

July 2024

Rutgers LEARN

“A Better Tomorrow”

75th Anniversary White Paper Series

Paper #7505

Remembering Ernie:

A Biography of Ernest DeMaio - Labor Leader

by

John Harrity

The Connecticut Council of Machinists (IAM)



Labor Education Action Research Network
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
School of Management and Labor Relations
50 Labor Center Way,
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

<https://smlr.rutgers.edu/LEARN>

RUTGERS
School of Management
and Labor Relations

Remembering Ernie:

A Biography of Ernest DeMaio - Labor Leader

By John Harrity

I sat next to a bed in the cramped Intensive Care ward of Norwalk Hospital. It was a large room with bays for the hospital's most critical patients, all of whom surrounded a nurses' station. The room was filled with quiet urgency, low-spoken orders and consultations, moans from the sick and the constant low beeping of an array of monitors, machines and computers helping keep the ill alive, or track precisely their decline and death.

In the bed was a small man, bandages wrapped around his stomach, through which seeped blood, the result of an unnecessary, botched operation to prolong the life of a brain cancer victim who was 81 years old. I knew he was dying and I was there to say goodbye. "Ernie," I said, taking his hand. "I want to thank you for all you've done for me. I love you like I love my father." Ernie weakly waved his hand, and nodded from beneath an oxygen mask, signaling he had heard my words, but too weak to do anything but both acknowledge and dismiss me. I squeezed his hand again and went out to the waiting room. Linda, now my ex-wife, took up the bedside vigil while I drove back to the Norwalk home where Mary, Ernie's wife of 51 years, waited. A couple of hours later, Linda called. Ernie DeMaio was dead.

A few days later, at the urging of Greg Tarpinian, who later served for some time as the Executive Director of Change to Win, the New York Times (1990) ran a brief obituary on April 1, 1990:

LEAD: Ernest DeMaio, a union organizer and former official of the United Electrical and Radio Workers Union, died of brain cancer on Thursday at Norwalk Hospital in Connecticut. He was 81 years old and lived in Norwalk.

Ernest DeMaio, a union organizer and former official of the United Electrical and Radio Workers Union, died of brain cancer on Thursday at Norwalk Hospital in Connecticut. He was 81 years old and lived in Norwalk.

Mr. DeMaio organized workers at General Electric, Westinghouse, Honeywell, Delco and other companies. After several years organizing workers in electrical manufacturing in New England, Mr. DeMaio helped found the United Electrical and Radio Workers Union in 1936. In 1942, he became general vice president of the union, a post he held until he retired in 1974.

He is survived by his wife of 51 years, Mary Karpa DeMaio, and four brothers, Angelo, of Wethersfield, Conn., Albert, of Westminster, Calif., Sam, of North Arlington, N.J., and Tony, of Victorville, Calif.

Not surprisingly, the New York Times had failed to capture the full significance of the passing of a remarkable radical US labor leader. Besides the Times' usual aversion to all things "left," DeMaio's story was too frequently ignored and too soon forgotten. He was ostracized by history due to a lifetime of making enemies of the most powerful. His battles on behalf of workers led him into heated conflicts with some of the largest corporations of his time, like General Electric and Westinghouse, as well as the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Manufacturers Association, and the most potent institutions of government, including the FBI and CIA. DeMaio was targeted by the virulent right-wing that operates as a tool and unifying facilitator of repression and ruin on behalf of the reigning powers Ernie opposed. A fearless advocate, Ernie fought for workers regardless of whose sacred cow might be gored in the process, and so he also took on the backwards and undemocratic autocracy within the labor movement, including the CIO and later the AFL/CIO, as well as stultifying forces within his own union, the UE, and the increasingly brittle and detached leadership of the Communist Party USA.

That's a wide swath of organizations and "sensitive" individuals to irk, and none of them felt inclined to celebrate or memorialize the life of the man who profoundly affected them, but often did so by sticking his finger in their eye.

With the greatest respect and affection, I also chastise Ernie for history's neglect of his contributions. Ernie never took the time to put onto paper the remarkable circumstances of his long and active life. Ernie loved to tell stories about the times in which he had lived and how those events were shaped by, and shaped in turn, the larger picture for workers.

Finally, shame on me and all Ernie's other young acolytes, who in our fascination with by far the wisest, most experienced and most prominent person we had ever met, and our tremendous sense of privilege to be within the circle of light at that table, we never took the simple step of clicking on a tape recorder.

This work is an attempt to make amends, to correct as best I can an error of the highest magnitude, made by me and so many of us, including Ernie himself, in not preserving an account of his life while he was still able to contribute to it. It is a remembrance as much as a biography, with my own recollections serving as a source along with Ernie's writings, speeches and oral histories.

It is, at last, what I owe him.

Ernie DeMaio was born on November 26, 1908 on Mechanic Street in Hartford, Connecticut. His parents, both Italian immigrants who met in Hartford, together had nine children, all boys. When Ernie's mother died in her 30's, Ernie's father remarried and had eight more children. According to Angelo, Ernie's older brother, their father worked construction, laying bricks at the massive Aetna headquarters on Farmington Avenue for ten cents an hour. Often, especially in the winter, the father could not find work. Ernie grew up knowing what it was like not to eat when the cupboard was bare. He learned too about the need to work – starting in the tobacco fields around Hartford in the summer he turned ten years old. Time off from school was not a vacation; it was work time, “because, if we didn't work, we didn't eat.” (Roosevelt, 1970: 2)

The lessons of poverty left a bitter mark on Ernie. His beloved mother died of tuberculosis when her health broke down during the time that she was left to care for the nine boys on her own – Ernie's father had been sent to jail for six months, without charges or a trial, during the Palmer raids, because he was Italian and a member of the Industrial Workers of the World. Before being incarcerated, the senior DeMaio had brought home a 50 lbs. sack of potatoes and a similar-size bag of beans, saying, “This is your food for the next six months.” But, as Ernie recounted, “There wasn't food enough to go around. My mother was the kind of person, she wouldn't eat. If there wasn't enough to go around, we got it. It broke her health.”

Ernie was, in his words, his mother's pet because he too contracted tuberculosis as a child, and his mother helped nurse him back to health. But her attention could be a bane as well.

Mrs. DeMaio was a devoted suffragette. She would send Ernie to school each day with a “Vote for Women” pin on his coat. Each day he would return from school with a bloody nose or fat lip, having had the button forcibly removed. “That's alright,” she would tell Ernie, “We havemore buttons.” Ernie, in fact, told me that on one occasion as he walked on Main Street with his suffrage button pinned to his coat, the parish priest stopped and punched him in the nose.

As is often the case, and especially in immigrant communities, poverty and politics intertwined. His earliest recollection is of heated arguments in the family kitchen at night among Ernie's parents and other adults, debating various shades of socialism, anarchism and other working class philosophies. On one occasion, Ernie recalled, “being awakened by, what I later learned, was gunfire. It seems that in the heated discussion among the Anarchists and the rising Bolshevik Movement in Russia, they were trying to resolve some doctrinal differences (UConn, 1987: 3).” In Ernie's neighborhood, after 1917, in addition to cowboys and Indians, and cops and robbers, the kids played Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.

Fittingly, the first book Ernie owned was a tattered copy of “Robin Hood” that he found discarded by the side of the road when he was ten. Ernie was a true working-class intellectual, self-taught after a formal education that ended with high school. He could explain complex economic theories and conditions in plain language that workers could understand, while writing articles, delivering speeches and providing analysis to the labor movement, Communists Party leadership and the international socialist movement.

