
1

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Ralph Cordiner, who became president of General Electric (GE) in 1940, summed up his company's good fortune when he admitted that "General Electric was fortunate to enter the most dramatic and sustained growth business in the Twentieth Century."¹ In the 15 years from 1920 to 1935, no industry in America grew and diversified as rapidly as electrical manufacturing. At the close of World War I, the industry primarily manufactured heavy electrical machinery, equipment, and apparatus. Consumer items such as the radio, the refrigerator, and the washing machine were all but unknown. The two giants of the industry, then as now, were Westinghouse and General Electric. As the electric age progressed, these two companies acquired additional independent electrical establishments and engaged in the manufacture of every conceivable electrical product from the kitchen toaster to giant locomotives. As a result of the demand for these products, consumption of electricity more than doubled during the twenties, and the industrial workforce in electrical manufacturing soared to 343,000 in 1929, nearly double the 1921 figure.²

The industry produced approximately 300,000 distinguishable products by the mid-1930s. Much of the growth lay in the production of home appliances—refrigerators, washing machines, toasters, and especially radios. In addition to vastly increasing the size of General Electric and Westinghouse, these products created new corporate giants such as the Philadelphia Storage Battery Company (Philco), the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), Maytag, the General Motors Frigidaire Division, Century Electric, Emerson Electric, and others. Production was located primarily in nine

states east of the Mississippi and north of the Mason-Dixon Line, and even in the midst of the Great Depression, output for the industry approached \$3 billion.³

The capstones of this industrial kingdom were the Schenectady works of the General Electric Corporation and the East Pittsburgh Division of the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company. They were the crown jewels in two companies that accounted for about one-fourth of the industry's annual sales by the end of the 1930s.⁴ General Electric, in addition to its numerous wholly and partly owned subsidiaries and its foreign branches, operated 32 manufacturing plants in 11 states. By 1937, even after the worst ravages of the Depression, General Electric had 75,212 employees, including the chairman of the board. Westinghouse, number two in the industry, had some 52,249 employees spread out over 19 plants in 14 states.⁵

The explosive surge in employment in the twenties made the crash in the industry during the Depression even more dramatic. Between 1929 and 1933, value added in electrical manufacturing fell by 70 percent, almost one-third more than the general drop in American industry. One of the results of the suddenness of the slide was the inability of General Electric and Westinghouse, both known for their innovative and professional personnel practices, to honor the implied promise of employment security that lay at the heart of welfare capitalism. Both companies tried. General Electric experimented with unemployment insurance and both of the electrical giants tried worksharing and shorter workdays as an alternative to massive layoffs. Skilled workers, a precious commodity in heavy electrical equipment plants, were given less-skilled work to do to forestall their layoff and possible loss to the company. Everything failed. By 1933, both companies had laid off approximately half of their workers.⁶

When it became clear that the disaster could not be contained by company action alone, the leaders of the electrical manufacturing industry, in particular Gerard Swope of General Electric, led the small, but influential group of corporate leaders who pushed President Herbert Hoover for public relief programs. Swope was also in the vanguard of the move toward central economic planning based on government-approved cooperation among corporations organized in industry trade associations—an idea that came to partial fruition in 1934 with the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act.⁷

Although Swope's solution to America's economic problems lay in a partnership between corporations and government, he also

acknowledged the need for employee participation in his corporatist vision. In addition to the range of company welfare programs aimed at bringing the worker into the "family" of the firm, Swope, as well as his contemporaries at Westinghouse, instituted elaborate works council systems to give employees a voice in a limited range of company policies and to keep independent unions out. As New Deal legislation chipped away at the legality of these company unions, management at both General Electric and Westinghouse adjusted by granting the councils considerable autonomy, including the right to collective bargaining. In many cases the leaders of these councils were senior skilled workers, many of whom had been active in earlier failed unionization drives. Through their work on the company unions they not only developed a basically stable relationship with management, but they also enhanced their stature as worker leaders. Both factors would have significant effects on the pattern of later industrial relations at General Electric and Westinghouse.

Prior to 1920, a scattering of AFL craft unions had tried to organize in the electrical industry. The International Association of Machinists, the Electricians, Moulders, Patternmakers, Polishers, Blacksmiths, Steamfitters and Carpenters had locals in several General Electric, Westinghouse, and other electrical plants.⁸

A number of strikes took place in the industry prior to and after the World War I, conducted by the various craft unions. These walkouts especially affected General Electric, but most failed because of a lack of craft union solidarity in the face of GE's intransigence. At no time were the craft unions able to gain a real foothold in the industry, or to establish a contractual relationship with any of the electrical companies. By 1920 these unions had been driven out of the industry entirely and protest virtually ceased. Only six strikes occurred in the entire electrical manufacturing industry between 1927 and 1929, involving just 1,800 workers.⁹ The experience of the craft unions made them reluctant to renew their efforts to organize the industry, and until 1932 unionization lay dormant. Disillusioned by their experience, the workers, too, showed little interest in a labor movement dominated by the craft concept. Yet despite the meager results and the general disinterest of most workers, some of the older skilled workers remembered the union days and constituted a cadre of union sympathizers ready to serve when events in the nation caused a revival of the trade union movement.

