union members in the district, the union's largest. When Sadlowski lost his bid for District Director in 1973 due to vote rigging, the Labor Department, responding to a union challenge, ordered a new election, which he won handily 2-1. As the half million mill workers covered by the Basic Steel Agreement had neither the right to vote on contracts nor the right to strike when the contract expired, Sadlowski backed formation of a union Right-to-Strike Committee, in which the handful of SWP members active in the union, including me, got involved.

I had worked in a steel mill—the same mill where my father worked—off and on since 1968, the year I graduated high school. A portion of that time I was in college, where I learned about socialism, passing first through Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), then the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), youth group of the SWP. I helped establish a branch of the SWP in St. Louis in 1973. I was then working in the same mill.

One leading SWP steelworker activist, Alice Peurala, had worked at Sadlowski's South Chicago mill for twenty years. She recruited a co-worker to the SWP who had also worked in the mill for years. A couple of SWP members also got hired there and soon we had a presence. When Sadlowski launched the militant, union-wide formation Steelworkers Fightback in 1975, he followed it with a campaign for International President. The small, but growing, number of SWP members in the union threw themselves into the campaign.

SWP union groups were called fractions. These were our party work groups. My first, informal, national steel fraction meeting was in Chicago on the occasion of a Right-to-Strike conference in 1974. In 1976 during the height of the Sadlowski campaign for President I took a week vacation to campaign at the Gary mills. Steelworkers Fightback candidates were contending for local and district office across the country. I learned then that the SWP's presence in the union had grown to nearly twenty, a number actively engaged in the campaign. These members had not, for the most part, been directed by the party to enter the industry. They were more often than not rebel youth who wanted get into the thick of things. There were a few older party stalwarts who acted as advisors. In addition to Alice Peurala, who went on to become the first woman elected president of a basic steel local, I remember Jack Sheppard, who had been a union leader at American Bridge in Los Angeles since the forties, veteran of some of the big battles of the post-war strike wave. Jack came into Chicago to work on the campaign. I can recall being with Jack and Alice at a campaign meeting at the Steelworkers Fightback office and then at Sadlowski's house, later at the home of labor journalist Staughton Lynn and at the union's annual memorial at the site of the 1937 Republic Steel massacre, where ten strikers were murdered by police. Sadlowksi lost that election, but three Fightback candidates were elected to the International Executive Board—three District Directors, including left progressive Jim Balanoff, who took Sadlowski's former District Director job.

Every year in August the SWP would hold a big conference in Ohio—one year a convention, the next an educational conference. In the seventies fifteen hundred or so would attend. I recall having a steelworker fraction meeting there in August 1977 after the Steelworkers election. Several from the party leadership sat in on the meeting. The room was packed. After listening to the discussion, SWP National Secretary Jack Barnes got up and explained how this was the most important work the party was doing, how the steel fraction was leading. That did it. For the next year it was all "steel, steel, steel"—the hot topic in the organization as dozens more entered the industry.

A few months later in December there was a SWP National Committee plenum. These national leadership meetings would take place every few months. The report coming out of the plenum had current SWP membership at 1780. In addition, there were several hundred members of the party youth group, the YSA. A steelworker friend of mine on the National Committee told me later it was reported there were 2300 members total, including the youth. That December NC meeting discussed the Political Committee's proposal to make a party "turn to industry." As I recall there was a follow-up plenum in February 1978 that finalized the decision and brought it to the membership, not for approval, but for implementation. The process of industrialization was already well underway by that time in steel. The SWP's weekly newspaper had expanded its coverage of the industry and the union, and hundreds of copies were being sold at the mill gates, especially of the issue detailing the recent Basic Steel contract, with its Experimental Negotiating Agreement (ENA) no-ratification-vote-no-strike provisions.

