

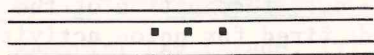
strike began on Labor Day, September 3, 1934, when 65,000 workers walked out. Two days later 325,000 were on strike from Massachusetts to Georgia. Strike activity began in Saylesville on September 7. By the time the strike ended late in the month, National Guard and State Troopers had battled crowds of up to 5,000. When the government with the support of the UTW leadership ordered strikers back to work, thousands were left unemployed as the millowners refused to rehire the strikers.

For the workers and families of Saylesville, as in hundreds of other mill villages, the struggle continued every day in a thousand ways. The people of Saylesville could no longer support the company as benefactor or participate in the company-sponsored institutions which once provided the fabric for life in the community. New patterns, based on a changed consciousness, had to be developed. The strike of 1934 marks a significant point in lives that are being lived today.



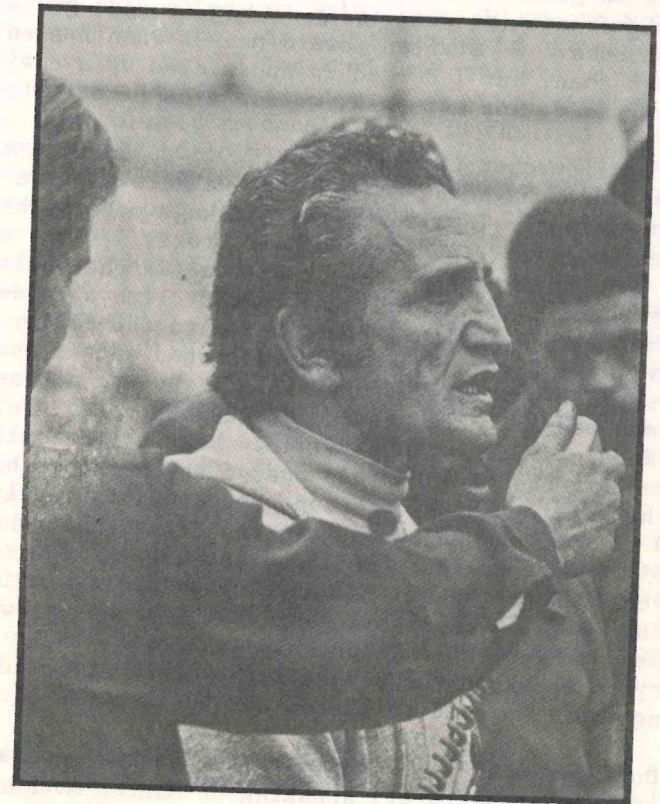
"Scared, any man who says he's not scared is a god-damned liar or he's crazy. But something makes you brave. I don't know what it is."

(Former yardman, Sayles Bleachery Plant)



"We Want Integrity": an Interview with Al Sisti

(Note: this is a transcription of an interview of Al Sisti by Duane Clinker, Scott Molloy and Paul Buhle. The order has been altered.)



Al Sisti

Q: I guess we can start with the Trade Union lessons you've learned.

A: I started to work at Atlantic Mills when I was thirteen. I knew nothing about a union at that age. You don't go through personnel, you don't sign anything, you just hang your coat on a nail and go to work. This was a mule-spinning department. I joined the union because my uncle told me to join the union. He was a spin-

ner there, I became a back boy. He said to me, you join a union. I paid a quarter a month. At that age, I could think of all kinds of things I could do with that quarter--nobody told me what a union was, what it did. As I went along, I didn't like what was happening to me. I was very curious as a kid. I found out they had union meetings, and I could go to the meeting, but I was a 25¢ member with no voice. How did you become a 50¢ member? You became a piecer or spinner.

But things were happening to us. I felt it was wrong that I didn't have a say. I started to speak at a union meeting in the woolsorters' hall, and they told the sergeant-at-arms, throw him out. I can still see that sergeant-at-arms today--a big, rugged guy with a broken nose. He started toward me. I wasn't even seventeen then, but I backed up and picked up a chair, when they said, let him talk, we don't have to listen.