Nevertheless, during the early years of the Depression the American labor movement continued the downward slide that had begun after World War I. Dues-paying membership fell precipi-

tously as numerous union jobs vanished when the economy collapsed. But the collapse also struck hard at the status and legitimacy of employers. No one lost more prestige than the large industrialists who had successfully crushed the labor movement of the World War I period and repelled efforts at new unionization in the twenties through a combination of political power, ruthless suppression, and welfare capitalism. As one observer of the dramatic shift of opinion caused by the Depression stated, "Capitalism laid an egg and lost its prestige."¹⁰ The corporate heroes of the 1920s had fallen, and the nation filled up with embittered and aggrieved workers.

The Great Depression profoundly altered not only the economic and social, but also the ideological climate of the times. Faith in capitalism was shockingly undermined. By 1933, one-fourth of the labor force was unemployed,¹¹ and one survey of unemployed workers' opinions revealed that nearly one-fourth of them felt a revolution might be good for the country.¹² In this setting, unionization stirred once more at the core of the electrical industry. Small local unions appeared at General Electric's Schenectady, New York, and Lynn, Massachusetts, works as early as 1932, and by 1935 the virus had spread to the big Westinghouse plants in East Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

The leaders of these early efforts were often highly skilled and well paid workers. Most had considerable seniority, enough to have escaped the layoffs of the deepest part of the Depression, and many were radicals, or came from families in which radicalism, or unionism, or both had been part of the experience of their brothers or fathers. As older, skilled workers, they were conscious of the inroads that new technology and the changing organization of work had made on their status and power in the shops and in their communities. They fit the model of what one scholar has referred to as "autonomous workmen,"—loosely supervised men who possessed a great deal of discretion in the carrying out of their tasks.¹³

These workers, especially the radicals and union supporters among them, had been overwhelmed by the success of welfare capitalism in the twenties. But although without direct influence, save for their roles on the works councils, they kept the flame of unionism alive. When the Depression created the circumstances in which the companies could no longer honor welfare capitalism's implied contract based on good wages and job security, these older workers were the natural candidates to lead the unionization drives at the heavy manufacturing plants of General Electric and Westinghouse.

Radicals such as William Turnbull, an immigrant British socialist at Schenectady GE, and Alfred Coulthard, a skilled pat-

termmaker and socialist at Lynn took the lead.¹⁴ At the RCA plant in Philadelphia, skilled machinists from the Communist-led Metal Workers Industrial Union took the lead. At East Pittsburgh Westinghouse, Logan Burkhart, a skilled generator inspector with previous AFL experience, played the key role. Communist organizer K. M. Kirkendahl led the drive at the General Motors Electrical Division in Dayton, Ohio. In South Philadelphia, IWW supporters such as John Schaeffer and James Price were instrumental in the organization of the Westinghouse turbine works.¹⁵

But the skilled, union-conscious craftsmen in the heavy manufacturing shops did not constitute the majority of the workers in electrical manufacturing by the 1930s. Many more worked in the small motor and appliance shops, by far the fastest growing segment of the industry. There, in companies like Philco, RCA, Emerson Electric, and Frigidaire, the workers tended to be young, semi-skilled, and largely without trade union traditions. A significant proportion of them were women. Unlike the skilled workers, they had little or no autonomy on the job, tied as they often were to sequential assembly operations. Their labor relations environment was considerably different as well. The new firms cared little for the paternalistic employee relations strategies championed by men like GE's Swope. Managers in these companies were often inexperienced in personnel matters. Not surprisingly, organization attempts in this part of the industry were often marked by bitter conflict. Also not surprisingly, this new workforce had grievances about low pay and working conditions that their older, more skilled co-workers did not share. Later, in a number of places, these two groups of workers would come into conflict for control of a number of local unions.

The first organizing breakthrough came in the appliance sector, at the Philco plant in Philadelphia. This huge factory—by 1930 the leader in the manufacture of radios—had never been threatened by unionism.¹⁶ The coming of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) changed all that. In June 1933, company officials established an employee representation plan in order to comply with the letter of the Act, if not the spirit. It had little success because of the presence in the plant of a small group of workers who had organized themselves as the Philrod Fishing Club. These workers, including a young man named James Carey, had banded together in 1932 for the ostensible purpose of buying a boat. Their real purpose was to raise money for organizing the plant.¹⁷ The group, headed by a committee that included Joe Quinn, George Morgan, Robert Gallagher, and Harry Block, successfully resisted the pressure for a company union.¹⁸

The company, through an administrative decision, gave the union sympathizers the chance they were waiting for. An order requiring employees to work ten hours a day temporarily to make up for a Fourth of July holiday produced a walkout by some 350 assemblers, testers, and repairmen. The strike began when a score of workers, including most of the members of the fishing club, walked off the assembly line and paralyzed the plant.

