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Ray Tombazzi Memoir

T591. Tombazzi, Ray (1902-1980)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 86 mins., 21 pp.

COAL MINING AND UNION ACTIVITIES PROJECT

Tombazzi, coal miner, discusses coal mining in Illinois: the wars between the UMW and PMA and the Mulkeytown march. Also mentions mechanization, black lung, and work outside the mine.

Interview by R.C. Rhodes, 1972

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by R. C. Rhodes for the Oral History Office of Sangamon State University on December 28, 1972 in Springfield, Illinois. Chris Skoczynski transcribed the tape and Susan Jones edited the transcript.

Ray Tombazzi was born in Cordenons, Italy on December 4, 1902. He started to work in the coal mines in 1918 in Tilden, Illinois as a coal loader. He also worked as a mule driver, then as a general utility man until 1922 when he worked in the coal fields in Benton, Illinois. In 1932 he was promoted to the position of motorman. In 1934 he went to Washington, D.C. and organized WPA workers. Between mining jobs, Mr. Tombazzi worked in Detroit in the auto industry. He was also involved in numerous contract negotiations for the coal miners. Mr. Tombazzi died on August 8, 1980.

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Table of Contents

Early Days as a Miner	1
The Union	3
John L. Lewis	4
Congressman Fries	5
Progressive Mine Workers.	7
Mine War.	7
Mulkeytown.	9
Work in Detroit12
Contract Negotiations13
The Depression.14
Today's Miner15
Future for the Coal Miners.17
Mechanization17
Black Lung.18

Ray Tombazzi, December 28, 1972, Springfield, Illinois.

R. C. Rhodes, Interviewer.

Q: We're reminiscing about your affiliations with the coal mining industry and the unions. First, Mr. Tombazzi, would you state your name and vital statistics and tell us where you've mined and what jobs you've held as a miner and as a union official?

A: My name is Ray Tombazzi. I started in a coal mine in 1918 in Tilden, Illinois as a coal loader with my father in the entry. I worked there about a year loading coal, then I got to driving a mule, then I was a general utility man: cleaned rocks, cleaned roads, made switches, drove mules, trapped and rode trips. Then I worked down in the small coal fields until about 1922 in the mines of Benton. I went to Taylorville, Illinois and I was engaged in solid shooting in Taylorville--mine No. 50, Peabody Coal Company. From there I went to driving a mule in mine No. 58. Rode trips and run a motor. That's about the size of it, then I went to No. 9. I was blackballed in [mine No.] 58 in 1929 and then I went to work at No. 9 and went as a trip rider. Then the strike broke out in 1932. I worked there as a trip rider and I think I was a motorman when the mine went on strike.

Q: Motorman? That's sort of a dangerous job, isn't it?

A: No. It's on haulage. No, fatalities among motormen is very low. It's more trip riders than coal diggers. They're more exposed to injuries than motormen.

Q: Did you have to join the union at the same time you started mining?

A: Definitely, yes. In my day when you first went into the mine, you went in as an apprentice. You only got half a turn--I forgot to embody that in my statement. That meant that if the turn was six cars, you and your father could load nine. That's all you were eligible for. After you received your mining papers, then you were a full-fledged coal miner. Then you got the full turn.

Q: How long was it before you got the mining papers?

A: I believe at that time you worked two years as an apprentice. Then you made an application for your mining papers and then you were a full-fledged miner.

Q: That came from the state?

A: Yes, you were examined by a state mine examining board.

Q: Would you have to go before them or would they come out to the mines?

A: No, in those days you had to go and take an examination. They would give you an oral or written. I don't remember exactly how it was, but I believe it was written in my day. They asked you questions about ventilation and different facets of the mine that you should be acquainted with in the two years that you worked.

Q: What was the purpose of that regulation?

A: It was the state law that an apprentice couldn't go into the mine without his father. He had to have somebody that had knowledge of working the face. You couldn't go to the face without an experienced coal miner so you had to be an apprentice for two years. Then he could get his papers and he could go in by himself or he could sign up for some other apprentice, which I had done in my time. Then he worked until he served up his apprenticeship and then he would have to go before the board to get his papers. If he passed, then he would go back to the mine until it was time to take another examination.

Q: As far as you can remember, this has always been in mining?

A: Yes. I think it became a law in 1904. I think that's when the legislature passed it.

Q: What caused this? A mining accident?

A: Yes, I believe it was. I don't know the nature of what prompted them to do it, but it was one of the facets in the lawmaking that had to be done, I guess.

Q: When you started mining, what did you think the coal union stood for at that time?

A: The coal union was for the betterment of men's wages and conditions. Under the union we were led to believe--which it was--that if you didn't have someone to relay your grievances, you were at the mercy of the coal operator or whoever your employer was, without any redress. If you were union, you would take up your case with the pit committeeman who was your representative--that's the first plateau--and then if he didn't agree, you could take it up with the president. If the president didn't agree, you could take it up with the board member who was a representative of your district. Then they would go through the group board and if they didn't agree to your problem there, they would take it up with the joint group board.

Q: After the joint board, what happened?

