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*Inside Labor*

# Labor, Industry and Government

## Cooperated in Ransom Operation

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By VICTOR RIESEL

Behind opaque secrecy a handful of men — of labor, of business, of transport, of science, of government — had coordinated a civilian air fleet, 26 railroads, over 200 companies, some 20 longshoremen truckers, and the greatest mercy missions of recent times.



Mr. Riesel

operation Ransom began early in the week of Dec. 11. Intelligence sources told the White House that Fidel Castro had agreed to exchange 1,113 prisoners — many of them stretcher cases — for some \$53 million worth of drugs, medical supplies and special foods. The cost of the rescue maneuver was put at over \$22 million.

Nobody trusted Castro. But the word also came from the Russians. Few trusted them, either. But the massive rescue maneuver was launched by Bob Kennedy. He was told it would take some four months to deliver the strangest ransom in history to the Cuban soviet.

A SPECIAL ACTION committee was set up inside the government. In one fashion or another the Justice Department, the Labor Department, the Commerce Department, the State Department and even the Treasury Department were involved. And, of course, the White House and the intelligence services.

The objective was to put together this huge amount of material without involving the government officially. The decision was to coordinate this publicly through the Red Cross.

To each its own, in effect, was the operational slogan inside the government action group. One department contacted the railroads — 26 of them were needed immediately, including the vital but tiny Port Everglades Belt Railway.

This is the switching line which shunts the cars from the main line to the dock. Soon some 40 refrigerator cars and 40 box cars were assigned to haul the ransom from cities as far off as Indianapolis, Atlanta, Louisville, New Orleans and St. Joseph, Mo.

Then someone contacted Pan American for

planes. And someone telephoned the Farrell Lines, which usually runs ships to Africa. It supplied the now famed African Pilot, a modified C-4 with a crew of 52. Fifteen steamship lines agreed to pay all of the ship's operating costs. Now came the men, including a crew from the National Maritime Union.

THEN A SPECIAL problem arose. Labor was needed to load those planes and the ship. Civilian money had to be raised for this operation, too. A government agency contacted AFL-CIO president George Meany. He called on Paul Hall, the Paul Bunyanesque seafarers' chief, who doubles as president of the AFL-CIO Maritime Trades Dept. He in turn worked with the department's executive secretary - treasurer, Peter McGavin.

They reckoned they'd need from 300 to 500 men immediately to work round the clock. But who would pay for their labor? In the Fort Lauderdale area, for example, there was no stevedoring firm of size to pick up the tab as had the steamship lines and the railroads and the truckers who were hauling stuff to the rails.

Furthermore, brothers Meany and Hall and McGavin wanted labor to stand shoulder to shoulder with industry and government in Operation Ransom. So the labor leaders began recruiting the cargo handlers.

THIS WAS A man - sized job. At least 16 "gangs" of 20 each were needed to load the African Pilot. Others were required for the planes being sent in by Pan American. Soon the aircraft loaders and the longshoremen were "on deck." They agreed to work night and day at straight time. Teddy Gleason general organizer of the International Longshoremen's Association, got the men together. The cost came to \$15,000. The Maritime Trades Department got the money up swiftly. By the weekend the 15th loading was almost completed, well ahead of schedule.

At no time did anyone know — anyone from the White House to the house of labor and the houses of business — whether Castro would keep his word. But our people gave of their time, their talents, their shoulders, their holiday hours on the chance they could get the youngsters from Cuba back to an adopted home by Christmas.