But his father, a Wobbly with little schooling and a suspicion of those who read books, actively opposed Ernie's love of learning. It reached breaking point when Ernie was 15 (UConn, 1987: 18).

“We got into a fight. It was a pretty ugly fight. He went at me. There was an old milk bottle. They used to use those heavy, glass milk bottles. I just grabbed that in time and swung, and I caught him on the forehead and staggered him.

Interviewer: Really?

ED: Well, he'd come at me with a knife. Pretty ugly. I left."

After leaving his family at age 15, Ernie completed high school by supporting himself selling shoes at eight dollars a week. In his senior year, he nearly starved after breaking his arm, making work impossible. But he made it. The deprivations that he endured, both with his family and on his own, did not blunt his appetite for life and for knowledge. Instead, these experiences fueled a life-long pursuit to understand how society worked, and how to make it better.

As Ernie described it (UConn, 1987: 21-22):

I first, on my own, began to see what was happening to workers and how other people were....

*I became interested in working-class problems. I was a worker now. I got nothing from anybody. I had to dig. I had very limited knowledge of the world. I knew about books and read things. My first book that really opened my eyes was *Poverty and Progress* by Henry George. The conclusions – He got lost towards the end, but he made an excellent case of how, side-by-side with prosperity and the wealth being piled in this country, we had the wretched poverty. And while I was aroused by this, I felt there was nothing there. Okay, you make a good case. Now, what do we do about it?....*

So I kept looking.

Though he desperately wanted to go to college, there was no way to afford it. An older brother had gotten a job at Western Electric in Kearney, New Jersey, so Ernie went to work there too. Once again, politics intersected daily life for Ernie.

Ernie, like many workers in the Italian-American community, had a special interest in the case of Nicolai Sacco and Vicenti Vanzetti, two Italian immigrants from western Massachusetts arrested supposedly for armed robbery and murder. Progressives around the world saw the case as trumped-up charges pinned on the pair because they were vocal Anarchists. Ernie's parents and many other Italian-Americans, including Ernie, had experienced significant anti-Italian discrimination that kept them from better jobs and housing, along with an automatic handicap dealing with the police or the judicial system. Sacco and Vanzetti became symbols for all the persecution and inequity that had rained down upon Italian immigrants, especially those with leftist politics.

On August 27, 1927 Ernie joined thousands of others gathered in Times Square to see whether the pair would receive a pardon or the electric chair. The huge crystal ball usually reserved for New Year's Eve was suspended at half-staff, to be raised high if the two were spared and to be lowered and extinguished if the execution took place. Thousands wept, shouted, raged and even collapsed when the ball dropped. Ernie and his companions went to a speakeasy and drank bad bathtub gin, getting sick in the process.

The next morning when his already irritating foreman told Ernie that he was, just as the foreman had long suspected, "A no-good, dago, anarchist son of a bitch," Ernie punched him in the face. The foreman ended up in the hospital with a broken jaw and nose; Ernie ended up unemployed. But more significantly, he was put on a "black list" and over the next few months went through a dozen jobs from which he was inexplicably let go after high praise for his work performance (Schultz and Schultz, 2001: 63). The solidarity and vigilance of employers was strong, leaving Ernie without a source of income.

Though he does not raise it in his oral histories, Ernie had told me that during this time, in order to survive, he had teamed up with a Dr. Wong, as a professional bridge team. Dr. Wong provided the stake money, and got Ernie a tuxedo; Ernie got a share of the winnings when the cards fell their way. It always struck me as an early indication of Ernie's intelligence and social skills – the dirt poor kid from Hartford who only made it through high school playing a complex card game for money, and fitting in with a clientele to which he would never before been exposed.

As he scrambled to survive, Ernie did what he always did – read to better understand what he was seeing in the world. He came across the writings of Socialist Party leader Daniel DeLeon, who referred frequently to the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx.

Ernie hunted down a copy of Marx's masterwork, and it was a revelation. As Ernie tells it (UConn, 1987: 24-25):

“Anyway, I did come across a copy of it. And, man, that began to open the whole damned world for me....

So I realized there’s a whole world out there. What was going on was not accidental. You weren’t rich just because you were blue-eyed and blond and tall and white. Because there were people with all those characteristics who were also poor. It wasn’t an ethnic question; it wasn’t a religious question. It was a class question.”

At the time, Ernie was working in Manhattan. He saw a demonstration where the police beat a woman into the gutter, but she went down fighting. She and the group were from the Communist Party USA, and Ernie decided that this was an organization committed to action, not just rhetoric. He joined.

At the time, however, joining the party involved an extensive vetting process. Ernie, out of a job again, volunteered for the Unemployed Council, reconnecting gas lines in apartment buildings that had been cut off for lack of payment. Without prospects in New York, Ernie moved in with his brother Angelo back in Hartford. Angelo was a production worker at the Fuller Brush plant. He told me it was hard work. He worked 10 hours a day at Fuller, then spent several hours a day delivering bundles of “The Daily Worker,” the Communist Party newspaper to Hartford-area factories, including Fuller Brush, Royal and Underwood Typewriter, and Pratt & Whitney Small Tools. “If the boss caught you, you were out of a job,” Angelo said. Though older, Angelo looked up to Ernie and followed his lead, and during the time I knew him, frequently expressed his admiration and confidence in his accomplished sibling.

Ernie went to work for the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) as an organizer in 1933. The TUUL was the Communist Party’s effort at industrial unionism, undertaken after the AFL made clear their opposition to the organizing of industrial workers, and before the CIO got rolling.

On Asylum Avenue in Hartford, Pratt & Whitney Small Tools operated, with a company union established after the Wagner Act became law. Ernie understood that many of the workers participating in the company union did so in a genuine effort to promote their rights on the job.

The TUUL converted Pratt’s employee association into the Machine Tool and Co-Workers Lodge Number One, affiliated with the Trade Union Unity League. Pratt & Whitney Small Tool had helped Pratt & Whitney Aircraft get started in the 1920’s.

They too had a company union, which Ernie flipped over to Machine Tool and Co-Workers Lodge Number Two.

Ernie told me that during the early years of the Depression, he and many others thought there would be revolution almost immediately. “People were starving. Everyone was out of work. We kept saying to each other, ‘How much can people take?’” The reality was, they could take a lot; it was not until the mid-thirties that serious organizing began.

About Pratt & Whitney Aircraft, Ernie recounted that the TUUL negotiated only one-year agreements. “We struck in 1933,” Ernie stated. “We struck in 1934. We struck in 1935, and almost got trampled to death in a ‘back to work’ movement started by some company rats.” That was the end of Machine Tool and Co-Workers Lodge Number Two.

Prior to its demise, the two union locals had become part of a loosely organized federation of independent unions throughout New England called the New England Council of Metal and Allied Unions.

Ernie served as the Secretary of the Federation, while continuing as an organizer for the TUUL. In that capacity, he hit Bridgeport in the winter of 1934, with the assignment to organize the massive General Electric plant (UConn, 1987: 63-79). The plant, almost a half-mile long, was four stories tall, with fire escape balconies facing Broad Street, which ran its length, and more than 4,500 workers employed there making GE appliances, along with wire and cable.

It was the biggest challenge Ernie had ever tackled. As with every other daunting task he faced in his professional life, Ernie began by reading everything he could get his hands on about Bridgeport, General Electric, GE’s Workers’ Representation Plan and stories about workers’ initiatives in recent times. Ernie learned, for instance, that Hungarian workers in Bridgeport had briefly established a workers’ council in the city in 1919 in imitation of the Bolshevik revolution. Ernie worked through the winter of ‘34-35, courting the Hungarian workers, members of the Workers’ Representation Plan, Communist Party members in the area and

Socialist activists loyal to Bridgeport's socialist mayor, Jasper McLevy.