A: If the joint board didn't agree on it, they would send it to an arbitrator. His decision was supposed to be final, but it was very seldom well-accepted because it seems as though he predominantly went against the workers for some reason. That was about the essence of the case.

Q: In the early days, what was the percentage of cases that got all the way to the top and justice was done?

A: Percentage-wise I just couldn't pin it down. In my district, when I was a board member here, I'd say 10 percent of the cases that were actually grievances that came within the mine came to me.

Q: So you're saying that the remainder, 90 percent, had probably as much cause on the one side for the problem as there was on the opposite side?

A: No, they would settle between the committeeman and the president.

Q: Oh, it was settled before it got to you?

A: Yes. Before it got to me, it was settled locally.

Q: You said earlier that the union was there to settle these grievances and arguments that cropped up. Now, as you look back, do you think your early views of the union were accurate?

A: Definitely. It was the only recourse we had to get any justice because, as I said before, we were at the mercy of the coal operators. You would have no grievance committee to take your problem to--no one. Of course, later on the legislation was enacted in Roosevelt's term: The Wagner Act which gave us more leeway. Then the National Labor Relations Board stressed more on unions. We had a right to organize, which heretofore was a hard thing to do. It was on the statute books but nobody would give us any support on them until Roosevelt came in.

Q: Has the purpose of the union changed any between the time when you first became a member and the present day union, or have they basically remained the same? What's the difference between the union of today and that of 1924 or 1925?

A: I'd have to classify the union of my day and the union of today--the union today is a dues collecting agency. That is it's prevalent . . . I don't see any unionism at all comparable to my days of mining--no, not one iota. It's just a dues collecting agency. Take for instance (the Teamsters Union and the Miners Union). It seems like the bigger they get, the bigger thieves they are. For instance, the Teamsters Union: Tobin was in prison, Hoffa was in prison. There's so many that I just can't name them all. The justice department has got more cases pending on shakedowns of contractors and coal operators and every facet of industry that is subject to blackmailing or whatever category you want to put them in. No, unionism today is nothing compared to what it was in our days. In our days a union member would be disciplined and reprimanded. They used to be fined for abrogating the constitution or the bylaws; today they seem to do anything they want--there are no restrictions. I'd say the union today is a farce.

Q: You remember John L. Lewis, don't you, Ray?

A: Yes, I do, very distinctly.

Q: Could you describe John L. Lewis?

A: I had one occasion with him. It was a meeting in 1929 or 1930. There was an international representative by the name of Bandy Williams. I was blackballed by the Peabody Coal Company and I encountered Mr. Williams at the Leland Hotel standing on the corner. He asked me where I was going and I said, "Well, I'm looking for work." And he said, "Why don't you come and work with me?" He says, "I think I can get you a job. I'm in the southwest--Oklahoma and Arkansas." And he says, "I need some help down there." He says, "Why don't you go up and see John L. He's in town at the Leland Hotel." "Well," I said, "By God, I've turned him down a couple times but I'm desperate. I'll go up and have a talk with him."

So I went up on the fourth or fifth floor--he had a whole suite of rooms up there--and as soon as I got off the elevator two men grabbed me and shook me down. I resented that, but there was nothing I could do. I went down to his room and two more men shook me down again, then I went in and seen John. Mr. Williams introduced me to Mr. Lewis and Mr. Lewis proceeded to tell me that they needed young men like me--young and aggressive with a union spirit--and they should stay within the realms of the union instead of fighting from the outside. Of course, I'd been fighting him on the outside for some time.

He said that Mr. Williams had highly recommended me to him and that he agreed to let me go with Mr. Williams to work. Mr. Kennedy, I think, was the secretary-treasurer at that time and he would advance me some money to go down with. But he said, "You must remember that you've got to stay in your father's house." Well, I resented that and I just told him, "Well, I don't think I'll accept it." So I left him on those grounds and never did go.

Q: You say the man's name was Bandy Williams?

A: They called him Bandy. He's from Taylorville originally and was the international representative. He tried to get me before. John Lewis would have his representatives out and anybody that would get a thorn in his side, he'd try to get them in.

Q: What was down in Oklahoma--coal mines?

A: Oh, yes. Coal mines were down in the southwest--it was Arkansas and Kansas. We had a fellow from Kansas come up here and he died of a broken heart. He was the president of the outfit down there. Don't you remember Howat?

Q: I thought that was the name of the fellow that was later the lieutenant governor of Colorado. Wasn't his name Howat?

A: They brought him up after John Walker stepped out. Don't you remember that?

Q: Alexander Howat. Okay. When was the next time you saw John L. Lewis?

A: I never saw him again, but Congressman Fries, who was the former sheriff of Macoupin County and later on was elected legislator, was a personal friend of mine. Then he was elected to Congress and he went to Washington. He called up from Washington and asked me to have a meeting with him. He wanted me and a fellow by the name of John Battuello to have a talk with him. I told him that he'd have to get a hold of Battuello himself because I had no way of contacting him, and I doubt if I could entice him to come and talk because he was more on the radical side than I was and his theories didn't coincide with mine. I was positive that I couldn't get him to come and talk to us because he abhors politicians anyhow. I said, "You'll have to make that stance yourself."

