

VFI Civil Rights

The Trial That Shocked A Nation

—“I said: ‘Oh, my God.’ He looked as if he were dead. Blood was coming out of his nose and his mouth. He was unconscious. . . . I said: ‘For God’s sake, let’s get out of here.’ ”

—From the sworn testimony of Mrs Catherine Gelles before the National Labor Relations Board inquiry into the Ford riot of May 26, 1937.

“These citizens, men and women, unarmed and not inviting physical combat, were subjected to physical abuse and detention to an extent unheard of in this community within the last generation while the Dearborn police stood passively by. It is a marvel that no fatalities occurred.”

—Judge Ralph W. Liddy,
Common Pleas Court
July 31, 1937

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THE NATIONAL CITIZENS’ COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY

Initiated by the Civil Rights Federation (formerly the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights)

Rev. John H. Bollens, Chairman; Hon. Patrick H. O’Brien, Counsel;
Marie Hempel, Treasurer; Harriet Chapman, Secretary

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[1937]

Here Are The Highlights

Sensational sworn testimony delivered in Court by reporters photographers, observers and victims of the events of the afternoon of May 26 when men and women members of the International Union, United Automobile Workers of America were slugged and kicked into unconsciousness by Ford servicemen.

Court met in Federal Building, Detroit, July 6th with National Relations Board Examiner John T. Lindsay presiding.

Attorney for the Labor Board was Laurence A. Knapp.

Attorney for the Ford Motor Company was Louis J. Colombo, Sr.

Attorney for the Union was Maurice Sugar.

Charge: Malicious and brutal assault by agents of the Ford Motor Company upon union representatives who were peaceably gathered near the River Rouge plant for the purpose of distributing union literature.

Among six other charges filed by the Board against the Ford Company were:

- (1) Threats and acts of violence against union sympathizers in the last four months.
- (2) The discharge or layoff in the last three months of many employees because of their union membership or sympathy with labor organizations.
- (3) Use of propaganda by the company against independent unionism.

Whose Property?

July 6, the first day of the hearings, was devoted to testimony intended to prove whether the overpass and the street car loading stations, on which the beatings took place, was Ford property or public property.

The overpass, or bridge, is above Miller Road, near Gate 4 of the Ford River Rouge Plant, Dearborn, Michigan. The street car loading and unloading stations adjoin the bridge.

The Government contended that the overpass and the loading stations had been leased to the Detroit Street Railway Department, and that they were therefore public property, and that only the Detroit Street Railway Department had the right to forbid persons from going upon them.

Louis Colombo, Ford Attorney, denied this. He did agree that Miller Road was public property.

John K. Norton, an engineer for the Wayne County Road Commission, testified that a portion of the overpass was above Miller Road, and the eastern portion was above Ford property.

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Homer Libbey, Secretary to the Detroit Street Railway Department, testified that the D. S. R. is paying rent for the use of the overpass and loading and unloading stations.

The high light of the closing period of the hearings was Maurice Sugar's introduction of the state supreme court action in connection with the suit of the McClintic-Marshall company of Pittsburgh against the Ford company for the foreclosure of a mechanic's lien. The Pittsburgh company furnished steel and other materials for the construction of the Eagle avenue underpass.

Admitted to Be Public

The Ford company, in a brief filed with the state supreme court, set forth:

"Appellees (McClintock-Marshall) contend the underpass is not in essence a public structure. The underpass is inherently public. If the municipality had sufficient funds it would undoubtedly have proceeded with this undertaking. Instead, the Ford Motor company did what the municipality should have done and constructed an underpass from which scores of thousands of the general public reap more benefit than the Ford Motor company. The mere fact that a private corporation constructs a project does not change its nature."

This bit of evidence was considered by the government attorneys and the trial examiner to be very significant. Maurice Sugar holds that it definitely establishes the fact that these underpasses are public property.

