

BAYONETS AT THE NORTH BRIDGE
THE LEWISTON-AUBURN SHOE STRIKE, 1937

On a damp, raw Thursday afternoon, March 25, 1937, several hundred shoe workers paraded in Lewiston, Maine.¹ Their march began a strike that would last three months and affect more than six thousand workers in nineteen factories. Strikers, non-strikers, and police suffered injuries, and considerable property sustained damage. Hundreds of National Guardsmen occupied Lewiston and neighboring Auburn while newsreel photographers and reporters from Boston and New York tried to interpret the affair. Larger in scale than other Maine strike of the 1930s, the dispute ended with the defeat of the United Shoe Workers of America (USWA), the CIO affiliate that had called it. Elsewhere, of course, the CIO organized mass industries and brought higher wages and better working conditions to millions. Why did it fail here? This paper attempts to answer the question with an analysis of the situation that confronted the strike leaders and with a discussion of their strategies and those of their opponents.

Lewiston and Auburn, with a combined population of fifty-five thousand in 1937,² had once been Yankee villages at the Great Falls of the Androscoggin. Then local capitalists organized to exploit the waterpower and built textile mills on the Lewiston side. The mills required a canal from the river, and Irish Catholic immigrants dug it. In time they also replaced the Protestant farm girls in the mills. By the 1870s, however, the Irish gave way, at least on the lower rungs of the ladder, to French Canadians who arrived daily at the Grand Trunk Railway Station. The

vast majority of the new immigrants stayed in Lewiston, while Auburn remained mainly Yankee and Protestant.³

Auburn's shoe factories, however, kept pace with the textile mills of its larger neighbor. Ara Cushman started business in the 1860s, soon introduced machinery, and built a shoe factory, which, for a time, was the largest under one roof in the United States. By 1872 Cushman and others had nearly quadrupled the 600,000 pairs turned out in 1865; at the turn of the century between two and three thousand "hands" made six million pairs a year.⁴ Shortly after World War I, the industry reached its peak in the "Shoe City," with eight thousand employees producing seventy thousand pairs a day, a record that helped rank Maine fifth nationally.⁵

In 1937 fourteen shoe factories operated in Auburn and five in Lewiston. Eight factories employed four hundred or more persons each; the rest gave jobs to between one hundred and three hundred men and women.⁶ Few, except the Cushman firm, had been in the Twin Cities long. Larger factories, such as the Somerset Shoe Company, the Maine Shoe Company, the C. V. Watson Shoe Company, and many smaller units had recently migrated from Massachusetts.⁷ Although most of the factories were in Auburn, the CIO held nearly all of its mass meetings either at the Lewiston City Hall or in the larger and newer Lewiston Armory; it set up headquarters and satellite offices in Lewiston; its parades began there; the notables who came to advise, investigate, applaud, or denounce the strike arrived there at the Maine Central Railroad Station. A majority of the workers at the Auburn factories probably lived in Lewiston. The only road link between the two cities, the North Bridge—nearly equidistant between the Cushman factory and the City Hall—became the battleground on the most dramatic day of the strike.

Old or new, large or small, Lewiston or Auburn, the shoe factories were non-union. In 1893 their owners ordered the workers to sign yellow-dog contracts. When the workers struck instead, the newspapers denounced them, the city marshal kept them away from the factories, and an injunction branded their action a criminal conspiracy.⁸ After crushing this walkout the manufacturers held the line through the following decades, proclaiming their open shop policy in public statements of 1905, 1909, 1918, and 1919.⁹

After successfully blocking workers' combinations, the manufacturers remained close and took shelter behind friendly state laws. An unnamed 1920 visitor from Boston said, "We were never in any shoe center where the manufacturers said so many loyal things about one another."¹⁰ Their Lewiston-Auburn Shoe Manufacturers' Association maintained an employment bureau, which they stoutly denied using to blacklist those who had incurred their displeasure.¹¹ Maine law permitted the blacklist and the yellow-dog contract, while setting criminal penalties for unlawful assembly.¹² A conspiracy statute, on the books for many decades, provided that if two or more persons conspire and agree together, with the fraudulent or malicious intent wrongfully and wilfully to injure the person, character, business or property of another

or if anyone

who by threats of injury, intimidation, or force, alone or in combination with others, prevents any person from entering into, continuing in, or leaving the employment of any person, firm, or corporation

the guilty party would be punished by a fine of \$500 or by imprisonment for not more than two years.¹³ Such traditions and laws set up formidable barriers against organizers. Only failure would attend their efforts, if history were any guide.

