

BEGINNINGS: THE NIGHT THE CHAIRS FLEW

The soot stained face of the cavernous Manhattan Center, once proud host to internationally known opera companies and symphony orchestras, fronts glumly on Thirty Fourth Street west of Eighth Avenue. In the Center's waning years, before its purchase in 1975 by Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, its expenses were mainly carried by the rental fees of various unions. In place of costumed basso profundos straining their larynx at the hall's arched ceiling, it echoed with the nasal drones of union officials in shark skin suits piped unceremoniously through a squeaking and often faulty public address system. Union rentals were a good bet for the Center in those years. Because whether the reports of the health and welfare committee or the pension fund played to a handful of listeners scattered around the first few rows or to a packed orchestra and balcony the fee remained the same. And, regardless of the turnout, the union would be back again to fulfill its obligation to hold an annual or bi-annual meeting in a place capable of containing at least a presentable part of the membership.

Occasionally, however, the more or less permanent dissatisfaction of union members expressed itself in ways other than non-attendance or apathetic yawns in the back rows. The dissatisfaction could become stormy and hostile towards union officials seated smugly on the dais. At those times the union rentals must have seemed of questionable benefit to the Center's managers. The hall's scarred and beaten interior was still vulnerable to the potential damage inflicted by an angry mass of unionists breaking into open rebellion.

Such a rebellion occurred at a taxi union meeting on April 14th, 1971.

By a quarter past seven in the evening four or five members of a small Trotskyist group were posted at the entrance of Manhattan Center and down at Eighth Avenue to catch people coming off the subway. The bi-annual meeting of the New York City Taxi Drivers Union, Local 3036, AFL-CIO, was not due to begin until eight, but a handful of drivers were there already. These early arrivals were ripe targets for the Trotskyists, whose pitch centered around the need for a labor party. The taxi drivers, they insisted, could help to build such a party that night by forcing their leadership to put its promotion at the top of their agenda. But for the taxi drivers that evening there were other items which rated higher on their list.

While one or two drivers stared blankly at the red banner headline of the Trotskyists' newspaper, others brushed the paper and the advice aside. "Listen, fella," began a well-seasoned appearing cabbie, his finger raised almost in warning, "for the past four weeks I've been bringing home thirty bucks less than usual, and it's not because I haven't been out there hacking all day long."

The finger stabbed the air again and a flush began to grow from the driver's collar. "It's because of this stinking fare hike. And that's what we're gonna talk about tonight!" Slamming his fist into the open palm of his other hand with a loud smacking sound, the cabbie turned abruptly and strode away.

Slowly, and then in a steady stream, more drivers arrived - many emerging from the subway at the corner, others, working the night shift, after having found parking spots on the hack stands around nearby Penn Station.

Loud talk began echoing down Thirty fourth Street as each newly arriving cab driver added their own particular horror story of riderless desperation.

The 48% fare increase, sought by the taxi fleet owners and approved by the City Council, had been instituted in March. It had left the normally cab hopping city of New York, as one driver put it, "deader than a month of Labor Days." Shouted accounts of tips almost too low to count, and the frequent "stiffs" - no tip at all - by the few passengers cabbies could find filled the night air and attracted the curious stares of pedestrians strolling by.

Cabbie after cabbie, some with their voices almost trembling with rage, recounted similar versions of cruising once fertile ground and seeing not a single upraised arm for hours at a stretch. All this, the drivers loudly proclaimed to one another, on top of the strike in December which had cost them two weeks of Christmas wages. Neither, they insisted, had the settlement terms been much of a holiday bonus. The union had agreed to remove the costs of health benefits and pensions from the fleetowners' shoulders. Under the new provisions, funds for the benefits would come from a ten cent deduction from each fare.

To the angry cab drivers milling outside Manhattan Center, this new plan was nothing but outright thievery. "Thirty trips a day I've been booking," shouted a short, stocky driver in a buttoned sweater, "and that means three bucks lifted right out of my pocket. Three bucks a day, twenty thousand drivers - you'd need a computer just to figure one week's take. So where are all those dimes going? That's what I wanna know!"

Besides the "dime" there had been an additional surprise in the contract package handed to the drivers - a reduction in the commission for new drivers from 49% of the clock to 42%. The fleetowners had been stocking up on new drivers, the older cabbies insisted, and getting them out on the streets first, while they themselves were being harassed for low booking and high mileage. "As though there was any money to be made out there!" one driver cried to the grey walls of Manhattan Center.