* * * * *

Permit Granted

Testimony of Walter Reuther, UAW Organizer

First witness to describe the riot was Walter Reuther, red-headed, quiet-spoken president of the West Side Union Local—membership 30,000. First he described the plans which had been made for the distribution of union literature. He said that a total of 50 to 70 people came to various gates of the River Rouge plant at about 1:45 P. M.

Governor Attorney Knapp: Women were greatly in preponderance?

Reuther: I should say two-thirds were women.

Knapp: Had you taken any steps to obtain a permit for the distribution of the leaflets?

Reuther: I had...I made application for it at the city hall. A copy of the leaflet was okayed by the Dearborn city clerk...I got the permit. I had it in my pocket when we went to the plant.

Knapp asked what instructions had been given to the women.

Knapp: You say specific instructions were given that there should be no violence of any kind?

Reuther: That is correct. I was very emphatic. A couple of the girls were hesitant and I re-emphasized that no violence was expected. I showed them our permit and explained in detail our constitutional rights.

Reuther's description of what happened:

I went to gate 4 in an automobile with Robert Kanter, an organizer, and the Rev. Raymond Sanford, a Chicago clergyman who was making observations for a church group, and a driver.

We parked the car about 75 feet from gate 4 and were just getting out when a man I thought was a service man said we had no right to park there and the driver moved the car. As Kanter, Mr. Sanford and I approached the stairway to the overpass of gate 4, we were stopped by a large, dark fellow who appeared to be an Italian.

He asked us who we were. I said, "I am an American citizen." Mr. Sanford said that he represented a church group. (Ed.: At this time Reuther and the two others met Frankenstein and Kennedy and all ascended the stairs.) We walked toward the center of the platform and several newspaper photographers snapped our photographs.

Knapp: Did anything happen soon?

Reuther: Very shortly.

Knapp: Did you notice any men on this superstructure?

Reuther: Yes, they were leaning on the railing all around.

Knapp: About how many?

Reuther: Approximately 150.

Knapp: Any of them carrying lunch baskets?

Reuther: No.

Knapp: Do you recall their wearing badges?

Reuther: I didn't notice badges on them or on the man who gave us orders downstairs and it struck me as strange that anyone could give orders at the Ford Motor Company without a badge.

(Ed.: Reuther then explained that he had worked at the Ford Motor Company from 1934 and was familiar with the Ford badge system.)

We had been on the platform about a minute when we were approached by men from all sides. When they got about five feet from us one man spoke to us and in an aggressive voice said: "This is private property. Get the hell off."

Knapp: What did you do?

Reuther: At the time we heard the command we saw the others converging on us. Instinctively we turned and started walking toward the stairs.

Knapp: In obedience to the command?

Reuther: Yes.

Knapp: Did you make any oral response?

Reuther: No.

Knapp: Your only response was to vacate?



Richard Frankenstein is here shown at the beginning of the attack. He is the figure in the middle whose coat is being pulled over his head. Frankenstein is a six-foot ex-football star from Dayton University. He is president of the Dodge local, and in charge of UAW organization at the Ford plant.

Reuther: That is correct.

Knapp: What hapened next?

Reuther: I had taken maybe three steps, no more than four, when someone slugged me on the back of the head from the rear. Immediately I was surrounded by 12 or 15 men who pounced upon me. I threw up my arm to shield my face. Meanwhile they pounded me on all parts of the head and upper body. There was general scuffling all around me. One fellow seemed to be the leader; anyway he was giving instructions.

Knapp: Can you identify him in this photo?

Reuther: The man who was one of the leaders of the group that beat me is on the extreme left of the picture.

Knapp: I want you to describe the character of the beating. Were you knocked down?

Reuther: After I was surrounded, I was struck severely. I was knocked to the ground and kicked until the man said "that's enough." I thought that they were going to release me then. They picked me up by the feet and shoulders and held me over their heads above the concrete. Then they threw me down on my back and kicked me again. I was lifted up and thrown on the concrete seven or eight times. Then they threw me into an aisle. I was lying beside Frankenstein. He was practically motionless. I was thrown down the stairs and found myself on the ground. I was beaten when I tried to get up. Then I was chased by four or five men. (Ed: Reuther escaped in the car of a passing motorist.)