It so proved when wage cuts in August 1932 spurred a walkout at the Cushman-Hollis company. Leaders of the

newly-formed Lewiston-Auburn Shoe Cutters' Social and Protective Club argued that, even before the reductions, cutters earned fifteen to sixteen dollars a week less than their counterparts in Massachusetts.¹⁴ Arbitrators recommended a smaller cut,¹⁵ and the strikers reluctantly returned.¹⁶ They had hardly done so when new trouble arose. Cutters' club leaders demanded reinstatement of a man allegedly fired for distributing club leaflets at Clark Shoe Company.¹⁷ Receiving no satisfaction, the cutters at Clark walked out.¹⁸ Then Cushman-Hollis discharged twelve men, most of them active club members.¹⁹ The ensuing strike virtually shut down the industry for a few days. Strikers paraded with "We Want Recognition" and "Abolish the Black List" signs.²⁰ As the factories seemed about to lose critical orders, Cushman-Hollis promised to take employees back.²¹ Only two of the twelve at the center of the dispute were reinstated.²² Smarting from defeat and smirched by a financial scandal, the cutters' club sank into oblivion.

Union leaders, like the fish in Mao's simile, would have to swim among the people to make converts, but the region seemed as hostile to their activities as the filthy Androscoggin was to real fish. More proof of this came in 1934, after the National Industrial Recovery Act's section 7 (a) had apparently opened the door for collective bargaining. An ill-planned, hastily-organized campaign in the Lewiston textile mills got nowhere. Mill workers themselves tore down the posters, the Roman Catholic clergy lent their weighty opposition to the "strangers," and Mayor Wiseman advised the fifty-eight-hundred textile workers in town to make sure that if they struck the union could feed them because the city could not. His strong stand for the "right to work" won him reelection six months later with the largest majority of his long career.²³

Two years after this fiasco, more than four years after the abortive strike of 1932, the shoe factories stirred again.

Meanwhile, Congress had passed the Wagner Act to guarantee the right of collective bargaining, and John L. Lewis had formed the CIO to organize basic industries. Early in 1937 Lewis and John Brophy, his executive director, founded the United Shoe Workers of America.²⁴ On its behalf, William B. Mahan—soon to arrive in Lewiston—led a successful drive for higher wages and union contracts in Massachusetts and New Hampshire shoe factories.²⁵ Mahan, Paul Salvaggio (first USWA-CIO organizer to come to Lewiston), and most of those who followed them here came from Lynn or its nearby towns. Lynn, Massachusetts’ “Shoe City,” had a long tradition of militant unionism. Its workers had for many years rejected the AFL’s Boot and Shoe Workers’ Union in favor of more active and democratic unions.²⁶

A small group of Twin Cities workers contacted the new union, which quickly sent them two organizers.²⁷ The newcomers told the local people that they would be receiving 15 to 25 percent more money for the same work in Lynn or Brockton.²⁸ The workers told the organizers that hundreds of young women worked more than fifty hours a week for two to seven dollars;²⁹ workers were fired without notice or explanation; they worked during rush times “as long as the foreman wanted us to.”³⁰ A non-striker, later a leader of the rival local union, said that “working conditions were bad . . . the people were fed up with it. The attitude [before 1937] was to have tough foremen and have the foremen be tough on the help It was a pretty well-known fact that if you were blacklisted in one factory, you were blacklisted in all of them.”³¹ A striker later summed up the employers’ attitude: “If you don’t like it, get out.”³²

The CIO, determined to organize these lower-paying open shops, stepped up its efforts.³³ More union workers arrived, including women to work directly with the numerous female stitchers. William J. Mackesy, another

Lynn native who had worked as a shoe cutter for thirty-five years, took charge. A powerful orator and magnetic personality, he is still remembered with affection.³⁴ On March 12, as successive public meetings attracted larger and larger crowds, Powers Hapgood, Lewis's lieutenant in the shoe industry, came to Lewiston. That same night he addressed more than three thousand people in the City Hall. He boasted of the CIO successes elsewhere, called the local manufacturers "little fellows" compared to the conquered automobile, steel, and rubber magnates, and pledged that the CIO would finish anything it started.³⁵

Although the City Hall rang every every few nights with impassioned oratory and loud cheers, voices of doubt, warning, and appeasement also sounded. Many Lewiston-Auburn workers, not to mention the manufacturers and some townspeople, questioned the motives of these so-called outsiders. One opponent thought that "they had just signed contracts where they came from with the promise that they would unionize Lewiston-Auburn, and I guess try to make wages higher . . . They came down here, many of us thought, either to organize or break it . . ." ³⁶ One of the women strikers recalled the organizers as "smart, they could talk . . . some were Communists."³⁷ The local press and the manufacturers sensed trouble early. The *Lewiston Evening Journal*, while granting that inflation and tax hikes justified higher wages, warned of "hot heads [who try] to rule the employees by hot language."³⁸ The Lewiston-Auburn Shoe Manufacturers' Association took full-page advertisements in the English and French newspapers to praise its own labor policy and to restate its open shop line.³⁹ To somewhat sweeten this bitter medicine, most of the owners soon announced raises, generally in steps up to 10 percent.⁴⁰

The CIO wanted 15 percent, a forty-hour week, better working conditions, and, above all, recognition.⁴¹ Trying to utilize the campaign's apparent momentum, on March 19, Hapgood addressed a formal proposal to the manufacturers' association. He noted that the USWA "has now signed applications for membership . . . of a majority of the shoe workers" and requested a "conference to discuss a union agreement covering hours, wages, recognition of the union, and other conditions."⁴² As days passed with no answer save a newspaper denunciation by the association, Mackesy sought to talk informally with its leaders. The president told him that "not now, nor on the fourth [*sic*] of July, will I or any of the manufacturers do business with you." Mackesy answered that he could no longer control the workers but promised to be available until the next meeting of the strike committee. The association would not budge, and the committee recommended a strike.⁴³

