

Excerpt from *The Price of Dissent: Testimonies to Political Repression in America* by Bud Schultz and Ruth Schultz (University of California Press: 2001), excerpted from pages 63-72

Oral History of Ernest DeMaio (head of the United Electrical Workers Midwest District 11, headquartered in Chicago). The UE was one of the expelled CIO unions, hit hard by persecution.

Hartford is my hometown. I was born in 1908 on Mechanic Street, in the Italian community, close to the Connecticut River. They used to have very heated arguments there. I was just a youngster then-I didn't know Bolshevism from rheumatism-but I can remember the heat of it. And all kinds of activities were going on. You had a kind of mass upsurge taking place. Well, that had to be destroyed, and it was destroyed. My father and my uncle were picked up in the dragnet of the Palmer raids in 1920-no charges-just thrown in jail with thousands of others up and down the seacoast.

Sacco and Vanzetti were first arrested in that same year. . I got involved in the latter stages of their defense. Do you realize what a trauma it was for Italians when they were executed? It created the impression that all was hopeless, all was lost. It happened on the 23rd of August, 1927. There was a huge gathering at Times Square, where the New Year's Eve ball would indicate whether they would be pardoned or executed. The place was jammed with hundreds of thousands of people. Then it happened-Sacco and Vanzetti were executed. Some of the fellows and I went to a speakeasy-there was Prohibition in those days-and we proceeded to get plastered.

[Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italian immigrants and anarchists, were convicted in 1920 of a double murder in Braintree, Massachusetts. Eventually, two Department of Justice officials swore that the government knew that the two anarchists were innocent but was prosecuting them for their political beliefs. A quarter of a million people marched in silent protest in Boston the day Sacco and Vanzeni were executed]

When I had to work the next day, I wasn't in the best of moods. My foreman was only interested in one thing: production. "Get the lead out, " he said. I told him to get off my back. He said, "What's the matter with you?" I said, "There's nothing the matter with me. Just get the hell off my back."

He asked, "Hey, were you at Times Square last night?" I said, "Yeah, why?" He looked at me: "I always knew you were a no-good, dago son of a bitch."

Well, I hit him once and broke his nose and jaw. And then it was all over. They fired me. But I didn't realize that they blacklisted me, too. I ,could get a job, give my reference, and each time it would catch up with me. I lost dozens of jobs.

Those guys were trying to grind me into the ground. I decided: Hell, I'm going to fight back. I didn't know how, but I was going to do it. By then, the crash of '29 had come, and nobody could get a job. I got active in the Unemployed Councils. Then the WPA came along. I organized there. When the general strike in textiles took place in 1934, I became active in that.

In 1935, I went into Bridgeport to organize the General Electric Company. At that time, it was the largest manufacturing plant in Connecticut. My heart sank when I saw the size of that huge plant, and I timidly asked the union if they had any contacts. "Contacts?" they said. "If we had any contacts, what would we need you for?"

GE didn't think we had a snowball's chance in hell to organize them. And the first committee of six that I set up, the company bought them off-offered them each a job at forty dollars a week. That may sound

like chicken feed today, but, mind you, this was the sixth year of the depression. After what happened to the first committee, I wasn't taking another chance of having them buy off the next one. So quietly I built until we were ready to spring out into the open.

There was a group of GE workers who were Coughlinites. ["Father Charles Coughlin, a Detroit-based cleric, had an influential radio program that was anti-Semitic, anti-CIO, anti-Roosevelt and anti-Catholic.] They were ordinary workers who were getting off their frustrations and were taken in by Father Coughlin. I decided to go to their meeting. We had a free-for-all there. The telling point I made with them was, "Hey, so you're Catholics. It doesn't matter who you pray to. It's who preys on us that's important." I finally won them over, and they became the most active force in building the union. Eighteen months after GE bought off the first committee, that plant was organized.

While I was organizing GE, I met with John Brophy, who was an advance man for John L. Lewis, the leader of the United Mine Workers. The meeting was at the old Taft Hotel in New Haven. He spent an afternoon explaining to me what Lewis was up to. They had set up the Committee for Industrial Organizations within the AFL. I asked him, "Why are you telling me all this?" He said, "Because it's young men like you who are going to do the organizing." The bosses of the AFL opposed all this. The end result was that they expelled eight unions. The Committee of Industrial Organizations was changed to the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and the campaign to organize the unorganized was on.