The committee thus found itself, unexpectedly, negotiating with one of the corporate giants of America. On July 15, 1933, only a few days after the strike began, Philco signed a contract calling for an eight hour day, forty-hour week, time-and-a-half for overtime and wage increases of up to 30 cents per hour. The agreement also included seniority and a grievance procedure.¹⁹ In only a few days a group of young men, none of the leaders older than 30, had brought a corporate giant to the bargaining table and had signed a contract without equal in American manufacturing.

Such complete surrender on the part of Philco is difficult to understand. At the time a number of unions in the AFL opened a drive to urge their members and allies to buy only union-made goods. One early UE organizer believed that this threat, coupled with Philco's desire to improve its share in the radio market, led to the company's decision to sign. There was also mention of a possible AFL boycott of Philco products, but this was not substantiated and seems unlikely.²⁰ The concessions probably resulted from a combination of factors, including ignorance on the part of the company as to the lasting significance of their concessions and a desire to resolve trouble with the unions so as to capitalize on the business upturn in 1933.

What followed illustrated the naivete of the parties involved. On August 17, 1933, barely one month after signing the first agreement, Philco signed another agreement that granted the local a union shop. All new employees were obligated to become union members within two weeks of being hired. There was some question as to whether this provision violated Section 7A of the NIRA, in that people would be denied freedom of choice in joining or not joining a union. The union decided, with the knowledge of the company, that a committee would go to Washington to get National Recovery Administration director Hugh Johnson's approval of the provision. They left the plant in their working clothes and after one of their two cars broke down, all ten arrived at the Capital tired from their cramped journey in one automobile. Having made arrangements for sharing one hotel room, they set out to find Johnson, armed with newspaper pictures of the man for identification.²¹

They discovered Johnson conferring with William Green of the AFL and the top management of the automobile industry about industry codes. The committee interrupted the meeting and asked Johnson to read the union shop provision. Johnson hurriedly did so and signed the document. The organization of the largest radio plant in the country was complete. Almost overnight, an 8,000 strong local union organized on an industrial basis had come into being.²² The agreement they signed proved to be so costly from the company's point of view that five years later Philco management resorted to a lockout to force a roll back of wages.²³

On August 3, 1933, the AFL agreed to grant the local a federal charter, which gave it something resembling colonial status within the AFL.²⁴ It was the first formal step toward the creation of the United Electrical Workers.

Even after the enactment of the NIRA, the AFL continued to show little interest in the millions of workers in industrial plants. When forced to act because of the existence of spontaneously organized locals of industrial workers, they relied on the device of the federal charter. The craft unions looked upon this as a method of holding onto the industrial locals until a way could be found to divide them up among the various craft unions. In 1933 and 1934, five such charters were granted to five major plants in the electrical industry as well as to several smaller ones.²⁵ General Electric at Fort Wayne, Indiana, and New Kensington, Pennsylvania, and Westinghouse at Springfield, Massachusetts, and Essington, Pennsylvania, joined the Philco local as federally chartered unions in the electrical manufacturing industry.²⁶ Thousands of employees in a number of other large plants in the industry refused to accept federal charters and instead remained independent. These included such giant factories as Schenectady and Lynn General Electric; East Pittsburgh, Westinghouse; and Camden, RCA.

As at Philco, the organization of unions in the heavy manufacturing plants was largely carried out by the workers themselves. This gave them a habit of independence and self-reliance that would characterize electrical industry unionism for much of its history. There was no national organizing drive funded by the CIO as in steel, auto, rubber, and textiles, and no full-time organizers. Skilled workers with some connection to trade unionism or radical politics took the lead. The Lynn General Electric plant serves as an illustration. The company had effectively replaced independent unions with company unions after an AFL recognition strike in 1918. One individual who had learned the lessons of that attempt to organize on a craft basis was Alfred Coulthard, who had been a

member of the old Patternmaker's League, an AFL affiliate. Coulthard, a socialist, led the drive which resulted in the organization of an independent electrical union at Lynn. Fellow skilled workers—machinists, tool-and-die makers, electricians—played prominent roles in the campaign. When the AFL offered them a federal charter and eventual dispersion among 21 craft affiliates, they refused.²⁷

The history of unionization at GE's Schenectady plant followed a similar pattern. The local emerged from a combination of two small locals. One, established by a group of skilled workers from Eastern Europe, belonged to the Steel and Metal Workers Industrial Union, an affiliate of the Communist-led Trade Union Unity League (TUUL). Most of its members were Communists. Charles Rivers, a Communist and New York State director of the Trade Union Unity League, provided the skilled leadership needed to bring the workers, many of them veterans of a failed International Association of Machinists (IAM) attempt to organize the plant, together. By the time he arrived in Schenectady in 1932, the young Rivers had already served as an organizer with the TUUL's National Textile Workers in Gastonia, North Carolina, and had spent nearly two years working as a machinist in a Soviet factory.²⁸ William Turnbull, a socialist and a skilled turbine inspector originally from England, started the second group. The two locals merged in 1934 when the Communist Party, as part of its popular front strategy, dissolved the TUUL and ordered its affiliates to move into the mainstream of the labor movement and "bore from within" to gain influence.²⁹