I can remember the union trying to collect dues, workers didn't have the money. But we knew what we were up against. Then the mills had huge motors that ran these machines, and when a belt broke, a rivet went flying through the air. They made you fix that belt, one guy would hold it, the other would climb a ladder, pull the bolt until it flipped over onto the pulley. One guy where I worked got flipped around and killed. They wouldn't stop the motors, that's why it happened. Sometimes people would get caught between them. We had union meetings down at Olneyville. Next to the hall was the barroom. The bar was open a couple hours before the meeting Sunday morning, and somebody really heated up would go in and have a few drinks beforehand. The police were called sometimes, because the meetings were really hot. What I remember clearly was oldtimers speaking, with an English accent or Irish brogue; what impressed me was their leadership qualities, their ability to speak on the subjects they knew affected the working man. We used to listen and be inspired by them.

During the 1930s, I remember Ann Burlak [a leading Communist labor agitator] speaking on Manton Avenue; people would go out for an hour at lunch and listen to her instead of going back to the job. Cops from the patrol wagons, "Black Marias," were handling her rough, practically dragging her away from the platform where she was talking. She wasn't shutting up for nobody, though. She inspired people in that mill, to a hell of a great extent. We were in an independent union, the International Mulespinners of America. Woolsorters were an independent union, but they were the highest paid, strongest group in the mill, because they were so necessary, and because you could only learn the job from

oldtimers. Those jobs were really sewed up mostly by English people who came over from the other side. The machinists came in with their own union. The CIO was organizing the weavers. And I was saying to myself, why don't we all join the same union? When the CIO really came in, everybody was ready for it, except the guys with their hands on the treasury of the independent union. They used to fight like hell.

It was so bad in the factory that they once mixed rabbit hair with wool, the rabbit hair would spin off and get into your eyes, your nose, everywhere, and got all over the machinery, so you had to clean the machines off several times a day instead of once. We started to bitch, but the union wouldn't listen to us, we were 25¢-a-month members. So we talked among ourselves and decided to strike. I led a wildcat strike. I was going to go up to the big boss, see if he would give us more money, and if he turned us down, I would head straight for my jacket and so would the others. I didn't know if anyone would follow. But it worked to this extent. Everybody got out on the sidewalk, and the cops dispersed us, so we had no picket line. We kept walking up and down Manton Avenue. The second shift went along with us, though, and the factory couldn't run. The union decided to allow us a special meeting, so they gave us a hall, the Franco-American Hall, right across the street from the mill, and they agreed to give us a right to go in and talk to management. I was elected spokesman, and I can still remember the big, fat guy behind the desk--he looked like a caricature of a capitalist. He stopped me halfway through my speech, and said, would you start again? I guess it was a technique of his. I started again, almost word for word, and when I got halfway through this time, he said, don't worry about it, you're going to get your raise. And I guess we got a \$3 raise, second and first shift, and from there on in the 25¢ rules went out the window. Everyone got the same voice.

After that, we didn't want another strike of our own--we wanted a strike of all of us against the big boss. Finally we did go out on strike, and it was bitter, it crippled the company, much of the spinning had to be brought from outside, and during the strike lots of scabs were brought in. A few of us who were pretty hot, couldn't find how to nail the scabs. We scaled the plant fence at night, climbed fire escapes, spotted one main guy and sent him to the hospital with a few broken ribs. When the strike was settled he was kept as a boss with his horns cut--that was a compromise. We were a hell of a lot better off than people in other mills, I knew that by talking around. If we wanted to

resist something, we could do it: if we decided a machine needed three men instead of two, by God those machines didn't run. No newspaper ever got ahold of these stories, nobody ever heard them but they happened.

I also remember the sitdown strikes, not in the Atlantic Mills but right down by the Woonasquatucket. Mostly women. I was really impressed by their militancy, and I have to think the inspiration went back to Burlak. It was unbelievable to see a woman say things like that, and whatever she was called, a Communist, it didn't mean much to us.

We worked fairly steady during the Depression. I could look out the window and see somebody selling apples at the corner of Manton Ave. and Delaine St., and there were some days when there was nobody out on the street, he was standing there freezing and I said to myself, this shouldn't be. I developed a hell of a lot of my feelings about government, about people, from that.