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Five Against One

Richard T. Frankenstein, Director of Ford Organizational Campaign of UAW

Frankenstein's description of the events leading up to the actual attack was approximately the same as that of Reuther. Further testimony follows verbatim:

Knapp: What did you do when you were ordered to leave the bridge?

Frankenstein: I don't know whether you have ever been ordered off from any place or not, but it's rather embarrassing. I looked at Reuther and Reuther looked at me and we started to go. I assure you we did not utter a sound. I felt a thud on the back of my head and looked around and a volley of blows was rained on me. As they pummeled me, I did not see much because some very adept person used my coat to good advantage.

Knapp (showing a picture to the witness): You were on your feet in this picture. Did you remain on your feet?

Frankenstein: Not very long. They knocked me down and some one put

his heel in my stomach and twisted it. A man whom I since have been able to identify as Samuel Taylor would say, "That's enough, fellows." Then they would stand me up and Taylor would knock me down again.

Knapp: How long did this continue?

Frankenstein: I can't say because I lost consciousness, but I would believe it was about 8 or 10 minutes . . . I was bounced, thrown, dragged and knocked down three flights of stairs. At the first landing a new group was waiting and took up the assault where the other group left off.

* * * * *

The Church—An Observer

Testimony of Rev. Raymond Sanford, Chairman of the Committee for Church and Industry of the Chicago Church Federation

Mr. Sanford was present as an eye witness at the leaflet distribution in case that the right to distribute these leaflets would not be fully respected. No person or no organization, however, expected the bloody events which took place.

Mr. Sanford's description of the attack on Reuther:

"I noticed him crouched down with arm shielding his face. His face was blanched. (There was a look of terror in his eyes.) Blood was trickling all over his face. A husky individual wrenched him loose from a railing and threw him down a flight of stairs. Eventually he was thrown down three flights of stairs with men attacking him from all sides."

Mr. Sanford's description of what he saw of the attack on Frankenstein:

"Four or five men were kicking and beating him. He was kicked in the groin and kidneys and knocked down. He was lifted to his feet and then knocked down and beaten again."

Mr. Sanford's description of the treatment given women who were trying to alight from street cars with their leaflets:

"Men were hitting at them and pushing them around. Girls were being called all manner of vile names usually attributed to women of the streets. A well-dressed man kicked one of the girls in the abdomen and she fell at my feet. I shot an imporing glance at a mounted policeman and he, in a pleading and 'For-God's-sakes' tone asked the well-dressed man not to hurt the women. He seemed to speak as one not having authority."

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Freedom of the Press

Testimony of Victor Beresford, Detroit News Reporter

Victor Beresford, Detroit News reporter, testified that he and Herbert Bauer, a United Press photographer, arrived at the River Rouge fight about 11 A. M. the day of the trouble.

Beresford: When we got near the overpass at gate 4, Bauer got out to take some pictures and I drove slowly on. I noticed about twenty-five car-



Ford "Workers" doing their "Work" . . . The Company's statement that no servicemen took part in the attack is proven false by this picture which shows an assailant bending over with a handcuff protruding from his right hip pocket.

roads of men parked under the overpass. Many of them jumped out of their cars and shouted at Bauer, "He's taking pictures; get that guy."

Laurence Knapp, NLRB attorney: How would you describe those men?

Beresford: I'd say they were hoodlums.

He was told to continue his description of what happened.

Beresford: My car was surrounded by about a dozen men. Meanwhile a similar sized group surrounded Bauer, who called to me. The men wanted to know if there were any cameras in my car, and what I was doing there. They escorted me to the main gate. Bauer had already been taken there and was being questioned by one whom I took to be a service man.

