

# Rank & File Unionism Threatens Steel Bureacracy

by Anna Gold

"The workers and the boss have nothing in common. It is a class question." Sounds like a soapbox speech from the 30's, right? Certainly it couldn't be an official from the Steelworkers' Union talking!

After all, labor statesman Abel forced the steelworkers in 1973 to swallow the Experimental Negotiating Agreement - an agreement by labor not to strike even if collective bargaining fails - and that hardly sounds like a class struggle approach! And yet that statement did come from a steelworkers' official - 38-year-old Edward Sadlowski.

Sadlowski isn't just talking to hear himself talk either. Currently director of District 31, covering the concentration of mills around the southern end of Lake Michigan from Chicago to Gary, Indiana, Sadlowski is challenging Lloyd McBride. Abel chose McBride personally to succeed him as international president of the 1.4 million member United Steelworkers of America, the largest union in the AFL-CIO. It's Sadlowski and his loosely organized army of rank and file supporters against Abel's well-oiled, professional machine - and the machine is worried about the outcome of the February election.

## RANK AND FILE CHALLENGE

And it's not just Abel who's worried. Sadlowski represents today a new movement in the trade unions. He is the latest and perhaps one of the strongest to openly attack the iron grip of the class collaborationist labor bureaucracies. Sadlowski is just the tip of the iceberg, and the bureaucrats and the capitalists whose interests they represent are afraid of the rebellious rank and file movement he represents. The ruling class knows full well that a working class conscious of its own potential and its own strength can no longer be held back, and that is why a challenge such as Sadlowski's, however mild it may seem, is a very serious threat.

To the vast majority of Americans, Sadlowski is a real radical, and he and his campaign have been consistently red-baited. "You can make it sound like any kind of revolutionary rhetoric you want", he answers, "but the fact is it's the working class versus the coupon clipper. The boss is there for one damn purpose alone, and that is to make money, not to make steel, and it's going to come out of the worker's back."

The race is more than just a contest between two men. It is a test between two concepts of trade unionism. The difference between McBride and Sadlowski can best be illustrated by three main campaign issues: Sadlowski believes that the rank and file should have the right to ratify any and all contracts before they are approved by the union, while McBride believes as does Abel, that membership ratification in basic steel would weaken the union's ability to bargain with the major steel manufacturers. While McBride supports the ENA, Sadlowski has actively opposed it: "It is diametrically opposed to my views of what a labor agreement should be. . . . It strips labor of what it is all about. ENA removes the threat of a strike, which is often more powerful than even a strike itself." Finally, Sadlowski has opposed the recent dues hike and insists that it should have been submitted to the membership for approval, and McBride considers that such an impractical and pure sort of democracy could only end in chaos.

## MILITANCY AND DEMOCRACY

As each campaign issue unfolds, Sadlowski and McBride fall on opposite sides of the fence around two basic principles: how much rank and file democracy is necessary, and how militant a union should be with respect to the manufacturers.

Sadlowski is fighting for a union leadership which is forced to be responsible to the base, while Abel's machine considers such a position to be idealistic and impractical -- a mere attempt to court votes by charisma and sweet-talk.

Sadlowski is looking for the union to return to the militancy of the thirties, a militancy which depended on the strength of the people united rather than on the sophisticated, statesman-like negotiations of today's labor bureaucrats. A good many of his followers take very seriously his stand for the six-hour day, an end to layoffs during the length of a contract, an end to compulsory overtime, and other such reforms.

Sadlowski's history as an independent and militant trade unionist goes much farther back than this particular cam-

He has made some advances: while Abel considered the consent decree a tremendous victory for minority workers in steel, Sadlowski has called for the struggle against racism to go further. He has supported the demand for a total reform of the seniority system, more bidding for jobs, and plant or corporation-wide seniority.

His slate includes both Black and Spanish-speaking candidates, while Abel included a Black member on his racist team only recently and as a result of pressures from the rank and file. These steps are only a beginning, however, and must be followed up by a more systematic program against discrimination if Sadlowski is truly to establish a new kind of unionism.

Sadlowski has also shown real weakness in his understanding of the need for a frontal attack on anti-communism. While he has consistently opposed red-baiting, he has not understood the need to defend the right of communists to play an active part in union politics. His vacillation around this issue leaves the door open for red-baiting to successfully silence union members, despite his insistence on his be-

lowski victory, can force the new administration not only to carry through on already defined goals, but also to expand its understanding to class struggle unionism.

## DOGMATISTS DENOUNCE SADLOWSKI

Sadlowski isn't a communist, he isn't a socialist, and his program definitely suffers from real inconsistencies. His weaknesses have so outraged the dogmatists like the October League that they have even called for a boycott of the elections.

"Ed Sadlowski in the USWA. . . ha(s) latched onto and even developed caucuses as instruments for derailing and suppressing the genuine rank and file rebellion at the same time that they promote themselves into positions in the trade union bureaucracy", argues OL. Sadlowski, they argue, hopes "to turn rank and file anger away from its developing revolutionary directions." For the first time in many years the class collaborationist Abel machine is being forced to face a serious challenge to its policies, spontaneous discontent is being organized and is finding a voice, and the OL calls

## SADLOWSKI CHALLENGES ABEL MACHINE



United Steelworkers union insurgent Ed Sadlowski (center).

paign. At 25 years old he beat the incumbent of 25 years on the basis of his reputation as a fighter for the rights of rank and file workers. In 1968 he was an active opponent of the Vietnam War, speaking against it in the union's convention as well as leafletting against it in the mills.

Even his recent election as director of District 31 came only as a result of a four year struggle which included petitioning the Labor Department for a new election in 1973 because of massive vote theft. He was elected in 1974 by a large margin, despite active opposition from Abel's machine.

Clearly, Sadlowski's major weakness is his failure to put forward a consistent and strong program against racism and sexism. However, to the extent that his campaign and his strength is dependent on the support of the rank and file, to that extent he will be forced to develop this area.

lie in the right of all members to voice their opinions.

The bosses aren't nearly so confused about what Sadlowski represents. They know that the campaign around him has the potential of unleashing years of worker discontent and militancy, and as the president of Illinois Slag and Ballast Co. said, negotiations with him would be "a new ball game".

The Sadlowski movement could indeed force a whole new ball game, but the future of their program depends much less on the man himself than on the strength of the rank and file movement. The Sadlowski campaign has initiated the formation of a network of fightback committees based in the shops and mills and run by rank and file dissidents. It is these committees and others like them that can force the success of the rank and file movement behind Sadlowski. It is these committees which, if they remain organized and active even after a Sad-

for a boycott of the elections to protect the purity of some mythical "pure" revolutionary workers movement!

Instead of looking for reasons to boycott this tremendously important mass movement, communists and radicals must join actively in the Sadlowski campaign. They must dedicate themselves to the task of consolidating rank and file organizations spontaneously formed around the campaign, and they must fight for the adoption of ever more advanced programs by these same committees.

The rank and file organization must provide both the basis of support necessary to Sadlowski to carry out his promises and the pressure to insure that he remembers them. As Sadlowski himself has pointed out repeatedly to his supporters, the only way to insure that the membership will receive honest and responsible union leadership is to "keep your foot up my butt"! It is up to the activists and the left wing to make sure that the rank and file makes this suggestion a reality.