I attended a national steel fraction meeting a few months later and was surprised to learn we now had, as reported, "over two hundred in steel." At that time we had some 120 party members in the Chicago-Gary area. Thirty-nine were now working in the steel mills. As I recall we had about a dozen in rail there as well. And this was just the beginning. For a full year the focus had been almost exclusively on steel. But in many cities there wasn't much of a steel industry. We had about three hundred party members in metro New York-New Jersey organized in eight branches, but there were relatively few steel jobs there. There was, however, hiring going on at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and at the Ford assembly plant at Mahwah, New Jersey. In short order, in an organized effort of impressive scale, we got fifty hired at Ford and seventy at the navy yard, building and refitting ships. It must have been something when they all got off probation and found themselves stepping on each other's toes trying to "talk socialism" and sell subs to the paper newspaper. Never mind, Mahwah closed two years later. The navy yard had few of the unions now targeted by the leadership. A couple years later there were only a handful still working there.

In California where the SWP had several hundred members the steelworkers had relatively few union locals. The autoworkers (UAW) and machinists (IAM) organized the aerospace industry. The autoworkers also had several assembly plants and the IAM represented mechanics at the big airline hubs. Dozens of SWP members got jobs in these industries and unions. Living in Milwaukee by now, I was working at a big mining equipment plant organized by the steelworkers, my wife—also a party member—at the General Motors plant. There were soon seven in her local union party fraction, five of them women. They worked to revitalize the local union Women's Committee, organizing buses of unionists to Washington to fight for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. By 1980 the party's national auto fraction approached the size of the steel fraction. At one point there were, as I was told, 180 in auto. The machinist fraction may have been about 150 at its height. With these changes in colonization targets the party's presence in the steel industry declined. In fact there was considerable fluctuation in the size of the national union fractions over the next several years.

National union fraction meetings were held every summer at the Ohio party gathering, but also periodically in between. My wife says she can remember attending auto fractions in St. Louis, Detroit and New York. Most of my national steel fractions were held in Chicago. As I recall, the members of the fractions elected their leaders. In most cases what that meant was whichever member of the party National Committee—or much smaller Political Committee—was assigned to work in a particular industry, that person would be chosen to lead the fraction. When Malik Miah was serving as National Chairperson of the SWP, he was also working at United Airlines and headed the national IAM fraction.

One noteworthy feature of this turn was it knew few exemptions, particularly in the leadership. Unless you had a serious medical condition or were part of the small inner leadership circle, you went into industry. Party leaders were expected to lead the turn. Peter Camejo worked in a garment shop, Barry Sheppard in an oil refinery. If you were in the central leadership you might be expected go in for a couple of years, then be pulled out to work on a campaign, organize a new branch, or edit publications. In the branches it was a little different. In some cases, pressure was brought to bear to get members to industrialize. Mostly, however, it was "patiently explain" and "lead by example." Nonetheless, several hundred members, who either personally resisted the turn, felt uncomfortable with the subtle pressure, or went in and decided after a time it was not for them, left the organization. Some became "active supporters" rather than full members. Many simply drifted away.

There were some recruits from the plants to replace those lost to the turn, especially in the early days before the Reagan era, before the crushing of the air traffic controllers' strike. I recall seeing a report at a 1979 national steel faction meeting detailing the thirty-five workers recruited to the party out of the plants in the previous six months. "Not bad," commented one veteran party trade unionist as we socialized at break. Two years later we were recruiting very few. This was due to several factors, among which the changing political climate. Some other groups on the left did nonetheless find ways to grow. The SWP by contrast had begun to convert "turn to industry" into workerist panacea, all the while drawing wagons in a circle in hopes of maintaining ideological purity in the midst of what was by then clearly becoming a deep period of reaction.

The turn had been rolled out to the membership as a means of growing the party into a substantial force in the labor movement. The party press reported a "mass radicalization" underway among U.S. workers. Expectations ran high. At first all went well. There was much excitement and optimism. But when the Reagan reaction set in things went south quickly. The rightward drift in politics coincided with a series of internal political disputes in the party on theory and political orientation and much factional warfare, primarily coming from the majority leadership. By early 1984 nearly two hundred critics had been expelled. Along with them went dozens of majority supporters, who were either kicked out or encouraged to leave as the party leadership introduced ever more restrictive "proletarian norms" of membership. The turn had been promoted as the big opportunity to break out of the "semi-sectarian existence" the party had been forced into since the McCarthy era. Now the organization rushed headlong back into that at once familiar mode of existence, transitioning to hidebound sect in record time.

