THE JACKSON PROJECT

War in the American Workplace

A Memoir

Phil Cohen

With a Foreword by Si Kahn

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Editorial Assistant to the Author: Patricia Ford

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All warfare is based upon deception
The general who is skilled in defense
hides in the most secret recesses
of the earth
He who is skilled in attack
flashes forth
from the topmost heights of heaven

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

PROLOGUE

From the Street to the Bargaining Table

Becoming a union organizer or business agent is seldom a childhood ambition. Most veteran union staff didn't start out consciously headed in this direction. Life pushes, shoves, twists, bends, and molds a person until one day they find themselves fulfilling a role not previously envisioned.

The best field operatives in the labor movement often come from difficult beginnings. They took a job in their late teens at a factory, warehouse, garage, or laundry because that was their only option for survival. By chance or fate, they ended up in a union shop. The work was mind numbing and physically exhausting, but they toughed it out one day at a time. Months or even years might have passed before something galvanized them to begin playing an active role in the union.

At that moment a fuse was lit. They fought their way up through the ranks of their local to become president or chief steward. It became as much an incentive to go to work each day as their modest paycheck. Their coworkers grew to trust and respect them, realizing they had the heart to give a damn, the guts to do something about it, and the instincts to make a difference. Eventually, they caught the attention of an international union and were offered a staff position. At least that's the old-school way.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been a growing inclination among union bureaucracies to hire college-educated candidates in the hope of better contending with increasingly sophisticated corporations. These young men and women graduate with a degree in labor studies or political science, and sometimes further their endeavors at the AFL-CIO

Organizing Institute. They are invested with a sense of mission to save the working class about whom, from their own experience, they know next to nothing.

Within a few years they are generally chewed up and spit out in a thousand little pieces. The blue-collar world is rough terrain for which the classroom never prepared them. After licking their wounds, they return to school to become lawyers or professors. A select few, with the most talent and ability to adapt, ascend to join the upper echelons of the organization that hired them. Though their abilities as negotiators and administrators may become formidable, these managers and directors are never fully embraced as one of the people, for they are cut from a very different cloth.

I left home when I was sixteen with a thirst for adventure looking forward and an absence of fond memories looking back. Actually, I was never sixteen. I was eighteen for three straight years because I had to work for a living. It was 1967 in New York City.

A year later, I was reading the want ads in a local newspaper when I came across one that said: "Drivers Wanted. No experience necessary. $30 per day." That was a lot of money back then.

My entrance into the office at the Long Island City garage was memorable. About a dozen men stood around just inside the doorway, joking and hooting as men will do in an industrial setting. One of them was boasting of his sexual exploits at a recent party when an obese gentleman in a sleeveless T-shirt cut in with a profane remark. The group tumbled upon itself with arm punches and howling laughter as if this were the most amusing thing they'd ever heard. Eventually someone noticed me and asked, "What do you want, kid?"

Explaining that I was responding to the ad, he asked to see my driver's license. I willed for him to not calculate from my birth date that I was underage, and he didn't. I was promptly walked into the garage and asked to sit in a car that in some ways resembled a taxi. It had a meter and I was shown how to turn it on and off.

"Go out in the street and make some money," the man told me.

It took me a couple of days to figure out that I had become a gypsy cab driver. Gypsies provide bootleg transportation to neighborhoods where legitimate taxis are afraid to venture.

During the next year, I was employed by several outfits, one of them owned by the mob. I prowled the streets of Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant, the South Bronx, and Jamaica Queens. Only a handful of other white drivers were doing this. I fought with muggers, drove dilapidated equipment, and was constantly harassed and cited by the "Hack Squad"—NYPD's taxi enforcement division. But at age seventeen, I was making a man's living.

When it came time to renew my driver's license, I had so many outstanding tickets and bench warrants from the taxi police that my application was declined. I descended to life on the streets, migrating between odd jobs and living in a cheap hotel. Over time the owners of the establishment came to know me. I had to my credit the fact that I was intelligent and not a heroin addict. They fired the live-in manager and offered me his position. I was once again earning a decent wage.

Even during this period, I had a willingness and instinct for helping those less fortunate to play the system and survive: concocting elaborate schemes for indigent residents to collect more money from social services, get better health care, and evade fugitive warrants. This was never done for compensation. I simply had an ability to see the landscape in finer detail than most people, and I shared the view.

In 1974 I signed my first union card. The New York City Police Department was making the transition from hard-copy to electronic filing of traffic offences. They lost a lot of data in the process. I was able to pay a lawyer $700 to clear my record, paving the way for a new driver's license.

Now of sufficient age and armed with a clean slate, I obtained a permit to drive legitimate taxis. During this era, the majority of New York taxis were owned by large unionized fleets. New York is a closed-shop state, meaning that union membership is automatic within an organized workplace. While I was filling out my job application, the garage foreman handed me a union card to sign.

The New York City Taxi Drivers Union was everything that gives organized labor a bad name. The sweetheart relationship with employers was transparent, and the grievance process was a sham. Despite this, it was obvious that we were receiving a larger cut of the meter, with better benefits and entitlements, than would have been the case without representation.

Driving a New York taxi during the 1970s was the ultimate existential experience. Fleet cabs weren't equipped with radios. You were trapped in an isolated bubble with your passenger, moving through a sea of chaos. Whether a wealthy executive or psychopathic junkie, whatever transpired between the two of you was without recourse or hope of intervention. Hours of tedium would be interrupted by unexpected encounters that pushed one's survival instincts to the limit.

Fear has a flavor. It is an acrid metallic taste at the back of your tongue. Anyone who has lived with the daily potential for violence knows what I'm referring to. My nights never passed without experiencing this taste.