When his first committee of six workers was bought off by GE management, Ernie approached the GE "Father Coughlin" group, workers who were fans of the right-wing radio priest, who was the Rush Limbaugh of the day. Ernie went to one of their meetings and, as he told me, said, "Fellas, I just want to ask you one thing – what has Father Coughlin done for you? Haven't you heard God helps those who help themselves? The way to help yourselves is with a union. That's what I'm here for – to help you form a union." GE workers did become convinced; in fact several of the Coughlinites became leaders of the local that eventually became the first organized GE location.

In 1935, shortly after his success with the Bridgeport GE plant, Ernie was approached by John Brophy, who was traveling the country as an emissary of John L. Lewis. Brophy met with Ernie at the Taft Hotel in New Haven, where Brophy extended an offer to Ernie to become an organizer for the about-to-be-formed Congress of Industrial Organizations. As Ernie told me, he asked Brophy, "Why is Mr. Lewis interested in someone like me?" Brophy responded that Lewis was looking for "young people who are willing to work, have new ideas and really believe in what they're doing."

The UE became the strongest union in Connecticut and throughout New England when it was formed, thanks in good measure to the organizing Ernie had done on behalf of the TUUL. The official birth date of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America was April 1, 1936. As Ernie tells it, James Carey became the organization's first president mainly because he was president of a non-affiliated local at Philco Radio, which had decided to recognize the independent to take advantage of the "Buy Union" movement in the mid-thirties. When the Electrical Workers Union was being formed, Carey's group was the only organization with dues check-off, and they pledged \$5,000 to the new national union. In response, Carey was unanimously approved as the union's first president (Roosevelt, 1970: 18).

Ernie was hired as the union's first full-time organizer, at ten dollars a week, with no expenses. He likened it to student organizers of the '60's. "We had missionary zeal...we were convinced that if workers were able to organize and bargain with the employers on an even basis that we would be able to

improve the wages and working conditions of the workers." (Roosevelt, 1970: 19).

In a speech at his 80th birthday party at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York, Ernie recounted his start with UE: "As an organizer for the United Electrical workers my early assignments were to organize the key plants of GE, Westinghouse and the electrical division of GM. After some success in those operations, I agreed to go to Chicago, a wide open town which then was mainly unorganized."

Ernie's description of "some success" modestly summed up helping the UE grow to one of the biggest unions in the country, reaching a membership of 200,000 by 1940. In response, the UE was from the beginning the object of redbaiting, as was the CIO in general. Ernie said the slogan used by employers and their agents was: "Join the CIO and Build a Soviet America." (Roosevelt, 1970: 27).

To be fair, it was also true that the United Electrical Workers Union had within its ranks, and leadership, a significant number of Communist Party USA activists, including Ernie. One reason for this was the fact that the UE absorbed into its ranks a number of large independent locals that had been organized by the Communist Party's Trade Union Unity League. From its inception, tensions existed between the Communist and non-Communist factions in the UE, and when the union splintered in 1949, it was along this fault line.

Communists within the labor movement risked expulsion from the labor movement, termination from their job and possible imprisonment for their beliefs. So it is interesting, though not at all surprising that Ernie, in his oral history interview given to Roosevelt University in 1970, acts coy regarding the question: "Sure there were Communists, I suppose, in our ranks as there was in every other union. John L. Lewis made no bones about that. He took whoever he thought could do the job. And you had a lot of young dedicated kids of various brands of socialism running around and willing to work day and night for next to nothing and get a job done, risking their lives going into

these industrial towns, going in alone, meeting under difficult conditions, with no prestige and very little of anything else going for them; seeking out, pulling together the forces in the shops that could do the job of organizing the unorganized. It worked out.” Ernie was describing not just a cadre of zealous activists, but himself.

Before landing in Chicago, Ernie worked his way steadily westward on behalf of the UE and the CIO more broadly, organizing across the East and Midwest. The level and pace of organizing was unlike anything we have seen in our tepid times:

Ernie was asked by John L. Lewis to join three other organizers, each picked to appeal to different ethnic groups, to tackle Jones-Laughlin Steel in Aliquippa, PA. Lewis was incensed with a newspaper ad posted by the company that CIO organizers were coming to town, which went on to state; “These agitators are mad dogs, and there’s only one way to treat mad dogs.” The threat implied was clear, and Lewis was not going to stand for it.

But the company’s grip on the town was a stranglehold. Earlier, the company had fired a number of workers involved in an organizing drive. When the workers went to the National Labor Relations Board, management declared they did not recognize the Board’s authority, and challenged the constitutionality of the NLRA.

The organizers were determined but not foolhardy. They met in a cellar at night, and tried to come up with ways to break through to the workers. They brought the wife of the former governor of Pennsylvania to speak, and then the Secretary of Labor, referred to by Ernie as “Ma Perkins.” But people were too afraid to show up, and even the four organizers had to sneak out with their guest speakers to avoid possible harm. Finally, they found an anti-fascist Italian immigrant who rented an apartment across the street from the plant gate. Ernie & his cohorts set up a PA system, “and for ten solid days all we did is talk. We’d take a half hour on, and hour and a half off, and back we’d go. Well, after 10 days of it we were knocked out. I, as a matter of fact, had burst a blood vessel in the throat and I didn’t know what was giving way. Showered the microphone with it” (Roosevelt, 1970: 48).

Meanwhile, a solid majority of workers from the plant signed up at a Steelworkers office across the river. The organizers met with Phil Murray, then head of the CIO, and asked him for permission to shut the plant down.

When Murray refused, Ernie said he would talk with Lewis about it. Murray relented but despised Ernie thereafter. The organizers went back to the plant and began telling workers headed into work they were on strike – and the plant shut down. “We organized the plant and it was the first basic steel plant in the country to establish exclusive bargaining rights, [but] Murray never forgot” (Roosevelt, 1970: 50).

In April, 1937, the case of National Labor Relations Board v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation, 301 U.S. 1 was decided by the Supreme Court, which upheld the constitutionality of the National Labor Relations Act.

After some time on the road, Ernie was given his choice of California, Iowa or Chicago for a more permanent assignment. He chose Chicago because it was the toughest challenge of the three. As previously stated, when Ernie arrived in Chicago, it was a “wide-open town” with few organized workers.

After studying, as always, the state of industry and workers’ circumstances, he and a small group (undoubtedly Communist Party activists) determined they had 21 weeks in which to build strength to position themselves for what Ernie saw as an upcoming battle with UE President Carey, with whom he had already become disenchanted. He needed to quickly organize some small shops. “We had twenty-one weeks to go and we set the goal of organizing twenty-one plants in twenty-one weeks, which we did. We met our goal” (Roosevelt, 1972: 70).

The level and pace of organizing was so extraordinary, and Ernie’s approach so bold, it is worth excerpting an extended passage from the oral history interview he gave to Roosevelt University in 1972 (70-72). “R” is responder – Ernie; “I” is the interviewer: R:

The most interesting one (it’s out of business now) was a plant on Western Boulevard called Ampro Products-Ansel Munson Production. Ansel Munson was the president. They were putting out a 16-millimeter sound projector at the time. I was passing down Western Boulevard one day, and I said to one

of the organizers with me, “Let’s organize that plant tomorrow.” He says, “You don’t know anybody there?” I said, No.” He said, “How are you going to do it?” I said, “Look, we’ll get out there, we’ll call up the shop, find out what time the plant opens. We’ll be there forty-five minutes before it opens. I’ll take the main gate, you take the secondary gate. What we’ll do is, we’ll stop the people coming in and say the plant’s on strike.”

