

Turn to the Working Class: The New Left, Black Liberation,  
and the U.S. Labor Movement (1967-1981)

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## ABSTRACT

Kieran W. Taylor: *Turn to the Working Class: the New Left, Black Liberation, and the U.S. Labor Movement, 1967-1981*  
(Under the direction of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall)

In the late 1960s and 1970s, thousands of young black, white, Asian, and Latino radicals from diverse class backgrounds concluded that a deep and long-lasting transformation of the nation's politics required them to concentrate their organizing efforts on worksites and within trade unions. They took jobs in steel mills, hospitals, auto plants, and truck barns. They rented rooms in working-class districts and immersed themselves in blue-collar community life. They organized workers from the salmon canneries in Alaska to the lumber mills of Mississippi and within unions as powerful as the United Autoworkers of America and as obscure as the United Glass and Ceramic Workers. They worked as union lawyers, organizers, and researchers, and they educated the public regarding strikes and around occupational health issues. Some of these radicals aimed to build labor support for the antiwar, African American, and women's liberation movements. Some sought to reform corrupt and ineffective trade unions. Still others harbored more ambitious dreams of a worker-led socialist revolution.

Structured around case studies in Atlanta, Detroit, San Francisco, and Seattle, *Turn to the Working Class* offers the first scholarly account of their contributions to the American radical tradition. The efforts of labor radicals in the 1970s were complicated and contradictory, and they ultimately failed to achieve

their most ambitious goals. Challenging the notion that the legacies of the 1960s protest movements were solely those of backlash and reaction, however, it argues that those who made the working-class turn advanced a spirit of militancy, promoted labor feminism and civil rights unionism, and reinvigorated a dormant tradition of international solidarity that had largely been extinguished from the labor movement during the anti-communist crusades. As workers continue to grapple with the impact of economic globalization, those traditions will be essential building blocks in ongoing struggles for democracy and economic justice.

To the memory of my father, Eugene Hoban Taylor (1929-2006)

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I am aware as I finish this wonderful list that it would make for an excellent union local, or at least a lively party. I have been blessed.

Kerry Taylor, Chapel Hill  
November 25, 2007

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Introduction.....                                   | 1   |
| One: American Petrograd.....                        | 19  |
| Two: The New Left's Southern Strategy.....          | 59  |
| Three: A Working-Class Hero is Something to Be..... | 109 |
| Four: The New Left's Labor Feminism.....            | 153 |
| Five: Laborers in a Smaller Vineyard.....           | 198 |
| Conclusion.....                                     | 246 |
| Bibliography.....                                   | 256 |

## Introduction

While living in Northwest Indiana in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I served as a board member of the Calumet Project for Industrial Jobs—a coalition of labor unions, civic groups, and churches that had joined forces to fight the epidemic of plant closings and mass layoffs that plagued the Gary area's steel industry. We enjoyed uneven support from union officials, including the conservative district director of the United Steelworkers of America, but among our most consistent backers were workers and community activists who had been politicized by their participation in the antiwar and civil rights movements of the 1960s. Some had entered the mills after high school only to be swept up in the era's spirit of rebellion. Others had been college students sent to Gary by left-wing political groups with instructions to secure manufacturing jobs and spark a rank-and-file worker rebellion directed at the steelmakers and ineffectual union leaders alike. Those who had retained their mill jobs through the 1980s had parlayed their organizational skills into positions of local union leadership from which they worked to build a more militant, inclusive, and democratic Steelworkers union in the face of tremendous challenges, including deindustrialization and the demands from the steel companies for contract concessions. Those working outside the mills were active in local politics, campaigning for progressive candidates, lobbying for the cleanup of polluted

rivers and brownfield sites, organizing the unemployed, and supporting groups such as the Calumet Project.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, I was struck by the presence of so many 1960s-era activists in the local labor movement, but I learned later that this was not unique to Gary. In the 1970s, thousands of young black, white, Latino, and Asian radicals from diverse class backgrounds concluded that a deep and long-lasting transformation of the nation's politics required them to concentrate their organizing efforts on worksites and within trade unions. They took jobs in steel mills, hospitals, auto plants, and truck barns. They rented rooms in working-class districts and immersed themselves in blue-collar community life. They organized workers from the salmon canneries in Alaska to the lumber mills of Mississippi and within unions as powerful as the United Autoworkers of America and as obscure as the United Glass and Ceramic Workers. They worked as union lawyers, organizers, and researchers, and they educated the public regarding strikes and occupational health issues. Some of these radicals aimed to build labor support for the antiwar, African American, and women's liberation movements. Some sought to reform corrupt and ineffective trade unions. Still others harbored more ambitious dreams of a worker-led socialist revolution.