It also called a mass meeting for the following night, March 24, to take a vote on the recommendation. Three thousand people filled the City Hall Auditorium's close-packed rows of wooden seats, while four hundred more waited on the stairs and the corridor below. Hecklers in the noisy crowd continually interrupted the long parade of speakers, especially Mackesy, who wound up the committee's case. He labeled the taunters "pets" of the manufacturers and shouted that "if you don't favor organizing a union now, it's because you want to keep on being slaves and because you're satisfied with the starvation wages you're being paid." He then read the committee's recommendation and asked, "Do you want it?" Most of the audience shouted "Yes," but some workers were disappointed that no formal vote was taken.⁴⁴ Mackesy immediately adjourned the meeting, explaining afterward that he had been told that certain men had been paid to create a riot. He later wrote that

my predicament at this time was a most difficult one. Feelings were high. I sensed a riot. The climax had come and my action must be a sudden one. I called for the ayes. A roar of approval went up. It was a prolonged roar. The opposition tried to drown it out but to no avail.⁴⁵

A week later the Twin Cities knew that they were in for a real strike, not a repetition of the pitiful farce of 1932. The CIO's success varied from factory to factory, but by April 1 perhaps three-fourths of the workers had left their jobs.⁴⁶ During that week both sides adopted their characteristic poses and strategies, never to materially alter them. Union advertisements attacked "long hours, low wages, and bad working conditions . . . our tribute to you and your stockholders."⁴⁷ The organizers made clear that they would use the strike to force the manufacturers to bargain with them. Refusal to do so, Mackesy said, would be a breach of the Wagner Act.⁴⁸ On their side, the owners spoke of "professional labor agitators" and declared that they had "no intention, either now or in the future, of doing business" with them.⁴⁹ At least one owner would concede the forty-hour week and 15 percent raise, but not recognition; another threatened to move; a third said that he would never recognize the CIO and would close first; and a fourth could not understand why the police had not broken up the March 25 parade.⁵⁰

Stung by the CIO's immediate success, local authorities quickly moved to the side of the manufacturers. On March 29 Auburn's police chief, Harry Rowe, with a force augmented by fifty-six state troopers, barred any picketing within five hundred feet of any factory.⁵¹ After one of the organizers told a group of strikers, "we'll have to fight this; do you mind getting arrested?",⁵² forty of them tried to picket. Rowe's men quickly picked them up, and while the judge fined each forty dollars and costs, 150 other strikers chanted "We want justice" outside the courtroom.⁵³ After this preliminary skirmish, on April 2, police arrested nine organizers,⁵⁴ the CIO's local lawyer, and two shoe workers,

charging them with “conspiracy to intimidate” certain workers.⁵⁵

With their opponents now on the defensive in the courts, though still holding an advantage in the quiet factories, the manufacturers opened new offensives. They advertised for new workers (“strike on: no trouble”) and soon attracted strikebreakers.⁵⁶ Rumors flew and were quickly denied that some of the latter slept on cots between shifts at some factories.⁵⁷ The owners also sought an injunction. They pointed out that, despite the CIO’s “attempted coercion,” there was no “duly chartered local union . . . affiliated with the USWA-CIO.”⁵⁸

Four thousand workers gathered on April 4 for the largest meeting held during the long dispute.⁵⁹ They could now read the *People’s Press*, a twelve-page weekly, if they wanted the union’s side of the story.⁶⁰ They could also buy food with strike wages in a newly-opened commissary.⁶¹ Their leaders, faced with the legal blitzkrieg outlined above, called in their own reinforcements. They filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board, the first step toward the supervised bargaining-agent elections that finally took place in nearly all the factories.⁶² The idea had already been raised locally, but Somerset’s President O’Byrne rejected it. “We are definitely going places under a plan already in effect,” he boasted.⁶³

How right O’Byrne was soon became clear when Justice Harry Manser, an Auburn resident who served on the Maine Supreme Court, opened hearings on the injunction petition. On April 15 and 16, when the manufacturers’ lawyers argued that the strike was illegal, Manser left no one in doubt about his own views. Workers, he said, could strike legally only after all peaceful means had failed to redress grievances.⁶⁴ The CIO’s lawyers tried in two ways to break through this stone wall. First, they reminded the court that the owners had ignored Hapgood’s

letter of March 19. Their opponents denied that the manufacturers' association, to which he had addressed it, had anything to do with the labor policies of its members. When the CIO lawyers persisted in probing this assertion, Manser cut off further discussion of the issue.⁶⁵ Second, the union's counsel tried to bring workers to the witness stand with examples of unanswered grievances. Manser first ruled that he would hear no more *individual* cases, and then rejected on technicalities two recitals of attempted *collective* action.⁶⁶ The judge ended the hearings with a single question to Mackesy: "At the moment [that is, on March 22 when Mackesy conferred with President O'Byrne of the manufacturers' association] did you have in your possession signatures of the majority of the employees in the local shoe factories?" Mackesy answered, "No."⁶⁷