My problem was that I was so interested in sports that I didn't go for the union bit, although I attended meetings and worked. I wasn't dedicated to the union movement.

Q: Was there any kind of ethnic split in the plant?

A: Some departments seemed to be dominated by one group or another. French were in the weaving. Italians were woollsorters, because they had gotten in by scabbing a long time back. Hiring practices ran through the departments, and the bosses would generally hire their own kind. It wasn't frowned upon, and it wasn't exclusive. There wasn't the hue and cry and discrimination. But there wasn't a single black worker in the plant. I didn't think of it then, but I have since.

Q: Did the War break things up?

A: I came back from the service in '45, didn't go back into the mill til '46. The plants had started moving South. We were all worried. But that tended to speed up the process of unionization, we wanted the CIO because we weren't protected. The weave shop, the last ones to come in through the CIO, were the most militant, because they had never had an independent union, and suffered all that frustration all those years. But we had factions in the union among old and young, too. The old guys had their own homes, money in the bank, but the young guys were looking ahead, saying you have it made but we still have to go a long way. The Atlantic became

the A.D. Juliard Company, and they were ready to spend \$2-\$3 million to keep their plant up to date. But they were caught between the competition and the work stoppages. You could see the handwriting on the wall.

Q: When did you leave the mills and go into steel organizing?

A: About 1951. I was unemployed, then got hired in steel in a curious way, by a neighbor who was a supervisor down at BIF [Builders Iron Foundry, Providence].

I used to read a lot, and I was impressed by what I'd read about the United Steelworkers. But I thought that was basic steel only. I was reading about Phil Murray and John L. Lewis, and Walter Reuther. In those days, you could look up to this leadership, just reading about what they would do would make you want to be part of their organization. Even up to the AFL-CIO marriage, which to me was never consummated, the CIO was thought to be shot through with Communists, too militant.

At BIF with some three hundred workers at the time, they had a real company union. My first big argument came right after deciding we had to do something. I left early for the coffee shop, and the president of the union told me to come back to work. I hadn't run into that since the old days. In no uncertain terms I said back to him--I thought you represented us, not the company--right in front of everybody. I knew I was jumping the gun, but it wasn't for him to tell us. This led me to say, what the hell kind of union do we have here anyway?

We started having meetings, trying to make something out of that independent union, but I knew you had to get into the labor movement as it was, pretty powerful then. What helped was that people began to realize a lot of things were wrong--in the assignment of work, in promotions, in the way they discharged people, there was no sense to it. Foremen were trying to make a name for themselves. Old guys were being told they were dead wood, they weren't pulling their weight, and they were given bad jobs. The clean jobs were going according to who you knew or didn't know. At Christmas time, either you made a deal with the foreman, brought whisky out to his car, or you didn't get overtime.

I kept telling people you need a union, not what we have now. I ran for steward, but got beat. Somebody labeled me a Communist. A couple of guys earlier tried to introduce a union, and one was a well-known Commu-

nist. So as soon as you got outspoken, they put the label on you. But with Nicholson File down the road, organized into the USW, we had help, a lot of people in there were friends with BIF. We got a committee in the shop--night shift, first and second shift, different departments because we worked in different buildings. The guys from L shop who had been influenced by the Communists were especially ready. We used to have meetings, a committee of ten to thirty people. We didn't talk so much about how to bring the union in, but what we would do when it was in. We didn't know about the struggle ahead of us.

We didn't have much help from the outside, the international. A steelworker rep once came to my house and I told him, look, we're so well organized from the inside, just help us when we need you.

Q: Did you write your own leaflets?

A: Not entirely. We did get some input there. The leaflets said what our contract would be like, what we could expect.

Q: What happened when you first got people together?