*Turn to the Working Class* represents the first scholarly account of their contributions to the American radical tradition. It highlights the long-term impact of the working-class turn on the contemporary labor movement and the American

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<sup>1</sup> On the work of the Calumet Project, including its central role in organizing the successful campaign to stop the closing of LaSalle Steel in Hammond, Indiana, see Bruce Nissen, *Fighting For Jobs: Case Studies of Labor-Community Coalitions Confronting Plant Closings* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1995).

workplace, while exploring the internal and external forces that limited its success. Challenging the notion that the legacies of the 1960s protest movements were solely those of backlash and reaction, it argues that those who made the working class turn advanced a spirit of militancy, promoted labor feminism and civil rights unionism, and reinvigorated a dormant tradition of international solidarity that had largely been extinguished from the labor movement during the anti-communist crusades.

The activities, experiences, limitations, and legacies of those radicals who immersed themselves in working-class politics in the 1970s have remained largely unexplored by historians. The principal accounts of the 1960s social movements emphasize the unfinished agendas and internal failings of the major youth protest groups. These narratives often strike a note of defeat as they close with either the dissolution of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, the divisive National Democratic Convention in Chicago, Richard Nixon's election, or perhaps the Woodstock or Altamont music festivals.<sup>2</sup> Yet for many young radicals and intellectuals, the late 1960s marked not the end of the

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<sup>2</sup> For a critique of the declensionist narratives that dominate the historiography of the 1960s, see the introductory essays in Van Gosse and Richard Moser, *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America*, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University 2003) pp. 1–51. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall raises similar questions regarding the historiography of the civil rights movement. She identifies a dominant narrative of the movement that is often confined “to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives.” These limitations prevent “one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time” (see Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 91, No. 4 [March 2005]: 1233-1263).

movement, but the beginning of a new phase of the struggle. Frustrated by the slow pace of change, they groped for new strategies and forged new alliances.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was only the most prominent activist to express the need for reformers and radicals to consider new methods of protest and new arenas of struggle. In October 1967, after offering testimony to the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in Washington, King threatened to organize a “camp-in” of poor people in the Capital to provoke a federal response to poverty.<sup>3</sup> The previous summer’s outbreaks of violence in dozens of cities pointed to the need for “a kind of middle road between riots and timid supplication of justice,” he explained to reporters, and a disruptive protest of the nation’s poor might serve as “a method of dislocating the functioning of a city without destroying life and property.” Looking toward another summer of violence and finding his leadership of the civil rights movement challenged by militants, King scored Lyndon B. Johnson for sacrificing the War on Poverty for an expanded war in Vietnam, and he expressed frustration that earlier civil rights victories ended legal discrimination, but did not guarantee true equality. He spoke more frequently and with greater urgency about the need for African Americans to develop their own economic and political resources. The organization of the Poor People’s Campaign—an interracial alliance of groups working for economic justice—became his primary political focus over the last five months of his life.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph A. Loftus, “Dr. King Suggests ‘Camp-In’ in Cities,” *New York Times*, 24 October 1967.