Contributing to all this was a major miscalculation made in late 1979, when the SWP leadership decided it was running out of colonizers and turned to the still vibrant, mostly student, YSA. The SWP leadership decided that the YSA would 'decide' that it too needed to turn to industry. The YSA would henceforth be an organization of young workers. Many dozens heeded the call, quit school and entered the targeted industries, which soon included meatpacking, as strikes swept that industry. I remember helping recruit a student activist to the YSA, then to the party. She was persuaded to move to another branch to take a sixty-hour-a-week job in a packinghouse. No one ever heard from her again—a tale often told. By the mid-1980s the SWP had lost half its membership and was down to only some eight hundred. Unable, or unwilling, to make corrections and change course the decline continued unabated. Soon the remnant youth group collapsed and hundreds more drifted away. Today the SWP has about one hundred formal members and perhaps two hundred supporters, mostly former members—an organization of no consequence. Having recruited few in recent decades its membership is now mostly retired, or nearly so—a sorry tale.

But in the early days the SWP's turn to industry went well. The political motivation for the turn was well thought out and intelligently explained. It was argued that this not was a therapeutic move intended to purge the organization of alien class influences, but rather that of a revolutionary organization taking advantage of the first real opportunities since before the McCarthy era to win workers to socialism. Certain therapeutic blessings were in fact discovered, but that came later. All those years since the 1950s witch-hunt were characterized as "the long detour," a period when the organization had been driven from

its natural milieu—the unions and the work places. Now with the turn the party would be back on its historic course.

The errors and setbacks of the eighties take little from the achievements of the seventies. The SWP had in fact organized its turn to industry in a methodical manner and with great success. The plants were hiring in the late seventies, the peak of a business cycle. Members were assigned to watch the newspapers for employment ads. When news came that an auto plant was about add a shift, word went out to the branches, and members were sent down to apply not only from local branches, but nationally. Many members transferred to other cities to get jobs where they were hiring and the party had targets. Sometimes a member with previous manufacturing experience would get a job in a targeted plant. That member would then conduct informal classes to prepare others in the branch for the required employment tests. Party members in Milwaukee applying at the two big General Motors parts plants trained each other in blueprint reading and use of micrometers and calipers. Members already in apprenticeships helped those preparing for an interview. Jobs committees researched industries, unions and hiring—both for targets and for who to talk to in the union or the personnel office. SWP branches got so good at this that when recession came in 1980 we still managed to get a great many people hired. You just needed to know where and how. The deep recession of 1982-83 was a different matter. We still got members hired, but bore the labor of Sisyphus as plant after plant, mill after mill, closed. Many members laid off from industry went on full-time for the organization, while drawing extended unemployment benefits.

Though the SWP probably never had more than eight hundred members in industry at any one time in the period from 1978 until the recession of 1982, certainly well over a thousand passed through the plants, some staying just months, others decades. Other industries the SWP targeted as the turn progressed were garment and coal mining, the former because it was among the most exploited sectors of the working class, the latter because of its importance in the economy and because of a militant strike wave, particularly the four-month 1978 national coal strike. At one time the SWP had two branches in the West Virginia coalfields and forty members working in the mines. In the mid-1980s the SWP, now much smaller, shifted a number of people from high-paying industrial jobs—"the aristocracy of labor"—to low wage garment shops, particularly in New York and Los Angeles. In Milwaukee we had small fractions at two union garment shops. It was not unusual then to see a party member three years into a machinist apprenticeship quit to take a job in a garment shop at less than half the pay. To assist members in their political work and recruitment in the plants many party branches conducted regular Spanish language classes. Another industry in which the SWP had a significant presence was rail. At its high point the national rail fraction numbered perhaps a hundred. There was also at one point a small national oil workers fraction of a dozen or two. One union the SWP did not send members into was the Teamsters. Given the historic role of the SWP and its predecessors in that union this might seem strange, until one considers the presence in the Teamsters of the competing International Socialists and the formation they helped lead—Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). The SWP just stayed clear.