A: The minute we got cards signed, we were a captive audience and the company would say, you've got the outsiders, radicals, things are going to be chaotic here. When we decided we would call an election, all hell broke loose, and they tried to keep us at our benches. I remember wondering how management found out I was leaving my bench. Then I saw which foreman was calling management--he was watching me. The independents were given leeway, we weren't. The law didn't actually allow that, and we posted a copy of the law on the bulletin boards. I remember going up to a foreman and saying, you see Joe over there, he's away from his bench, he's talking independent. When I saw he didn't bring him back, I shoved him over toward the guy and told him to get over to him. I could have been fired. But we had a strong bunch in there. The best thing was that the local steelworkers' union leader was Larry Spitz. Larry was a Brown graduate, a close friend of President Keeney at Brown. He had been in Woonsocket, working in textiles and he was constantly being called a Communist. He involved himself in all the community problems of the working man: the Blue Cross jacking up their rates, when they tried to close Butler Hospital, anything that would affect people's well-being. I felt that if I could have been half the guy he was in the union movement, I would be one hell of an organizer. He was a leader, night and day. When the bakery workers

were fighting corruption in their union, we were the ones who helped, with our protection every night, our baseball bats. Larry told us we had to fight corruption wherever we saw it. With his leadership we had going for us the Summer Institute, our own educational fund, advisory board meetings with reports made on the strike fund from our own resources, and an area-assistance fund to help us with doctors and lawyers to represent us. We were way ahead of others.

David McDonald [president of the Steelworkers] was a good administrator, but he never worked in a steel mill. He once allowed me to get a mike and speak at a convention in Atlantic City. I got up and told the delegates that their problems were different from ours. Management used to use scabs and thugs against you. Now they were using legislation and other means, you had to be a hell of a lot smarter, just as militant, and the problems were just as hard to fight. McDonald agreed, the difference was sowing division.

We ran into a tough crisis when I.W. Abel decided to run against McDonald. Spitz decided to run against Don Stevens, New England head of the USW. What happened after that changed everything for the steel workers in this area.

I was union president. I took a month's leave of absence and went up and down the district, extolling Spitz' virtues. We had some sticky moments. In the big campaign finale in Faneuil Hall, all the forces lined up against us were passing out leaflets outside. I was given the privilege of opening up the meeting. I appealed for unity, sticking to good trade union principles.

I.W. Abel was elected. But Spitz was defeated. He couldn't work under Stevens anymore. There was a period of uncertainty. Larry was called to Pittsburgh, and he took with him George Butsika, now director of education in the steelworkers, then on an education committee with me. Men like him were replaced with Stevens men. Advisory Board meetings were called sporadically now. Educational scholarships started to go downhill. Nothing seemed to work any more. They even tried to take the Summer Institute away from us, but we fought tooth and nail, and with Pittsburgh's help we were able to keep them. What bothered me was that Larry must have entered into an agreement never to have come back to the district. We couldn't even get him back to give a speech--we had the heart knocked out of our work. I was on a wage-policy committee made up of elected people, a district conference. The problem was that every time you

went to a wage-policy meeting, the small local unions were left out of the contract consideration. Basic steel remained with all the benefits, and our locals didn't get many of the benefits and improvements. We were getting to feel like second-class citizens. When they first raised our dues, under McDonald, the \$5 dues burned everybody. I found out about it when I got my paycheck. That was my first little bit of disillusionment.

I went to a wage-policy meeting right after Abel negotiated his first contract. Abel and the negotiating committee were ordered to go to Washington by President Johnson, who had a reputation for being heavy-handed. We were in Pittsburgh when the negotiating committee was called in by him. When they came back, my mind was open. And suddenly I.W. Abel gave me the feeling that the committee had been brought in and Johnson laid down the law that there would be no strike. And he's telling us that the president of the US told us that! While he was saying it these thoughts were flying around in my mind--who the hell is running this union anyway? So I raised my hand and I was the first one he gave the floor to, he recognized me and I lambasted him, and I said you went to Washington a proud steelworker and came back with your tail between your legs. I said I've heard of Johnson's big club, but this is ridiculous. I said, we're a free trade union movement, we're masters of our own destiny. And I wanted no part of this. I hadn't even spoken to the guy next to me on this. I just got goddamned mad, it seemed to me that if we're a free trade union movement we don't accept what the president says as law for our contract.