I came up here in the St. Nick Hotel with Fries and he told me that John L. Lewis wanted me to go along with him. He told me that John L. Lewis called him in his office and asked him if he could do anything with me and John Battuello. He said, "Maybe I can do something with Tombazzi but I don't think I can do anything with Battuello, but I'll try." And then he up and told me that he sent a cab over to Taylorville to come and get me and told me that he wanted to go along with John L. Lewis. Of course I was with him and had dinner with him and I got here about eight and I didn't get home until about two that morning. He was persistent that I give in and go along with Lewis. Fries himself had picked up the job that I should have because I'd lobbied over here at the state house before. Frank knew that I could mix pretty well with the legislators and talk on problems concerning the miners. Fries suggested that Lewis would put me in as a lobbyist, which Lewis agreed--but I wouldn't agree. I turned it down. Frank said that he would send my airplane ticket, but I told him it was no use because I wasn't coming to Washington.

Q: This was in what year?

A: That happened in 1934. I'd been there before to Washington. I organized WPA workers and we were working for 22 cents a hour even there in Taylorville. I'd wrote to Frank Fries about my case and told what my plight was. He said, "You get your papers ready and come up here. I'll take you right up to the WPA administrator." I got there on a Wednesday-- I'd come in at eight on the bus and by ten I was in the WPA administrator's office. Frank said that he was going home Friday and there was no need for me to go home on the bus. He said, "Why don't you ride home with me?" When I came home to Taylorville, the WPA administrator was here waiting for me.

In two months I had the prevailing rate of wages in all the respective classifications. From 22 cents an hour, the cement finishers got 80 cents, the carpenters got 85 cents, the common laborers 62½ cents--everybody in their respective classifications got their wages. We used to get \$44 a month. We got 22 cents a hour. I don't know how many hours that involves; I think 5½ days a week per month. So when we made our \$44, we'd moonlight at something else. That's what Fries did for me. I guess he thought that he could get me to go along with John L. Lewis, but I turned him down.

Q: How was Fries affiliated with the government?

A: He was a congressman in our respective district, at that time the apportionment put him in our district. He was representative in Macoupin County. He was sheriff, then he was representative, then he run for Congress, he went by leaps and bounds.

Q: How long was he in Congress?

A: He didn't stay long; I think he went two terms.

Q: Going back to Lewis, do you think he was a good labor leader?

A: I'd say he was ruthless. He had a lot of strong-arms in the field. Anybody that gave him any trouble, he'd send out his squad and put them in line. If the local union didn't go along with the provisional government, he took away the autonomy from the local union. He was ruthless but he did some good; he got more pay and he set up the welfare. He had the foresight. Of course, a lot of little operators took the axe from him. There was no question about the illusion between the operators and the union. A lot of people would take issue with me, but I still maintain that the little operators went [out] by the collusion of the big operators of the union.

Q: Did you know Lewis when he was mining in Panama?

A: All I knew was that I went down to his local and had him hold their dues in obeisance, but it wasn't the next meeting that they voted it back again. He and his brother were working at the Cosgove-Mann Coal Company. He was the president of the local and his brother was secretary-treasurer. I was one of them; there were three of us went down there that night and they voted. Of course it was a small crowd but nevertheless they voted to hold their dues in obeisance. But I don't think they skipped one payment.

Q: That's a long way from Panama to the head of the national union.

A: Yes.

Q: He made it in a relatively short time, didn't he?

A: My recollection is that somebody died along the way. Wasn't it White? I don't remember just how Lewis stepped up the ladder.

Q: Could you give me some more comparisons or contrasts between the two unions, the Progressive Mine Workers and the United Mine Workers?

A: All of the local unions in the Progressive Miners had their autonomy and they took up their cases and their contract as they were supposed to and they would get recognition when they took up their case through different channels. But the militancy of the Progressive Miners deteriorated too, in time, because there got to be more office seekers than there was principal union leaders. Claude Percy, the first president, tried to run a second time. He called me into the office and asked me if

I wouldn't go along with him and he'd take care of me. I said, "You're talking to the wrong party because I wouldn't vote for you for nothing now." Our relationship fell off quick.

Anytime he wanted anything in Taylorville, Percy would call me up; he wouldn't trust the others. He'd always call me or a fellow by the name of George Ritchie, but he wouldn't talk to Stanley. Stanley was the president of the amalgamated local and I was the vice-president. He [Stanley] confided in me and I finally exposed him. He was on the Peabody payroll--the president of our amalgamated local. To avoid any confusion I told him, "If you don't resign today, I'm going to expose you." So he did. For a long time Jack Stanley was scared to death that I was going to blow it out, but I never did. Argus told me himself, he said, "Your president is on our payroll." And I said, "I wouldn't doubt it." I didn't dispute his word.

