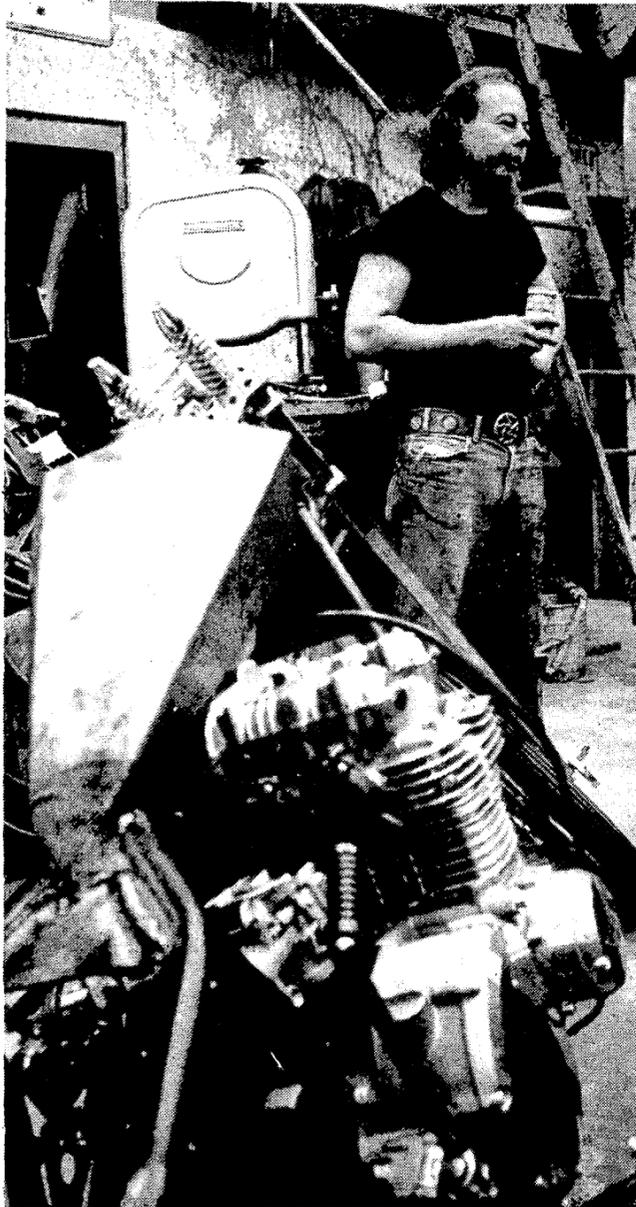


# A bike, a beer and a union card

By Dan MacLeod

To protect their identities, photos of the Undertaker's Motorcycle Club were not used. These motorcyclists belong to a Michigan club.



Photographs by Steve Kagan

I'd been warned beforehand that the guys from Local 42 were pretty tough but, after all, they were the ones who had asked union headquarters for help. Since I had to go to Columbus to look firsthand into their complaints, I made arrangements to meet the local committee that evening.

While waiting for them at my motel room on the outskirts of town, I was still puzzled by the attitude of their regional union rep, Harold Freeman. When Harold sent me their request for an evaluation of hazardous chemicals in their small auto parts plant, he said they were very sincere. I couldn't imagine why he was refusing to join us that evening.

I heard a commotion outside. Pulling back the window curtain, I saw three or four mean-looking bikers come roaring by on Harleys, followed by a beat-up red Chevy pick-up truck. I let the curtain fall and went back to my papers.

A few seconds later, there was a knock on my door and two of the bikers were standing before me, helmets under their arms.

"We're lookin' for a fellow named Dan," one said. He had a nasty scar on his right cheek.

I hesitated but finally admitted that's who I was. My union guys were bound to be along in a few minutes, if I needed help.

He thrust his hand forward. "My name's Ivan." He was fairly short, clean shaven with medium length hair. But, with his leather jacket and a missing front

tooth he looked pretty formidable. I'm chairman of the union bargaining committee at the plant."

The other fellow grabbed my hand and began pumping it excitedly. He was taller and skinnier with a long ponytail and a scrawny little goatee. "My name's C.J.," he volunteered, his eyes wide and brows arching as he spoke. "I'm the financial secretary."