<sup>4</sup> On King’s efforts to organize the Poor People’s Campaign, see Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: the Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton

By the fall of 1967, many other activists—including veterans of the Mississippi Freedom Summer, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, and leaders of the growing antiwar movement, shared King’s belief that the American political system was largely impervious to moral suasion and nonviolent protests. Two days before King’s appearance before the National Advisory Commission, more than 50,000 antiwar protestors gathered for a peace demonstration at the Lincoln Memorial after which they marched across the Potomac River to “confront the warmakers” on the steps of the Pentagon. Some burned draft cards and hurled eggs and bottles at the federal marshals, the military police, and members of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, who responded by clubbing and arresting protestors throughout the night in order to clear the Pentagon parking lots. The pacifist antiwar leader David Dellinger told the *New York Times* that the confrontation marked a “new stage in the American peace movement” as the “cutting edge becomes active resistance.”<sup>5</sup> A similar scene unfolded on the west coast the previous day when 10,000 protestors marched on the Oakland Military Induction Center to disrupt recruiting. A standoff with police erupted into a six-hour melee. Frank Bardacke, who was indicted for his role in organizing the demonstration, later remarked that he and other antiwar activists had concluded that “there was no point any longer to going out for a Sunday afternoon and applauding a thousand different speakers saying the same thing.” By goading

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& Co. 2007) and Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2007); and Gordon K. Mantler’s forthcoming dissertation, *Black, Brown and Poor: Understanding Interethnic Relations in Post-World War II America*, Duke University.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, 22 October 1967.

law enforcement officials and other authorities into violent street clashes “we were going to threaten chaos in the country, and by threatening chaos we were going to stop the war in Vietnam.”<sup>6</sup> Journalist Andrew Kopkind captured the new mood when he observed that “to be white and a radical in America . . . is to see horror and feel impotence. It is to watch the war grow and know no way to stop it, to understand the black rebellion and find no way to join it, to realize that the politics of a generation has failed and the institutions of reform are bankrupt, and yet to have neither ideology, programs, nor the power to reconstruct them.”<sup>7</sup>

Radical activists experienced frustration, outrage, desperation, and despair in the late 1960s, but few were as immobilized as Kopkind’s observations might suggest. The antiwar movement’s largest demonstrations lay ahead of it. A few provocative and well-publicized protests by young feminists presaged the mass movement for women’s liberation, and under the banner of Black Power, African Americans undertook countless new initiatives for black political and economic empowerment. The turn to the working class was a response to the same political realities that gave rise to Black Power, second wave feminism, and the final phase of the antiwar movement.

The tremendous advances toward gender equality over the past thirty-five years have inspired a steady stream of studies that examine the enduring significance of the women’s liberation movement, and the ambiguous and

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<sup>6</sup> Bardacke, quoted in Ronald Fraser, ed., *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt* (New York: Pantheon Books 1988) pp. 151-152. The Pentagon protest and the Oakland demonstration were the key events of a loosely coordinated “Stop the Draft Week.”

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Kopkind, “They’d Rather be Left,” *The New York Review of Books*, 28 September 1967.

contested legacy of the civil rights movement have led historians to begin taking a closer look at the rise of Black Power in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>8</sup> The labor movement's steady decline and the presumed rightward political shift of the American working class, on the other hand, have contributed to a tendency to project these recent developments back onto the 1970s, thus obscuring the turn to the working class and its legacies. Two of the most popular images of American workers in the 1970s—television's reactionary longshoreman Archie Bunker and the angry building tradesmen who pummeled antiwar demonstrators on Wall Street following the Kent State massacre—endure because they serve as prototypes for Nixon's Silent Majority and predecessors to the Reagan Democrats, and most recently, George W. Bush's Red State supporters. To be sure, the coupling of economic and social conservatism expressed in Republican electoral victories and the demise of the New Deal coalition have been central themes in American politics over the past thirty-five years.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the 1970s were not solely an era of working-class reaction. Working-class politics

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<sup>8</sup> Principal accounts of the women's liberation movement include Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf 1979); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking 2000); and Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1989). A growing body of scholarship on Black Power includes: William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: the Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1992); Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt 2006); and Joseph, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge 2006).