I: Just the two of you?

R: Just like that, just the two of us. We proceeded on that basis. People would say to me, “Strike? I didn’t know we were on strike!” And I’d say, “You haven’t been attending your union meetings, have you?” He said, “No.” I said, “See if you don’t attend your meetings, you don’t know what’s going on.” To make a long story short we shut the plant down. Then the question was what to do with them. We didn’t know the name of a single worker in the plant. I decided to take the people around the side of the plant, where there was some parking space. I suggested that they break up by departments, and each department pick their own steward and hand in the name to me. We would make that our Bargaining Committee. We would go in and meet with the company.

I: Did they ever ask you who you were?

R: Oh, I told them who I was. In the meantime, we’d passed out cards. We’d signed practically everybody up. Now I had not only the names of everybody in the shop, but I had a Shop Committee, elected by the workers. We went in, met with the company. He said that if the people wanted a union he would recognize it without any trouble. So we went in with the Committee; we showed him the cards. He stalled and we immediately filed for an election with the NLRB. To make a long story short, we won the election.

Now that’s some of the means we used. We were operating on the basic fact that the condition of the workers was so bad, that if we took forceful action we could rally the people. It proved out right.”

Ernie described dividing Chicago into “sections.” “We would clean out a section, one after another, with the results that we built the largest union in the city of Chicago (Roosevelt, 1972: 73). The UE added on organizers as they grew and brought the union to the biggest industrial sites in the city. “In a relatively short time, UE became the biggest union in Chicago, Minneapolis and in several industrial centers in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois” (DeMaio, 1988: 5).

During this time, Ernie also met the woman who would become his wife, Mary Karpa. Mary was working for the Steelworkers Organizing Committee when she met Ernie. Ernie’s oral history interviews always focus on the political, not the personal, but I know that Ernie proposed to his bride by saying, “Mary, let’s say we go down to City Hall and make this thing legal.” Not the most romantic proposal, but the marriage, the partnership, between Ernie and Mary endured lovingly for 51 years, until Ernie’s death. They never had children, but this was a medical issue, not a choice on their part.

During this same time period, the late thirties, the Civil War in Spain attracted hundreds of Americans who defied a US ban on travel to Spain, and joined the forces of the Republic fighting against the Spanish fascists and their German allies. Among those who joined the US contingent known as the Lincoln Brigade was one of Ernie’s brothers – Tony DeMaio. In the 1950’s, when Ernie was being pilloried by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Tony’s role in the Spanish Civil War was used to tar Ernie. In part, this stemmed from the fact that Tony, who was also called before the committee, and had been investigated by federal prosecutors, was accused of executing six American deserters, and running a prison camp for the Spanish Republicans where errant international fighters were held and allegedly abused (HUAC, 1952: 3667). Ernie did not believe these allegations, and Tony was never prosecuted.

Mary shared Ernie’s political perspective but not his zeal for activism; she ran the household while Ernie was out trying to change the world. But I remember a story Ernie told about the two of them driving out into the boondocks of Wisconsin to bring handbills and other material to strikers in an isolated town. They were on a deserted country road, their car filled with UE material, when they saw a roadblock manned by armed vigilantes posted to keep support from reaching the strikers. Ernie threw a blanket across the back seat and another across he and Mary in the front. He said to Mary, “Cuddle up next to me. We’re honeymooners and we’re lost.”

The vigilantes stopped their car but bought the story, and Ernie and Mary got the supplies to the strikers.

Unfortunately, even as the CIO was amassing members, with the UE growing by leaps and bounds, cracks and fissures were forming that would fracture the union juggernaut. One of the most shocking was John L. Lewis' endorsement of Wendell Wilkie over Roosevelt in 1940. Ernie recalled, "I was in Dayton, Ohio at the time, listening in the union hall to his speech, and when he said he was coming out for Wilkie, well it was just as though we were being gutted" (Roosevelt, 1970: 29).

In 1941, the UE decided, through convention action, to replace James Carey as president of the union. Carey did not respond with redbaiting at that time, a stance that would change later. Ernie said Carey proved to be an embarrassment to the union. "He was able to get nowhere in negotiations with General Electric or Westinghouse, which to us were key. Too flippant, too irresponsible and also domineering – he wouldn't let anybody else do it, with the result that we ran into the kind of problems with him that we decided we're not going to go anywhere with this guy." (UConn, 1987: 26)

In the meantime, fascism was on the rise in Europe, and the US ended up at war. In 1942, President Roosevelt appointed Ernie to the War Production Board and the War Manpower Commission. Ernie stated that, "we supported that war, because we believed that fascism menaced the working class and needed to be destroyed" (DeMaio, 1988: 5). He also told me that the War Production Board uncovered evidence of employer profiteering during the war, including at least one extreme example. The War Production Board found evidence that Norden, which made precisely calibrated bombsights, was deliberately producing defective sights to prolong the war, and their profitable business. Ernie, who remained incensed about this criminal behavior 40 years later, could not get the Department of Defense to act on the accusation.

UE District 11, which covered Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota, grew into a large, activist-oriented organization. Their political involvement extended to the local level, and there Ernie helped Hubert Humphrey get his start in politics, an initiative that he soon regretted. In 1943, the UE decided to find a progressive candidate for Mayor of Minneapolis. Though Ernie was not thrilled, the union decided to support an unknown –

"an extremely voluble instructor at the University of Minnesota whose name was triple-H, Hubert Horatio Humphrey" (Roosevelt, 1970: 63). Humphrey lost in 1943, and the UE decided to back him again in 1945, running a high-energy campaign that carried Humphrey into office. After getting established in the position, Humphrey began redbaiting the UE. Ernie went to see Humphrey about it. Humphrey responded, "Well, you've got to understand, Ernie, that I have to do it... my credentials as a liberal would be suspect if I didn't redbait" (Roosevelt, 1970: 66). According to Ernie, Humphrey was soon accepting generous patronage from the oil industry, and throughout his career ensured that his liberalism "never gets to the point where he's going to bite the hand that feeds it."

Following the end of World War II, the adhesive goal of victory against fascism was gone, allowing fractures within and beyond the labor movement to widen, splinter and snap, destroying the remarkable momentum that the UE and other labor unions had developed prior to the war. For Ernie, the biggest disappointment, and a hope he later acknowledged as naive, was that the alliance between the socialist world and capitalism, which together had defeated the fascists, would remain intact after the war. Ernie spoke about this time in his 80th Birthday speech, in a passage worth highlighting:

As you know, the military phases of fascism were destroyed on the battlefields of Europe and Asia. What we did not comprehend at the time was that the profascist reactionary forces of capitalism regrouped into global resistance to socialism abroad and to trade unionism at home.

Winston Churchill who had been repudiated by the British at the polls lowered the iron curtain in Fulton, Missouri. A coordinated, orchestrated media campaign whipped up hysteria against communism. The cold war against the Soviet Union and the American working class became government policy.

We failed to understand these developments, because our faith and trust in Earl Browder led us astray. He opined that the enlightened forces of US capitalism would see the inevitability of communism, and would cooperate with it.

The fallacy of that position is self evident now, but open opposition to it was not permitted, at that time.