Manser's decision to issue the injunction, announced on Wednesday morning, April 20, surprised very few. His arguments appeared then and appear now to clash jarringly with the Wagner Act, upheld only seven days earlier by the United States Supreme Court. Manser, for instance, declared the strike illegal because no strike could be legally called until the leaders had organized a majority of the workers and had presented their grievances to the employers.⁶⁸ The law raised no such conditions; in fact, it stated that "nothing in this act shall be construed so as to interfere with or impede or diminish in any way the right to strike."⁶⁹ Now, the judge correctly implied that an organization that had not signed up a majority of employees in a unit could not be an "exclusive representative for the purpose of collective bargaining."⁷⁰ But the Wagner Act allowed a strike that *attempted to gain* majority acceptance by workers and recognition by employers.⁷¹ Rights or wrongs of federal law aside, Manser made liable to contempt of court charges anyone

who picketed, sought to prevent workers from returning to their jobs, or spoke in public meetings “to agitate a strike.”⁷²

Matters now moved rapidly. Frustrated, Mackesy openly defied Manser’s order in an afternoon speech at City Hall. To thunderous cheers, the chief organizer said that, while he had always warned against violence and disorder, “the responsibility for what will happen in the future will be . . . that of the judge” He added that “no one can prevent you from visiting your friends in Auburn.”⁷³ That night, while demonstrators ringed the Auburn factories, about five hundred strikers, singing the songs the CIO men and women had taught them, crossed the North Bridge to Auburn, only to be turned back by the police.⁷⁴

On the following afternoon, “Red Wednesday” to the anti-CIO English papers, a crowd twice as big moved again to the bridge. Local and state police faced them. Suddenly an Auburn police officer seized a woman by her hair and raised his nightstick. Other women pulled away his club and struck him in the face with a stone. As he fell, bleeding, another rock knocked a state trooper unconscious.⁷⁵ The crowd surged forward, but forty special constables and deputies fired their tear gas canisters and the marchers scrambled back toward the bridge. The police struck right and left with their sticks, clubbing at least one innocent bystander unconscious, after first punching him in the face.⁷⁶ A reporter “saw and counted seven state policemen bullying a young woman passerby.”⁷⁷ The marchers, driven back to the Lewiston side where the police were more friendly,⁷⁸ dispersed by early evening. Within hours, Governor Lewis O. Barrows sent nearly four hundred National Guardsmen to the Twin Cities.⁷⁹ They were ready Thursday afternoon to repel a third attempt to enter Auburn, via the railroad bridge this time. The forty deputies, their tear gas, and their submachine gun were not needed.⁸⁰

The “Battle of the Bridge” put the strike on the front page of the *New York Times* and made the strikers newsreel figures;⁸¹ it also brought an abortive attempt to settle the dispute. The New England director of the National Labor Relations Board, Dr. A. Howard Myers, talked to both sides separately and urged the manufacturers to talk with the CIO leaders. Rejecting this advice, they sent their counsel to negotiate.⁸² In the ensuing discussions, the CIO held that all those, and only those, employed on March 24, 1937, should be eligible to vote in bargaining-agent elections; the manufacturers wanted those presently employed to vote as well.⁸³ On May 4 the talks broke down with fourteen of the firms, while five continued to confer.⁸⁴

When the lawyers for the fourteen companies left the negotiating table, Manser brought the CIO leaders to trial for contempt of his injunction. The prosecution told the jury, a group almost incredibly unrepresentative of Maine’s most urbanized county,⁸⁵ that the sanctity of law and order rested with them. After the defense championed free speech and characterized the injunction and contempt proceedings as simply the manufacturers’ tactics to win the strike,⁸⁶ the jury speedily found all seven defendants guilty. Manser sentenced each to six months in jail and refused to admit them to bail pending appeal.⁸⁷ A few days later, he offered to release them if they apologized, ended the strike, and left the state, a proposition they naturally rejected.⁸⁸ Organized labor and its supporters called for a national boycott of Maine vacations,⁸⁹ appealed to the La Follette Committee to investigate,⁹⁰ and asked for a probe by the Department of Justice.⁹¹ Nothing came of any of this.⁹² A writ of *habeas corpus*, filed with the Maine Supreme Court did succeed two months later.⁹³

As April turned into May, the strike ground into its second month with a stalemate. Seven shoe factories had

closed, and five others had drastically curtailed their operations.⁹⁴ Yet, with many of the CIO organizers in jail and their followers unable to picket within five hundred feet of any factory, the union seemed distant from victory. At this point a ghost from the past arose and materialized. The Lewiston-Auburn Shoeworkers Protective Association (LASPA), organized, chartered, and incorporated in October 1932 and dormant ever since,⁹⁵ claimed one thousand members on April 28.⁹⁶ A few days later, its principal spokesman, the prominent attorney Frank W. Linnell, said that LASPA had enrolled a majority of the workers in ten factories.⁹⁷ Apparently taking these claims at face value, manufacturers rushed to recognize the local group; on June 1 Cushman, the largest factory, became the fifth to do so.⁹⁸ One of its executives, Cushman Abbott, said that “we have always practiced collective bargaining and we always will—but not with outside gangsters.”⁹⁹ Five years earlier, and for decades before that, Cushman Shoe and the rest had never deviated from the open shop; but now they scrambled toward LASPA like drowning men for a life preserver.

