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THE DEPRESSION YEARS IN YBOR CITY*

by Jose Yglesias

In the sunlit town, the Depression came imperceptibly. The realization came to me when Aunt Lila said there's no food in the house. My aunt, who owned the house we lived in, would no longer charge rent. It would be shameful to charge rent with \$9 a week coming in.

The grocery man would come by and take a little order, which he would bring the next day. When my mother would not order anything because she owed, he'd insist: Why are you cutting down on the beans?

There was a certain difference between the Depression in my home town than elsewhere. There weren't dark, satanic mills. The streets were not like a city ghetto. There were poor homes, that hadn't been painted in years. But it was out in the open. You played in the sunlight. I don't remember real deprivation.

Ybor City was an island in the South. When an American got mad at any Latin, he called him a Cuban nigger. This was one of the first feelings I remember: I want to be an American. you become ashamed of the community. I was an ardent supporter of Henry Ford at the age of twelve.

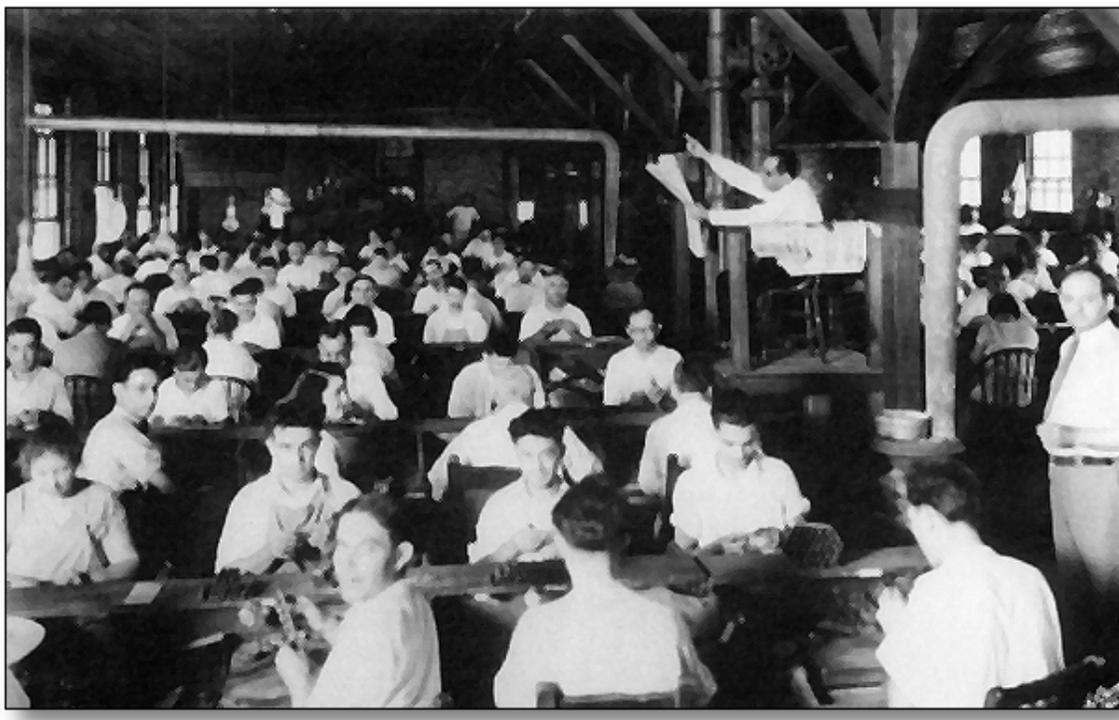
The strike of 1931 revolved around readers in the factory. The workers themselves used to pay twenty-five to fifty cents a week and would hire a man to read to them during work. A cigar factory is one enormous open area, with tables at which people work. A platform would be erected, so that he'd look down at the cigar makers as he read to them some four hours a day. He would read from newspapers and magazines and a book would be read as a serial. The choice of the book was democratically decided. Some of the readers were marvelous natural actors. They wouldn't just read a book. They'd act out the scenes. Consequently, many cigar makers, who were illiterate, knew the novels of Zola and Dickens and Cervantes and Tolstoy. The works of the anarchist, Kropotkin. Among the newspapers read were *The Daily Worker* and the *Socialist Call*.

The factory owners decided to put an end to this, though it didn't cost them a penny. Everyone went on strike when they arrived one morning and found the lecture platform torn down. The strike was lost. Every strike in my home town was always lost. The readers never came back.

My uncle was a foreman. He was ill-equipped for the job because he couldn't bear to fire anybody. He would discuss it with his wife: We have to cut off so many people. What am I going to do? My aunt would say: You can't fire him. They have twelve children. You'd hear a great deal of talk. You knew things were getting worse. No more apprentices were taken in. My sister was in the last batch.