This campaign against communism, and essentially any progressive politics, would dominate us as a country, and rend the labor movement, over an extensive period of time. For Ernie, those years would present the greatest challenges he would ever face, which we will discuss.

But there were other daunting challenges, and disappointing divides within labor, that also contributed to labor's weakening position.

After the war, a labor economist calculated it would take an 18.5 cents hourly pay increase for CIO workers to catch up with price hikes that occurred during the war. Ernie described the planned campaign: "It was agreed that, as of the first of April 1946, on the first Monday after the first of April, the Steelworkers would go down. On Tuesday the Autoworkers would go down; Wednesday the Electrical Workers would go down; on Thursday rubber and whatever else there was, a number of smaller unions, and then whatever was left over would come out on Friday, so that by the end of the week we would have the entire CIO on the streets" (Roosevelt, 1970: 34). This coordinated "attack" on capital, the closest to a national general strike the US was likely to see, was possible because John L. Lewis had in the early days of the CIO insisted on every contract expiring the first week in April. The first president of the Mineworkers was named Mitchell, and his birthday was April 1st, known as Mitchell Day in the UMW, and for a short time, in the CIO.

But the dramatic plan was undone, not by the bosses, but by Walter Reuther and the UAW. Reuther led GM workers out on strike in early 1946, during a period when the production facilities would be closed regardless while converting back from wartime production. Reuther settled for 18 cents. More importantly, the UAW and GM agreed on health insurance and pension plans, and supplementary unemployment benefits. This undercut the CIO's political agenda for national health care and expanded Social Security – what Ernie described as "cradle to grave benefits."

In the meantime, just prior to Mitchell Day, the independent Communications Workers decided to strike, shutting down nation-wide communications. There was chaos when the CIO unions entered the week, with some plants shut down and others still operating.

In general, corporations accepted the strike situation, but General Electric decided to remain open by getting workers to cross the picketline. Pitched battles took place across the country, but unions could not communicate with the field or with other organizations. Unions began to settle, but following a pattern that Reuther had established, including a contract expiration date not in April. As Ernie described it, "Divisions began to take place that finally tore the CIO apart" (Roosevelt, 1970: 37). "It developed," Ernie said, "into a question of who was playing the bosses' game and who was playing a basic game of defending and advancing the interests and welfare of the membership" (Roosevelt, 1970: 40).

The CIO was now run by Phil Murray, whom Ernie described as a "weakling" in confrontations with the employer, but dictatorial when it came to running the CIO. "There was no room for discussion. It was a whole rubber-stamp operation. The democracy of the organization was being destroyed." (Roosevelt, 1970: 42) Ernie himself had written a critical article about Murray's steel contract, quoting Gene Debs admonition to not follow leaders, because "When a leader says, 'You are my sheep,' he means, 'You are my mutton.' In other words, 'You are my meat'" (Roosevelt, 1970: 34). The article circulated widely, including 200,000 reprints on the west coast by the regional CIO director, who was also not a Murray fan. Unfortunately, Murray saw the article as well, and Ernie had now crossed him twice.

The fissures within the labor movement had complex roots, but the lines began to reflect the country's growing obsession, the "Red Scare." At the 1946 CIO Convention, Murray asked for a standing vote on a resolution resenting and rejecting communism in the affairs of the CIO. Ernie asked me rhetorically once, "Do you know what that's like? To be the only person standing to vote against that resolution in a hall with 3,000 people?" It was the start of a period that seemed a waking nightmare to Ernie, though he survived.

In 1949, as Ernie described it, the CIO split. In the history books, it is reported as the CIO's expelling 10 unions deemed communist-dominated. The UE was at the top of the list. After the split, employers began enforcing the anti-communist "loyalty oath" included in the Taft-Hartley Act, enacted two years earlier. The UE took the position that no union activist should sign the legally required "I am not a communist" affidavit. Stewart-Warner, one of the first to act, fired 250 UE shop stewards and local officers for refusing to sign the oath. Other companies followed suit, an action that was affirmed by the National Labor Relations Board and the Supreme Court.

The affidavit had a deeper purpose. Union officials began to get summons from the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Lying on the affidavit carried a penalty of perjury. Before the Congressional Committee, failure to answer questions truthfully was also perjury. The only choice, especially for communists, was to refuse to answer questions at the hearing based on 5th amendment rights. But General Electric and other companies took the position that they would terminate any employee who did not cooperate fully with the Congressional investigation. In one example Ernie gave, the entire Executive Board at the Schenectady GE plant was fired. The IUE, the International Union of Electrical Workers, then launched a raid on the plant. The IUE was founded in 1949 as the "anti-communist" alternative to the UE. The IUE was led by the UE's first president, James Carey. Carey ended up, Ernie reported with clear satisfaction, being "the only president to be kicked out of two international unions." (Roosevelt, 1970: 33)

It soon became "open season" on UE shops. In Ernie's Midwest district, the UE had more than 120,000 members employed at major manufacturers; they were swarmed by raids from the IUE, UAW, Steelworkers, IAM and Teamsters, losing huge numbers of members. But as Ernie stated with pride at his 80th birthday, "Most of the targeted unions could not endure the frenzied assaults, but the UE though badly wounded survived as a national union."

Ernie once described that time to me as endless driving and endless meetings with people filled with fear, communists who were afraid of losing their jobs, their homes, being publicly humiliated and shunned, possibly going to jail. Ernie's friend, Howard Fast, went to prison in 1952 for 18 months, as did a number of US communist leaders.

Ernie feared jail as well when he was subpoenaed to appear before the committee. He said that he told Mary he would either end up fired or in jail. He decided to take their savings and buy a farm. "I figured that even without a job, I could grow our food," Ernie told me. In an odd quirk, a man Ernie learned later was an FBI informant, gave Ernie a tip on a good piece of land for sale at a good price. Years later, when retiring from the UE, Ernie sold that land for a small fortune, providing Ernie and Mary with much greater comfort than a UE pension would have allowed.

Ernie was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee on September 2, 1952 in Chicago. The day before, International Harvester had gone out on strike. On the day of Ernie's hearing, three thousand strikers ringed the courthouse and eventually stormed the building, singing, "We'll hang Chairman Wood from a sour apple tree." The following day, Ernie told his supporters to stay home. "The National Guard had been called out. They had sandbags, machine guns, the works. They were out to frighten us. I walked in there alone and I'm whistling to myself, thinking, 'You idiots.'" Ernie cited his 5th amendment rights repeatedly during the hearing, while being belittled and castigated by the committee. But the third day of hearings was canceled when Chairman Woods had a heart attack (Schultz and Schultz, 2001: 65-67).

Ernie did tell me that in the early 50's Joe McCarthy had planned to hold hearing in Milwaukee, in McCarthy's home state of Wisconsin. His target was the UE, and Ernie had been subpoenaed. But he was aware that McCarthy was staying at a downtown hotel with an attractive young man said to be an aide. Ernie put out thousands of copies of a flyer featuring a heart-shaped photo of McCarthy and the young man, with the headline, "McCarthy in Love Nest at Biltmore Hotel." McCarthy canceled the hearing and left town immediately.

At the same time that Ernie was being attacked as a communist, he was involved in a bitter debate with the leadership of the Communist Party USA. They had decided, based on the devastating losses inflicted on the ten unions expelled from the CIO,

that Party members should make every effort to leave those unions and become active in the raiding unions. As a key leader in the UE, Ernie could have led thousands of members into the IUE, the UAW or one of the other internationals taking over UE strongholds. But he told me he considered that a betrayal of the workers who had chosen UE's politically radical, militant approach to trade unionism; he could not bear to bring those workers into, in his eyes, a lesser organization.