The one thing that the federal locals and the independents had in common was a desire to have the AFL grant an industrial union charter covering the entire industry. The Philco local passed a resolution in December 1933, calling for assistance in the formation of a national organization to coordinate organizational activity and better conditions throughout the industry.³⁰ James Carey played a key role in urging this action. He had been a delegate to the 1933 AFL convention in Washington, D.C., and realized the hostility in the Federation to industrial unionism. Carey also knew that a national charter was of paramount importance to the electrical workers.³¹

In response to Carey's call, representatives of the federal locals and the independents met on December 28 and 29 in New York City. From the meetings emerged the Radio and Allied Trades National Labor Council with Carey as its chairman. Dues were set at \$1 for current operating funds and a one cent per month per

capita tax for finances.³² The primary purpose of the organization was to secure closer coordination of all affiliated unions in the radio industry by collecting and disseminating facts on hours, rates, working conditions, as well as production, earnings, and other pertinent information.³³

The formation of the Radio and Allied Trades Council raised little enthusiasm in the AFL. The conservative craft unions looked with particular suspicion on any liaison with the left-wing leadership of the independents. The federal and independent groups had first made real contact in the summer of 1933, during the NRA code hearings for the electrical industry. They were joined in these informal hearings by a third group, an affiliate of the Communist-led Trade Union Unity League organization, called the Metal Workers Industrial Union.³⁴

The men who organized the Metal Workers Industrial Union shared many of the characteristics of the union pioneers in heavy electrical manufacturing. One key group of skilled mechanics had been members of the Micrometer lodge of the International Association of Machinists during the First World War and had witnessed the destruction of their union in the twenties. These men kept the idea of trade unionism alive among the younger workers, one of whom was James Matles, an apprentice machinist who rose to become the dominant figure in the Metal Workers and one of the key leaders of the TUUL.

James Matles was born Eichel Matlis Fridman in Soroca, Bessarabia (Romania) to Jewish parents in 1909. An average student, Matles left school after junior high school and held a variety of jobs as a mechanic and chauffeur until he emigrated to the United States in 1928. From his earliest days in the machine shops of New York, he demonstrated the dedication and leadership qualities that were to make him respected by friend and foe alike during a turbulent union career that would span nearly half a century. In spite of his youth and his limited command of English, Matles' co-workers called on him to negotiate with employers. His militancy and ability did not go unnoticed by William Z. Foster, Communist Party stalwart and head of the Trade Union Unity League, and by 1932 Matles occupied one of the key leadership positions in the TUUL. Matles considered Foster his mentor, and under the direction of the leader of the great steel strike of 1919, he became a fervent believer in industrial unionism. Whether he also became a member of the Communist Party has never been conclusively proven, but right-wing critics later claimed that he joined in 1930 and became a member of the Party's national trade union commis-

sion in 1934. But considering Matles' role in the TUUL, it is likely that any decision as to whether or not to formally join the Party depended on tactical considerations and was made by Foster and the other party leaders, not by Matles.³⁵

Matles and other leftists such as Charles Rivers and James Lustig successfully organized in the machine and printing shops in New York City by concentrating on the older shops where a high percentage of experienced, skilled workers could be found. Soon, with the support of TUUL affiliates elsewhere, the effort spread to other cities.³⁶

At the New York meeting, the newly formed Radio and Allied Trades National Labor Council applied for an AFL industrial charter. The Federation demanded the unseating of the delegates from the independent locals before an industrial charter could be considered.³⁷ Not wanting to stand in the way of the charter, the independents agreed to withdraw. However, a close working relationship, albeit unofficial, was maintained.

Pressure for and against an industrial charter continued. The Executive Council of the AFL recognized the existence of a peculiar problem in the electrical industry which made it difficult to establish craft unions. At its meeting before the 1934 convention, the Council searched for a method of applying a general policy that would result in the organization of the many skilled workers into their respective craft organizations, and a coordination of these organizations by plants, through shop councils. The shop councils were to contain representatives from the different trade unions, and would enable a single agency to bargain collectively with management for all employees, thus combining the virtues of centralized bargaining with the self interest of craft union membership. The Council viewed the federal local as the first step toward this end.³⁸

The federal unions in turn viewed this approach with considerable skepticism. They realized that the ability of the big manufacturers to shift production between plants to avoid pressure would have to be met by the power of one union representing all the workers of a particular company. To further this end, a group of federal labor union delegates met in early October 1934. Twenty-three delegates representing 42 federal locals from a number of branches of the electrical manufacturing industry, including radio, took part.³⁹ Of those present, 20 delegates were instructed to vote in favor of industrial unionism and three were uninstructed. The meeting formed a committee charged with seeking the advice of John L. Lewis and David Dubinsky, leaders of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), which had been formed in the AFL. Lewis and

Dubinsky strongly supported the group's resolution that the federal unions "not be separated or segregated into craft unions, but be held intact on industrial lines. . . ."40