Of course, they blew up his house and made a little show of it. They bombed my home twice and I got shot once. I've been incarcerated I don't know how many times--\$385,000 worth of bonds. I was a board member here in this district. I used to go to John Mezo's out on Jefferson Street. I used to go there because John was from Kincaid and I knew him and his wife. And I go in there frequently and take a few drinks. There was a girl in there who was always making a pass at me and somebody in there told me, "That girl wants to get with you." I said, "Well, hell, she's a streetwalker." She kept making passes at me and drove by and said, "Hello." So finally I got with her. I went with her about six months. I always suspected she was a plant, but she became infatuated with me. I was in the hotel one night and I told her, "You're a streetwalker and I'm an official of the union--not that I'm any better than you because I'm about as bad as a renegade. I'm a whoremonger and everything else as far as that is concerned." But I said, "You being a streetwalker and me walking the streets with you and holding this office, I just can't do it. I can't go with you." And by God, one night she committed suicide in my room. I think she was a plant, but it backfired on them. She got in love with me.

Q: From your different vantage points, you saw the mine war develop. Taylorville seemed to be pretty much of a fortress for the United Mine Workers. The Progressives really didn't get into Taylorville like they got into Springfield, Gillespie and the other towns. Were the Progressives organized in Taylorville?

A: Oh yes, definitely. We were strong but the element from the outside came in and took our jobs. Then gradually the hometowners were inveigled into going back to work. Of course I tried in 1936, but there was no way; we weren't making any headway with the miners. We were at a standstill. We would have whipped them into submission if there hadn't been any collusion with Lewis and the Peabody Coal Company. We had them going our way but the United Mine Workers . . . I know at one time Jack Glasgow, who was a sub-district president of the Taylorville district, and Juglett who was the vice-president, and some other guy went up to Argus and was going to kill him. I told him by God, he better take a reverse stand or they were going to kill him. They went up there. They tell me that Mr. Argus just shook and cried and did everything. Argus was the general

superintendent of the Peabody Coal Company. He was talking negotiations with Stanley and he even had a conference with Percy and Stanley and I think Keck was the secretary-treasurer. He was whipped into submission. The United Mine Workers threw so much money in there and it turned about face--it was all lost. They was on the verge of signing with us.

Q: Where did the money come from?

A: It came from the United Mine Workers. John L. Lewis was in as treasurer. Lord knows how much money was thrown in. They had so many men on the payroll. The coal company wasn't producing any coal at all and, of course, there was a lot of sabotage going on costing the coal company all kinds of money. The railroads were being stopped at a lot of places. We had the militia from 1930 to about 1934, four years they had the militia in.

Q: Almost continually.

A: Oh yes, definitely. You might call it four years of military rule. We had about two weeks of marshal law there when they arrested so many.

Q: Who was commanding the militia? Was it out of Springfield or was it out of several different places?

A: Colonel Davis was the guy from Carbondale. He was the general or the commander and they had all kinds of captains. They had me up before the military court all the time but I didn't pay any attention. I remember Bojeans from Peoria and Meachum from Decatur, who was my captain at the CMPC camp. That was years ago. Then they brought down a militia group from Chicago one time. They were all union men and they stayed a week and they took them right out. Hell, the Chicago militia got to knocking them scabs right and left and raiding their homes. They did a turnabout face quick. They got out of there real quick.

Q: Where did the scabs come from?

A: They were recruited from West Virginia, Kentucky and Alabama. They solicited from all over; they had agents going out and recruiting men to come to work not knowing what they were getting into. They gave them a cock and bull story--it wasn't what they thought it was at all. I talked to a lot of them and they said, "They didn't tell us there was a war here or anything." Because they kept it out of the papers. There was some excerpt or something on the back page whereas here it was on the front page of the St. Louis papers. The Chicago papers didn't play it up too much but St. Louis Post-Dispatch did and all the local papers. They played it up pretty big. There was about twenty some that was murdered and I don't know how many homes were bombed. They had attorneys' [homes] bombed and a lot of them shot, riots in the streets and all kinds of pistol battles. I got shot once here, got a bullet in my leg and I got bombed twice. I got beat up once down in Franklin County; they took me down there and left me for dead.

Q: When was that?

A: That was about 1933, maybe 1932. I thought the mine war broke out in August of 1932.

Q: Yes.

A: Then it was in October of 1932 when they got me.

Q: Did you go down to Mulkeytown?

A: No, they wouldn't let me go down. I had to stay home to keep a line of communications, to keep abreast of things. If they needed supplies or anything, I would have everything ready to go down. They was halted in Mulkeytown and they wouldn't let me go. I had pneumonia anyhow and I was sick, but like a damn fool I didn't give in and I had to go to the hospital for weeks with pneumonia.

Q: Both sides were lucky that no more people were hurt in that battle at Mulkeytown.

A: Fries was so bitter against the United Mine Workers because his nephew went down in that march and he was shot in the jaw. They shot him with a rifle. I don't know if anybody was killed down there but there was a few of them shot. Ellis Williams--that was his nephew--got shot through the jaw. I didn't see the boy, but Frank was mad about that.

Q: Was he the one whose tongue was shot off?

A: Yes, that was him. Where did you get that from?

Q: Art [Gramlich].

A: Oh yes, that was his nephew.

Q: What event in your opinion was most important in determining the outcome of the war? What was the turning point? Was it the battle at Mulkeytown?

