THE BERLIN railroad strike, which tied up city and incoming traffic for over a month this spring, was brought on by three festering problems facing rail workers—wages, the continuing struggle against communist domination and the need to establish the right to join any union without fear of reprisals.

The Railroad Union, a member of the Independent Trade Union Organization (UGO), encountered peculiar difficulties because of these factors. Railroad workers were employed by a communist-controlled organization whose operating authority in the railroads gave it power over the workers' individual lives. They worked, moreover, for an organization which paid their wages exclusively in East marks, the Soviet-controlled currency.

To understand why railroad workers residing in West Berlin were among those hardest hit by the currency reform of June 1948 the terms of the currency law must be remembered. East marks and Deutsche marks (west) were equally valid officially as legal tender in the west sectors of Berlin, but the East mark did not have to be accepted except in payment for basic necessities of life.

THE DEUTSCHE mark acquired at once a higher value than the East mark, and the general rule applied was that workers were paid 25 percent of their wages in Deutsche marks. The 15,000—18,000 railroad workers residing in the west who received 100 percent of their wages in East marks were immediately placed at a disadvantage. They could purchase the basic rationed necessities of life with their East marks according to the law. It soon became evident, however, that merchants, although observing the letter of the law, displayed increasing resistance to the acceptance of East marks.

The law did not require them to sell clothing for East marks, nor shoes, cigarettes, soap, toilet articles or many other so-called luxuries which actually were necessities. Thus the railroaders represented one of the largest single bodies of workers who did not receive any Deutsche marks in wage payments, and during the period from June 1948 to March 1949 there was growing discontent among them.

When in March 1949 the Deutsche mark was made the sole legal tender

Photographs by DENA

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in West Berlin, the railroaders could no longer contain their discontent. They were actually suffering because their employer, the Soviet-controlled Railroad Management Board (Reichsbahndirektion) refused to conform to the law of the territory in which it was operating. Thus a first cause of the strike was the workers’ just demand for payment of wages in Deutsche marks in accordance with the law.

THE SOVIET attitude toward democratic trade unions lay at the root of the other factors which eventually precipitated the struggle.

In June 1948 the Independent Trade Union Organization of Berlin was formed as the fruit of an opposition movement within the communist-dominated trade union federation.* It had developed from small beginnings in 1946 through the startling victory in the trade union elections of May 1948.

For all of West Berlin and for many in East Berlin it became the successor of the so-called Free German Trade Union (Freie Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund), the communist-dominated union federation established under the sponsorship of the Soviets in May and June 1945. Its assumption of the name Independent Union Organization (Unabhängige Gewerkschafts-Organisation, abbreviated to UGO) signaled the complete severance of the democratically-minded trade unionists from the group dominated by German communists, many of whom were trained in Moscow.

The independent democratic trade union leaders and followers were the progeny of certain elements in Germany who during the era of the Weimar Republic sought to apply democratic ideas and methods on a nationwide scale. However, internal conflicts prevented their achieving a sufficiently unified front to withstand the onslaught of Hitlerism.

NEVERTHELESS, during the Hitler era many of those men who still clung to democratic ideals went into retirement and preserved their hope and determination once again to seek the accomplishment of the tasks they had begun earlier. Among them were the leaders of the opposition to communism within Berlin trade unions.

From the beginning of the development of the democratic trade union organization the Railroad Management Board had consistently followed a policy of persecution against workers known to favor the western brand of unionism. By May 21, 1949 about 1,200 lifelong railroad workers had been summarily discharged solely on the ground that they were UGO adherents. This was the second cause of the strike.

Another peculiarity of Soviet labor philosophy is that there can be only one union, that it must be a tool of state policy and that the worker has no right to form other workers’ organizations. Thus was provided the basis for the third demand of the UGC Railroad Union, namely that they be granted “right of coalition”; in other words, that they be free to join any organization of their choice without fear of persecution or discrimination.

THE FACT that the strike was called shortly after the “lifting” of the Berlin blockade and on the eve of the

Conference of Foreign Ministers in Paris on May 23 attracted worldwide attention to it. Fears were expressed that the Soviets would be able to cloud the issues, as it would not be possible under the circumstances to test immediately Soviet intention with respect to the implementation of the New York agreement. This proved to be the case. (Continued on page 22)

The two mark-currencies used in Germany are officially known as “Deutsche marks.” To distinguish between the two, the official name is used for the currency used in the larger part of Germany of the three Western occupying powers, while that circulated in the former Zone and Soviet Sector of Berlin is commonly known as “East marks.” The two currencies have an official exchange rate of one to one; however, the actual relative value has been four “East marks” to one Deutsche mark.