The strike left a psychological scar on me. I was in junior high school and a member of the student patrol. I wore an arm band. During the strike, workers marched into the schools to close

*Reprinted from *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, by Studs Terkel (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 109-12.



A lector reading to Ybor City cigar makers in about 1930.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

them down, bring the children out. The principal closed the gates, and had the student patrols guard them. If they come, what do I do? My mother was in the strike.

One member of the top strike committee was a woman. That day I stood patrol, she was taken off to jail. Her daughter was kept in the principal's office. I remember walking home from school, about a block behind her, trying to decide whether to tell her of my sympathies, to ask about her mother. I never got to say it. I used to feel bad about that. Years later, in New York, at a meeting for Loyalist Spain, I met her and told her.

Everybody gave ten percent of their pay for the Republic. It was wild. The total community was with Loyalist Spain. They used to send enormous amounts of things. It was totally organized. The song "No pasarán" that was taken to be Spanish was really by a Tampa cigar maker.

It was an extraordinarily radical strike. The cigar makers tried to march to City Hall with red flags, singing the old Italian anarchist song, "Avanti popolo," "Scarlet Banner." I thought it was Spanish because we used to sing "Avanza pueblo." You see, the bonus march made them feel the revolution was here.

It was a Latin town. Men didn't sit at home. They went to cafes, on street corners, at the Labor Temple, which they built themselves. It was very radical talk. The factory owners acted out of



A march in May 1937 by Ybor City residents in support of the Spanish Republic.

Courtesy of La Gaceta.

fright. The 1931 strike was openly radical. By then, there was a Communist Party in Ybor City. Leaflets would be distributed by people whom you knew. (Laughs.) They'd come down the street in the car (whispers) with their headlights off. And then onto each porch. Everybody knew who it was. They'd say, "Oh, cómo está, Manuel." (Laughs.)

During the strike, the KKK would come into the Labor Temple with guns, and break up meetings. Very frequently, they were police in hoods. Though they were called the Citizens' Committee, everybody would call them Los Cuckoo Klan. (Laughs.) The picket lines would hold hands, and the KKK would beat them and cart them off.

The strike was a ghastly one. When the factories opened, they cut off many workers. There was one really hated manager, a Spaniard. They would say, "It takes a Spaniard to be that cruel to his fellow man." He stood at the top of the stairs. He'd hum "The Scarlet Banner": "You-you can come in." Then he'd hum "The Internationale": "You-you can come in." Then he'd turn his back on the others. They weren't hired. Nobody begged him, though.

When the strike was lost, the Tampa paper published a full page, in large type: the names of all the members of the strike committee. They were indicted for conspiracy and spent a year in jail. None of them got their jobs back.

The readers' strike lasted only a couple of weeks: *La huelga de los lectores*. I just don't know how they kept up their militancy. There were, of course, many little wildcat strikes. Cigar makers were just incredible. If they were given a leaf that would crumble: "Too dry – out!" When cigar makers walked out, they didn't just walk out at the end of a day. They'd walk out on the day the tobacco had been moistened, laid out. The manufacturer lost a few hundred dollars, in some cases, a thousand.

There were attempts to organize the CIO. I remember one of my older cousins going around in a very secretive manner. You'd think he was planning the assassination of the czar. He was trying to sign people up for the CIO. The AF of L International was very conservative and always considered as an enemy. They never gave the strike any support. It was considered the work of agitators.

People began to go off to New York to look for jobs. Almost all my family were in New York by 1937. You'd take that bus far to New York. There, we all stayed together. The only place people didn't sleep in was the kitchen. A bed was even in the foyer. People would show up from Tampa, and you'd put them up. We were the Puerto Rican immigrants of that time. In any cafeteria, in the kitchen, the busboys, the dishwashers, you were bound to find at least two from Ybor City.

Some would drift back as jobs would open up again in Tampa. Some went on the WPA. People would put off governmental aid as long as possible. Aunt Lila and her husband were the first in our family, and the last, to go on WPA. This was considered a terrible tragedy, because it was charity. You did not mention it to them.

That didn't mean you didn't accept another thing. There was no payday in any cigar factory that there wasn't a collection for anyone in trouble. If a father died, there was a collection for the funeral. When my father went to Havana for an operation, there was a collection. That was all right. You yourself didn't ask. Someone said: "Listen, so and so's in trouble." When Havana cigar makers would go on strike, it was a matter of honor: you sent money to them. It has to do with the Spanish-Cuban tradition.

Neighbors have always helped one another. The community has always been that way. There was a solidarity. There was just something very nice.

People working in the cigar industry no longer have the intellectual horizons that my parents had, and my aunts and uncles. They were an extraordinarily cultivated people. It makes it very difficult for me today to read political analysts, even those of the New Left, who talk in a derogatory way of the "glorification" of the working class. The working class I knew was just great.