I was an angry young man attired in T-shirt and jeans, spending much of my evenings driving well-dressed businessmen between airports, hotels, restaurants, bars, and massage parlors. They referred to me as "driver" or "fella" and tried to make small talk. I kept them at bay with monosyllabic responses, like any self-respecting cab driver. I deeply resented these men in suits but also envied them for having a job that paid one to travel.

One night as I made my way through the streets of midtown Manhattan, I had an epiphany. Like all true insights, it was an unanticipated flash that lasted a couple of seconds, yet remained vivid for the rest of my life. I realized that my own values and essential integrity were far more in line with the natural order of things than those of the respectable denizens of commerce who comprised the majority of my clientele. I understood that what I had deep inside was worth infinitely more than their affluence and prestige. It eliminated the need to hate them. It was an important step on my journey to empowerment.

Five years later, I followed the thread of a tumultuous relationship to North Carolina. I'd always dreamed of escaping from New York to a place more rural and close to nature, where one didn't have to walk down the street with hand in pocket, grasping a weapon, braced for confrontation at every turn.

I was utterly unprepared for and shocked by the work environment. Wages were far lower than up north, and the attitude of the workforce was disconcerting. Most working people in New York had an understanding of their basic rights and dignity as human beings. This didn't mean that they weren't exploited, but at least they were aware of it. They became angry and found ways to get back.

I drifted from job to job, surrounded by coworkers who were paid minimum wage, treated like garbage, and yet proud of their circumstances. Grown men were called "son" by people they addressed as "sir," without giving it a second thought. During conversations with friends, I found myself blurting out, "What they need down here are unions." I had no involvement with political or social causes as yet, but the words tore themselves from me time and again.

During the fall of 1979, I landed a job as a city bus driver in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. My years as a "professional driver" had actually counted for something. Chapel Hill is a university town, so the transit system wasn't put off by my longish hair and semi-outlaw persona. I could look in the mirror and once more feel like I had a real job, earning something that resembled a man's wages.

The Transportation Department employed about a hundred drivers and maintenance workers. It also had a union—Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1565. The local was utterly worthless. Most southern states have laws that prohibit collective bargaining agreements between municipalities and their employees, meaning you can have a union but not a contract. The ATU thus viewed our situation as a lost cause and provided no service except for collection of weekly dues.

Local 1565 was founded and run by two women who saw the labor movement as their personal hobby. They cherished the symbolism and reveled in the bureaucracy but were clueless when it came to actually helping anyone. North Carolina is a right-to-work state in which union membership is voluntary. Though the shortcomings of the local were readily apparent, I joined at the first opportunity.

While driving a taxi in New York had been dangerous and unpredictable, driving a bus in a university town was stupefying in its boredom. The routes were short and circular, and your speed had to ebb and flow to an exacting time table. An eight-hour shift passed like it was an entire week. I measured my time in seconds and the distance in inches.

Management had no accountability in its treatment of employees. Some were treated fairly; others weren't. The employer wasn't held to any burden of proof in cases of discipline or discharge. Reasonable policies were replaced by the irrationally stringent when least expected. Drivers were fired without cause while the union leadership did nothing to intervene. They held monthly meetings, cackled over their minutes and reports, and engaged in lively debate about the rights of working people.

Over time I came to know and care for some of the senior drivers who had been with the system since its beginning. My most poignant observation was watching the lights slowly flicker out in the eyes of good people, as they gradually succumbed to the grind and capricious whims of others.

I clearly remember my galvanizing moment as if it happened five minutes ago. Drivers were gathered in a semicircle around the garage superintendent as yet another policy change was unveiled. I observed the demeanor of my coworkers, the look on their faces, their body posture. A voice welled up from deep inside saying, *Someone's got to do something about this.*

I scanned the faces and eyes of everyone in the room, trying to recognize who that person might be, so I could approach them afterwards. My gaze finally turned within, and I realized that person was me. At the time, I wished it could have been someone else.

I got myself elected chief steward and took over the business of reorganizing the local and representing employees, leaving the otherwise ineffective president in place as a figurehead to handle uninspiring administrative duties. She resented and opposed my initiatives, but I neutralized her influence whenever and however necessary.

I studied the town's personnel ordinances and grievance procedure, using them in place of a contract. Alliances were forged within the Transportation Board and Town Council. I enlisted support from the Rainbow Coalition and turned the struggles of transit workers into a media spectacle, generating statewide coverage that lasted for years.

Over a seven-year period, the senior management of the Transportation Department and eventually city officials were dragged to the bargaining table. They served within a public arena, and we had acquired the leverage to portray key individuals as either part of the solution or part of the problem. The process of discipline and discharge became accountable, resulting in the reinstatement of terminated employees. Though we still didn't have a contract, the reams of policies and procedures that were negotiated in many ways constituted the equivalent.

During the spring of 1987, a major victory resulted in all the mechanics becoming part of the union. Dramatic health and safety violations, and instances of personal bullying, were brought to light and remedied. The superintendent of maintenance was fired.

The notion started to dawn on me that perhaps I should be doing this for a living. I picked up the phone one afternoon, called the North Carolina AFL-CIO in Raleigh, and asked for the president. I didn't realize it at the time, but the odds against him taking a cold call from a stranger were a million to one; but he picked up. His name was Chris Scott, and I gave him a rapid-fire, ten-minute summary of the last seven years. He offered to schedule a meeting.