The struggle of the rival unions reflected and fostered religious and ethnic tensions. LASPA, seen by the CIO sympathizers as the creature of the owners,¹⁰⁰ numbered few persons of French descent among its leaders.¹⁰¹ Every list of officials of the CIO local, on the other hand, reveals a large majority of French names.¹⁰² When a citizens’ committee formed to combat the CIO, Yankee business and professional men headed it. They thought the CIO’s “vicious, cruel, false, malicious, and unwarranted teachings . . . breathed the very spirit of communism.”¹⁰³

Smouldering animosities burst into numerous acts of violence. Little happened in the first three weeks, but after the injunction, the battle of the bridge, the arrival of the National Guard, and the appearance of LASPA, *Le Messenger* saw a “guerilla” raging. Despite barricaded

windows and well-protected garages, many homes and cars were stoned;¹⁰⁴ six ruffians tied and beat one unfortunate, leaving him wearing a sign saying "DON'T SCAB RAT."¹⁰⁵ Sometimes fights broke out on picket lines between LASPA and CIO people.¹⁰⁶ Police found three sticks of dynamite about 150 feet from one factory.¹⁰⁷ In one of the last, and certainly one of the most curious, incidents, a fire at the Lewiston-Auburn Shoe Manufacturers' Association headquarters destroyed filing cabinets containing lists of workers.¹⁰⁸

One more attempt at compromise failed before both sides brought up their strongest reinforcements. Lee Pressman, John L. Lewis's top lawyer, met with Governor Barrows and the manufacturers' ubiquitous legal staff.¹⁰⁹ The governor, a druggist from the small central Maine town of Newport, had already publicly taken sides, declaring that "the trouble started as the result of a visit to Maine of certain organizers"¹¹⁰ His efforts foundered on the same shoal as Myers's: the owners would not budge from their demand that persons hired since March 24 should participate in bargaining-agent elections. The CIO, fresh from smashing victories in a few factories that had already held elections, would give no ground.¹¹¹ Barrows removed the National Guard,¹¹² but the failure of his intervention ended a *de facto* truce which had postponed both the trial of those charged with conspiracy and the National Labor Relations Board hearings.

As in the contempt trial held three weeks earlier, the mill of justice ground rapidly in the conspiracy case. Notwithstanding the CIO attorney's plea that the Maine statute "made it a crime for workingmen to organize for the betterment of their condition,"¹¹³ the jury¹¹⁴ convicted nine of the twelve defendants. All but one came from Massachusetts; all received a fine of \$100 and five months in jail; and all but the five already serving time for

contempt were admitted to bail.¹¹⁵ This verdict again outraged liberals who had scarcely recovered from the contempt decision. Norman Thomas came to Lewiston and denounced Manser for refusing to free on bail those in custody.¹¹⁶ American Civil Liberties Union investigators visited and attacked the Auburn city manager for refusing relief to strikers' families, Manser for misreading the Wagner Act, and the Maine legislature for not repealing the archaic conspiracy law.¹¹⁷

While the targets of all this criticism may have lost little sleep over it, the manufacturers now had to face federal interference in their affairs. The National Labor Relations Board examiner, Dr. John Lapp, conducted lengthy hearings at Auburn Hall while the conspiracy trial went on across the street at the courthouse. The owners' lawyers bullied union witnesses,¹¹⁸ raised numerous objections and engaged in several shouting matches with Lapp when he rejected them.¹¹⁹ "We were there merely to be pilloried," whined attorney Mahon.¹²⁰ Lapp, the silver-haired economist, author, and negotiator ruled that the shoe manufacturers were engaged in interstate commerce. The Wagner Act thus applied to their relationships with their workers.¹²¹ Interpreting the law in his report, Lapp dismissed the CIO's charges that the manufacturers had blacklisted malcontents or interfered with union organization. In fact, he said, the manufacturers had not refused to bargain. Hapgood should have approached them individually, not collectively as he had done in his March 18 letter. The CIO had bungled; the strike was not a strike to force collective bargaining under the Wagner Act.¹²²

Having strengthened the foundations of the manufacturers' argument, Lapp then dynamited its superstructure: the strike was not illegal and the executives should negotiate, not call names. Closing the hearings with these preliminary remarks, Lapp promised

a final report from the National Labor Relations Board.¹²³ When it came, it ordered elections in twelve shoe factories within twenty days, with no one but those employed on March 24 to be eligible to vote.¹²⁴ With this vindication the CIO now ordered its sympathizers to go back to work on June 28, 1937, after a strike of ninety-five days.¹²⁵ Three days later, the Maine Supreme Court found that Manser had misinterpreted the law in denying release on bail to those imprisoned for contempt.¹²⁶