In 1938, there was a series of Dies Committee hearings to discredit the CIO by red-baiting. It was the earliest days of the CIO, and the entire organization was charged with being Communist-dominated. Millions of pamphlets were put out by the National Association of Manufacturers: "Join the CIO and Help Build a Soviet America." It was written by a guy named Joseph Kamp of the pro-fascist Constitutional Educational League. These guys were running around creating a lot of noise, but they didn't settle any of the problems of the people.

I went from Bridgeport to Pittsburgh. I kept moving westward, to Dayton, Ohio, where I was in charge of organizing the electrical division of General Motors. From there, in 1941, I went to Chicago, where I spent most of my time. I became the president of District Council 11 of the UE, which included Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Indiana.

The local police, the Chicago red squad, tracked us. Sometimes they made it obvious to you that you were being shadowed. They wanted to let you know they were there. At other times, quiet surveillance might be going on simultaneously. You think you're getting rid of your tail, but the guy you're not aware of is watching you. And they had every hall in town bugged. Anything that was said in a meeting was recorded. Every time a strike took place, they were there. If there was a big meeting at the head quarters, they were on the outside, even if they had guys on the inside.

I would bait George Barnes, Captain Barnes. We'd have a strike meeting around the Honeywell plant, and I would point to him, just tear him up and down. He would never touch me. I figured that going on the offensive is probably what saved me. He finally got his just deserts. He was taking big payoffs from the companies. And because he wanted to be careful, he turned the money over to his wife. Then he announced that he was retiring and going down to Florida to enjoy life. Well, at the time he retired, his wife took off with the money and another man. And poor George had to get a job as a security guard. I would see him every now and then and say, "George, all your ill-gotten gains, all the money you squeezed out of these corporations to protect them against us-what the hell did it buy you?" . .

After the war, the CIO took the position that the executive board would set the policy on politics, and every union would have to toe the line. Phil Murray said, "This is the policy," and everybody there

said: "Yes, yes, yes, yes." They all did, except our guys and maybe a few others: Harry Bridges of the Longshoremen's Union; the guys from Mine,

Mill and Smelter Workers; the Office and Professional Workers; and some of the other smaller outfits. So we had sharp differences with the CIO. . .

Well, we had to make a decision as to whether we would stand our ground and fight or whether to go like the rest of them: play the game, cover up, and get along with the boss. We made the decision to fight. We knew that if we took them on, we'd go through hell. We just didn't realize how much hell we'd go through. So you might say we were foolhardy. All we were doing was taking on the U.S. government, the employers, the officialdom of the trade union movement, and the Catholic Church, which was very active in the industrial areas.

The CIO was just about to expel us when we walked out. But that was a "you can't fire me, I quit" business. Then they set up their own outfit, the International Union of Electrical Workers, to raid us.

The IUE is given credit for splitting the UE, but it could never have done it without GE and Westinghouse and the attacks of the government through the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, et cetera. Let me give you an example of how GE used the Taft-Hartley Act and the House Un-American Activities Committee. If you're going to petition for a union election, you have to have signed cards from thirty percent of the eligible employees of the particular bargaining unit you're petitioning for. In this case, the IUE could not get that thirty percent. But the Taft-Hartley Act provided that companies could call for an election without getting the thirty percent. So GE called for an election to kick the UE out. Then GE adopted a rule that if any of their employees were called before governmental agencies and didn't answer all their questions, they would be fired. The House Un-American Activities Committee under J. Parnell Thomas—who later on went to jail himself for taking kickbacks from his staff—would announce publicly that they were coming to town. They would name the leading officers of the union and subpoena them.

When you were called before HUAC, the question would be: Are you now or were you ever a member of the Communist Party? We all decided not to answer it. We would take the First and Fifth Amendments. We had a legal and constitutional right to that protection. If you know the background of the Fifth Amendment, it comes out of the Inquisition. They would torture people to get them to say what they wanted. So the whole concept developed that no person should be forced to testify against himself or herself.