A: No, if anything Mulkeytown was the point that made it more militant. The militancy occurred when these infractions were imposed on us, like curfews, and restraining us from walking in the streets. They had the militia with the bayonets and they'd stick you with them damn bayonets. They would arrest people and put them in the courthouse in Taylorville, all under military arrest. They would load them up on cars and take them twenty or thirty miles out. Then we'd send a truck and bring them back in. This went on continuously for two days.

They depreciated the Christian County courthouse by about a half million dollars--tore out windows and all the library books, and all the furniture in there and they threwed it out the window. The judge's chambers was all torn to hell. They just demolished the whole courthouse and they would arrest them and put them in the courthouse. That was their point of incarceration. They didn't even have jail cells for them. They

arrested everybody. I remember they took the mayor, whose name was Armstrong, and he was so mad that he said, "Tear the son-of-a-bitch up!" Oh, I tell you he was mad. Of course, later on Argus got Spresser in there as mayor and from then on it was sixteen years of Mayor Spresser. He [Argus] had everything in there; he had the whole sheriff's force, he had everybody. Everybody was under his thumb, all on the payroll. Finally they broke it up. When we had the trial, he took sick leave and he never did come back to trial. He died.

Q: Do you think the National Guard perpetuated the events while they were there?

A: Yes, they helped encourage them by their orders. They were ordered to make us move on with no loitering on the street. You know, how practically martial law orders which include no congregation of more than two and those were the orders that they had to abide by. They controlled the streets all hours of the night and all hours of the day and picked up anybody that was suspicious. They'd take them up to the tribunal, the military court, where they didn't do anything but harass you.

They took me up there every time they would see me. They accused me of passing ammunition and the commander would say that if events happened over there, they were going to hold me responsible and all that malarky. Of course, they had goon squads going out--the United Mine Workers--and they'd shoot into homes. If anybody came out alone, they'd beat the hell out of them. Of course, we had our squads and we'd shoot back at them; we'd waylay them. We killed a few of them, you're damn right. We didn't fool around!

End of Side One, Tape One

Q: The Progressive Miners supposedly had twenty-one martyrs from what I understand. How many martyrs do you think the United Mine Workers had?

A: We had a battle over there at the No. 7 one time and Lord knows that the ambulances came from all over.

Q: You have no idea how many martyrs there were for the United Mine Workers?

A: We knew that there were three of them that bombed Stanley's house: a fellow by the name of Cheeney, who was supposed to have gotten shot, and a fellow by the name of Mitchelson, and another fellow by the name of Chuck something--I forget. They shot his leg off, but he's still living. The other two died. The FBI was supposed to be looking for them for four years and they never did find them. They were hiding from one joint to another and they never did catch them. They were hired--known gunmen--and they were kept in seclusion by the Peabody Coal Company. Their wives said time and again that they were getting paid by the Peabody Coal Company while their husbands were gone. It's not part of the fact, but it's hearsay.

Q: Can you put your finger on any event or any time when the war came to an end or did it just sort of fade away?

A: It faded away gradually. A lot of the miners went back to work. And I talked to them and told them it was no use; we weren't making no groundway or no headway in the union. It seemed like it was a status quo deal and it seemed like this was as far as we could go. They tried to go in Pennsylvania and set up a nucleus and wouldn't get one formed. They tried in Kentucky and we did have a little nucleus down there; we tried in Virginia and West Virginia and the reports were always coming in favor but no action. It was just payrollers out killing time--that was the essence of it. Of course, I was out in the field but I'd given it up because as I explained, I would organize them little mines and they would impose such restrictions on them that they couldn't compete with coal companies. They would go out of existence, so I quit organizing.

Q: Who won the war?

A: In principle we won it. Principally and morally we had the populace with us, but financially we didn't get it.

Q: Could you characterize a town as being a Progressive town and another town as being a United Mine Workers town? Is this the way things were viewed at that point in time? I know the Springfield press gave, it seemed, a lot of good press to the Progressive Miners. I might be mistaken, but it seemed like that.

A: No, the consensus of opinion among all the populous was favorable to our cause--there was no question about that. But the United Mine Workers predominantly with their finances overwhelmed us, putting it bluntly.

Q: I asked you a while ago where the money came from and you said the treasury of the United Mine Workers. Are you saying it came from the dues that the United Mine Workers paid?

A: That would be the only source if it came from the United Mine Workers. But I'd say it was a collusion between the operators and John L. Lewis at that time. I'd say the operators kicked in too to help Peabody because they were confronted with the same thing and they were fighting the same battle. It was an economic battle so to speak, because mechanization was coming in on them and technology was moving fast. To put it bluntly, social economy wasn't keeping up with the industrial economy. That's the true facet of the whole thing.

Q: It's a matter of record that prior to the CIO's taking a hold in the automobile industry, General Motors spent over \$800,000 a year to keep the unions out--that's what their expenditures were for. So this wouldn't necessarily be an unknown quantity at that time and it wouldn't be a precedent setting situation. The companies did spend money to keep the unions out.