The strike was over, however, only in a technical sense. The overwhelming majority of the two thousand strikers who marched in groups back to their former workplaces found no work.¹²⁷ “Loyal” employees and new employees sufficed in the traditionally slow summer season. Strikers who had returned earlier to the five factories where the CIO had won elections had found little to cheer about either. Two factories closed and two others delayed signing with the winner.¹²⁸ One small factory signed the first CIO contract in Maine.¹²⁹ Events now repeated themselves after the July elections in the other factories. The CIO won every election, although at only two places did a majority of the total number of employees vote for it.¹³⁰ The low turnout reflected a boycott by LASPA. A month after these votes, the National Labor Relations Board scheduled more hearings. When they upheld the conduct of the hearings and certified the CIO as the bargaining agent at all twelve factories,¹³¹ LASPA’s attorney Linnell commented, “So what?”¹³²

It was a valid question. Not one of the twelve factories the CIO had won in July ever signed a CIO contract. Some went out of business for good. One closed temporarily and then reopened under new management in the same building and with the same machinery but with a new name and a LASPA contract. Another closed for a time and then just reopened without any union.¹³³ The only

factory that actually signed a CIO contract used a sham strike to wriggle out of it.¹³⁴ In the spring of 1938 a third round of hearings probed three factories that had simply rebuffed all CIO's attempts to sign a contract.¹³⁵ The examiner concluded that the three manufacturers had "interfered with, restrained, and coerced their employees in the exercise of their Wagner Act rights," and threatened court action, to no avail.¹³⁶

Why did USWA-CIO fail in Lewiston-Auburn during the same period it tripled its New England membership?¹³⁷ In one sense, of course, it did not fail. The organizers kept a strong following throughout the long strike and won every election after it ended. Their opponents simply kept defying the National Labor Relations Board and fighting endless delaying actions until the CIO gave up.

This answer, however, only begs several questions. Mackesy, in a long letter written while he served his sentence for conspiracy, provided interesting answers to some of them. Was it the CIO's tactics? He thought that "the one outstanding obstacle to an immediate victory" was that of having started after the busy late-winter season when a strike would have cost the owners more.¹³⁸ He admitted that the CIO should have visited each manufacturer individually, but he justified the omission of a formal strike vote. Or was it something less tangible, more pervasive? The opposition of the community? Politicians, save one or two Lewiston aldermen and two state senators, the Chamber of Commerce, bankers, merchants, and, above all, the clergy opposed the CIO.¹³⁹

Mackesy correctly emphasized the hostility of community leaders. Nothing could have hurt the CIO cause more than the opposition of Lewiston's four French

Roman Catholic pastors.¹⁴⁰ Their spokesman, Rev. Édouard Nadeau, often stated his sympathy with the goals of the shoe workers but just as often warned his flock against the CIO, “which has let itself be penetrated with Socialists and Communists.”¹⁴¹ Not only those who preached from the pulpits, but those who presided over the courts, policed the streets, operated the businesses, and published the English newspapers backed the manufacturers’ solid front against the so-called outside agitators.

Did the opposition of community leaders and the hostility of large sections of the general public more than offset the heavy majority of shoeworkers who followed the CIO at the outset? Yes. The shoeworkers, like the textile workers, of the Twin Cities had no tradition of militant labor activity. Their inexperience certainly helped create the bad timing Mackesy noted; it may also have forced the outsiders to dominate the local people too much, thus making it easier for the opposition to divide and conquer. Strong place-attachments and distrust of those men and women from “away,” especially after the unprecedented events, for Lewiston-Auburn, of Red Wednesday, weakened the CIO’s appeal and helped LASPA. Above all, the *poverty* of the Lewiston-Auburn shoe workers forced them finally to submit: “They were getting so far behind in their rents and their bills. . . . That was why it was hard for a strike to win here; nobody had any money.”¹⁴²

In winning, the shoe manufacturers reasserted their power. They had proved that the National Labor Relations Act, blessed though it might be by President Roosevelt, the Congress, and even the Supreme Court, meant little to them. In an age of centralizing power, they could use local laws, local stubbornness, local prejudices, local inexperience, and local poverty to ignore national policies that inconvenienced them. When “Big Labor” was winning, it could also lose.

NOTES

¹ *Lewiston (Maine) Evening Journal*, March 25, 1937; *Le Messenger* (Lewiston, Maine), March 25, 1937. The *Journal* gives the number of marchers as 268, while *Le Messenger* reports that one thousand paraded. The English-language paper opposed the CIO and its strike, while the French-language paper sympathized with both.

² *Maine Register, State Yearbook and Legislative Manual*, No. 79 [1941-42] (Portland, Me.: Fred L. Tower Companies, 1941), p. 245.

³ James S. Leamon, *Historic Lewiston: A Textile City in Transition* (Auburn, Me.: Central Maine Vocational Technical Institute, 1976); Margaret J. Buker, "The Irish in Lewiston, Maine: A Search for Security on the Urban Frontier, 1850-1880," *Maine Historical Society Quarterly* 13 (Special 1973): 3-25.