Those were difficult times. As Ernie stated in "The Price of Dissent" Schultz and Schultz, 2001: 73):

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

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

The CIO merged back with the AFL in 1952, because, as Ernie saw it, "there was no need for two AF of L's in the labor movement." (Roosevelt, 1972: 98). But the UE survived. "We decided that we would not abandon the positions we'd fought on and we paid one hell of a price for it. When we got down to what was the hard core, and we beat back raid after raid, it became an expensive proposition for these other unions. Besides they're not organizationally inclined. They don't know, in many instances, how to organize the unorganized" (Roosevelt, 1972: 101).

But the UE was also unable to organize, facing attacks from other unions as well as the boss when they tried to get a campaign going. Ernie recalled once that at their nadir, UE activists wrung their hands over what to do next. Ernie asked how much they had in their treasury, and based on the response, recommended the renovation of their

Chicago headquarters, putting extra funds into a facelift for the building's façade. "They think we're down and out. Let's show everyone, including our enemies, that we're still in the game."

Ernie was involved in a plethora of causes even while fighting to preserve his union. In 1951 along with Coleman Young, Paul Robeson and a number of others, Ernie was a founding member of the National Negro Labor Council. The NNLC was a short-lived but powerful organization that challenged both employers and the labor movement to end discriminatory practices. They were subjected to withering redbaiting attacks not only by the media and politicians, but by other labor organizations. Still they embarrassed the AFL-CIO and its affiliates into beginning to pay attention to the issue of racial discrimination. The NNLC disbanded in 1956, exhausted from redbaiting but also satisfied that unions had begun taking steps needed to reverse decades of racist practices.

Ernie was again called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956, and questioned about his affiliations with a number of organizations, a list that shows he continued his political activity despite government intimidation (HUAC, 1956). According to the haranguing questioning of the committee, Ernie was a sponsor or chaired a number of large meetings, including: the New York Bill of Rights Conference, the Midwest Conference to Defend the Bill of Rights, and the Delegates' National Assembly for Peace, among others. He was a leader of the American Peace Crusade, the Midwest Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born, and the US Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born, and wrote articles condemning McCarthyism, HUAC, and the Korean War. The Committee transcript indicates that he attempted to attend a World Peace Conference in Poland in 1950 but was denied a passport.

Also in 1950, his assistant at UE District 11 quit very publicly, denouncing the UE for being communist-controlled. The aide, Lee Lundgren, specifically accused Ernie of putting the Communist Party's agenda ahead of the needs of the workers, a charge not supported by the record of Ernie's work.

Ernie told me that for some time he was an avid photographer, taking pictures at marches, strikes, demonstrations and large meetings. But by the 1950's he stopped, for two reasons. "People thought I was a rat, taking pictures for the FBI. That's what the atmosphere was like, Ernie explained. Inadvertently, it turned out to be the case, as Ernie and Mary found out after returning home from travels for the UE. Their Chicago home had been broken into, but all that was taken were photos, files, and a large union/leftist button collection that Ernie had been assembling since the 1930's. They assumed that the FBI had been behind the break-in.

In the 1960's Ernie continued to advocate for the civil rights movement. The archives of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference contains correspondence between Ernie and Martin Luther King, who was seeking funds for a campaign in Montgomery, Alabama (Hydrick, 1996: 29). Ernie told me that he marched with King in Selma, Alabama across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965, in the second march responding to a vicious police attack two days previously. Ernie was also an early and outspoken critic of the Vietnam war. For much of the war, the UE was one of only a few US unions that actively opposed the conflict. A small article from October 5, 1971 from MIT's student newspaper, The Tech, notes:

About 400 people attended the New England Antiwar Workshop Conference sponsored by the Greater Boston Peace Action Coalition at BU's Hayden Hall Sunday. Ernest DeMaio, United Electrical Workers vice-president, gave the keynote address, calling 'for labor-student movement unity. Workshops for Vets, Gays, Women, Labor, Students and Community Groups were held. Each delivered a short report at the end of the day. Significant motions were made by the Vets, that the November 6 march be led by a GI contingent and Women for a United Women's Contingent feeder march.

The AFL-CIO was increasingly a conservative force politically, but according to Ernie, by 1963, unions that represented workers at GE, including the UAW, IAM, IUE and the Teamsters, were collaborating with the UE, especially during contract negotiations. "They could not have had coordinated bargaining in the GE set-up without us. The IUE which got a basic portion of our members, they don't know how to negotiate a contract. That's the truth!" (Roosevelt, 1972: 121). By the late 60's, presumably Ernie was allowed to get a passport. He made an important trip to Europe during the

1969-70 GE strike, meeting with electrical workers unions in several countries. He saw how, just as in the US, the European trade union movement had lost a significant degree of its innate force through splits along ideological lines – fractures that Ernie believed were nurtured and at times paid for by the CIA. The global trade union movement had after the war divided into two camps. The World Federation of Trade Unions included more progressive unions around the world along with the labor organizations of the socialist countries. US unions, along with more conservative labor groups in other countries formed the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). During his trip to Europe, "I met with ICFTU people and the WFTU people. I was concerned, as all of us were here, that we had GE's plants shut down in the United States, would they be able to get their stuff made in other parts of the world? We got assurances from all of these other unions that, as far as GE was concerned, it would get nothing out of the rest of the world." (Roosevelt, 1972: 117)

In his work, Ernie focused more and more on the issue of global capital, the challenges it presented to national trade union movements, and the need for global solidarity to respond to those challenges. "The workers have a common exploiter. They have common interests and they'll find ways and means of supporting each other. I don't know just how that will be done because that's a democratic process. The people will get together, they'll state what their problems are and first what they can do on a minimum basis and build on that. That's what I see happening." (Roosevelt, 1972: 118)

In 1972 Ernie was a member of a 10-person delegation that visited the Soviet Union at the invitation of the USSR's electrical workers union – a trip made possible by Nixon's visit to Moscow earlier in the year, which loosened travel restrictions to the USSR (UE, 1973). This was, I believe, Ernie's first trip to the Soviet Union, a place where he developed strong ties and close friendships over the rest of his life. Ernie was also part of one of the first fact-finding visits to Chile after the coup in 1973.

He told me there was a real sense of fear on that trip, and not only because fascists were in control of the government and the murder of trade unionists and leftists was routine. This was a coup that had been arranged with the full cooperation of the US government, and regrettably, suspected involvement from the AFL-CIO's AIFLD operation. There would be little sympathy from either the US government or the AFL-CIO if the delegation was attacked. But the trip was unmolested, and their report brought attention to the condition of detainees, particularly trade unionists.

Though it was not known until much later, Ernie had by this point made it onto President Nixon's "Enemies List," a roster of up to 30,000 American who were to be singled out by the IRS and other government institutions for their outspoken criticism of Nixon. In 1975, Ernie was again involved in a Congressional investigation, conducted by the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary (Judiciary, 1975).

Ernie got other attention as well. Katya and Bert Gilden, who wrote novels as KB Gilden, published "Between the Hills and the Sea" in 1971, the story of a large industrial local in the 1950's whose communist and progressive leaders are increasingly hounded by the multiple prongs of the looming Red Scare. The book was based on activities at the Bridgeport GE plant. The novel contains an unflattering depiction of a union organizer who cares more about politics than people. In one scene, a character observes:

In the ensuing imbroglio it became apparent, to him anyhow, that Lucas, far from looking forward to open letters and meetings, harbored a taste for the secret, the conspiratorial: the agitational figure skulking around corners in the dark, scattering the seed of his message; who appears at anonymous gatherings like this one to proclaim his cause and then, folding his cloak about him, disappears into the mists of time (Gilden, 1971: 1240).

