Interview with Harry DeBoer
with comments by Pauline DeBoer
Interviewed by Sal Salerno, Peter Rachleff, Randy First
20th Century Minnesota Radicalism Project

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SS: Well, last time we talked we got an overview of your life up until the point of the Truckers Strike and that's the point at which we stopped. But I think rather than going forward from the Truck Strike, could you talk a little bit about what it was like for you in the twenties, what you did when you were in your late teens, early twenties? That would be helpful.

HD: Well, I was born and raised on a farm you know. I thought I could whip Dempsey when I was a kid and I used to think about it. So I did some boxing and I finally found that I could make more money following the shows boxing. [In] those days the circuses would...just the idea of a boxing match would draw people because a lot of boxing was done in the big towns and none in the smaller towns. I followed Capital Amusements\(^1\), one of the [traveling] shows, and my job was taking on allcomers. We'd pay them if they stayed three rounds with me and if they didn't, of course, we wouldn't pay them anything. Fortunately I was in good shape. It sounded big to go three rounds but if you aren't in shape you don't go three rounds with anybody. That's the secret of the game, you know. It wasn't that you were so good but [that] you were in better shape than your opponent. I did that for several years. There was a lot of Wobblies that followed those shows in that period. My dad, being a socialist, [would] get involved in various discussions with the Wobblies on these shows, and that is how I got involved in the trade union movement. And then there were the coal drivers and the Dunne brothers and [Carl] Skoglund, they worked in this coal yard. [Since I] was a Wobbly I got involved and that was my life from then on.

SS: So you joined the Wobblies?

HD: Hm hm (affirmative).

SS: Do you remember when you joined?

HD: I was a Wobbly before even I was at the circus. You see, my dad was a socialist and he'd had a big farm and he always hired Wobblies. In most cases these Wobblies they'd probably come and stay a week or two or a month or so for us. That was their life, they just kept going from one town to another and organizing the labor. So even when I was twelve years old I was already listening to discussions with the Wobblies, the Wobblies that are working with my dad. That's how I got to understand the labor
movement. After [a while] I got to meet Skoglund. I’ve reported on Skoglund, haven’t I?

SS: You’ve talked a little bit about him, yeah.

HD: He was a Norwegian; [no,] he came from Sweden. He was a Bolshevik and a Wobbly and was acquainted with the Dunne brothers. They were working in this coal yard and I happened to wind up there because they were going to have a stag party and they were looking for a boxing match. I said that I’d whip anybody that they could find to fight me, which was no hard job, like I say; I was in shape and my opponent wasn’t.

RF: The fight was to get the workers together, wasn’t it?

HD: That’s right. We had several stags and kept the workers down at the stag party, and I used to fight there.

PR: I thought you told me once that you had worked briefly in the Hormel plant.

HD: That’s right.

PR: In Austin, right?

HD: Yeah, three days.

PR: Oh, that briefly.

HD: This was exactly two years before the strike they had. Apparently they got wise to me and they checked back and found out where I came from, that my dad was a socialist and so forth and so they just let me go, that’s all. And I didn’t care. That was one of the deals. And I was going to make my money fighting. But then after I got involved in the Truck Drivers’ union—I even went to St. Louis and various places—my life was actually for the labor movement in a sense, after I got past eighteen years old.

SS: Is that when you came to Minneapolis, when you were eighteen?

HD: Yes, but I didn’t stay. I went from one place to another, like St. Louis for instance. But then I came here, got married. My wife’s father was a coal hauler and driver. And so I went to this coal yard and got involved in boxing. The coal yard at that particular time just happened to be Fuel Distributors they called it. It was at least ten or twelve yards that merged with the Ford Motor Company who owned this coal at that time. Ford Motor Company furnished the yard and the coal. All they wanted was truck drivers and helpers to get rid of the coal; they had everything else. It turned out to be a pretty good-sized yard. And that’s where the organization for the coal strike was started. It was the coal strike that actually got the trade union movement going here in 1934. And
that's how I got to be an organizer. See, when we were organizing drivers the job was to stop these drivers. I had the courage to stop drivers because I felt I could handle myself in the event I had to. Very frankly, I never had to hit any truck driver. I stopped them and talked to them and got along with them and organized them. I felt pretty good about that and I got credit for that from the organization committee.