A week later, I was sitting in AFL-CIO headquarters. Chris told me, "There are very few people in this world who are natural organizers, but I believe you're one of them." He asked me to prepare a résumé that could be presented with his recommendation to directors within the various unions. Chris also suggested that my local certify me as its delegate to union conferences, so my sphere of connections could be expanded. Within the next several weeks, I made my first appearance on the broader stage of the labor movement, becoming an expected participant at the monthly Central Labor Council meetings in Raleigh.

My daughter, Colie, was two and half at the time and usually attended by my side (or on my lap). It was a familiar context, as she had been joining me at Local 1565 membership meetings since she was eight months old. Her mother and I had recently undergone a difficult separation but remained of one accord when it came to the wellbeing of our child. We had an informal joint-custody arrangement, alternating pick-ups from day care and keeping her through the night.

During the course of the next year, I received periodic overtures from labor leaders to whom Chris Scott had introduced me. They all involved relocation to the Northeast or Midwest. It was tempting but I wasn't willing to abandon my daughter, though I was sick to the point of revulsion at the prospect of continuing to drive buses. In the spring of 1988, I called Chris to discuss my dilemma. "Let me hook you up with Ernest Bennett of ACTWU," he said.

ACTWU was the acronym for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, the largest union in the South. It represented a fairly recent merger between the Textile Workers Union of America and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union.

Ernest was assistant director of the Southern Region and wanted to get together the next time he was in North Carolina. We met a month later at the Howard Johnson's in Greensboro, where he candidly portrayed the organization for which he worked.

The Southern Region of ACTWU comprised eight joint boards, each with jurisdiction over numerous locals. It had become the focus of national attention during the JP Stevens campaign and memorialized in the movie *Norma Rae.* While this initiative had resulted in the organizing of numerous cotton mills, it had bankrupted the Textile Workers Union, ultimately leading to the merger.

The unromantic truth is that following the glory days of JP Stevens, the Region had fallen into a state of decline and apathy. Many of the joint board managers and staff lacked the competence and determination to withstand membership erosion from right-to-work laws and the incessant onslaught of hostile employers. Bargaining leverage was lost, workers became disenfranchised and uninvolved, while small groups of cronies elected their arrogant and lazy friends to positions of local leadership.

The southern director was a calculating, ambitious reformer in his late thirties named Bruce Raynor. His intention was to revitalize the Region one local at a time by any means necessary. To this end he had hired Ernest Bennett, a freelance community and union organizer, three years before. Ernest became the director of what was referred to as "internal rebuilds."

Rebuilds are one of the most extreme and challenging enterprises within the labor movement. They aren't as straightforward as new organizing drives. An operative is inserted into a troubled local to reorganize from within and shift the balance of power with the company. This means quickly winning the trust of a disillusioned workforce while running a game on the existing leadership until replacements can be trained and elected.

Ernest was interested in the means by which I had transformed my own union local and told me that he hoped to be in touch soon with an assignment. He was sincere and passionate regarding his involvement in the labor movement. Bruce's motivation was far more pragmatic than altruistic. He wanted to take over the national union and needed a strong power base from which to do it. Regardless of his reasons, he had hired Ernest, and Ernest was about to hire me.

A few weeks later I received a phone call. Ernest said, "Okay, we're set. You're going to Andrews, South Carolina." He then gave me an overview of the local and its problems.

"The best I could get for you to start is $325," he told me. This wasn't much more than I was earning as a bus driver, but he went on to explain how expenses were paid. In addition to travel and work-related costs, I would receive a twenty-five-dollar per diem—a tax-free food allowance. What you didn't eat, you kept. I was suddenly about to be earning far more than I ever had in my life, doing something I cared about.

Ernest stressed that I was being sent into a "hardcore situation" and wanted my assurances about being able to handle it. I was genuinely unconcerned. My whole life had been a hardcore situation.

On July 5, 1988, I drove down an intricate web of two-lane roads to Andrews. All things considered, I'd fared well in being assigned only four hours from Chapel Hill. It would be possible to return home every other weekend for three days. The objective for which I'd held out had been achieved: a job within the labor movement that kept me close to Colie.

Andrews was a poor, backwater community about thirty miles from the coast. There were two traffic lights, and the hub of social activity was a recently constructed Hardee's. Within forty-eight hours, I was situated in a small apartment overlooking the union hall.

Local 1900 consisted of nine hundred hourly workers engaged in the manufacture of T-shirts and panties, employed by Oneida Knitting Mills at three factories. The knitting plant produced fabric and cut patterns for two sewing facilities which pieced together the garments. The union was in total disarray after years of incompetent administration that management had exploited. It was barely maintaining majority status, with membership hovering near 50 percent.

The local had been serviced for years by James Johnson, manager of the South Carolina Joint Board. Ernest had thoroughly briefed me about this man. He had worked for Con Edison in New York and been a shop steward for twenty years before his wife convinced him to return to her roots in South Carolina, where he got a job at Oneida. Appalled by the wages and working conditions in a nonunion southern mill, he had jumped headlong into the fray when union organizers showed up at the plant gate. James had "risen like a fireball" during the campaign, been hired once the contract was signed, and promoted shortly thereafter to manager.

Ernest portrayed him as someone who had ascended through the ranks too quickly, becoming complacent and more enamored of his

position than its responsibilities. He considered James an adversary and was concerned about my working relationship with him.

I decided to form my own opinion at our first meeting. James was actually quite congenial. He loved the union but not quite as much as good food and pretty women from the local who saw him as a big shot.

"Look, this is a chance for us both to look good," I told him. "I'm aware that with everything you've had to do managing the Joint Board, you couldn't possibly have had time to address all of the Oneida local's problems. Give me a free hand, I'll knock some heads together, and I'll turn the local into something that will make your whole Joint Board shine. In the end, I don't care how much credit you take for it. You'll be the king and I'll be your knight."