Besides, there was no way you could answer "Yes" without crawling and becoming an informer. They would want you to name names. You had to become a rat. If you answered "No," then someone could come out of the woodwork, a stool pigeon or a company plant or an FBI informer, to say that he or she was a member of the Communist Party and had collected the dues of the individual who was on the hot seat. They could charge you with perjury, and that meant a five-year rap. And since the certification of the union was involved when an officer was accused of perjury and fired under those circumstances, the company could call for an NLRB election—and the IUE, the UAW, the Teamsters, the Machinists Union, they all came like locusts to tear us apart. But here's the bind: If you took the First and Fifth Amendments, which you had every constitutional right to do, you were immediately fired by GE.

They were out to destroy the unions by gutting the leadership. They drove out all of the progressives and, yes, the Communists from the unions. Were there Communists? Sure. They helped organize the unorganized. But you see, the question was not whether you were a Communist or not. The important thing was that you would be called a Communist if you wanted to fight the company, even if you just

tried to implement the resolutions adopted by the CIO itself. Their positions were there on paper just for the record. We in the UE were red-baited, and in the red-baiting, a hell of a lot of very good people got ground out.

On April 1, 1949, the Stewart-Warner Company, the Sunbeam Corporation, and Foot Brothers, three companies we had under contract, fired five hundred officers and stewards of our union on the grounds that they were security risks. The courts ruled that if an employer had a reasonable doubt regarding the security of an employee and he fired him, no law was violated. If I accuse you of being subversive, how do you prove you are not? Since there was no defense, they could charge anyone. That's what the whole red-baiting thing was.

We were in negotiations with Stewart Warner then. The company said we had to accept tile contract and extend it for another year with no changes. If we insisted on changes, then they would break off negotiations. We did. That's when they came out with their wholesale discharges. That company, alone, fired two hundred and fifty union officers as "security risks." You had those massive firings-and there was blacklisting, too, in bad economic times. We were heading into our first postwar recession, with the prewar depression fresh in our minds. Not being able to get a job is sometimes worse than death. Guys who did get work had miserable, menial jobs, jobs that were low-paying, long hours.

But the big scare was in 1952 in Chicago. On September 2, we struck the International Harvester chain. That's the day I was called by HUAC. The strike was set for midnight. At nine A.M., I'm in the House Un-American Activities Committee. Some three thousand of our guys took off from the picket line, surrounded the courthouse, and, as I was being sworn, stormed the courthouse, singing, "We'll hang Chairman Wood on sour apple tree." The next day, the newspapers had an eight-column spread, with scare headlines: "Reds Seize Courthouse."

The UE had the largest union in the city of Chicago at the time. And we were extremely active, not only on the basic economic issues but in the political life of the city. But the red-baiting turned the community against us. We were made to look like pariahs. In the Chicago Loop, they saw me coming, they would scurry over to the other side of the street. They didn't want to even be seen saying hello to me. And many of those were people I had helped in the trade union movement: took them on the job, trained them, gave them staff positions.

Yes, the public was frightened. But those who stuck, why did they stick with us? Under the conditions that prevailed, we had nothing to hold them except what they saw as our integrity. Why would they demonstrate for me when I was under attack? Because they saw it as an attack against themselves. Those workers fought for me, and I fought for them. We had that kind of a relationship. Without it, I would have rotted some federal prison a long time ago.

The day after they marched into my HUAC hearing, our guys said "What'll we do for an encore?" I told them to stay home. The National Guard had been called out. They had sandbags, machine guns, the works. They were out to frighten us. I walked in there alone, and I'm whistling to myself, thinking, "You idiots."

They asked me if I knew a guy from Quad Cities who worked at the John Deere plant down there. He had already testified. I looked over at him and said, "Hey, I wouldn't know that guy if he crawled out of my living room rug." One guy testified that in Quad Cities he was collecting my Communist Party dues. Another guy said he was collecting my dues in Chicago at that time. This is at the same hearing. You would think that the only thing I did then was fly around the country paying dues to FBI agents. But you

know, it didn't matter. It didn't have to be consistent. The important thing was that in the hysteria that prevailed, they could nail you to the wall.

On the third day, the chairman, John Wood, had a heart attack, and he had to call off the hearings.

Well, it wasn't a pleasant thing, but I'd made up my mind a long time ago I was not going to cooperate in making myself a punching bag for somebody else-or let the organization that I represented be a punching bag. If they were going to hang me, they'd hang me for being a lion and not a lamb.