PR: In the earlier period when you were involved with the Wobblies, were you ever connected with a local organization, or was it really just individuals who travelled around and happened to see each other?

HD: Just travelling around, no branch or anything like that. I just liked chasing around.

PR: Did you ride the box cars a lot to get around? Is that how you travelled?

HD: No, I'd ride the blinds mainly. Do you know what the blinds are?

PR: Underneath?

HD: No, the blinds are between the coaches on the passenger cars; they're doors going through each car. You'd just get in-between them and you'd make good time. In those days the passenger [trains] really made time. For instance, [from] Crookston to here we had to only stop twice to fuel up and we'd make it in less than eight hours. The blinds was the way to go if you had the courage to ride them.

SS: Well, there were home guards, though, weren't there in these various places?

HD: Referring to what?

SS: Stable Wobblies?

HD: Oh, no. The Wobblies actually would go from one place to another, mainly according to weather. They'd come up north and harvest and so forth and make pretty good money. The Wobblies had already set conditions up and so if they were going to haul and bundle on those thrashing rigs, they'd get as high as seven dollars an hour in a lot of cases. And then they'd go south in the winter and work the mills and so forth. But the Wobblies, they [didn't] want to have a job and stay there. None of them married.

RF: You give quite a bit of the credit to the Wobblies for those early days of the strike when they stopped the trucks, don't you?

HD: Oh yes, we, the Wobblies understood how to fight and that's what they'd do. [As a] matter of fact, they didn't want to be an organizer; they wanted to get connections and go somewhere else, actually.
PR: You got to know Skoglund and the Dunnes. Were there other people that you had known back earlier that you also connected with in Minneapolis around the coal yards in the Thirties?

HD: No, I made my living boxing actually.

SS: Yeah, I'm interested in the years right before the truck strike, like 1928 to 1934, to get a picture of what was happening politically in the Twin Cities. I know that that was a point where people started to pull away from the Communist Party, some people did at least. Like James Cannon came to Minneapolis to give talks about the things that he had seen going on.

HD: Well, Cannon at one time was a Communist, you know.

SS: Oh yes.

HD: But when Trotsky and Stalin split, that's when Cannon and the Dunne brothers and Skogie went with Trotsky. Because I was acquainted with the socialist movement I joined the Trotsky movement at that period. You see, the Trotskyite, we had a rough row to hoe because Stalin had the backing of the whole Russian movement and here we were actually rebels from that point of view. But we were able to organize the workers and we won the [coal workers'] strike. As a matter of fact that is the first strike that was won in this town for a long time, that coal strike.

PR: Yeah.

HD: After the coal strike, we would have workers come to the yard wanting to see those leaders that won that coal strike. And it just so happened that Skoglunds, myself and the Dunnes were all from one yard. And so we finally went to the union hall at nights; organized workers wanted leaders of that coal strike to lead them. I remember Farrell [Dobbs], for instance. We were just kids compared to the Dunnes and Skoglunds. We stayed up there nights and collected dues and so on. They found out that we were active and that helped us a lot. Of course, when the first strike [came] we actually took over leadership and so forth, and the second strike also. That's how come we got to be leaders. Skoglunds and the Dunnes, they had the know-how and we learned from them. We found out that they knew what they were doing and they were honest and sincere. That's what we wanted.

PR: Apart from the issues in the Soviet Union that split Stalin and Trotsky, how do you think the group of you approached organizing workers differently than the way Stalinists approached organizing workers?

HD: Well, in a sense the Stalinists helped us. The Dunne brothers and Skoglunds were honest and sincere about getting conditions for the workers. The Stalinists' job was only to follow Stalin. And, of
course, because we were organizing workers and doing a good job, they
had to criticize us and accidentally by doing that they were helping
us. They hurt themselves by criticizing us when we were doing a good
job.

PR: When the Hormel strike broke out in November 1933, were you
already working in the coal yards?

HD: No. You see, I fought with the workers because of my father.