James found this to be a magnificent arrangement, and we got along famously.

The local president, Ron Talbert, was functionally illiterate. On its own, this reflected a cultural tragedy common to rural, Old South communities. But a person with these limitations was ill-equipped to represent hundreds of people under the terms of a collective bargaining agreement he could barely read or comprehend. Ron tried to compensate with belligerence and swagger. He was the textbook example of an unqualified leader, elected year after year by a handful of friends, while everyone else ignored the elections.

Document boxes containing grievance files were placed on my desk. There were over fifty cases dangling in limbo between the various steps of the process. Half of them lacked contractual merit, but the rest represented serious issues that should have been resolved months or even years before. One of my first tasks was to conduct private meetings with each of the local officers and shop stewards, secretly making profile notes and rating them on a one-to-three scale.

I met with a young steward from the Cutting Department named Anthony Coles, whose involvement in the local had nearly ceased. He had long ago lost faith in the bargaining process but was thoughtful and intelligent, with a clear grasp of what needed to be done. He was indignant but not hotheaded. Within five minutes I recognized him. He was the future president of Local 1900.

Over the coming months, an entirely new infrastructure emerged within the local union. There were numerous vacant positions, and it

was easy to define a role for the right people. I trained and developed an alternative tier of leadership, slowly transferring control of the local over to them. Workers were organized in mass demonstrations of support behind major group issues, leading to dramatic resolutions and policy changes from the company. The most reviled members of management were discredited in the process and eventually replaced. Two hundred fifty-three workers joined the union, bringing the membership to 88 percent.

Hundreds of members turned out to vote at the local elections, and Anthony became president in a landslide. A shop steward named Loretha was elected vice president—the first female officer in the history of Local 1900. Ron Talbert never knew what hit him.

Early in the campaign, I became involved with a sewer named Stacie, the drop-dead gorgeous, hottest girl in town admired by every guy over the age of fifteen. She became a steward at the sewing plant, using her charm to help build union support among its workers.

Once established in Andrews, I began periodically returning with my daughter. She hung out with me at the union hall and off-shift workers were happy to babysit while I visited the plants. The membership became mesmerized by little Colie, with her wavy blond hair, sparkling blue eyes, and mischievous laugh. They referred to her as "a blessed child."

The Oneida campaign was a perfect storm. It made my bones and established the foundation for my career in the labor movement. Both Anthony and Loretha went on to be hired by the union.

In March 1989, I drove back to North Carolina at the conclusion of the project to rest, regenerate, and spend time with my daughter. Like the secret agent in an old spy movie, I awaited the phone call that would tell me where I was going next.

CHAPTER 1

I lived in an old farmhouse about ten miles south of Chapel Hill—a refuge of peace within a lifestyle of conflict. One afternoon, the phone rang.

"I've lined up your next project," said Ernest. "It's at the Buster Brown plant in Chattanooga. The membership is down to 33 percent, and I think the company is getting ready to try and decertify us. We really need you there."

He provided details of a meeting scheduled in Knoxville with Mark Pitt, manager of the Tennessee Joint Board.

Once again, several days after speaking with Ernest, I was on the road, this time headed west on I-40. I believed in pacing myself to be effective when it mattered most. I left a day early and took a hotel room in Black Mountain, a picturesque town in the Smoky Mountains about thirty miles east of Asheville.

The meeting wasn't until the following evening. I slept without setting an alarm and made a leisurely exit from the hotel. My mind was cloudy, and everything seemed surreal as I packed my bags. Andrews had been my whole universe for nine months. Each day had been so densely packed that it felt like several years. Suddenly this reality and the intimacies I had found within had vanished like a glimmering soap bubble pricked with a pin.

I drove along the winding mountain passes through Asheville and beyond, where the interstate once again straightened into never-ending monotony. The "Welcome to Tennessee" sign finally loomed to my right, inciting the rush I always experienced when crossing a state line for the first time. I pulled onto the shoulder to commemorate the moment and stepped out of the vehicle, feeling my shoes touch the ground and breathing the air deeply.

I proceeded with the remaining two-and-a-half-hour journey, turning into the parking lot of a Waffle House on the outskirts of Knoxville as dusk fell. Ernest and Mark had just arrived and were sitting at a table.

Mark was a slender man with stooped shoulders and short black curly hair that was starting to become speckled with traces of white. His dry and matter-of-fact monotone contrasted sharply with Ernest's effervescent and passionate demeanor. He was clearly very intelligent. Ernest had a stocky but not very muscular build and was nearly bald. One wouldn't have guessed that both men were only a year or two older than my thirty-eight years. I stayed in shape through daily exercise, was learning to eat healthy, and made a point of getting enough sleep when possible. Neither of these directors embraced such disciplines.

Following an hour of discussion about the situation at Buster Brown, Mark mentioned that he was also having serious problems with a textile plant in Jackson. Local 281 was a runaway train. Membership had declined to a third of the workforce with multiple new exits each week. The company was also in serious financial trouble. Mark had gotten the workers to accept concessions that management claimed were necessary to stay in business. I sensed that workers had been pressured to comply in a manner which failed to maintain their confidence. It was eventually decided that Buster Brown could wait and I would be assigned to Jackson. I asked where it was.

"About six hours west of here, off of I-40," Ernest nonchalantly replied.

My heart skipped a beat up into my throat and then sank to my stomach. I was being sent to perhaps the most remote outpost of the Southern Region—thirteen hours from my daughter. My expression remained deadpan and my eyes betrayed no emotion.

"Sounds like a plan," I said. "Give me directions and all the contact info when we get to the hotel."