Throughout 1934, the unions in the radio industry continued their efforts to secure a national charter from the AFL. The Federation, however, despite the appeals, contended that it was not sure that such a proposed national union could finance its affairs and refused to grant it recognition as an industrial union. Also, during this period, organizing efforts continued in the electrical industry, both by the federal locals and the independents. Quite regularly, however, when applications submitted by newly organized industrial locals for federal charters were rejected by the Federation, these organizations joined with the independents.⁴¹

In December 1934, 11 federal locals sent 18 delegates to Buffalo for the purpose of securing national cooperation. The National Radio and Allied Trades Council, a formalization of the group formed a year earlier in New York City, came out of the Buffalo meeting. While it was not the industrial union they wanted, it was one of the first organizations of its kind to be recognized by the AFL.⁴² Lewis Hines, the AFL organizer who had been assigned to the federal radio locals as an adviser, ran the meeting. The prominence of two Philco local members, Carey as president and Harry Block as vice-president, demonstrated the continuing influence of the big Philadelphia local in the radio group. The first action of the new council was to renew the application for an industrial charter.⁴³

At the beginning of 1934, a development took place that was to have a profound effect on electrical industry unionism. In March of that year, the Trade Union Unity League officially folded. Its demise resulted from the decision by the Communist Party to give up trying to establish a dual union movement in the United States. The new party line called for "boring from within" the AFL and its existing unions.⁴⁴

One of the TUUL affiliates, James Matles' Metal Workers Industrial Union, had developed a close working relationship with the electrical unions, especially the independents. When William Green ordered the federal radio locals to stop cooperating with the independents, including the Metal Workers Industrial Union, because they were dual unionists, the three groups agreed to stop open cooperation because the radio group feared it might jeopardize its chances for a national charter. Covert cooperation continued, however, with Matles remaining very close to the situation.⁴⁵

In early 1935, a convention of all the independents representing the electrical manufacturing industry and the Metal Workers

Industrial Union met. The objective was to organize a national organization which would then seek affiliation with the AFL on an independent basis. Delegates represented unions from Schenectady, Lynn, Pittsburgh, New York, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. Many of the men who would become stalwarts of the UE's left wing participated—men such as James Lustig, Leo Jandreau, Carl Bersing, David Davis, Elmer Van Gelder, and Charles Rivers.⁴⁶ Although the federal locals were not represented, they had observers at the meeting. The delegates formed the National Federation of Metal and Allied Unions. It consisted, on paper, of two national unions: one known as the Electrical and Radio Workers and the other as the Machine, Tool and Foundry Workers, the new manifestation of the Metal Workers Industrial Union. William Turnbull from Schenectady GE and Charles Kenneck, a tool-and-die maker from Philadelphia, headed the two affiliates, while Kenneck was chosen president, and James Matles secretary-treasurer of the new federation.⁴⁷ Matles, as the only full-time official, exercised effective control. The federation's objective, in line with the Communist Party's revived popular front strategy, was to seek an industrial charter from the AFL in close cooperation with the federal locals.

On July 19, 1935, Matles informed William Green of the existence of the new Federation of Metal and Allied Unions and told him that it was seeking a basis for affiliation with the American Federation of Labor. He asked for a conference between the representatives of the AFL Executive Council, the Federation's Metal Trades Department, and a committee from his group.⁴⁸ Green told Matles to communicate directly with John P. Frey, head of the Metal Trades Department.⁴⁹

The representatives of the new federation met on September 5, 1935, with Frey, Arthur O. Wharton of the Machinists, and Daniel Tracy of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. The latter two had definite ideas about what should become of both the new federation and the federal radio locals. Matles's committee presented its demands for an industrial charter for the electrical and radio industry, in line with an understanding with the federal radio locals. They knew that this would not receive a sympathetic hearing, but decided that as far as electrical manufacturing was concerned, there appeared to be no possibility of doing anything with any of the existing craft union organizations.⁵⁰ Dodging the issue, Frey, Wharton, and Tracy told Matles and Kenneck that only the AFL Executive Council had jurisdiction over the issuance of a charter.⁵¹ As for the Machine, Tool and Foundry Workers, it was decided that negotia-

tions between that group and the International Association of Machinists should commence.⁵² The decision on the electrical industry, it was hoped, would be made by the fifty-fifth annual convention of the AFL scheduled for October in Atlantic City.

Meanwhile, with full knowledge of what was transpiring among the independents, the National Radio and Allied Trades Council continued to seek an industrial charter. The group met in Cincinnati on March 30 and 31, 1934, to discuss the state of unionization in the industry. President Carey read a letter from William Green informing them that it was the opinion of the AFL Executive Council that the time was not ripe to issue a charter to a national union of radio workers. He doubted that the new union could be self-sustaining, but he did not close the door entirely and urged the NR & AT to continue to organize.⁵³

After relaying Green's message, Carey told the disappointed delegates that it would be foolish to carry on a "long winded" fight with the Executive Council over the charter. He proposed, instead, to take the matter directly to the Atlantic City convention.⁵⁴ The radio locals accepted Carey's reasoning, but also decided that if the AFL convention refused to grant a charter, the NR & AT would continue as an independent organization.⁵⁵ At the time of all of this heady talk, the organization had only \$133.25 in its treasury.⁵⁶