RF: Weren't you in Minneapolis by the fall of 1933? That's when he
was saying....

PR: Yeah, yeah.

HD: Oh....

RF: Was the sit-down in 1933 or 1932?

PR: 1933.

RF: Yeah.

PR: What I want to get at is the local reaction up here among the
activists to what was happening in Austin. Did people feel like they
started to see that the labor movement was starting to wake up, even
though, as you say, the coal strike was the first successful strike
here in the cities?

SS: Yeah, what kind of impact did it have?

HD: Oh, I see what you mean. Well, you see, that started from [Floyd
B.] Olson when he said that the workers should organize and that is
what started the workers to join unions. I have to admit that Olson
did some good for the working [class]. See, there were two [strikes].
The first strike they had in Austin was two years prior to the one
they had last year. Frank Ellis was a genuine Wobbly and he had
some supporters. They were the ones that actually won conditions for
those workers, but they didn't have nothing to do with Minneapolis, of
course.

PR: I mean, didn't Skogie say something like, "Let's take a ride down
to Austin to see what's going on down there. You know, God, they're
occupying the plant!"

HD: At that time a lot of people didn't even know who Skogie was.
You see, Skogie got to be known after the strikes in the coal yard
with the Dunne brothers. There was another Swede by the name of
Soderberg and they had an apartment where they used to live.² They
were both in the coal yard but Soderburg didn't get the reputation
Skoglund got because he was more of a quiet guy. Like if you and I
would be talking, he'd probably butt in but he wasn't one of those who
would go out and talk to strangers and tell them, "We got to have a trade union movement." Yet he did a lot of work. That's one of the main things about organizing the workers: if you're a worker yourself it's a big thing in your favor, like Skoglund and the Dunnes, Ray Dunne in particular. He got fired from [being] a weigh master, you know. He was a weigh master--weigh master is the same as a boss in a coal yard--but he got fired because he was a Wobbly; he was speaking for the IWW. But that actually did him some good out amongst the workers. When you asked what I was doing, I just fell in line. My father educated me from the point of view of what a Wobbly does and how they worked and I followed right in line. My dad came down several times. See, he was a farmer. He'd come down and, as a matter of fact, he left some money with my wife to see to it that we had groceries and stuff because he knew I wasn't making wages. He was a big help to me.

PR: And he still had the farm out in North Dakota all that time?

HD: Oh yes.

RF: Crookston?

HD: Yeah. You know he was well known amongst the Wobblies. All the Wobblies that came through would stop and have a meal or so. And we had always had a hired girl that could help my mother out. So my dad had a reputation of really supporting the Wobblies.

RF: He supported Debs, too, didn't he?

HD: Oh, definitely. You see he came from Holland, you know, and took out the papers. You see, in that period, you took out one set of papers but legally you had to have two sets. They nominated my father and then it came out that he didn't have [the second set of] papers and that's what stopped him. Of course, my mother didn't either. If it wasn't for that, not because he is my father, but if he'd have had papers, then no question but he'd have got to be governor. Him and the governor was chums the way it was, that Governor Olson.

PR: That's interesting. We've seen a little bit from the other angle in doing the interview with [Jack] Maloney. Maloney talks about being a teenager in Minneapolis and going out to do migrant labor in North Dakota and how they would size up the farmers, which were decent and which weren't. It gives us a nice fit from the two.

SS: Yeah.

HD: Yeah, it was a pretty rich period there for the Wobblies.

SS: Yeah. We were just trying to get a picture of what it was like to be in Minneapolis right in that period before the strike in the coal yards.
HD: Yeah, the Wobblies were the ones responsible for that strike.

SS: In the coal yards?

HD: Yeah.

SS: How so?

HD: Well, Ray Dunne and Carl Skoglund, they were Wobblies.

SS: But didn't they stop being Wobblies after the Russian Revolution?

HD: Pardon me?

SS: Well after the Russian Revolution didn't they join the Communist Party?

HD: Yeah.

SS: Did they still have a red card? Were they still Wobblies?