Ernest had flown to Knoxville so we drove in my vehicle to the accommodations he had chosen.

"I like working with you," he confided.

When I asked why, he thought for about thirty seconds and then said, "You go the extra mile . . . and you're hungry. You remind me of myself when I was starting out."

I became distracted and missed an exit which was quickly corrected through an illegal U-turn over the median. "Look out Tennessee. Phil's just arrived," Ernest chuckled under his breath and continued the briefing.

The plant in Jackson was a historic facility, built in 1906 by the Bemis Bag Corporation with a union local dating back to 1938. A Pakistani investor named Humayun Shaikh had acquired the business nine years earlier and renamed it Tennessee Textiles.

The mill had originally manufactured yarn from raw cotton, which was then woven into cloth for burlap bags, a common agricultural commodity during the first half of the twentieth century. As the product became obsolete, production shifted to rolls of unfinished cloth for sale within the apparel and other textile markets.

There were currently 387 hourly employees, reflecting a significant downsizing that had occurred over the years. Even before the era of free trade agreements, the output of American textiles was diminishing in the face of foreign competition. The company had been struggling for months to successfully consummate its sale to new owners.

One of the accommodations the union had offered was the postponement of all 1988 vacation wages until the end of the year. Management and union officials had assured employees that the delay was necessary but payment could be expected before Christmas. Each worker was owed between one and four weeks' salary, depending on seniority. The deadline had passed four months ago, and the company remained in default, further diminishing the union's credibility. This had become the most volatile group issue in the plant.

The local had been serviced for years by a business agent named Eddie Cox, whom Ernest described as lazy, not very smart, and a heavy drinker. He made a monthly pilgrimage to Jackson, sat in on grievance meetings, but then did little to follow-up with resolution. I asked Ernest why the union didn't simply let him go.

"It's not that simple," he responded. "Eddie was once president of his own local, at an old Celanese plant, and his way of handling things seemed to work in that situation. When the plant shut, he was hired into a position for which he wasn't really qualified. He's been with us for over twenty years. What are we supposed to do? Where could he go if he lost this job? He'd probably end up pumping gas somewhere."

We arrived at the hotel and continued our meeting in the lobby until midnight.

"I know you like to hit the ground running and take a plant by storm," Ernest cautioned, "but that's not going to work here. It's going to take time before these people trust an outsider. The wild card will be the new owners. The company has refused to provide any details about who they are. If it turns out we can work with them, the project goes in one direction. If not . . . then we'll have to deal with it.

"For now, work your way into the local and build relationships. Identify the major issues and do what you can to resolve them. But don't get too far out in front of the people or you'll lose them."

There is an ethic within the labor movement that a moment spent not serving the cause is a moment when one doesn't deserve to be alive. A dedicated staff member is expected to be available 24/7. I had never bought into this. Instead, I believed that by nurturing oneself and staying fit, an organizer kept his edge and presented his best to the field. Most union representatives adopt the lifestyle of a businessman. I tried to live like an athlete.

Ernest's flight wasn't until late morning, and with nothing more to discuss, it made sense to sleep in. I wanted to start the next leg of my journey feeling rested and arrive in Jackson with my wits about me.

At 7:00 a.m. there was a knock, followed by pounding on my door. I knew it was Ernest but decided to ignore him and try to fall back asleep. The effort was unsuccessful so I showered and dressed. Upon opening the door, I found a note attached by tape. It was a page-long diatribe from Ernest, cussing me out for not responding. When we encountered each other at checkout, he asked, "Where the hell did you go? I knocked on your door earlier this morning."

"I was in the shower," I told him. "I must've not heard you."

"Oh, okay," he grunted, and let it go.

We had a cordial parting at the Knoxville airport, and I found my way back to the interstate. Jackson is in West Tennessee, about two thirds of the way to Memphis coming from Nashville. I periodically stopped at pay phones to make introductory calls and schedule my first meetings. I arrived exhausted, with my nerves frayed. It wasn't how I had wanted to begin the assignment, but that's how it was. I took a room at the Ramada Inn.

Mark had contacted the personnel director, casually informing her that I would be assuming the duties of the local's business agent. It's not unusual for unions to reshuffle workloads, so there was nothing about this call to raise an alarm.

My first meeting in Jackson was on March 30 at 1:00 p.m., with Local President Percy Ray Long. Local 281 owned a rather nice union hall in a residential neighborhood of old mill houses, which is where we introduced ourselves. It was apparent from the beginning that this was a good man with a serious drinking problem. Percy had one of the more high-end jobs at the plant, as a loom fixer in the Weaving Department. He was a black man about my age, with a once-muscular build that hadn't fully deteriorated due to the physical demands of his work. His hair and mustache showed premature streaks of grey.

Percy seemed genuinely pleased to make my acquaintance. Mark had apprised him of my arrival shortly after the meeting in Knoxville. "It's about time the International sent in someone like you," he said. "The union is in really big trouble and it's getting worse each day."

Percy went on to talk about the vacation pay issue and how he felt that management was trying to bust the union. He raised numerous other concerns as well but I was only able to take disjointed and fragmented notes. This was an off-shift day for Percy. He displayed the rambling and unfocused demeanor of the functionally intoxicated.

"Have you found yourself any Tennessee pussy yet?" he inquired.

I explained that I had only arrived the previous night.

The portrait of an innocuous-looking man in sport jacket and tie hung on the rear wall of the large meeting area.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"He was one of our former business agents back in the late 1940s," Percy answered. "He got shot during a strike."

"How'd that happen?"

"He knocked on someone's door, and they met him with a shotgun. And then they blew him away."