<sup>9</sup> On the rightward political shift, see Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1996); Steven Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989); Peter J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press 2001); and Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001).

were more dynamic and complicated than the images of Bunker and the hardhats suggest.<sup>10</sup> Triggered by rising unemployment, inflationary fears, and stagnating wages coming at the end of a long post-war boom, nearly 2.5 million workers went out on strike in 1970, including postal workers, General Motors employees, and coal miners. The number of unauthorized wildcat strikes in the early 1970s surged to levels unseen since the 1930s, and thousands of other workers, including members of the United Mine Workers, the Steelworkers, and the Teamsters, battled entrenched and corrupt labor leaders in order to democratize their unions.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the Archie Bunker narrative works only if we ignore the tremendous and growing diversity of the American working class in the 1970s. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality act and the vast expansion of the service sector brought millions of immigrants, youth, women, and ethnic and racial minorities into the workforce. On the job and in the courts, these workers challenged discriminatory hiring and promotions practices, while the public employee unions took in new members at levels unseen since the days of the

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<sup>10</sup> For an incisive look at the complexities of 1970s working-class politics, see Jefferson Cowie, “‘Vigorously Left, Right, and Center at the Same Time:’ The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s,” *America in the Seventies*, Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004) pp. 75-106.

<sup>11</sup> On the rise in labor militancy beginning at the tail end of the 1960s, see Aaron Brenner, “Rank-and-File Rebellion, 1966-1975” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University 1996) and the forthcoming collection, Robert P. Brenner, Aaron Brenner, and Cal Winslow, eds., *Rank and File: Labor Militancy and U.S. Politics during the Long 1970s* (London: Verso Press). On the Teamsters reform movement, see Dan LaBotz, *Rank-and-File Rebellion: Teamsters for a Democratic Union* (New York and London: Verso 1990) and Robert Bruno, *Reforming the Chicago Teamsters: the Story of Local 705* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press 2003). On similar efforts in the United Mine Workers and the Steelworkers, see Paul F. Clark, *The Miner’s Fight for Democracy Arnold Miller and the Reform of the United Mine Workers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1981) and a forthcoming study of steel by Ruth Needleman in Brenner, Brenner, and Winslow, eds., *Rank and File: Labor Militancy and U.S. Politics During the Long 1970s*.

CIO.<sup>12</sup> In short, the young labor radicals who made the turn to the working class found fertile ground for organizing, and had reason for optimism at the prospects of moving American politics to the left through the rejuvenation of its unions.

At the same time that radical labor activists looked hopefully to the future, their working-class turn represented the re-discovery of an age-old political strategy. Left-wing activists had a long history of implanting themselves among the working class and the poor as a strategy for bringing about social change. Beginning in the 1870s the Narodniks—young Russian intellectuals seeking the Tsar’s overthrow—left the comfort of their professional lives to work among the peasants, whom they saw as inherently revolutionary, but in need of leadership and guidance.<sup>13</sup> Since its founding in 1919, the Communist Party USA, the largest American communist party, had sent waves of “colonizers” into industry. These factory-based activists, operating with the support of Party lawyers, journalists and community organizers, reached their peak of influence within the new industrial unions in the 1930s and 1940s. Virtually every socialist grouping in the United States had at some point used a similar strategy for building a base in the working class.

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<sup>12</sup> On the struggle for workplace equality, see Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: the Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2006). Regarding the wave of public sector organizing in the 1970s, see Paul Johnston, *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace* (Ithaca and New York: ILR Press 1994).

<sup>13</sup> The peasants found the Narodniks to be strange and turned them over to the Tsar’s police. Betrayed by the peasants, some of the surviving Narodniks turned to political terrorism. Others laid the groundwork for the Russian socialist movements of the twentieth century. Their tactic of “going to the people,” however, has been largely dismissed as meddling and naïve. For more on the efforts of Russian intellectuals to “go to the people,” see Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press 1991); Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *Road to Revolution: A Century of Russian Radicalism* (London: Cassell and Co. 1957); and Vladimir Lenin, “The Heritage We Renounce,” *Lenin Collected Works*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1972) pp. 491-534.

Many of the young labor radicals of the 1970s were familiar with parts of these traditions, and in many cases they were mentored by older Communists, Trotskyists, socialists, and liberals who had engaged in working-class organizing before the war. These relationships were complicated. As New Left and black movement activists sought to locate their labor activism within the context of an American radical tradition, they welcomed comparisons to the struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. They listened to and learned from Old Left role models. At the same time, many younger radicals harbored resentment toward the Old Left—the Communist Party especially—for having supposedly succumbed too easily to the Red Scare and for failing to break free from Soviet domination.