Party industrial fractions were organized not only on the national, but the local level. A small branch like Milwaukee, which only briefly numbered as many as forty members, had at different times fractions in auto, rail, steel, garment and the machinists union. Fractions at General Electric and General Motors, numbering a half dozen each, met regularly to discuss work on party campaigns, potential recruits, to plan union interventions, and how to defend against red-baiting, where that was a problem. Members lent each other support and assisted where individuals were running into difficulties—with job skills, with management, with co-workers, with union officials.

There were many problems with the manner in which the SWP conducted itself in the trade unions. One was with the approach of "talking socialism." Though winning workers one-by-one to socialist ideas is a fundamental, how it is done is important. With the SWP there was a tendency toward propagandism—measuring success in winning workers to socialism against the yardstick of socialist pamphlets or newspaper subscriptions sold.

A second and related problem was that of discouraging members from initiating struggles. When fights broke out we would participate, more often than not with stacks of socialist newspapers under our arms, but we would get involved. But the SWP did not, at least in this period, have a strategy for taking on the boss. I had some first hand experience with this. During the high tide of the "bosses' counteroffensive" in the mid-1980s—after Reagan had signaled to the entire employing class with his crushing of the air traffic controllers' strike that it was open season on workers and unions—we were confronted with concession demands at my steel plant that would have set us back decades. When a first concession proposal was voted down, union and company went back to the bargaining table. When we got the company's "last, best and final offer," we took a strike vote. The International rep and local union bargaining committee recommended a 'yes' vote on the company offer with its steep wage and benefit cuts. There were five hundred union members at the meeting. I got up and spoke against the agreement and said we needed to strike. Afterward, the former union president told me he thought things hung in the balance until I spoke, that my speech resolved the issue. We struck the company for six weeks and got them to drop most of their concession demands. When I reported what happened at the contract vote to my SWP branch I was roundly criticized for adventurism, that I was irresponsibly leading the workers into a fight they would not likely win, given current political conditions. Besides, that was not why we were in the trade unions; we were not there to lead struggles. We were there to talk socialism. I left the party a couple years later. I was elected local union president.

There were other problems. The line was the U.S. working class was undergoing a mass radicalization. Problem is, when members went into the plants for the first time, they had difficulty finding it—the radicalization. They knew it was going on because they had read about it—it was just a matter of finding out where. If your shop or industry seemed conservative, that was because the radicalization was obviously going on elsewhere. There were always greener pastures. Consequently, there was an extraordinary amount of moving around. It was not unusual by the mid-eighties to meet party members who had already worked in three, four or more industries in as many cities in the few years of the turn. Some of our European co-thinkers referred to this as the "grasshopper effect." Comrades jumped from plant to plant, industry to industry, city to city, in perpetual search of the holy grail of the radicalization. The result was a rootless presence in the working class. The party's relationship to the class was abstract and general, not concrete and specific. We were like itinerant missionaries to the working class, not part of it.

And more problems: though not prone to the sectarianism or ultra-leftism displayed by some socialist groups, the SWP's insistence that its members decline nomination for union office until such time as the working class was prepared to accept revolutionary leadership lent itself to a form of abstentionism. Members were discouraged from running even for shop steward—advice that was sometimes ignored, especially in the early days of the turn before the central leadership took charge of directing the work. This unwillingness to accept leadership for fear it might politically compromise meant the SWP had an influence in this period far less than its numbers might suggest. Another socialist organization—the International Socialists – with far fewer members but with a dynamic, flexible and well thought-out union strategy had a greater impact. During my first twenty years in the steelworkers union I served on local union committees and was elected as a delegate to the central labor council and to district steelworker conventions, but held no local union office. When I dropped my formal party membership in 1988, I was elected shop steward, followed by financial secretary, then president of the thousand-member local. A decade later I was asked to go on staff for the international union. I retired in 2012 as sub-district director, responsible for the union in the southern half of Wisconsin. I remained an active socialist, a member of the revolutionary socialist organization Solidarity, throughout. My socialist politics were known in the union. Much had changed in the labor movement over the previous decades. Being a red was not such a big problem anymore. One fellow International rep loved to introduce me at conferences as his "favorite Communist." I was good with that.

Bill Breihan, Milwaukee, January 2019.