Bauer was explaining who he was and the men complained they did not want their pictures in the paper . . .

I asked him (the man in charge. Ed.) if he knew Richard Frankenstein and Walter Reuther and the union group were coming out in the afternoon to distribute literature.

He said: "Yes, we've been looking for them for a couple of weeks."

I said: "What if they go on to the overpass to distribute literature?"

He said: "We'll throw them the hell off there."

Beresford reported to his office and then went back to the Ford plant just before the trouble started.

Beresford: I drove on to the cinders about 300 feet south of the overpass. I had a police radio in my car, so I stayed there to check on possible trouble in the neighborhood. I saw Frankenstein walk in front of my car, apparently in quite a hurry. I saw several photographers and reporters follow Frankenstein. Then a car pulled up close beside mine with four or five men in it. One said to me . . . "Did you see where Frankenstein went?" I said, "I don't know."

Then they got out of their car and something attracted their attention to the overpass. They ran over there and I followed them. There was considerable confusion there and I remember in particular one heavy set man ran up the stairs four at a time. . . As I got there they were throwing Walter Reuther down the steps on his ear. He got away and got into the open.

Laurence Knapp, Government attorney: Did you see fighting north of the fence?

Beresford: Oh, yes. Everywhere you looked there was some one getting kicked around.

* * * * *

"Kill Him! Kill Him!"

Testimony of Mrs. Catherine Gelles, Member of the Women's Auxiliary of the UAW

Mrs. Gelles: I tried to get off the street car. Two or three men grabbed me and started twisting my arms trying to take my leaflets away.

Question: Had you or the other women provoked them in any way or said anything to them?

Mrs. Gelles: No. We were taken by surprise even before we had a chance to get off the car. They broke the package open, and I took what I could hold in my hand and threw them over the fence.

Her Description of What Happened to Meriweather

Mrs. Gelles: A colored fellow was kneeling over him and pounding him. A tall man in a gray suit and a gray hat was kicking him. Another fellow, he was fat, also was kicking him . . . They kept hollering, "Kill him! Kill him!" I started pulling them off. When I saw his face, I saw it was Mr. Meriweather. I said: "Oh, my God!" He looked as if he were dead. Blood was coming out of his nose and his mouth. He was unconscious. But finally he came to and got up. He could hardly stand. He started away but it was in the wrong direction and I said: "My God, Mr. Meriweather, let's get out of here."

Then someone grabbed me from behind and someone pushed me from the front and I fell down. While I was down someone kicked me in the stomach. When I got up they continued to beat me. They started to drag me toward the street car. Another girl came running over to help me. There were about three of us then.

As they pulled us on to the street car a girl I know only as "Stella" was holding on to the doors and they knocked her down and started to beat her and kick her.

They pushed us all back on the street car which went to the other side of the bridge where the motorman let us off. Stella leaned up against a fence and was real ill.

There was a mounted policeman there. I said: "You're an officer. Call an ambulance for this woman, she's sick." He said: "Oh, let her get back the way she got out here. We did not invite her . . ."

Then the man again pushed us back on the car and then I became sick myself. Back at the hall (Ed.: the union hall) doctors gave me pills for my stomach. I was sick for three days.

* * * * *

"Kick His Brains Out!"

Testimony of William Meriweather, a Cadillac Worker

William Meriweather, a Cadillac worker, spent a month in the hospital with a broken spine as a result of the beating he received on May 26th. (As this goes to press fifteen Ford men are under indictment for assault on Meriweather. The indictment, issued by a grand jury conducted by Ralph W. Liddy, says that the union man is suffering from spinal injuries.)

Meriweather's description of the noon meeting held by the union people before going to the Ford plant, was the same as that given by Frankenstein, Reuther, Kilpatrick, and other witnesses. He said that everyone was warned against creating disorder and told that no trouble was expected. The men were told to escort the women and "keep an eye open," he said.