A: Oh yes, definitely. The CIO had an awful battle up in the auto industry. You have to give Lewis credit for that. You have to give the man credit where credit is due, but still he was a ruthless ruler. He dominated, there's no ifs, ands or buts about it.

Q: I've talked to a lot of union men from time to time. Whether they were on one side or the other, many of them would go to Detroit to work, usually during strikes.

A: We had to have an avenue to get some money to live on.

Q: There were always jobs open in Detroit?

A: Oh, yes. Miners were always welcome because they were considered good workers. They had a good reputation as workers, consistent. I went up there twice and I got jobs both times, but they said, "The only trouble with you miners--we like to hire you but as soon as you hear that whistle blow, you go back home and you leave us." I had a chance as a foreman at Michigan Stamping up there. I started in as a trucker and learned the machinery fast. In two months the superintendent wanted to put me in as a foreman on one of them because I could read mikes and plans and sharpen tools. I'd watch these fellows and I'd read a little at night. I just took it in as my work and they tried to promote me to foreman but as soon as I heard that whistle blow, hell, I left.

Q: Did you make more money as a miner?

A: Well, the environment was better. At home you were among your associates. To me, being in the city would be like being in a prison--you go to work and you don't know your next door neighbor. You just can't mix with everybody. The city is next to prison to me. There's too much confinement. You stand around and you don't know . . . whereas, at home you'd been raised up with these people. You know their traits and go out with them, but in the city you just don't think of things that way.

Q: Would you normally think of an automobile assembly line when someone said mechanization to you back in the 1930s? What would come to mind if someone said the mines were going to be mechanized?

A: I could see it forthcoming. I worked on the gearshaping at Ford's. To give you an idea, at Ford's they said, "You're working here now and you got six machines. You just work two machines for the first two hours and the third hour you pick up the third machine, the fourth hour the fifth machine, the sixth hour the sixth machine." It was just continuity--grabbing a gear and putting it on and taking it off. Some would go through on me and here would come a man back there to reprimand me and say, "You're not holding up your job." It was \$5 a day. I was in Detroit when Ford instituted \$5 a day wage. He was the first one. He didn't want no union and that's why he give them \$5 a day. Others were paying \$4 and \$4, but to keep the unions out he instituted a \$5 a day and everybody went to Ford.

This is a coincidence--I met my cousin from Italy. A fellow was standing in front of me and I seen him twisting and squirming. I said, "You seem to be from a foreign country. Are you Italian?" And he said, "Yes." So I asked him where he was from and I said, "You seem to be in distress. Why don't you go over there at that tavern." In those days, 1926, it was Prohibition but they had taverns over there. I said, "Go over there and get relief."

He came back and when I said, "Where are you from?" in general conversation, he said, "I'm from Cordenon." I said, "That's where I was born. What's your name?" and he said, "Tombazzi." I said, "Hell, that's my name." He went to Argentina, he's a millionaire down in Argentina, contracting.

Q: Let's talk about contract negotiations, Ray. Explain how contracts were negotiated after the Progressives were formed--a contract that might be negotiated either by the Progressive Union or the United Mine Workers. How did it come about?

A: I was on my first scale convention and we consummated a contract in Hillsboro, Illinois. But we adopted the same contract. They were never voted on until they were consummated with the United Mine Workers. Although we went through the routine, we never did consummate our own contract--maybe a few conditions differently than the United Mine Workers. But on the basic pay we duplicated the United Mine Workers, they set the pace, generally. Of course, we negotiated and we showed faith in consummating the contract, but we always waited to see what they did and then we adopted their contract.

Q: Why would you pursue instead of lead in setting contracts?

A: That was because we had to keep our operators in a competitive basis with our opponents.

Q: What would happen if the Progressives set the contract first? What would you anticipate the United Mine Workers would do?

A: We were in such a minority that we couldn't take the lead.

Q: Would you be outflanked, in essence, if you went first?

A: I'd say we'd have to backtrack. It would be a slap at the Progressive Miners and our organization. If we should consummate a contract it would be superior to the United Mine Workers, the operators wouldn't go along with it because they would have that competitive argument.

Q: Once you consummate a contract it's good for a period of time, isn't it? You can't redo it?

A: Sometimes they have a 90 day clause. Whoever wants to terminate the contract gives the other one 90 days. I think that the last contract was consummated that way. I believe that in essence that was it. You had to notify the other that if they wanted to terminate the contract they could.

Q: Describe a typical week during the middle of the union war in the life of a coal miner who was active in the union. I'm assuming that at this point in time a lot of mines were working off and on, some were on strike. What happened in the life of a miner?

A: Which do you mean--the idle miner or the working miner?

Q: Whatever the case might be. Describe both.

A: The idle miner would just loaf on the streets. He'd go to his habitat where he was killing time. Some of them would go play cards, some would go hunting, some would go fishing, some would try to eke an existence.

Q: Working welfare then was it?

A: No, we had a commissary. The other unions contributed towards, the other local unions that were working--would contribute so much of their pay. I believe the Springfield local here used to give \$5 a member a month. Down in other areas, they would give \$1 a pay or \$2 a pay. I just can't enumerate the amounts. These would be portioned out to various commissaries and it was prorated according to families. For instance a person who had five in the family would get probably three pounds of beans where a person with two in the family would get one pound of beans. Everything would be proportionate according to the size of the family. Of course, we used to go out and ask farmers if they wanted their corn picked. We would pick the corn for a portion of their corn; then we'd take it and get it ground and we'd have corn meal.