⁴ Auburn History Committee, *1869-Auburn-1969, One Hundred Years a City* (Lewiston, Me.: Twin City Printery, 1968), p. 111.

⁵ Albert Pierce, "A Study of the Development of the Shoe Industry in Auburn" (Senior Thesis, Bates College, 1930), pp. 1, 13.

⁶ Employment figures are derived from National Labor Relations Board, *Decisions and Orders 1937*, "In the Matter of Charles Cushman Shoe Co., et. al., and United Shoe Workers of America," cases #R161-R172 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), pp. 1021-1026.

⁷ Auburn History Committee, *1869-Auburn-1969*, p. 120.

⁸ Pierce, "Development of the Shoe Industry," pp. 1, 3.

⁹ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, September 12, 1932.

¹⁰ Pierce, "Development of the Shoe Industry," p. 34.

¹¹ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, September 12, 1932.

¹² Charles C. Killingworth, *State Labor Relations Acts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 8-11.

¹³ Maine, *Seventh Revision, the Revised Statutes of the State of Maine. Passed August 5, 1930 and Taking Effect November 10, 1930* (Augusta, Me.: Kennebec Journal Print [1930]), ch. 138, secs. 26-27, pp. 1620-21.

¹⁴ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, August 22, 1932.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, August 17, 1932.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, August 30, 1932.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, September 9, 1932.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, September 15, 1932.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, September 19, 1932.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, September 27, 1932.
- ²² *Ibid.*, September 28, 1932.
- ²³ Laureat O. Bernard, "A Political History of Lewiston, Maine, 1930-1939" (M.A. thesis, University of Maine, 1949), pp. 84-86, 89.
- ²⁴ Benjamin Stolberg, *The Story of the CIO* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), p. 229.
- ²⁵ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, February 15, 23, 24, 26, 1937.
- ²⁶ John T. Cumbler, *Working Class Community in Industrial America: Work, Leisure, and Struggle in Two Industrial Cities, 1880-1930* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), pp. 55-65.
- ²⁷ National Labor Relations Board, *Decision and Orders, 1937*, p. 1027.
- ²⁸ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, June 3, 1937 (testimony of Paul Salvaggio at conspiracy trial).
- ²⁹ Donald W. Curtis, "The Lewiston-Auburn Shoe Strike of 1937: A Case Study in Social Control of Industrial Disputes" (Senior thesis, Bates College, 1949), pp. 8-9.
- ³⁰ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, May 20, 1937 (testimony of Joseph Gilbert at NLRB hearings).
- ³¹ Interview with Mark Burke, Auburn, Maine, March 5, 1979.
- ³² Interview with Maurice Filteau, Auburn, Maine, March 5, 1979.
- ³³ Curtis, "The Lewiston-Auburn Shoe Strike," p. 8.
- ³⁴ Interview with Maurice Filteau, Auburn, Maine, March 5, 1979.
- ³⁵ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, March 12, 1937.
- ³⁶ Interview with Mark Burke, Auburn, Maine, March 5, 1979.
- ³⁷ Interview with Alice Savard, Lewiston, Maine, May 31, 1979.
- ³⁸ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, February 24, 1937.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, February 27, 1937.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, March 3, 1937.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, February 15, 23, 1937.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, March 23, 1937.
- ⁴³ Curtis, "The Lewiston-Auburn Shoe Strike," pp. 66-67.
- ⁴⁴ *Le Messager*, March 25, March 26, 1937. The selection from Mackesy's speech translated from French by the author. The *Lewiston Evening Journal* did not quote it.
- ⁴⁵ William J. Mackesy to Donald W. Curtis, quoted in Curtis, "The Lewiston-Auburn Shoe Strike," p. 68.
- ⁴⁶ *Le Messager*, April 1, 1937.

⁴⁷ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, March 27, 1937.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, March 26, 1937.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, March 25, 26, 1937.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, March 29, 1937; *Le Messenger*, March 29, 1937.

⁵² Interview with Alice Savard, Lewiston, Maine, May 31, 1979.

⁵³ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, March 30, 1937.

⁵⁴ Mackesy, a thin man of about fifty, was arrested by six policemen as he sat alone in his hotel room. See *Le Messenger*, April 12, 1937.

⁵⁵ Four non-strikers told their foreman that one of a group of about ten men had asked them to stop as they were walking on Main Street, Lewiston. He asked them what they thought about the union, tried to persuade them to join it, and finally asked them to go to union headquarters to hear more. They did so, listened and left. The union men made no threats. When the foreman heard all this he took them to a Cushman executive, who brought them to the firm's lawyers, in whose presence they signed affidavits charging intimidation. See the *Lewiston Evening Journal*, May 28, 1937 (testimony of Wilfred Laroche and Oscar Marchand at conspiracy trial).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, April 6, 8, 1937.

⁵⁷ *Le Messenger*, April 6, 13, 1937.

⁵⁸ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 9, 1937. This charge was true and the oversight was soon corrected. See *ibid.*, April 15, 1937.

⁵⁹ *Le Messenger*, April 5, 1937.