At an interim meeting on charter tactics in Philadelphia on July 25, it was decided to convene in Atlantic City at the same time as the AFL meetings.⁵⁷ Shortly after this meeting, Carey heard from Weldon Caie, national secretary-treasurer of the Electrical and Radio Workers Union, the new organization of the independents, that the goal of the new organization was the amalgamation of all federal unions in the radio field into one industrial union.⁵⁸ There was no direct mention of merger with Caie's group, but this had been looked upon as the ideal solution by both groups for several years. Carey invited the Electrical and Radio Workers to send observers to the federal group's Atlantic City meeting. The AFL had also learned of the projected conference, and William Green directed Lewis Hines to attend and keep an eye on the proceedings.⁵⁹ By this time Green must have been aware of the danger. The presence of the independents raised the specter of one large industrial union in electrical manufacturing outside of the confines of the house of labor. To Green, already plagued by the CIO, this must have been anything but a pleasant thought.

Thus the stage was set for the drama to be played out in the convention hall on the boardwalk. The pressures of the AFL from the electrical unions were duplicated throughout the country in the

other mass production industries—rubber, auto, and steel. The sentiment for industrial unionism had found its spokesmen in the members of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) which, with John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers as its leader, had brought the old federation close to schism. The Committee vowed to bring the issue of industrial unionism to the floor of the convention, and 30,000 electrical industry workers, both in the federal and independent groups, waited for the convention to render a verdict.⁶⁰

The 1935 AFL convention proved to be one of the most decisive ever held by that body. A dramatic confrontation between industrial and craft unionism took place. The delegates witnessed the spectacle of burly John L. Lewis of the Miners, who was emerging as the charismatic leader of the “progressive forces” within the federation; and the even burlier defender of craft unionism, William “Big Bill” Hutcheson of the Carpenters, come to blows in full view of the assembled throng. The fracas proved to be symbolic of the irreparable split that was fast developing within the AFL.

When the resolution calling for a national charter for the electrical workers was introduced, the possibility of thrashing the issue out on the convention floor proved distasteful to the AFL leadership.⁶¹ John P. Frey and Matthew Woll, secretary and chairman, respectively, of the resolutions committee, made sure that the resolution never reached the floor. The Committee referred it to the Executive Council for action.⁶² This move killed the chances for an industrial charter. The Executive Council apparently decided that the time had come to stop allowing the federal locals and the independents to continue organizing along industrial lines lest the movement get out of hand. If there ever was a chance of bringing these groups into an AFL craft union, the leadership of the federation must certainly have sensed that it was rapidly slipping away.

One important product of the 1935 convention was a working relationship between Carey and Lewis. The young leader of the electrical workers attended the meetings of the CIO held in the President Hotel while the 1935 convention was in session.⁶³ It must have been an exhilarating experience for so young a labor leader to be so close to Lewis, Hillman, and others who were in the process of changing the face of the American labor movement. From this point on the federal locals watched the CIO and waited.

A significant event took place in Atlantic City during the week prior to the AFL convention. The National Radio and Allied Trades had convened at the Chelsea Hotel to decide their strategy. Meeting with them were the invited representatives of the left-wing Electrical and Radio Workers.

The issue of merger between the NR & AT and the independents raised a great deal of animosity at the meetings. Lewis Hines, the AFL's representative, argued vehemently against any merger. He brought up the anti-AFL attitudes of some of the independents, and warned the federal locals that they would be swallowed up by the much larger independent organization. His main objection, however, and the one on which he placed the most emphasis was that some leaders of the independent group were Communists. He called them members of a world-wide movement for the overthrow of patriotism, and while he admitted that the entire group was not tinged with red, there were "active communistic spirits" behind it.⁶⁴

Carey responded with words he would later regret: "Mr. Hines, has said that some of the men who came here representing the independent group . . . were Communists. I know and care nothing about this; we too have been called radicals and Communists and declared to have no place in the labor movement. We have been accused of being radical outsiders."⁶⁵ At the time, Carey rejected red-baiting as a bogus and divisive tactic. In the halcyon days of the 1930s, during the organization of America's mass production industries, all were welcome and a man's politics mattered little. Nevertheless, wanting to do nothing to jeopardize the opportunity for the charter at the upcoming AFL convention, the two groups ended talk of merger but agreed to continue to cooperate.

Disappointed with the results of the convention, Carey still clung to the hope of acquiring an industrial charter within the AFL. While at Atlantic City he spoke at length with John Brophy, CIO Director of Organization, and Lewis. They impressed upon him that the CIO was still an educational committee within the Federation rather than a dual movement.⁶⁶ He was advised to wait and he did. It was, however, becoming more and more difficult to hold to his course because of the pressures for independent action from his federal locals and the pressure for merger from the independents.