Q: No one really starved during this time.

A: Oh, no. Of course there were more mealtimes than there were meals in some cases. If they needed some footwear or something, in my area they would come to me or put it before the commissary board. We'd make arrangements to give them something to relieve the agony. We would prorate wood. Everybody that worked got their wood, they'd get the proportion of their wood hauled to them. Trucks would be donated and everybody would help in sawing and cutting. We'd clear off places if a farmer wanted some land cleared off and we'd take the wood.

Q: The real peak of the Depression really didn't take place until after 1929. That was when the impact was really beginning to be felt in this country. In central Illinois when did the coal miner's weekly wages begin to decrease? When did he begin to feel a little pinch?

A: During the Depression it was the survival of the fittest. It was at a low ebb in 1929 after the crash and everything went "kapoot". The miners were pinched pretty good. Well, everybody was pinched pretty good at that time. It was the survival of the fittest. There were no relief agencies at that time until the National Emergency Relief was set up by Roosevelt.

Q: You received full employment up until 1929?

A: No. I believe Detroit was at full employment. I believe the automobile industry was about the only one that had full employment.

Q: When were good mining years, in your opinion, as far as a miner making a lot of money.

A: It was during the war. When Hitler started the war over there was when the miners started getting momentum all over. They were clammering

for miners. Of course they conscripted men here for their services. They would conscript them and put them in mines. The government took some miners from Taylorville and sent them up to Utah. Quite a few of them were sent different places where they needed miners. They got in the service and then they put them in the coal mines. And then there was a recession in 1952, in Eisenhower's deal. There were two little recessions in Eisenhower's regime.

Q: Let's suppose there were similar situations developing in the coal unions today that were developing around the 1930s. Do you think today's miner would involve himself in a dispute as did the miner in the 1930s?

A: Not the generations of today, no. They've been ill-mannered and maybe I'm putting it a little bluntly, but they don't have the concept of fellowship. I'd say that they are individualists.

Q: Whereas they used to work together more as a group?

A: Yes. It seems like it's dog-eat-dog today. It seems like that's the attitude. You can take the dope in with it, but the generation's gone to hell. This generation is an aftermath of war. It's got to the generation of the war babies.

Q: We're talking right now about people in general. I was wondering if it might be a difference in the people, or the unions, or both? Can you point your finger in one direction?

A: I'd have to say what comprises a union is the people--the people are dissenting but they're not militant. To put it bluntly, they don't attend meetings and they don't actually know. Ten percent of the young generation today, if you'd ask them just what the union is, I doubt if they could give you an explanation. I think that the union is demoralized by its constituents because they don't attend meetings. All they do is just receive, pay their dues. If they had to pay dues out of their pockets, there wouldn't be no union--they wouldn't respond. It just has to be checked off as compulsory and that's just what it is. They have no concept because of the fact that their bellies are full. When the bellies get empty, maybe they'll sit down and give the union recognition.

I'd say the concept of unionism today is just a good dues-collecting agency and I believe I'm putting it mildly--and racketeers for the heads. Hoffa, for instance, who went to prison and robbed them out of seven million dollars and went into a venture without even consulting anybody. Yet if you talked to the truck drivers today, they'll laud him to the sky. They say, "He done a good job. We don't care how much he stole." That's the consensus of opinions among all of them. You talk to them. "We know that he stole. Hell, they all steal."

Not long ago I heard in Chicago and there they have three different set ups. In Chicago, their union is dominated by a man by the name of Prio who is a gangster. They have to dominate with a rough cue up in that country--in Chicago. But they pay dues to the International and yet they say they don't get any pension from the International. They got their own set ups. Groups up there, different local unions, get their own

pension group. I heard of one guy not long ago, read in the Chicago Tribune, he's retired and he can't get no pension, and he's been in the Teamster's Union for 35 years. He hadn't been in that long enough to derive any benefits. Hoffa comes out of the penitentiary and they give him two million dollars. After taxes he's got \$1,200,000--right out of a penitentiary after stealing seven million dollars. I say he took it flagrantly because he took it up there and he never consulted nobody and they put it in some deal in Florida. I just can't understand it; I just can't go along with it.

For me to join a union today, I'd have to think twice. I'd have to go on my own because I think I could handle it better than knowing that I've got an official I can't trust. You just take it and scrutinize it from every angle. There may be one, maybe that Dubinsky. He's about the only one that I've never heard his name charged in the labor annals. Look at the seaman's [union] over there. Hell, I've read so many of them. They got them for extorting money from the treasury--so many, it's just appalling!

Q: You mentioned a while ago if they were at the bottom of the barrel things might be different. Let's make this clear. Are you indicating that if the miner in the early 1930s, if his barrel wouldn't have been empty, he might have followed the union a little differently than what he did?