That sparked a hell of a commotion. Sadlowski--I thought a lot of him already--was part of that argument. I went back to my hotel room and was burned. Larry Spitz came back to my room, and said, "You hurt that man. Don't ever do that again." When we gave Larry a send-off banquet in Rhode Island, he had said, "Always fight for your principles, whether the orders come from Pittsburgh or Washington." And now I said to him, I will whenever I have to.

I should have looked beyond Larry Spitz toward the whole labor movement. I wouldn't have had the letdown that I had. It's a mistake to put all that trust in to an individual. I became a maverick.

Q: Why do some guys go one way, and guys like you another?

A: Somebody could say to me, what's your title in the labor movement. Nothing! I'm just an ordinary worker,

I'm proud of that. You know when the Civil Rights movement was coming up, trade unionists didn't seem to respond, and told me as president of the union, don't go on King's march. I told them I'm my own man. I went. They didn't want me to go to peace rallies. They used to say, what are you doing talking to that long-haired guy. I had a lot of trouble as a union president at that time. The company hired some new guys, some of them with long hair, and they found a way of coming over to my bench. I was very active in the farmworkers. I was told reds dominated that, too. You know, they've done a hell of a lot to educate college kids and others--they know more about it than average workers. That's the union leadership's responsibility. The old guys who remember the 30s, they knew. But the young ones....

Q: Where did the gap come in?

A: For me, when people didn't conduct themselves as stewards the way I wanted them to. They complained I was active in too many community organizations and they attacked me for having a 7th grade education. I said, I'm not mending my fences, I've had it. People used to say, you're not getting my vote. I'd say, okay, shove it, and tell anybody else who feels like that not to vote for me either. I think I hurt some people by things I said. For instance when it came to promoting Black people in the department. Today they can bid, and women can bid, for any job.

By now I'd been a union president for ten or twelve years, I was defeated and talked into running a couple other times but it never worked out. I was relegated to the Old School of trade unionists. People are only beginning to find out that it wasn't such a bad school.

Sadlowski gave me a feeling that there was a chance. I hadn't seen him for years, but I knew the kind of guy he was. I began to work for him, and funny things happen, a hell of a lot of local people are suddenly looking for leadership. All the people we got into contact with during the Sadlowski campaign, they went Sadlowski in spite of the leadership. We didn't have any money even to get Sadlowski here, but in our local he won three to one. That's where I began to realize there's some hope of getting back to where we should be. From that point on, I've been active in public hearings about strikers' unemployment benefits and retirees, and I intend to keep doing that, whether I'm with or against the so-called leaders.

Q: Do you think the labor movement in RI ever used its political muscle as it should have?

A: I think it was strong enough to do something, but instead they accommodated themselves. "Tradeoff" means deal. I don't think companies are so much afraid of unions as such; they have so many damned regulations already. What they're afraid of is unions as a political force.

Q: Today we're starting to get things rolling again. What advice do you have to the rank and file today? Is there anything to be learned from, to be more conscious about?

A: Most workers are pretty shrewd. They can tell if they're being sold a bill of goods. Leadership has to develop, from the grass roots up. People have to never lose sight of the fact that they may become leaders, but they're still workers. We want integrity, we want responsiveness. I'd rather have my treasury small and yet have dedicated leaders, not unions buying huge buildings with company contributions. You've got to be intelligently militant, because people don't buy the other kind of militance. You've got to be willing to explain, you've got to stress short and long range objectives. You may lose your first election. Your home may be disrupted. Mine was. You have to get the women involved. They can do a hell of a job, be a great force in the labor movement. If the right woman came along, I wouldn't mind voting for her for president of the USW. Why not? At one time, it would have been ridiculous for anyone to say something like that. Look around, you won't see too many women in leadership roles. That's got to change, and it would help to deal with the problems of family life, too. You've got to have a certain amount of faith and a certain amount of trust, and even that's no guarantee.

There are young people around now. They're very sharp. When they don't know they ask. They're working. You can see it in the Sadlowski campaign, for instance: A hell of a lot of young people took leadership roles. They knew what it cost them. They will be looked up to and respected later. You continued to stick to your principles and after a while it comes through to people. That's our only hope.

Edited and transcribed by Paul Buhle.



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