HD: Oh sure, they were Wobblies right to the day they died. Carl and this Soderberg, this buddy of his, and I, we lived together for a year in an apartment when we were working for the union. I was fortunate. Every night we'd have discussions, what took place, what we did.... I was lucky to live with them, there's where I picked [it] up.

RF: I think you've made a point from time to time that it was an important side to the Wobblies that they understood that in the strike you had to shut the plant down and they were real militant. And they understood that more than anybody else, and that's why in that coal strike they became a crucial team of people that would go out and stop those trucks.

SS: The part, I guess, that's somewhat confusing is that there wasn't really a local or stable group of Wobblies here in the Twin Cities in that period.

HD: No.

SS: So this was just people... Well, I guess the Dunne brothers and Skoglund and....

HD: Well, there was a period that if you were a militant fighter, you were a Wobbly.

SS: So it didn't matter that there wasn't a local?

HD: No, but I lived with Skoglund and [Oscar] Coover and them and every night we'd have discussions: what took place, what happened, what we was going to have to do. The Wobblies actually were the ones
that won that strike. As a matter of fact, they would have won the strike in Austin too. When you call a strike, you're going to have to fight to win it and if you don't you're going to lose. That is one thing in favor of guys like Skoglund, Dunne, and so forth--they could talk to rank and file workers.

PR: There seems to have been an active period of unemployed demonstrations.

HD: Oh yes.

PR: Did you participate in any of those?

HD: No. I was always involved with the workers in coal. For instance, I certainly would encourage them, knowing they were fighting for better conditions for the workers. But I never was that involved. I could do more in the yards where I was at [work], you know.

SS: It's sort of hard to get at this but we keep trying to ask, what happened when the Dunne brothers and Skoglund quit the Communist Party?

HD: Well, you see when they quit the Communist Party they supported Trotsky and the Stalinists. Why, they had voted them down and kicked them out in a sense.

SS: Right, but I'm trying to see what it was like for them in Minneapolis after they made that decision to become part of the Left Opposition.

HD: Yeah, well, they were the ones that organized the coal drivers and they got me and a lot more workers like me to support the Trotskyites. They got to be known as Trotskyites.

PR: What was left of the Communists when Skoglund and the Dunnes left? Were there any talented, active people left behind?

HD: As a matter of fact, we had some pretty rough times with what we called the Stalinists.

SS: That's what I'm asking you about.

HD: And some of them were really rough; they beat up on more than one Trotskyite during that period. [If it] sounded like a trick move, like if they wanted a Trotskyite to come down and talk to some workers, we would go down there but we took help along. We never went down alone because we lost one of our comrades in . They beat the dickens out of him and the Stalinists are the ones that arranged it. This guy was doing a good job for the Trotskyist movement and the Stalinists had a lot of workers that supported them, you know...

SS: So one of the things they would do is invite a Trotskyist to come
HD: Yeah.

SS: And then in the middle of the speech or when the person started talking they would beat up on him?

HD: Yeah. If we got a call that a group of workers wanted to talk to Skoglund, for instance, we got wise. That’s the way we lost one of our men that way. One of our men got beat up that way.

SS: And after he was beat up, didn’t he come back?

HD: Oh yeah, he come back but we got wise, and we never sent no individual down to one of those groups more than once.

SS: But a group was a different story?

HD: Yeah.

SS: What sort of things happened after that? I mean, once you got wise to bringing a group with you, were there ever situations where the groups would fight each other?

HD: No, they got wise, too.

SS: And that stopped the physical violence?

HD: Yeah. We’d always seen to it that we were fighting for the workers and the workers finally got to support us. You can see what happened. We won the truck strike and we won [better working] conditions. We’re the ones that got them, believe me, nobody else.

PR: After the strikes and after you recovered [from] getting shot, was that the end of your career as a boxer?

HD: Yeah, that took care of me.

PR: How long did you stay around town or did you go to St. Louis next?

HD: I would only go to St. Louis if I was instructed to go there.

PR: Oh, so it was just on short trips?