Members of the Local 281 Shop Committee and Executive Board began entering the hall at 4:00 p.m. These two bodies comprised the central leadership core of old textile locals. The Shop Committee sat at the table during grievance meetings and contract negotiations while the

Executive Board handled administrative duties. It wasn't uncommon for an individual to serve on both, and each of them acted as shop steward within their department and shift. (Stewards were front-line representatives within their immediate work areas.)

Collective bargaining agreements allow for the local leadership to be excused from work to attend meetings. The union reimburses earnings through a process known as "lost time." Those who were leaving work under this procedure were all present by 4:05. The others straggled in over the next half hour. I shook hands and introduced myself to each one as they entered the room.

Vice President Georgia Bond arrived at 4:15. Mark had made a point of warning me about this officer, characterizing her as a hothead militant, whose influence should be limited. I took this under advisement while deciding to keep an open mind. Georgia had wavy black hair, sharp piercing eyes, and a pleasant smile. Her presence didn't put me off during this first encounter.

The ten local officers arranged folding metal chairs so that we sat in a circle. The group included a Shop Committee member named Reverend Donald Vandiver. His demeanor exuded a level of confidence and composure. It's not uncommon in the rural South for ministers of small congregations to preach on Sunday and earn their living in a factory during the week. Donald worked as a fixer in the Carding Department and was the only white member of the group.

During the late 1980s, the demographics of the average southern textile plant were approximately two-thirds black and one-third white. There was usually a disproportionate ratio of black to white employees among union members, especially within the leadership. Black workers were inclined to view the labor movement as an extension of the civil rights movement, while many of the whites, in the longstanding tradition of the Old South, tended to identify with the Caucasian management structure. It would be necessary for each constituency to feel well represented if the local was to be reunified. I decided to keep my eye on the preacher.

Once the committee was assembled, Percy opened the meeting by asking us to rise while Reverend Vandiver said a word of prayer, a common practice in southern locals. I introduced myself to the group and explained my reason for being in Jackson, asking them to discuss the most serious issues at the plant, as well as the sentiments of their coworkers and management.

Everyone began speaking and shouting at once, ranting about various concerns while at the same time reiterating that the situation was hopeless and that "the union can't do nothing about it."

"Day by day, the union keeps steady losing ground!" one of the voices declared.

They turned on each other, arguing and screaming, some gesturing wildly. I tried to interject several times but was cut off and drowned out.

An older man, wiry of build and wearing denim overalls with a straw hat, periodically leapt to his feet, flapping his elbows against his side and bellowing, "Caw, caw, caw! Caw, caw, caw!" I had no idea regarding the meaning of this proclamation.

I finally stood, put my foot up on the chair, and said, "SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

All chatter ceased and a dead silence filled the room.

"Do you want to have a union, or do you want to just keep on complaining while the company walks all over you?" I asked. "It's up to you. It's your local. If you don't want to work with me, that's fine. I'll call the union and they'll be happy to send me somewhere else tomorrow. But if you want to save your local and build it into something you can be proud of, you're going to have to trust me.

"I am not Eddie Cox or Mark Pitt, so as of now, you're done blaming me for what they did. I am not some college boy who decided to save the working people. I am working people. I was the leader of my own local for eight years, and it was in worse shape than this one when I got there. I'm a specialist in fighting the worst companies and I'm here to help you fight this one.

"You don't know me. You've been lied to and given false hope before. Some of what I'm saying you're not going to be able to believe until time goes by.

"What you've got to do right now is look me in the eyes, and then look into your hearts, to the place where God, or your own inner voice, or whatever it is you most believe in speaks to you. Ask that voice if you can trust me. If the answer is 'no,' then I'm out of here. But if the answer is 'yes,' then starting right now you have to work together, follow my plan, and do what I ask of you, because I've been in this situation before and this is what I do."

I gazed out at the committee, scanning from face to face as they stole glances at each other and at me.

Percy finally spoke up. "I may hate to admit it, but I think we've got nothing to lose. The union's sent in this man to help us and we should at least give him a chance."

Heads began to nod. Georgia said, "If this man's really here to fight, then I'm with him."

Hollis Wade, the man in the straw hat, put his hands on his waist and stared thoughtfully at the floor.

"This is your local and your town, and I have a lot to learn from you," I said. "But I can only learn what I need to know if you give it to me in a way that I can wrap my mind around and make sense of.

"I'm going to ask you questions and if you have an answer, raise your hand and I'll call on you. One person speaks at a time and they have the floor until they're finished. If you disagree with what they're saying, wait your turn. No one gets interrupted.

"Management may be a bunch of selfish bastards but they are professionals. If you want to fight them and win, you're going to have to learn how to act like professionals yourselves. The way you were all fighting among yourselves when the meeting started, the division among the workers, that plays right into management's hands. As long as we're fighting each other, we can't organize and become strong enough to fight them."

Heads once again began to nod. Hollis raised his head and looked me in the eyes. Donald murmured "amen" under his breath.

I began asking targeted questions to identify and flush out the primary issues, writing as the committee members spoke and discouraging outbursts of emotion and personal opinion.

"It's not that as a human being I don't care what you think and feel," I said, "because I do. But thoughts and feelings don't win grievances and arbitrations. Evidence does. I've come to town with a gun, but I need you to give me the bullets."

It appeared to me that this was the first time any of them had been spoken to so candidly or interviewed in this manner by a union representative. Everyone remained at the hall much later than expected. Some periodically excused themselves to call home and apologize to their spouses. I ended the meeting by stressing that everything we discussed needed to stay among ourselves for the time being: "Resist the temptation to talk about this with the folks in your department and even your

families. You can say that you've met the new union rep and he seems to know what he's doing, and let it go at that."