On December 9, 1935, Carey received another blow. The government called for joint conference of representatives of industry and labor concerning unemployment in Washington. Labor's representatives met prior to the conference and elected John P. Frey of the Metal Trades Department to represent the manufacturing and fabricating group. The radio workers fell into this classification. Carey demanded a delegate to represent the mass production industries. Outvoted and slighted, Carey and his supporters turned the meeting into a bickering session.⁶⁷ Aside from the organizational question of representation, the incident pointed up a side of James Carey's character that became increasingly evident as his

power in the labor movement increased. Carey was a man who enjoyed the warm glow of the spotlight.

The question of amalgamation with the independents continued to occupy the minds of the leaders of the federal group. Torn between their hope for a change of heart by the AFL and their desire for one big union in electrical manufacturing, they continued to hold off the independents who were urging a merged union and a joint organizing drive in electrical and radio. Green's man, Lewis Hines, persistently warned against any collaboration. Block and Carey, however, were tiring of the AFL's stalling tactics. Since 1934, the AFL Executive Council had been saying that no charter could be considered unless the federal group stayed aloof from the independents. They had acceded to no avail. Now, said Carey, the National Radio and Allied Trades would cooperate with the independents no matter what the AFL said.⁶⁸

With the concurrence of the delegates at the December conference of the NR & AT at Pittsburgh, Carey wired William Green requesting firm information as to whether the question of an industrial charter for the federal group would finally be discussed at the January Executive Council meeting.⁶⁹ Green agreed that it would.⁷⁰ After roaring their approval while Philip Murray of the United Mine Workers and John Brophy of the CIO castigated the AFL craft unions, the delegates also unanimously decided to form an independent national organization if the AFL refused to grant the charter. They also decided that another meeting would be held two weeks after the AFL Executive Council meeting to take action on that group's decision.⁷¹

Green directed James Carey to plead the case of the electrical workers before the council in Miami. Carey had little hope for success. Indeed, he fully expected the vote to be 15 to 2 against the issuance of the industrial charter with only John Lewis and David Dubinsky supporting the request. He was wrong. Only Lewis voted for the charter.⁷² Dubinsky had already begun his trek back to the good graces of the AFL. In a terse wire, Green informed Carey that "the Executive Council decided that best interests of radio workers, including those you represent, would be served through . . . affiliation with IBEW."⁷³

The decision was fully expected. Yet, although it is hard to believe that the craft unions thought that the radio workers would docilely accept the mandate, it appears as if they did. Arthur Wharton of the Machinists, for example, had his eyes on the electrical independents.⁷⁴ He apparently assumed that the NR & AT would accept the IBEW proposal, and that the independents, cut off from

any hope of merging with an industrial union within the AFL, would then be absorbed into one of the other craft unions. Wharton intended it to be the Machinists.

Immediately following the Executive Council's decision, Green asked Carey to meet with President Daniel Tracy of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers to discuss merger terms. Carey agreed, but asked Green if the federal locals could maintain their present status if they rejected the IBEW proposal.⁷⁵

Carey knew that there was no hope for merger with the craft union. The IBEW offered the NR & AT class B membership. The radio group was to have no special department in the IBEW, nor could they participate in the benefit program. Each industrial local was to have one vote as opposed to one vote per member in the craft locals.⁷⁶ When the NR & AT met in Washington in February to discuss the proposal, the mood of the meeting was hostile. IBEW president Tracy appeared at Carey's invitation, but after long, often acrimonious discussion, the proposal failed by a large vote.⁷⁷

Carey, in the meantime, had received an ambiguous telegram from Green in response to his inquiry concerning the status of the federal locals should the meeting turn down the IBEW proposal. Green wrote that the federal locals would exist until they were transferred to the IBEW.⁷⁸ He was apparently prepared to disregard the decision of the federal locals in the matter and simply assign them to the IBEW. His lack of understanding of the temper of the NR & AT members was striking.

With Green's ultimatum in hand, the NR & AT met in Washington and took several significant actions. One more attempt at an industrial charter in the AFL would be made. In the likely event of failure, plans were drawn up for the establishment of a new national industrial union.⁷⁹ John Brophy and Katherine Pollock, both CIO officials, observed the proceedings.

After the Washington meeting, Green's agent, Lewis Hines, notified Carey that the federal charters would be lifted and the group expelled by the AFL.⁸⁰ He made it clear that the Executive Council had spoken its last word on the matter.

With this warning from Hines, Carey and representatives of the independent Electrical and Radio Workers lost no time in arranging for a joint convention of the two groups. A committee of four federal delegates and four independents met at Buffalo on February 22 and 23, and projected plans for the creation of one industrial union with jurisdiction in the electrical manufacturing industry. They sent out a call for a founding convention in Buffalo.⁸¹

An exhilarated group of 50 delegates assembled in Buffalo on

March 21 to form a new industrial union, the United Electrical and Radio Workers of America (UE).⁸² Still reluctant to believe that they were permanently outside the house of labor, the delegates announced as one of their purposes the application for a national charter within the AFL. They did this knowing they had the full support of the CIO.⁸³ John Brophy's telegram to the convention branded the AFL action as "arbitrary," and the convention urged the Committee for Industrial Organization to give them assistance and support.⁸⁴