⁶⁰ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 3, 1937.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, April 7, 5, 1937.

⁶² *Ibid.*, April 14, 1937.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, April 13, 1937.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, April 16, 1937.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, April 17, 1937.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, April 19, 1937.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, April 20, 1937.

⁶⁹ See National Labor Relations Act in Henry Steele Commanger, ed., *Documents in American History*, 7th ed., 2 vols. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), 2: 318. The National Labor Relations Board report tartly comments as follows: "In its opinion the Court appears to have interpreted the National Labor Relations Act to declare strikes by a minority of employees in a plant illegal. That such a

declaration did not represent the intention of Congress is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of the Act." See National Labor Relations Board, *Decisions and Orders, 1937*, p. 1028.

⁷⁰ Commanger, *Documents*, 2: 316. See particularly sec. 9a.

⁷¹ Robert R. Brooks, *When Labor Organizes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), p. 128.

⁷² *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 20, 1937.

⁷³ *Le Messenger*, April 21, 1937. Translated from French by the author.

⁷⁴ *New York Times*, April 22, 1937.

⁷⁵ *Le Messenger*, April 21, 1937.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, April 22, 1937.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, April 26, 1937.

⁷⁸ Interview with Maurice Filteau, Auburn, Maine, March 5, 1979.

⁷⁹ *Le Messenger*, April 22, 1937.

⁸⁰ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 24, 1937.

⁸¹ *New York Times*, April 23, 1937.

⁸² *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 23, 1937.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, April 30, 1937.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, May 4, 1937.

⁸⁵ A locksmith, two housewives, and a baker came from the Twin Cities, which comprised 80 percent of the county's population. Six made up the other 20 percent. See *Lewiston Evening Journal*, May 4, 1937.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, May 6, 1937.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, May 7, 1937.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, May 10, 1937.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, May 24, 1937.

⁹⁰ *New York Times*, May 8, 1937.

⁹¹ *Le Messenger*, May 13, 1937.

⁹² *Lewiston Evening Journal*, June 16, 1937.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, July 1, 3, 1937.

⁹⁴ National Labor Relations Board, *Decisions and Orders, 1937*, p. 1028.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1021; Jacqueline Boucher, "The LASPA" (Senior thesis, Bates College, 1956), p. 3.

⁹⁶ *New York Times*, April 28, 1937.

⁹⁷ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, May 1, 1937.

- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, June 1, 1937.
- ⁹⁹ *New York Times*, April 23, 1937.
- ¹⁰⁰ Interview with Maurice Filteau, Auburn, Maine, March 5, 1979; interview with Alice Savard, Lewiston, Maine, May 31, 1979.
- ¹⁰¹ *Le Messenger*, June 4, 1937.
- ¹⁰² For a list of twenty-six CIO officers, twenty of whom have recognizably French names see *ibid.*
- ¹⁰³ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, June 18, 1937.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Le Messenger*, May 13, 1937.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, April 22, 1937.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, June 17, 1937.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, April 26, 1937.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Le Messenger*, June 29, 1937.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, May 15, 1937.
- ¹¹⁰ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 29, 1937.
- ¹¹¹ *Le Messenger*, May 18, 1937. It will be remembered that five of the factory owners had continued to talk with the union when negotiations with the rest had broken down on May 4. These elections, held under NLRB supervision in the latter part of May, were the result of these talks.
- ¹¹² *New York Times*, May 17, 1937; *Lewiston Evening Journal*, May 17, 18, 1937.
- ¹¹³ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, May 25, 1937.
- ¹¹⁴ This time all twelve jurors, five farmers among them, came from the small towns of Androscoggin County. *Lewiston Evening Journal*, May 25, 1937.
- ¹¹⁵ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, June 7, 1937.
- ¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, June 17, 1937.
- ¹¹⁷ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, June 7, 1937.
- ¹¹⁸ *Le Messenger*, June 2, 1937.
- ¹¹⁹ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, May 24, 1937.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, June 26, 1937.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, June 2, 1937.
- ¹²² *Ibid.*, June 10, 11, 1937.
- ¹²³ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, June 24, 1937.
- ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, June 28, 1937.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, July 1, 3, 1937.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, June 28, 1937.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, May 23, 28, June 22, 1937.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, June 15, 1937.

¹³⁰ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, July 13, 19, 1937. Thirty-eight percent of the eligible workers voted, that is, 1,571 out of 4,684; the CIO received 1,542 votes. See National Labor Relations Board, *Decisions and Orders*, 1937, p. 1034.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1021, 1035.

¹³² *Lewiston Evening Journal*, August 31, 1937.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, July 19, 1937.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, December 28, 29, 1937.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, April 7, 1938.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, May 18, 1938.

¹³⁷ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, July 8, 1937.

¹³⁸ William J. Mackesy to Donald Curtis, quoted in Curtis, "The Lewiston-Auburn Shoe Strike," pp. 73-74.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-77.

¹⁴⁰ Boucher, "The LASPA," p. 5.

¹⁴¹ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 17, 1937.

¹⁴² Interview with Maurice Filteau, Auburn, Maine, March 5, 1979.

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