On approaching gate 4, Meriweather testified he saw a good many automobiles, with groups of men standing on the running boards, looking



Robert Sentman president of FAECT being pummeled by service men.

north for something. Many of them were wearing dark glasses, and the atmosphere was tense, he said. He testified that the women were attacked as they came out of the street car.

Question: What did you do then?

Meriweather: I did what I was instructed to do. I kept my eyes open and observed. Then my attention was attracted to Walter Reuther. He was walking along the fence, apparently dazed, with a couple of large knots

on his head. I said: "How does it happen that the City of Dearborn lets Ford get away with this, when we have a permit?" He said: "I don't know. This is the most vicious attack ever perpetrated in this country and we are going to prosecute every way we can. . . ."

I saw two men kicking a union man who was lying on the ground. They were snarling at him, "Take off that union button." I tried again to get to the women and I saw Robert Sentman (Ed.: a UAW member) being pursued by Oscar Jones, alias Jackie Young, a Negro prizefighter, and Wilfred Comment.

Sentman was running and they were hitting him from the rear. They knocked him down and dragged him on the ground like something that was not human.

Meriweather testified that he was struck from behind, as he turned around in time to see the girls "mauled around," knocked down and kicked.

Meriweather: I was grabbed from the rear and got a clip on the head. Someone said, "Get that union———" Jones and Comment rushed at me, knocked me down and kicked me. I don't know how many times.

One of his assailants, Meriweather said, was yelling: "Kill him! Kick his brains out. Stamp his face in!"

Meriweather: I kept feeling feet thudding into my back until I lost consciousness. The first thing I remember was hearing Mrs. Catherine Gelles say, "Oh, my God, Meriweather, get out of here!" The pain was so great I could hardly navigate.

When I was trying to get away someone hollered "Run!" I couldn't run so I rolled under an auto and then saw from the footsteps that three men were trying to find me. They looked inot the car but not under it. Then they left.

I lay there to get my breath, which had been kicked out of me. Then I found my car. The starter would not work and I had to crank it. I drove back to union headquarters, although I could hardly push the pedals in to the floor.

A doctor examined me and said I had a broken back. An X-ray showed the first and second lumbar vertebrae on the left side snapped off one-half inch from the spine. I was taken to the Woman's Hospital, May 28th, where I remained five weeks in a cast.

Meriweather opened his shirt and showed to the government attorney his cast, which he was still wearing.

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Around and Near the Plant

Testimony of Ralph Dunham, a UAW Member

On July 9th the hearings were dramatically interrupted. Ralph Dunham, a young union member, collapsed on the witness stand. Dunham testified that as a result of injuries received he had spent twelve days in

the hospital, with internal hemorrhages, and that a doctor told him he would require an operation before he could work again.

Dunham was describing the beating given him by four or five Ford men.

"Something had broken loose in the pit of my stomach," he said.

At this point in the testimony he bent over in his chair. He seemed to be thinking. In a moment it was noticed that his shoulders were shaking and that he was on the verge of tears. He was led to the Trial Examiner's chambers, where he finished his testimony.

Dunham said that he had distributed leaflets, alone, near Gate 4. When he had finished, he said, he telephoned and was told that a union car would stop for him. As he was waiting a green sedan containing four or five men drove up and the men got out.

Dunham: After the first blows my body went numb all over. The other blows were just jars that didn't seem to hurt.

He said that he couldn't say what weapons were used but testified that as the men went away he noticed a blackjack and handcuffs hanging out of one of their pockets.



Walter Reuther and Richard Frankensteen after washing off the blood.



A Ford worker looks at Fordisms with an antidote in his left hand. —Wide World Photo

310 Hofmann Building

Detroit, Michigan

I wish to contribute \$..... to the Civil Rights Federation to further the work against the unfair labor practices and denials of civil and human rights of the Ford Motor Company, and against the spread of the vigilante movement. I wish further information concerning the Civil Rights Federation and the procedure of affiliation.

Name

Address

Type of Organization No. of Members.....