HD: After we won that first strike, then I was under the ice [in the hospital]. We had an organization, [and] an executive board, and we would decide whether I could go to St. Louis to do something. It got to be a genuine organization and the proof of the pudding is you see the kind of union we had, that existed only because of Trotsky. We were a bonafide, disciplined organization. It didn’t make no difference what it was--I could have probably went and made a thousand
dollars in Chicago, but if they decided I'd stay here, I was going to stay here.

PR: Were you an officially-paid organizer for Local 574?

HD: Well, see, I was laid up for quite a while on account of my leg but we were having trouble on the Market, particularly the fruit market. We lost all our members. I'd just come out of the hospital, (I was in the hospital for three months), and Farrell came and said, "Think you can walk with crutches? We've got to have you." See, I had done some work on that market before, and I was known there, so we decided [that] they'd bring me down there and pick me up and that's the way I was lucky enough to organize that market, within three weeks, if you believe it.

PR: You had it all re-organized within three weeks?

HD: That's right.

PR: On crutches?

RF: Unbelievable.

PR: Yeah.

HD: Actually that helped me, being on crutches. Like, here's a guy that gets hurt fighting for them, and here I am again. So it did me more good than harm from that point of view. From then on I was general organizer. Where ever they thought I could do any good I was sent there.

RF: You were elected to the executive board at the end of the strike, weren't you?

HD: Yes, when I was in the hospital they had an election and I was elected to the executive board--that is, I was a trustee.

PR: Were you aware of the issue in Austin about whether the truck drivers in Austin should be in the Teamsters' or in the Independent Union of All Workers?

HD: Well, I was for the general organization of all the workers in one union.

PR: And not splitting them off?

HD: Yes.

PR: Ah ha. Did you ever know this Carl Nilson who was an organizer in Austin?

Pauline DeBoer: Nielson?
PR: Nielson, Nilson.

HD: Oh, Nilson, yeah.

PD: He was a good ______.

HD: Yeah, yeah. I had the reputation of fighting for the workers and would lay down my life if I had to, and when you're out fighting them bullets you're laying down your life.

SS: True enough.

PR: Well, as...

HD: Pardon me just a moment would you please? In the hospital there were so many workers who wanted to see me, some I'd probably never even known but they wanted to see me, the hospital finally put me in a private room down in the second floor. Workers would come to deliver to the hospital and they could come and see me. The hospital did that just because it saved a lot of rigamarole with the visiting hours and so forth. And that was quite a period, yeah. I'm sorry, I....

PR: No, that's good.

Moving just a little bit more ahead, as the CIO starts to get established nationally and particularly in Minnesota, how do you look at this emerging CIO, you and the people around you? Was it something that you saw as simply favorable or were you concerned about the role that the Stalinists were perhaps playing in it?

HD: Naturally, the Stalinists played a role. It was so plain to see that you weren't going to organize a bonafide union and get [better] conditions, so we automatically were opposed to that.

RF: Opposed to? But you supported the CIO?

HD: Yeah, supported them but we didn't support no Stalinists if they were in leadership or so forth.

PR: Well I guess my question is how much do you think they were in the leadership as the CIO began to develop in Minnesota? Frank Ellis plays a prominent part, and he's still an independent, but I'm real curious about the politics that dominated the CIO in Minnesota in the Thirties.

RF: Yeah, that's a good question.

HD: Well, you see, in some of those cases the Stalinists played a good role too. But where they would make their mistake was Stalin, and at that point they lost their prestige. Even Frank Ellis, but Frank was a fighter. When it looked like anybody wasn't supporting
the movement, he was the first to point it out and to get rid of them 'cause they weren't gonna help the movement any.

PR: The other thing that struck me as I've been looking at materials from the period is how much support you were able to develop within the Minneapolis Central Labor Union. It seemed that when Tobin or [A F of L President William] Green wanted to attack the local, you developed a very strong base of support in the other unions within the Central Labor Union. How were you able to do that?

HD: Only through the work of our rank and file workers in unions. They more than once criticized or tried to say we were too radical. They were looking out for themselves and we were able to prove that kind of baloney. We took him in the union and we got him (I put myself in the class with the Dunnes and Skoglund because we were the ones that fought together and we were able to get to some places where they got some members fired purposely and we seen to that). Just because we were honest and sincere about getting conditions for the workers. The only reason that we were able to do that, to get what we did was Trotsky and, of course, the Trotskyites. Trotsky played a leading role even after Stalin kicked him out. He was still a big help to us.