Stronger intergenerational relationships might have prevented young labor radicals from repeating the same mistakes as their political forebears.<sup>14</sup> For example, encouraged by the success of third world anti-colonial struggles, the surge of labor protest, and the staggering social and political changes they had witnessed within a few short years, labor radicals overestimated the American working class's revolutionary potential. As a result, they sometimes failed to recognize their coworkers' more pragmatic concerns, around which they might have built broader-based struggles for concrete reforms. At times, they were prone to dogmatism that alienated potential allies or attracted alienated workers who brought little to the task of movement building. The young labor radicals often operated most effectively when mobilizing workers to respond to immediate conflicts with employers, but they were less effective at developing new leaders

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<sup>14</sup> On the relationships between the Old and New Lefts, see Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

from among the workers and they established few institutions that would allow workers to sustain their efforts over time.

Still, to understand the failings of the turn to the working class, we must look less to its internal weaknesses than to economic and political developments of the mid-1970s—including mass layoffs and plant closings, government and employer repression, and a resurgent conservatism in the broader political culture.<sup>15</sup> Dozens of young radicals lost their jobs as wary supervisors and plant security personnel, working in tandem with local and federal law enforcement agencies, cracked down on dissent. Coworkers were often reluctant to come to their defense for fear of losing their own jobs. Due to their lack of seniority, hundreds of other activists were among the first to lose their jobs as the mass layoffs hit manufacturing in the mid-1970s. Finally, all manner of organizing within the labor movement became more difficult after the recession of 1973-1974 when workers, squeezed by an increasingly volatile economy proved less willing to engage in protest activity than they had been just a few years earlier.

*Turn to the Working Class*, however, is not primarily a narrative of decline and defeat. Rather it joins more recent scholarship in seeking to balance an assessment of the left's real weaknesses and losses with its persisting democratic legacies.<sup>16</sup> As the following chapters reveal, labor feminists, black

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<sup>15</sup> On deindustrialization and the economic crises of the 1970s, see Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America* (New York: Basic Books 1982) and Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds., *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). The Fall 2005 issue of *Labor* is devoted to labor in the 1970s, see *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Vol. 2, No 3.

<sup>16</sup> Gosse argues that “the least-told story of U.S. history in the late twentieth century is how the social movements of the Sixties institutionalized themselves.” He identifies a “a pattern of irreversible democratization of political and personal life over three decades—the ‘new

nationalists, Asian radicals, and their white allies picketed, lobbied, and initiated lawsuits to win real victories that opened up new job opportunities for women and minorities. They led strikes and protests that revitalized moribund local unions and they organized and educated coworkers to resurrect traditions of labor internationalism that had been mostly dormant since the onset of the Cold War. Moreover, many labor activists and intellectuals who managed to survive the dislocations of the 1970s have found important niches as elected union leaders and staff members. Their presence has been especially notable since the 1995 election of AFL-CIO president John Sweeney, who drew upon the energy and expertise of dozens of 1970s labor radicals to inform and guide his “New Voice” reform program.

On the evening of Sweeney’s victory, Peter Olney, a longtime labor organizer who left Harvard University in 1971 to work in factories, attended a celebration that took him back over twenty-five years of his political past. “I looked around the room and I swear I saw tons of my ex-comrades, people who’d been in other revolutionary organizations,” he recalled. “That was the vibe of the folks who drove” the Sweeney victory and resulting changes within the AFL-CIO. “They weren’t necessarily the top leaders, but they were . . . research directors, organizing directors. I mean the hands-on stuff that was making change in labor, a lot of those folks came out of the that New Left going to the

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democratic order” (see Gosse, “Postmodern America: A New Democratic Order in the Second Gilded Age,” in Van Gosse and Richard Moser, eds., *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America*, [Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2003] p. 25).

working class experience.”<sup>17</sup> Those activists brought ideas, values, and strategies to the contemporary labor movement that had originated in discussions and activities at labor’s radical fringe in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup>