By a quarter to eight the crowd had swelled to more than a thousand. Mixed together on the concrete sidewalk were grey haired and balding veterans, and younger drivers, many with long hair and beards. To these newcomers the older drivers invoked a legitimacy of thousands of miles logged behind the wheels of Checkers and Dodges. But even though divided by age, experience and differing outlooks, the drivers that evening were able to bridge the gap between them.

Also mingling in the crowd were the union leadership's paid representatives, the recipients of part-time jobs, semi-official positions and small favors. One of these, engaged in a heated argument with a young woman from the Trotskyist group, lost control and swatted out at her, causing a small stir that went largely unnoticed in the roar of the crowd.

As hundreds of cab drivers milled about in the chilly night air waiting for the doors to open, dozens of arguments flared and died. But where one ended, another began, and most common to

all was the recurring name "Van Arsdale" which was used interchangeably with the word "union." Dozens of fingers stabbed the air making charges and emphasizing points. Any Van Arsdale supporter who attempted to dismiss the complaints with reassurances that it was just a matter of time until the riding public got used to a higher fare was descended upon by a dozen angry drivers, each with a counter argument recounted with mounting fury. For once the union loyalists were overwhelmingly outnumbered, as those who might have sat on the sidelines of earlier union disputes were now actively dissenting from union policy.

Harry Van Arsdale, Jr., head of the New York City Central Labor Council, national secretary-treasurer of the highly paid and exclusive electricians' union and power broker to the power brokers, had managed to organize the taxi fleet drivers of New York City in 1966. From his vantage point at the head of the city's Labor Council, the amalgamated authority of the AFL-CIO unions in the city, Van Arsdale had brought a singular prestige to the struggle. In addition he lent the weight of his well-cemented political friendships. "Rocky" was a friend and an ally - the governor reportedly made few major moves without consulting with Van Arsdale. And, as the leader of the electricians' union, Van Arsdale was able to throw hundreds of loyal and disciplined troops into the battle for the taxi garages.

The successful organizing drive was a feat which the then left wing Transport Workers Union under Mike Quill in the thirties, and the mob, represented by Johnny Dio and the Teamsters, in the fifties, had both failed to accomplish. That noteworthy achievement was welcomed by the vast majority of cab drivers, as were the not insignificant improvements in the daily grind of a cabbie's workaday world. "After twenty years of hacking, at last I didn't have to bring my own wiper blades to the garage every day," reflected one grateful driver. But, in the spring of 1971, after the seemingly fruitless strike in December and followed by the huge fare increase in March, the house that Van Arsdale had built seemed beginning to totter.

At the outset of the December strike, union president Van Arsdale had told his membership they could win "parity with the transit workers." But, two weeks later, having missed the bulk of the pre-Christmas rush, a small number of confused and dispirited drivers had voted at another Manhattan Center gathering to return to work. The April 1971 meeting was the first chance drivers had had to re-encounter the leadership over a settlement they had neither seen nor endorsed, but under whose provisions they were now working.

When, at a few minutes to eight, the doors to Manhattan Center swung open there was a crush to get inside. Wedged in against one another at the building's entrance, drivers who couldn't see over the heads of those in front wondered aloud why no progress seemed to be being made getting inside. Cries of "Let's Go!" and "what's holdin' it up?" came from the rear of the crowd. The handful of drivers who had managed to gain the top step of the entranceway called to those behind them, "They're checking the dues receipts." Those within earshot groaned.

Inside the lobby of the hall, loyal shop stewards and borough representatives were selectively picking out people and demanding proof that they were indeed paid up members. While drivers known to be friendly to the union's officialdom were being waved inside, others, many of them younger cabbies and therefore more likely adversaries, were checked. When one young driver, boasting a full beard and flowing dark locks, was refused admittance by a union stalwart, only the

shouts of others behind him to "Cut the bullshit!" and "Let him in!" persuaded the official to drop his objections.

Slowly, and one at a time, the membership was admitted past the checkpoint through a single door leading to the hall. There, on stage, beside a huge blue and gold banner emblazoned with the name of the union, sat the elected officials, nervously shuffling papers and anxiously looking out at the seats being filled before them.