SS: Could you talk a little bit about that, how he was a help?

HD: At one time I met Trotsky. and I arranged a trip to see him by getting so many members...we had a kind of a....

SS: Contest?

HD: ...contest and....

SS: And you won it?

HD: Yeah. It was just about like sitting here talking right here and he was telling me how we have to change, the system has got to change and so forth and I didn't have no arguments against him. So....

PR: You've really emphasized the practical side of things, people, the sort of education, sitting around at the end of the day and discussing what's happened and what needs to happen tomorrow. Were there things that people read too?

HD: Oh yes. Every time we had a meeting or discussion Trotsky's books would come up: where you find this in Trotsky's [writings]. I don't mind, I'll tell you that Trotsky was a big help. Without Trotsky I'm not too sure whether we'd have been able to fight Stalin. The Stalinists would have took over, no question about it. I can recall, we used to have discussions purposely, you know, with like the five of us. We wanted to know what we're going to do here or there, so we'd have a meeting and a discussion and it would be settled that way--how to do it.
RF: Wasn't Skoglund on the Central Labor body though? Didn't he head up a committee?

HD: Oh, Skoglund, he'd head up some committees probably.

RF: I thought he headed up the committee that decided whether or not a union would get strike sanctions.

HD: No, the only way he'd be on more than one committee would be just like us sitting up here and we would decide, "Well, Carl'd be the guy to handle that particular thing."

RF: But he was familiar with the whole union leadership, locally and in the state, wasn't he?

HD: Skoglund?

RF: Yeah.

HD: Oh sure.

RF: Yeah.

HD: He was responsible for practically the whole leadership. With the Dunnes and myself, we, I supported...

RF: But I mean he knew the leaders of the other unions and was able to work with them?

HD: In some cases yes and in some cases no.

PD: Didn't you have people, like Coover, that were in the electrical workers' and some of the carpenters...?

HD: Oh sure.

PD: So you did have friendly relations with all of these various unions?

HD: Yes, I'm glad you brought that up. The Trotskyites they had members in the carpenters' union, in the truck drivers' union and practically every one of the unions. Every one of the radicals in the Central Labor Union in one way or another supported the Teamsters' which was Trotskyites. We [were] the first union to actually get a contract and got conditions. One of the things we learned mainly from Trotsky was the fact that we have to support the labor movement. We supported every local whether we agreed with them or not. Like, I might say, "Well, so and so. But after all, the workers are the ones who need the conditions, and they're the ones who are going to fight for them, and that's where we're going to have to be." I was fortunate, very fortunate. I had a father for a socialist to begin
with and then I got active with Skoglund and the Dunne brothers. Ray Dunne was the real leader of the Dunnes....

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PR: Now through your involvement with the Workers' Party you must have gotten to know people from other areas. Did somebody travel through and fill you in on a strike in Boston or a strike in San Francisco? Did it bring you into a network of information and ideas that you wouldn't have been part of otherwise?

HD: Oh sure, there ain't no question about it. The Party would contact you, particularly Skoglund and Ray Dunne, and then in turn tell the rank and file like me. That happened dozens of times. We got to meet a lot of bonafide, trade union, honest-to-God fighters and it was that kind of a leadership that won strikes. I'll tell you that if it wasn't for Skoglund and Dunne we'd a never won that strike, never. Well, you read about it.

PR: So the life after the strike--there's union meetings, other people's picket lines that people are going to, speakers coming through town, informal discussions in the evening. You had mentioned earlier these boxing matches, stag parties. What other kinds of things did they do to get people together? Did they feel that in order to reach the rank and file workers that they still needed to have things like boxing matches or stag parties, or did they think now rank and file workers would come to union meetings, more intellectual discussions?

HD: Well, problems like that came up during the period. You're fighting to get workers organized and you hear about John Jones, and he done this somewhere in Billings, Montana. And he would come. I [would] contact him and told him what we were doing and he would come down. Then I'd report this to the group here, so on and so forth. That's the way a lot of things.... We always tried to get some worker, rank and file, to come.

