

Philip Murray. Membership dues went directly to Pittsburgh, where the organizing committee took its bite and sent the rest back to the locals; any local that stepped out of line could be deprived of its funds.

Unlike members of most other unions, basic steelworkers were given no opportunity to vote on contracts—a right which Abel promised to institute when he was elected in 1965, but never did. Communists, who had built the union in the 1930s, were later driven from its ranks, and though the organizing committee was ultimately transformed into a legitimate trade union structure and some opposition arose from time to time (in 1957, when Don Rarick campaigned on the issue of a dues increase, and in 1969, when another unknown, Emil Narick, ran against Abel), the “official family” was never seriously challenged. Even when Abel ousted David McDonald in 1965, it was a palace coup, within the establishment, rather than a rank-and-file crusade.

With that kind of power lodged at the union's Pittsburgh headquarters, Sadlowski had his work cut out for him as director of the Chicago-based District 31. The Abel leadership first refused to turn over union files. It held up funds. It cut Sadlowski's staff from sixty-three representatives to forty-four, and harried him relentlessly. Four or eight more years of this under McBride was more than Sadlowski was willing to contemplate. He decided to take a flyer for the top post—but as events have now proven, he could not quite make it. He and his staff visited dozens of cities and proselytized thousands who came to their meetings, but on election day they were unable to place poll observers in more than half of the 5,400 local unions. They were particularly weak in Canada (with 180,000 members), and the South also was handily carried by the “official family.”

Young workers rallied to Sadlowski's cause—“He's the kind of guy who speaks for us,” one of them said. They worried about the 55,000 men and women who had been laid off in the last few years because they feared they might be next. And they were concerned about the union grievances piling up without resolution—a backlog they attributed to the snug relationship between their officials and management brought about by the no-strike ENA agreement.

Older workers, however, were more cautious. “Why should we change?” they asked Sadlowski's organizers. “We have a good contract.” ENA might be wrong in principle, but in practice they had received a substantial wage increase under its provisions, as well as improved vacation and pension plans. The right to strike might be the cornerstone of unionism, but they did not want to strike if they could avoid it. Sadlowski, they felt, was destined to lead them toward payless weeks on the picket line. He was an unknown quantity; McBride was “safe.” Typically, at one plant in Madison, Wisconsin, the day shift, composed of workers with the most seniority, voted predominantly for McBride; the night shift, made up of younger workers, gave the edge to Sadlowski. Even allowing for likely vote frauds and violations of the rules, McBride had the votes to win.

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From a broader perspective, Sadlowski's defeat is a commentary on where the union movement has been and where it is going. The dissident from Chicago was unable to overcome a legacy that began with the labor revolution of the mid-1930s but evolved into a quiet but successful counterrevolution by management to subjugate its working-class adversaries.