"But the company's laughing at us," said Georgia. "We've got to let them know that we're going to stand up and we're not going to put up with this anymore!"

"If we do that, the campaign will be over before it starts," I said. "For right now, this is a covert operation. We have a lot of work to do until we're ready to fight. The longer we can keep this a secret, the stronger we will be when we choose the moment to let things rip. The company will never know what hit them."

"So you're saying that the company and the scabs get to keep on laughing at us?" asked Hollis.

"I hope so, until the day we smack the grin off their faces."

As I lay in bed that night, I reflected on how my girlfriend in Andrews had given me an invaluable gift. She taught me how to dress as a union rep. Stacie was fastidious about her own appearance. She was not conceited or aloof but did take quiet pleasure in being the town's most sought after girl. Stacie would arise at 4:30 each morning to spend an hour and a half in the bathroom, making certain that her clothes, makeup, and hair were just right. When she walked down the aisles of the sewing plant, she expected all heads to turn.

My preferred look had always consisted of jeans, boots, and a leather jacket in total disregard of fashion trends. Before leaving for South Carolina, I'd scraped together a meager collection of what I thought were appropriate clothes for the business world.

Once the campaign was underway, over a hundred Oneida workers began showing up for the monthly union meetings. The largest segment of the workforce consisted of women who worked at the sewing plant. The night after each meeting, Stacie would share with me how the girls had critiqued each item of my attire. She would admonish me with remarks such as, "They all loved what you had to say, as always, and they thought your shirt was cool this time, but how can I say this, they didn't think much of those pants and shoes."

Stacie told me that the girls wanted to see their union rep dressed in a manner that was professional but still down to earth. He should look like someone who conducted business with corporate vice presidents,

but not like a "suit" the average person couldn't approach. They needed to identify with and be able to look up to him at the same time.

Stacie began to accompany me on trips to the shopping mall, and within a few months, my work ensemble had evolved into a business-casual mode consisting of a traditional dress shirt with collar, khakis, and a nice pair of laced shoes. Loud colors and golf shirts simply weren't me. I kept the beard and mustache, but my longish hair was now better styled.

It felt like the passage through an initiation the night that Stacie, lying beside me in a skimpy negligee, smiled and said, "The girls thought you looked really cool today! They approved of everything you wore."

I awoke the next morning at the Ramada Inn and selected a pin-striped shirt and beige trousers from my closet. Having met with the local leadership, it was now time to begin introducing myself to management. It was critical that they perceive my arrival as a routine transfer, that I was in town in an administrative capacity, not as an organizer. I grabbed a quick breakfast and drove to the mill for an appointment with Personnel Director Byrnice Butler.

All factories segregate their front office section from the manufacturing area. It's climate controlled and comfortable, in stark contrast to the overbearing noise, fumes, and seasonal extremes of temperature that lie just down a corridor, through heavy metal doors.

Byrnice was a rotund, fairly congenial woman in her late forties who had been with the company for many years. Though not overtly hostile to the union, she obviously held it in subtle contempt. The personnel director gave me two documents her secretary had neglected to mail, listing the names of employees who had decided to revoke their membership.

She was nonchalant in handing the papers across her desk, but I could sense an aura of complacent satisfaction. Instead of referring to the union as ACTWU, both letters began, "The following employees wish to withdraw their membership from the ACTWA." Byrnice had been dealing with the union for years, and she was far from illiterate. It was a casual gesture of disdain.

I began the meeting by inquiring about the state of the business, assuming control of the discussion in a way that would inspire her to relax and provide information. Byrnice talked about the mill's serious cash-flow problem and her expectations that the plant would be sold within

the coming months. This opened the door for me to raise the vacation pay issue. She assured me that the plant manager was looking into it and would get back with all of us shortly. I addressed the matter sufficiently to imply that I fully understood its history and legal implications but not to foreshadow the imminent escalation of the union's response.

We turned our attention to several terminations that were part of the grievance caseload. Byrnice expressed confidence that the company had thoroughly reviewed its position and acted correctly. I told her I would further study the files before commenting. She then shared with me that a number of years ago, a young organizer had been assigned to run a membership-building campaign. He had "stirred things up quite a bit" and put out leaflets referring to her by name, complete with caricatures lampooning her weight.

I said it was my practice to communicate with workers through printed materials but not in a manner which made things unnecessarily personal. Byrnice asked if I would allow her and the plant manager to review my leaflets before distribution.

"To the same extent that the two of you plan to have me review your employee memorandums before posting," I answered.

I left the office after a couple of hours, feeling that my objectives had been accomplished. Byrnice understood that I wasn't one to trifle with but didn't perceive me as a threat.

I expected to spend a solitary and boring weekend at the Ramada, making follow-up calls to committee members and filling out my expense report. I was in a first-floor room facing the parking lot in a motel style building.

Few environments are more sterile and less nurturing than a hotel room. A night alone in a hotel on business is not the same as being on vacation with your family. I now understood why so many businessmen in my taxi had requested assistance in finding a prostitute. While this hadn't become part of my lifestyle, my judgments and perspective mellowed considerably.

At nine o'clock on Saturday night I was in my lounge clothes, feeling somewhat dazed and numb by confinement and lack of activity. My guard was down as I searched in vain for something worth watching on television until I was tired enough to fall asleep.

There was a pounding on my door that quickly repeated itself. My heart rate accelerated and I instinctively went into defensive mode. "Who is it?" I shouted through the door.

"It's me, Percy."

I opened the door to encounter the local president, nicely dressed in a sport jacket and reeking of alcohol. I had no alternative but to invite him into my room. The last thing I wanted was force myself into work mode and relate with a drunken Percy, but there he was.