PD: When did you have the Christmas parties? Was that during that time?

HD: That period? Yeah, it came up during the discussion and by God we'd have a Christmas party for the members' kids. And that got to be a real thing, real....

PD: Yeah, it was at the Armory.

HD: Imagine.

SS: When did they start? Was this in 1935, 1936?

HD: During that period.
SS: Yeah, I remember seeing a picture, actually. There's a picture in the Historical Society of one of the Christmas parties.

HD: We had over a hundred stewards and these stewards were elected by the workers that they worked with at a barn. These stewards then, we always had steward meetings, twice a month, taking up whatever problems we were faced with and what's [going] on somewhere else, and so forth. So you see we had a hundred stewards working with the workers, and they in turn are getting some ideas. These workers aren't dumb, either, you know. And so that is actually what built that union, no question about it.

PR: I'm sure that the newspaper was also an important tool, The Northwest Organizer.

HD: Oh yes. We recognized that as the most important of all, no question about it. That was the leadership that thought that up too, it didn't just come by itself.

SS: What role did the Socialists play in this period?

HD: Well the Socialists, naturally, they wouldn't support the Trotskyites but rank and file they would support us. But right out openly in their meetings, they didn't come out and support us and say, "We're the guys, honest, fighting for the workers," so forth. They didn't ever do that. But at the same time the Socialists, when they were around when Debs was still alive, Debs was a real fighter, you know.

SS: Yeah. I was talking more in the Thirties, right before the time of Norman Thomas.

HD: Yeah, but it'd depend on...

SS: On what the issue was?

HD: Yeah, that's right.

PD: Wasn't Norman Thomas friendly to the strike though?

HD: Oh yes, we even had a statement from him to the workers to support that strike. We took all advantages. Anybody that had any kind of a reputation or done anything, even if he wasn't a Socialist, if he was known for doing something, we would use him; we'd call him.

PR: Did you work then as an organizer from the period when you got out of the hospital until World War II?

HD: Yeah.

PR: That whole stretch?
HD: I, well, I was an organizer from then on.

PR: And you were out of the area as much as you were in the area?

HD: Yes and no. You see we purposely went to organize all the unions around.

[Short gap while they changed tapes]

PR: You were talking about the decision for Dobbs to shift away from being the eleven-state organizer for the Teamsters to working full-time for the Party. How did that affect what you were doing?

HD: Well, in a sense I was assigned to take his place and so I had to get acquainted with various workers and, of course, Farrell had given me a written notice so that the guys could see. But I’d as soon as stayed locally where I was. When you start working eleven states then, the next job I was going to work was on the West Coast, Beck, Montana was next, and you don't ever actually get to know a lot of real fighters that you would have if you had a chance to stick with them.

PR: In a lot of these other cities were people already ready? Did they feel like they were just waiting for the right leaders to come in? Had they heard what had happened in Minneapolis and now they wanted it where they were?

HD: You know, that is one of the problems we had. Some God-darned faker would say he's from Minneapolis, and probably he'd never seen Minneapolis but he'd say he was from Minneapolis, and they supported him. They'd even give him some money. We had a lot of cases like that.

PR: Were there ever any contacts made out in these other areas with organizers that were out from Austin organizing meatpackers in, say, Sioux City or Otumwa or in Omaha?

HD: We'd get letters or telephone calls every day from unions or workers that wanted to have an organizer come down and speak to them 'cause we had the reputation and that's what they were looking for. They were looking for a bonafide honest organizer and that's what we were. I don't give a damn what anybody says, there wasn't nobody on that payroll that did anything to harm the trade union movement and there wasn't one on that payroll that wouldn't go to work for nothing if it meant better for the workers.

SS: I think that this is probably a good point to stop for now.

PR: Sure, sure.

(END OF INTERVIEW.)
FOOTNOTES

1A carnival show rather than a circus proper.

2Axel A. Soderberg, a coal driver, lived at 2723 W. 25th Street in 1934. Skoglund is not listed in the City Directory.