At a little after eight p.m., at a sign from the officers on the dais, the dues checkers rose and walked into the hall, slamming the door on the astonished faces of several hundred drivers who had not yet made it through the gauntlet. Up on the stage, union Vice President Robert Pancaldo started to call the meeting to order but was quickly interrupted by a chant from the back of the room. "Let them in!" thundered the drivers at the back.

Swiftly, a group of union loyalists moved to block the entrance and hold the doors shut against the pushing from the other side. A scuffle erupted between drivers in the hall bent on opening the doors and those intent on keeping them shut. As the chant grew louder the officials backed off. The doors opened and to the cheers of those inside, the remaining drivers filed in.

Every organization has its rituals, the taxi drivers union notwithstanding. The traditional moment of silence for deceased members was called for, and while the noise level dropped a few decibels, by the time a scratchy recording of the national anthem had been played, the hall was filled with the sound of hoots, whistles and yelling, not unlike a well-oiled crowd looking forward to a double header at the stadium.

Whether or not Harry Van Arsdale ever had control of the April meeting was a question of debate later, with some contending that by losing control of the doors at the rear, any power over the functioning of the meeting had slipped from his hands. At any rate, when Van Arsdale, short, silver haired and red faced, began aiming his high and nasal monotone at the crowd it was lost in a chorus that seemed to erupt from everywhere in the room. "Point of Order!" screamed some twenty drivers who were on their feet in different Parts of the hall waving small copies of Robert's Rules of Order. "Point of Order, page thirty seven!" they yelled.

There was, as it happened, no mention of a point of order on page 37 of Robert's Rules, a fact any of the officers on the dais could have easily gleaned had they taken the time to look. But it wasn't in Van Arsdale's time proven tactics to respond directly to anything said from the floor. Rather, he employed his well worn look of quiet exasperation and indignation and asked how many members wanted to get on with the meeting. It had worked countless times before for the labor leader, and, under normal circumstances, it would have worked again. Force the crowd to quiet the discontents themselves and then proceed to avoid the issues. But on this particular spring night the assembled taxi drivers were not buying.

The roar from the floor did not subside, and, unable to continue, Van Arsdale recognized an upraised hand in the crowd. The driver strode purposefully to the microphone on the floor and made a motion that the union not accept any contract that contained the "dime" and the 42% rate for new drivers. The room exploded into cheers.

Raising his voice to be heard over the din, Van Arsdale proceeded to ignore the motion. "Cab drivers are their own worst enemy," he fairly shouted at the crowd. The hoots and boos mounted, but Van Arsdale pressed on. The gypsy cabs, he told them, were out there pushing the medallioned cabs off the streets. With the gypsies, the City Council, and the fleetowners all forcing the union into retreat, a good contract had been obtained under difficult conditions, he insisted. But all over the room now, drivers were standing, many of them waving dollar bills over their heads and shouting "We want bread! We want bread!"

"You don't just go in and ask for everything," said Van Arsdale at the podium, a hint of pleading now entering his voice for the first time. "The garage negotiators are difficult and competent men. You compromise."

It was as much as Van Arsdale was able to say. The entire room now appeared to be standing, and joining the bill wavers were others who began pitching dimes onto the stage which clinked against the metal chairs of the officers and rolled back onto the floor. Suddenly, out of the crowd a young driver leaped to the stage and grabbed Van Arsdale's microphone. "I say this is as far as we go with these guys," the driver shouted, his words reverberating off the walls. Van Arsdale, his red face darkening, stood beside the driver at the podium vainly trying to cut him off. "I say..." the driver yelled, but the rest was lost when someone, on a signal from Van Arsdale, pulled the plug on the mike. The driver kept talking, his lips moving, but his words inaudible to the crowd. At that point, as a driver in the front row later described it, all hell broke loose.

Another driver scrambled up from the floor and in an effort either to heave himself up on the stage or pull the officers down to him, yanked the tablecloth off the officers' table. The officers retaliated by shoving the table over into the crowd below.

Hundreds of cabbies now surged towards the stage and metal folding chairs began hurtling through the air at the retreating officers. The union's sole Black officer, hand picked by Van Arsdale, stood by the president's side shielding him with a chair held over his head. But there was no intention of making a stand of it. Van Arsdale and the other officers beat it out a rear exit. After they had left, police entered the hall. All around the room more than a thousand drivers stood staring disbelievingly at the stage, now empty except for the dozens of folding chairs lying here and there.

"This meeting is adjourned," announced an officer of the 14th Precinct.