As one of its final acts, the convention, according to a pre-arranged deal, elected James Carey President, and Julius Emspak, a young and virtually unknown independent from Schenectady General Electric, Secretary-Treasurer. The two men had youth in common. In 1937, James Carey was 26 years old, and Emspak only 33. Carey, born in Philadelphia in 1911, had little direct trade union influence while he was growing up. His parents were staunch liberal Democrats and Catholics. His first exposure to organized labor came as a teenager when he participated in a strike of movie projectionists in a New Jersey theater where Carey worked part-time as a projectionist's helper. He attended night school at Drexel and the University of Pennsylvania, but his true education in trade unionism came largely from two sources, an upbringing in an atmosphere of liberal Catholic social thought compatible with the papal encyclicals on labor, *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadregesimo Anno*, and advice from socialist, and strongly anticommunist, hosiery workers in Philadelphia who gave him counsel during his days as a young labor leader at Philco. His career in the labor movement began with the group at Philco which formed the first radio local in 1933. From there he went on the staff of the AFL and kept that post until the formation of the UE in March 1936.⁸⁵ He went from obscurity to being the "boy wonder" of the labor movement in three years. It was an auspicious debut, and Carey was in time to become fond of the spotlight, a trait that would prove to be his Achilles heel.⁸⁶

In contrast, Julius Emspak preferred to work behind the scenes. Carey later claimed that Emspak's election marked the beginning of Communist influence in the union. Although he never admitted to party membership, over the years Emspak was repeatedly branded as a Communist. The obscure young man from Schenectady lived to see the day when he was labeled as one of the most influential American members of an international Communist conspiracy.

Like Carey, Emspak's background fit the profile of the educated, progressive young workers whom the Depression had directed

into the shops where they used their education to help organize the mass production industries. He was born in Schenectady in 1904, of Hungarian immigrant parents. His father, a General Electric worker, was a socialist, although his death in a railroad accident when Julius was only nine limited any political influence he might have had. After his father's death his mother worked for General Electric as a cleaning woman and his two older brothers left school at fourteen to go into the plant. The family, although nominally Catholic, had a tradition of radicalism and anti-clericalism. Emspak too began work at the age of fourteen in the shop at General Electric, but he returned to high school after finishing his apprenticeship in tool and die making. With help from a loan fund created by Gerald Swope, GE president, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Union College and began graduate study at Brown University. After one year at Brown, Emspak left to look for a job. Disillusioned by the seeming irrelevancy of his graduate studies and hard pressed for funds, he first tried for work on a newspaper, but the Depression closed off that avenue. Desperate and in debt, he took a job in the shop at RCA in Camden, New Jersey, where he took part in a major strike. Six months later when he returned to Schenectady to work for General Electric, interest in the labor movement precluded his taking a white collar job when offered one by the company. He chose, instead, to return to the factory where he became an activist in the local and, according to later testimony by a close friend of those days, a Communist. He had also developed, by this time, along with so many others during those Depression years, into what James Matles later called a true "worker intellectual."⁸⁷

In the Schenectady plant, Emspak became the protege of William Turnbull, president of the Schenectady local and later president of the Electrical and Radio Workers. Turnbull, a dedicated union organizer, was also a socialist.⁸⁸ He gave Emspak his first practical trade union education. When the time came to choose a secretary-treasurer for the newly formed United Electrical Workers (UE), the likely choice among the independents was Albert Coulthard from Lynn, Massachusetts, who had long experience in the labor movement and who had been the driving force in the organization of the local at Lynn General Electric. Coulthard, however, refused the office because of a reluctance to leave his home local and move to New York.⁸⁹ Instead, he, along with Turnbull, the most respected and powerful independents, supported young Julius Emspak. Coulthard pushed hard for the appointment because he believed that Emspak's education uniquely fitted him for the complex job of secretary-treasurer.⁹⁰

Before the caucus of the independents at the founding convention settled on Emspak, a delegate from Lynn asked him directly whether he was a Communist. Emspak replied that he was not and never had been.⁹¹

And so two of the nation's youngest labor leaders set out to lead what was to become the third largest affiliate of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Both bachelors at the time, they immediately made plans to establish the national office in a rented room at 1133 Broadway in New York City. With \$99 from the union's meager treasury, they furnished the office with clothes racks, chairs, and roll top desks.⁹² The two young men shared a room and, in between trips exploring New York, they began to run the UE. The first organizer hired, at a salary of \$10 a week, was Ernest DeMaio, a young radical who had been active in the unemployed councils movement of the 1930s and who had gained his union experience as an organizer for the TUUL's Machine, Tool, and Foundry Workers.⁹³

Carey's first official act as president was to send a letter to William Green informing him of the convention's instructions to persist in seeking an AFL charter.⁹⁴ Green replied, telling Carey, whom he pointedly refused to acknowledge as president of anything, that since his local had been expelled from the Federation for dual unionism and lack of payment of the per capita tax, there could be no further discussions with the AFL.⁹⁵ The UE was on its own.