A: I'll tell you, people with a full stomach, people get different attitudes. Economy depends on the economics from any individual--that's just natural. If he's starved, he'll go out and hustle; but if it's given to him on a platter, he'll just wait. It reminds me of the time that old Wilson said he hated to see a hound dog sitting on his ass and howl when he should get out and hustle a little. I go along with that concept.

Today our dole system has ruined our people. Last year I had a man that wanted some work done and I said, "I'll get you some help," but he said, "Oh, hell no. I'd lose my compensation. I can make more sitting on my ass." That's prevalent all over. Our social economy has not kept up with our industrial economy by no stretch of the imagination. Our industrial economy got too far ahead of our social economy and it's lagging back. And the social economy is the people that have to work, and of course, the industrial economy is the machinery. It got so far advanced that they never taxed the machinery to the point to be up with the social economy. I think that one asset of our economy has gone to hell for those reasons.

Q: This might be a poor comparison, but when you were talking about the union member of today, I was wondering if maybe his membership isn't more or less mechanized today just like the mines are. Do you think that's possible?

A: It's a routine matter with him now. If he wants to work it's mechanized. It's automatic that he has to join the union.

Q: His membership is mechanized. He doesn't have to think too much about it.

A: No, it's just routine. It's taken for granted that he's got to have it, not that he's earned it. When I was in the mines they voted on whether to accept you. It was just like a lodge.

Q: What future do you see for coal miners?

A: Mechanization is getting to the point where the people can't visualize the output of this machinery. They have a continuous miner now. I think it's three men on a shift: the operator, the pender, and the buggy run. They can produce twelve hundred tons of coal in an eight-hour shift. I don't think mechanization has even scratched the surface yet. I think they can run it by robots. I visualize it the way they send men to the moon, what they can do from remote control. I think it can be push button from the top with very, very few men.

Industry is just going to be industry in name, not in labor. Twenty some years ago I remember reading an article in the Hot Springs region where the technology was making such strides--that's twenty-five years ago. The automobile industry was moving towards that end. This article said that there were two million people engaged in the automobile industry, directly or indirectly. If they would put the automation in full force, two hundred thousand could triple the output of the industry. Consequently, 1,800,000 would have to look for new fields. And that is just one facet of our economy.

I was in North Dakota and it would make your eyes pop out to see how mechanization has taken over all the work of the potato pickers. It picks up the potatoes and grades them. All they do is haul them in the shed and dump them.

Q: Do you think mechanization is good or bad?

A: It's good if the social economy would keep up with it, but they're going to have to tax it to a point where it's going to put everybody on a dole system. It's practically a dole state now. We have about fifty million, with subsidies and receiving aid from the government. The railroads today can pull so much tonnage. They have three men now and they used to have five men: the engineer, the brakeman and the conductor. They pull three times as much tonnage. Comparable to any other industry, they're just multiplying the output and lessening the work hours for men.

Another example is the lettuce fields. Used to . . . they'd go out there and they'd have to pack so many lettuce heads and get them in a sack and go to their point to check in. Now they've got a belt out there and a truck goes right along and licks up everything. The same with celery and carrots. I don't know where we're going to. Even the steamship lines, the Stevedors, used to have about five times more employees than they have now. They got these containers and a big crane picks it up and where it took ten men to put something on a ship, now one man handles it with a crane. These containers are loaded in the ship and they're unloaded the same way and there's no man hours involved. Moving dirt used to take about eighty horses to move what one bulldozer can now.

Q: Do you think then that the dole system, if that's what we're coming to, is bad?

A: I don't think it's good for the race; it makes them dilatory and there's nothing to keep them active and they can't accept no responsibility. When the people become dormant and idle, I'd say the generation just disintegrates. I can't see any future for those people regardless of unions or no unions. When there's no work for them, this idleness, and these people are accepting this dole system pretty good from what I've read. They turn down work and wait for the dole wagon to come along. I don't see that it's good for the country.

Q: Well, you're seventy years old and you said a few minutes ago that you've got to keep busy.

A: Oh, yes. I'm pretty active or I'd go nuts. I raise a garden in the summertime and gave fifty bushels of lettuce, tomatoes and peppers away this year. I've got a friend and we go out mushrooming. I know that we picked at least thirty bushels of mushrooms and gave them away. Apples and pears that nobody would pick up, I'd pick them up and give them to the poor. I just like to be active.

I ran a gambling joint for quite a few years but I got arrested and the judge told me not to come back. I'm too old to serve any more time for recreation (laughter) but I like to work. I don't know how many people I've helped with black lung, guide them and tell them what to do and how to do it. I'm always willing to help somebody as a religious thing.

Q: That black lung is a wonderful thing.

A: Yes, but Jesus! I went down to Tilden, Illinois and old Withers, her husband has been dead forty years. I don't begrudge them but it just shows you how loose the government is with their money. I got a check a while ago but I have to give mine all back because I worked. \$4,962, I got to give it all back. I'd be glad to give it all back but I hate to lose it. Me working, it cost me \$2200 to work this year because I could have gotten social security and black lung. It cost me \$2200 to work this year.

Q: Okay, Ray. Thank you very much.

End of Side Two, Tape Two