Lucas is described physically in words that would fit Ernie. The Gildens, who also wrote "Hurry Sundown," told Ernie one of the characters was based on him, but Ernie said he could never find himself in the book.

Ernie retired from his UE positions in November 1975 when he was 65 years old.

In typical fashion, he used his leave-taking as a political opportunity, to convince a UE convention to pass a mandatory age-65 retirement provision for UE full-time officers. His retirement party was a major event, hosted by Detroit Mayor Coleman Young.

Shortly after retiring, Ernie was offered the position of permanent representative to the United Nations for the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). Ernie and Mary returned to Connecticut, buying a home in Norwalk. The WFTU was the global organization that brought together the labor organizations of the socialist world, the most left unions in Europe and many trade unions from the so-called Third World. As he had when he was the lone standing vote against the CIO's anti-Communist resolution in 1949, Ernie again stood squarely and publicly in sympathy with socialism and opposed to the political posture of the AFL-CIO. But the appointment had been a deft choice; Ernie had extensive contacts, ironclad integrity among those who knew him personally or professionally, and a hide toughened by years of denunciation and investigation by various enemies.

While working for the WFTU, Ernie became an advisor and mentor for many up-and-coming labor progressives. I first saw Ernie speak in 1977, at the 1199 Health Care Workers Union office in New Haven. 1199 was staffed at that time by many young progressives who had graduated from the movement against the war into the labor movement. They invited Ernie to speak about organizing the CIO and labor law reform. I remember still my sense of disappointment that Ernie concluded a talk about the revolutionary actions of workers building the CIO by urging those in attendance to write to our Congressional representatives for changes to Taft-Hartley. But the problem was my youth and inexperience, not Ernie's restraint in what was clearly not a "revolutionary" time.

I saw Ernie again, and met him for the first time in 1979. He was speaking in Bridgeport, at a small, packed meeting of Steelworkers and supporters, gathered to hear the man Ernie introduced – Ed Sadlowski.

Ernie was a key advisor to Sadlowski during his quest for the presidency of the United Steelworkers union. Ernie advised many of the new, militant trade union leaders coming into their own.

Ernie became a mentor to Labor Research Association (LRA), revitalizing the left-oriented consulting and educational organization that had been founded in 1927. Greg Tarpinian, who later served as the first Executive Director of the Change to Win coalition, joined LRA as its director in 1980. He and Ernie quickly became close friends and collaborators. Though Ernie did not get to pursue higher education, over the years he had developed into a sharp-eyed economist, with a sophisticated analysis of transnational corporations, the impact of globalization on the US, and the need for international solidarity among workers.

He spoke out repeatedly about what he saw as AFL-CIO policies that defended bosses more than workers. His most vehement criticism was leveled at the American Institute for Labor Development (AIFLD), the AFL-CIO's international outreach program. Ernie charged that AIFLD took money from the CIA and followed their agenda overseas, often to the detriment of workers in other countries and here in the US – Chile being the most egregious example. Ernie would speak about AIFLD taking funds from the National Endowment for Democracy, an agency created by the Reagan administration, and which Ernie said received funds from the US Chamber of Commerce. “The AFL-CIO is taking money to supposedly build the labor movement overseas from the same people who are working full-time to destroy it here,” Ernie fumed.

LRA sponsored conferences in 1982 and 1983 on workers' solidarity and transnational corporations. The 1983 conference was held in Toronto, Canada so that representatives from Soviet labor organizations could attend. Ernie was the keynote speaker at both conferences.

In 1985, Ernie was asked by the Cuban government to give the May Day address in place of President Fidel Castro, who had decided that year that the Havana parade lasted too long and was difficult for participants to endure. Ernie gave his remarks to an international assembly, an event that received press around the world, but not a word here in the US.

Though Ernie's relations with the socialist world were strong, he was in the 1980's expelled from the US Communist Party, after decades of contributions

to the organization's vitality, in the face of concerted government persecution, as well as great personal sacrifice. Ernie described his expulsion in the 1987 interview he gave to Jack Goldring for the University of Connecticut. Ernie stated that he had been outspoken in his criticism of Lane Kirkland, head of the AFL-CIO, for that organization's essentially anti-union activities internationally, where they worked hand in glove with the CIA and the business community. During the PATCO strike in 1981, Ernie's rebukes became even sharper, over Kirkland's utter failure to muster an adequate response to President Reagan's audacious assault on the labor movement – firing 10,000 striking air traffic controllers and jailing the leaders of the union. After castigating Kirkland's milktoast response, Ernie heard from CPUSA leadership that Kirkland was part of the “Grand Coalition against Reagan,” and should not be criticized. Not surprisingly, Ernie continued speaking out. In 1984, at an international conference in Sofia, Bulgaria, Ernie voiced his criticism of Kirkland, and added that Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale was anti-Soviet. Soon thereafter Ernie was told he was no longer a party member. “I was told it was against the policies. And then, I was told that by an unofficial decision I was out. I said, ‘What do you mean by an “unofficial decision”?’ Because I'd been through a couple of things before. How do you appeal an unofficial decision? ...I decided to say nothing” (UConn, 1987: 92).

Ernie continued his travels to the socialist world on a regular basis, bringing interested trade unionists with him on many occasions. Those were polarizing times still, perhaps more so in the labor movement than in other sectors of the society. The president of one of the biggest Teamster locals in New England, who was introduced to Ernie through me, accompanied Ernie to the World Youth Festival in Havana. Upon his return he was immediately dubbed “Tommy the Commie” and was defeated in his re-election bid the next year.

Ernie often expressed frustration about the Soviets, outlining a criticism I never heard elsewhere.

They told me, ‘We would talk with him.’ I asked, ‘Well, what if he didn’t listen, and kept showing up that way?’ They explained that a group of his co-workers would talk to him about the need of everyone in the group to do their share. ‘And what if he still didn’t listen? What then?’ Then they’d send him away for detoxing and sobriety training. ‘And what then, if it still kept happening?’ You get the idea. Finally, I’d ask, ‘Does it reach a point where you just fire the guy, because he can’t cut it?’ Well, they would look at each other like ‘This guy is crazy,’ and not know what to say. But you can’t run a company, or a country, like that.”

Ernie at one point in the mid-eighties told me he was working on a report for the Soviets about how to organize and operate US industries after they took over the United States. It was obviously an overly optimistic concern.

In 1985, Ernie retired from the post of UN representative from the WFTU.

In 1986, Ernie became the third American to receive the Order of Lenin, the highest civilian award bestowed by the Soviet government. The other two Americans to be so honored were Harry Bridges and Big Bill Hayward.

I started work at Pratt & Whitney in East Hartford, CT on June 6, 1979 and soon met Linda Buchanan, who introduced me to Ernie DeMaio. Linda & I were married in 1981. We were both involved in union activism, and like many other young, progressive trade unionists, we were drawn to Ernie, who was extremely generous with his time, patient with our inexperience and wise in his counsel. Ernie and Mary became unofficial official members of our family. Our oldest son, born in 1981, is named Nicholas DeMaio Harrity.

I came to know Ernie well; he was a mentor but was also a close loved one. Though the term “second father to me” is trite, that expresses our relationship. In 1984, when Ernie began considering retirement, he offered to hire me as his assistant, with the aim that I take his place as the UN’s WFTU representative. While considering the proposition, I was elbowed out of the way by CPUSA leadership, who put a long-time party functionary in the spot when Ernie stepped down.