"I just came from seeing one of my honeys," he slurred. "Mmmmmm, that pussy felt good!"

He raised his fists like he was grabbing onto something and began to gyrate his hips. "I kept moving real slow, in and out, in and out. I wanted it to last forever . . ."

He looked up to see if I was impressed. *This is going to be a really wonderful night,* I thought to myself.

Percy decided it was the ideal time to show me about town and suggested we take a ride in my car. I got dressed and obliged. We drove around the streets and highways of Jackson for several hours. I couldn't understand most of what he was talking about, but Percy didn't seem to know the difference.

Jackson could best be described as a small city surrounded by rural countryside, rather than a town. It had a moderate industrial base for its size, and the largest demographic was lower-income working class. It was a drab and Spartan environment with little culture and few amenities. The population was large enough for the hard-drug world to have made its inroads.

In a state of relief and exhaustion, I dropped Percy by his car in the Ramada parking lot at 2:00 a.m. and returned to my room, furious at the front desk for having given out its number. Standard procedure is to call a guest, informing them of a visitor in the lobby. Once the campaign heated up, such sloppiness by the hotel staff could have serious consequences.

The union hall was a one-story brick building with a small lawn in front. One entered through a foyer and passed a second set of doors into a large meeting area with a wooden stage at the far end. The desk reserved for the union representative was located off to the side. I situated myself on Monday morning, found some letterhead, and wrote an introductory

letter to the plant manager, Paul Poston. A shop steward or union member who noticed my car out front came in periodically to engage me.

The committee arrived promptly at 4:00 p.m. This session began with their silence and full attention. They had spent the weekend reflecting on my words and returned to the union hall with a sense of anticipation that redress, for which they had abandoned all hope, might suddenly be at hand.

The group assured me they had been discreet during the intervening days, sharing just enough with coworkers to arouse their curiosity. This was precisely what I had hoped for because it set the stage to begin engaging the membership.

The workforce was assigned within a seven-shift "continuous operation"—standard at many textile facilities. Larger departments were divided into four twelve-hour shifts with day and night crews, working three days on, followed by three off, plus alternating Sundays. The schedules rotated through the weekly calendar, distributing workdays evenly over time. The remaining departments operated on three eight-hour shifts.

I proposed a series of shift meetings held around the clock to accommodate the various schedules, starting a week from Wednesday in the evening and running through Sunday morning. The recording secretary held up a generic flyer that she explained was used by the local to announce meetings by filling in the date, time, and agenda, and then posting on the union's bulletin board at the mill. I told her she was welcome to use it, but that from now on we were going to communicate through leaflets, handed out at the plant gate on all shifts, ensuring that every worker received a personal copy.

I asked the committee to handle the initial distribution without me as I was scheduled to return home for several days. The timing of meeting announcements is essential. If you leaflet during the prior week, most people have forgotten before the date arrives. If you leaflet the day before, many don't have time to make arrangements for child care and other necessities. The perfect time to leaflet is forty-eight hours in advance.

In 1989, the advent of user friendly computers was still in the realm of science fiction, and leaflet preparation involved an entire day's work. I wrote copy on my portable typewriter the next morning, suffering

through the inevitable delays caused by typos, whiteout, etc. I located a printer across town and presented him with layout instructions, including headlines to be typeset, then cut and pasted into the text.

The next afternoon I returned to pick up the several hundred copies I'd ordered, relieved that paragraphs remained in the proper sequence with the headlines correctly placed. I entrusted them to Percy and began the long drive east as daylight faded, stopping at a hotel in central Tennessee after midnight.

I turned south onto I-26 the next morning, planning to divide my personal time by first visiting Stacie in South Carolina and then my daughter in Chapel Hill. It was somewhat of a surprise that Stacie actually wanted to see me. During our last encounter she had pleaded with me to stay in Andrews and take a job at the factory so that we could be together.

"You knew this was coming from the very first day," I told her. "Wherever I end up, we can still stay in touch and see each other sometimes."

"And what the hell kind of future is that?" she demanded with a fury fueled by alcohol. "The only thing you care about is the damn union! You care more about the damn union than me and your daughter put together. You think you can buy her love with gifts now but one day she'll figure it out."

"That isn't true and you know it," I tried to reassure her. "But my whole life has led me to this job and it's something I believe in. I'm not going to just quit. Why don't you take a week's vacation and come back with me to North Carolina?"

"What's the point?" she responded, storming out of my apartment.

Stacie Summers greeted my return late on Thursday evening with hugs, kisses, and falling tears. She lived in a trailer on the same property as her parent's doublewide in Summersville, a rural community where three-quarters of the five hundred citizens were named Summers.

She climbed into bed wearing a black lace garter with stockings, and we began to make up for lost time. I didn't consider ours to be a relationship rooted in true love or profound communion. But there are instances when an intermingling of the innate sweetness and fire within two people eclipses the lack of genuine intimacy.

Apart from the obvious, I didn't get much sleep. Stacie was in the habit of rising every hour to smoke a cigarette before resuming her slum-

ber. The click of her lighter always woke me. At 4:30 a.m. she began the sanctified ritual of perfecting her appearance for the coming workday.

I headed north on Saturday morning, feeling as though it might be possible to stay connected with Stacie while stationed in Jackson. I arrived at my isolated farmhouse that night, unpacked, and drove to pick up Colie.

Even during this interval of relaxation, my mind kept wandering back to Jackson. Distribution of the recently prepared leaflet was scheduled to begin on Monday morning, and I couldn't avoid second-guessing my decision to leave the responsibility with Percy (Fig. 1, Appendix).