"We was expecting some older dude," Ivan said coolly, like he was used to being in charge. "I'm also chairman of the road committee of our bike club and we was thinkin' of takin' you over to our place."

I finally understood Harold Freeman's reluctance—Harold was a slightly built, elderly black man.

## Beer and business.

I climbed into the pick-up truck where I met Lyle. He was big—tall and heavy with a full bushy beard and flowing hair. A plaid flannel shirt barely covered his huge frame. He held out a massive hand to me in welcome, but didn't say a word. Lyle, I later found out, was the union safety committeeman.

We stopped at a plain cement-block building tucked in among some warehouses, garages, and bars in an old industrial area of town. Outside the building was a long row of shiny Harley-Davidsons. The sign above the door said, "Undertaker's Motorcycle Club."

The barroom was lit by only a couple of Budweiser clocks. I couldn't make out much besides the cement block walls and a long bar, against which were leaning 10 or 12 figures all with long, stringy hair. Each was wearing what seemed to be six or seven shirts along with their colors. As my eyes adjusted I made out several tables, most of them filled.

Everyone was drinking beer from the bottle. A few had shots of whiskey in front of them, too.

Over in the corner stood a small stage with mirrors on the walls. A pudgy striptease dancer was doing an uninspired routine. She seemed to be relying heavily on the strip and very little on the tease. No one in the room was paying her any attention.

We sat down at one of the tables. A new dancer, a little thinner and prettier, came on. She quickly took off her clothes to some country-rock tune. Everybody ignored her too.

Ivan, C.J., Lyle and I ordered our beers and began talking. A few others joined in. The dancer who had just quit had put on a dress and was now making her way from table to table trying to get someone to buy her a drink. She came up to us but the guys brushed her off without bothering to look up. "Not now Midgy, this is business."

We started talking about the union and their plant. "The plant's only been open a couple of years," Ivan was saying. "About 60 guys in there. The company screwed up when they opened. They musta been lookin' for just young husky guys, 'cause what they got was a hunderd percent vets from Nam."

C.J. added with a laugh, "Yeah, includin' most of us from the Undertakers. They just didn't know it."

Ivan continued, "Man, there was problems at first. Coupla the guys beat up a foreman with a pipe, 'cause he'd been ridin' them too hard, and they got sent to jail for it. Then we had a strike, but since we didn't have no union, some of the guys got fired for it."

"But we drove off the plant manager," C.J. said proudly with his eyes wide. "He kept getting these a-non-ee-muss letters calling him 'Pear,' on account of he was fat and funny shaped. I remember one went, 'Dear Pear, we was all trained to kill in Nam and you'd better watch yer ass or we're gonna slit yer throat,' and it was signed, 'Green Cheese.'"

Slowly, some words started coming from Lyle, the only ones from him all evening. "None of us never knowed who Green Cheese was." He grinned at me with an evil look in his eye.

## Hard questions.

Ivan went on, "I figured we needed a union. You're always stronger if you're together."

"So we got everyone to sign up and when we had our first election, most of us officers in the Undertakers was elected to the union positions."

"They assigned us Harold to help us out and, man, has he been cool. He taught us a lotta stuff. That ol' man sure got some tricks up his sleeve."

"We keep invitin' him to come down here with us, but I think he's scared of these other guys." He motioned to the dark figures still standing at the bar, then paused. "I guess I can't blame him. Some of these mothers are mean. And I s'pose a little prejudiced."

They began asking me about some of the topics they had seen in union position papers. Finally one of them asked, "What do you think about national health insurance?"

I answered with a shrug, "It's pretty straightforward, we gotta have it. What would you do if you got laid off now, lost your insurance, and then got sick?"

"Well, isn't that socialized medicine?" Ivan asked, eyeing me closely.

"Not exactly," I answered cautiously. "It only deals with payments, not public control over the whole system."

He put his arms on the table, leaned forward and asked, "Well, what do you think of socialism?"

I looked around the room and wondered what the correct answer to this question was. Lyle was looking more like a hunk of green cheese all the time.

I started slowly. "There's lots of types

Continued on page 23



Photographs by Steve Kagan