Ernie’s health suffered some setbacks in the 80’s. In one of life’s ironies, Ernie was in Norwalk hospital for angioplasty when the nurses went out of strike. Ernie got the name and number of the union, and would call them from his hospital bed with reports.

Ernie was back in the hospital in April 1987, at St. Vincent’s in Bridgeport, for heart-related treatment. I drove down from Hartford to see him. The entrances to the hospital were all blocked; no visitors allowed. It was April 23, and the L’Ambiance Plaza had just collapsed, killing 28 construction workers – a disaster that spawned labor’s Workers’ Memorial Day for those killed on the job.

In 1989, the Soviet Union and the most of the socialist world collapsed and disappeared. We would sit with Ernie and Mary watching CNN, the two of them shaking their heads in sad disbelief. Ernie had seen the problems, and spoke more freely than about the lack of leadership, and the decline in productive capacity that accompanied a general demoralization about the prospects of socialism. Ernie was angry at the failure of the socialist leaders to make good on the promise of their social order. Mary’s brother, long-time UE activist Mike Karpa, summed up some of the disappointment and disgust aptly: “They controlled the education system, the media, the courts, the economy, the factories, the entire society. And they were rejected by the people. They had every chance in the world, and they blew it.”

But Ernie was also angry that the capitalist world, led by the US, had hounded, undercut, sabotaged and undermined the socialist realm at every opportunity. Ernie had often responded when people complimented him on his vitality and energy despite his advancing years: “My mother made me promise that I wouldn’t go until after the big change.” The collapse of the socialist world was not the big change for which he was waiting.

Ernie continued to give speeches, receive visitors seeking advice and counsel, and travel after stepping down from the UN position. He was urged by all to write his memoirs but put it off. During this time, however, he began recording on index cards his definitions of words and phrases from the labor movement, putting his own definitive spin on the subject. Two examples:

FEATHER BEDDING: Negotiated work rules in a union contract. In the corporate realm of double speak, any labor contract clause that protects jobs.

The media applies this term only to unions, never to corporate bloat. See also: Corporate Bloat (DeMaio, 1993: 77).

LABOR STATESMAN: A union official who rises above principle to promote the notion that what is good for the company is good for the workers. One who preaches tranquility and “stability” among workers undergoing the rigors of austerity. A collaborator (DeMaio, 1993: 121).

Ernie eventually assembled enough material for a book. He had given it a title, and written both a dedication, “To My Wife of Over Fifty Years, Mary Karpa DeMaio,” and an introduction. After his death, Ernie’s wife Mary self-published a limited edition of the book, called “Words for Workers in Changing Times.” The front cover contains a quote from Greg Tarpinian, then Director of Labor Research Association, who states well what so many of us experienced and felt:

“Ernest DeMaio was a quintessential American. He was a leader of tens of thousands of working people. During some of our nation’s toughest times, he fought the greedy and powerful with a selfless tenacity that inspired loyalty and self-sacrifice. He stood up to the government, the courts and the police in the name of equality and decency. And through it all he kept his humor and his humility.

Ernie DeMaio was as fine a role model as I and hundreds of other young people could have had as we grew to take on the tasks left unfinished by earlier generations. Our ideas, our understanding, and our optimism were defined as we listened and debated with our mentor, Ernie. And we are grateful that he took the time in his otherwise demanding schedule to pen some of his choicest gems. This is a book to treasure for a lifetime.”

Ernie died of complications related to brain cancer on March 28, 1990. He was 81 years old. Linda and I took his brother Angelo out to dinner several days later, to grieve and reminisce together. At one point, without warning, Angelo burst into tears, burying his face in his handkerchief. “Oh, Ernie. So young, so young. He could have done so much.” Angelo lived to the age of 99. Ernie would have gotten a chuckle out of Angelo’s lament.

Ernie – Ernest – DeMaio was the most remarkable person I have ever had the privilege to know. His energy and enthusiasm, his intellectual curiosity and didactic skills, his dedication, and immense generosity with all he had, including his understanding and beliefs, his essential optimism in the rightness of labor’s cause and our eventual triumph –

they resonate with me still. Thousands of people were touched by the work he did, the fights he fought, the example he set.

Though his commitment to socialism and support for the Soviet Union and its partners may seem misguided to many, both during his lifetime and now looking back, Ernie neither apologized for his beliefs nor became myopic because of them. He was a child of poverty, who had seen first-hand what that was like, and lifted himself out of that circumstance by working to lift up his sister and brother workers. Ernie first and last stood with the workers, and took on anyone who tried to impede or exploit them – whether the CIA, GE or the AFL-CIO.

Ernie had a toast that he would enthusiastically offer whenever we gathered together and shared food, drink and each other’s company. It was almost like saying grace, and always signaled the beginning of a conversation where history would be illuminated, lessons for the current battle would be learned, and much laughter would fill the room and our hearts. I offer it now at every occasion, and salute my friend Ernie here with his own words, to which he helped give truth: “Here’s to the working class, and its glorious future.” Amen.

References

- DeMaio, E. (1988). *80th Anniversary Dinner, Roosevelt Hotel, New York, NY, December 2, 1988*. Unpublished – from John Harrity’s DeMaio files.
- DeMaio, E. (1993). *Words for Workers in Changing Times*. Salem, MA: Deschamps Printing Company.
- Gilden, K.B. (1971). *Between the Hills and the Sea*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company.
- HUAC (1952, September 2). “Communist political subversion. Hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Eighty-fourth Congress, second session.” Retrieved from on December 12, 2009 from http://www.archive.org/stream/communistpolitic01unit/communistpolitic01unit_djvu.tx.
- HUAC (1956, December 4). “Communist political subversion. Hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Eighty-fourth Congress, second session.” Retrieved on December 12, 2009 from <http://www.archive.org/details/communistpolitic01unit>.
- Hydrick, B. (1996). *Guide to Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954–1970*, pp. 29. Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America. Retrieved on December 14, 2009 from www.lexisnexis.com/documents/academic/upa_cis/1562_recssouthchrleadconfpt1.pdf.
- Judiciary (1975, July 11). “*The nationwide drive against law enforcement intelligence operations: hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Ninety-fourth Congress, first session.*” Retrieved on December 5, 2009 from <http://www.archive.org/details/nationwidedrivea02unit>
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1971, October 5). Events in Brief. *The Tech*, pp. 5. Retrieved on November 20, 2009 from <http://tech.mit.edu/V91/PDF/N37.pdf>.
- Roosevelt University Oral History Project in Labor History (1970). *Ernest DeMaio Interview by Elizabeth Balanoff, November 16, 1970*. Chicago, IL. Retrieved on November 26, 2009 from <http://faculty.roosevelt.edu/library/oralhistory/08-De%20Maio.pdf>.
- Roosevelt University Oral History Project in Labor History (1972). *Ernest DeMaio Interview by Elizabeth Balanoff, February 23, 1972*. Chicago, IL. Retrieved on November 26, 2009 from <http://faculty.roosevelt.edu/library/oralhistory/08-De%20Maio.pdf>.
- Schultz, B. and Schultz, R. (2001). *The Price of Dissent: Testimonies to Political Repression in America*. University of California Press.
- University of Connecticut Center for Oral History Interviews Collection (1987). *Ernest DeMaio Interview by Jack Goldring, July 14, 1987*.
- United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America (UE) (1973). *A UE Delegation Visits the Soviet Union* [Pamphlet]. New York, NY.