Chapter 1, “American Petrograd”, underscores the growing frustration of African Americans regarding the failed promise of the civil rights movement—frustration that in the late 1960s pushed young radicals and reformers to see organizing the working class as key to effecting social change. The narrative centers on Detroit, where a group of young black radicals labored for nearly ten years to build a movement to challenge racism and exploitation in the automobile plants, the UAW, and the city’s neighborhoods. Shortly after the Detroit Rebellion of 1967, these young men and women established Revolutionary Union Movements in several plants, as well as an umbrella group—the League of Revolutionary Black Workers—to coordinate their activities. A series of disruptive wildcat strikes and demonstrations led to reforms within the industry, and the League’s apparent success signaled the potential for an alliance of radical intellectuals and workers. Hundreds of black and white radicals from across the country moved to Detroit, believing that it would become the “American Petrograd”—the cradle of a working-class revolution. For the most part, they

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<sup>17</sup> Olney, Interview by author, 5 November 2003.

<sup>18</sup> In 2005 seven unions split from the AFL-CIO to form the Change to Win Federation. The massive Service Employees International Union and UNITE HERE took the lead in establishing the new federation, which maintained that the AFL-CIO was insufficiently committed to organizing new workers. The presence and influence of veterans of 1960s protest movements was likely even stronger in the new federation than in the AFL-CIO. Three of the key Change to Win leaders—Andy Stern, John Wilhelm, and Bruce Raynor—are Ivy League graduates who were politicized by their participation in the civil rights movement and the New Left.

were too late. The automakers and the union had accommodated some of the workers' demands regarding employment discrimination, and the League had disintegrated under the weight of repression and its own internal weaknesses. The League experience, nevertheless, continued to inspire young radicals to organize among the working class for several years.

Chapter 2, "The New Left's Southern Strategy," traces the New Left origins of the turn to the working class through the history of the October League—a Marxist-Leninist group with roots in the Students for a Democratic Society and the Southern Student Organizing Committee. After sending members into factories to build a working-class revolutionary party in 1972, the October League led a seven-week strike of workers at the Mead Packaging Corporation in Atlanta. The October League activists successfully channeled a generalized spirit of dissent among the predominantly African American workforce, whose working conditions had been little changed by the civil rights victories of the previous decade. While the strike forced Mead to make changes in the plant, the workers, ultimately, had little use for the October League's brand of communism and were motivated more by pragmatic concerns. The October League, too, eventually succumbed to the economic downturn that quelled broader worker militancy in the 1970s.

Chapter 3, "A Working-Class Hero is Something to be," traces the strategic adjustments labor radicals were forced to make in response to the changing political and economic realities of the late 1970s. The chapter also offers a close look at the day-to-day experiences of individual leftist activists and

intellectuals as they attempted to organize workers in a variety of settings, including a Buffalo auto glass plant, a Durham tobacco factory, and California vegetable field. How did they obtain factory work? How did they establish credibility among coworkers? To what degree did their radical politics coincide or clash with the workers' more pragmatic concerns? How did they relate to union leaders? What sorts of personal changes did they experience moving to labor-based organizing?

Chapter four, "The New Left's Labor Feminism," highlights the work of the Women's Alliance to Gain Equality (WAGE), a white feminist organization that fused labor politics with the women's liberation movement in the San Francisco Bay area. WAGE emerged in the early 1970s because existing unions had ignored the needs of the growing number of women in the Bay Area's rapidly expanding workforce. WAGE activists organized women workers into new unions, agitated for minimum wage increases, and fought to extend special labor laws protecting women and children to men. Several of the Bay Area's largest and most powerful hospital, government employee, and clerical worker unions have been deeply shaped by the leadership of women from Union WAGE, who represented an alliance of labor feminists with connections to Old Left political parties and younger second wave feminists who had been politicized by the 1960s social movements.

Chapter five, "Laborers in a Smaller Vineyard," recounts the story of a group of Seattle-based Filipino activists who broke the grip of the gangsters controlling their union and built a base of opposition to the Ferdinand Marcos

dictatorship in the Philippines. These efforts were led by Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes, two cannery workers who had been politicized by the antiwar movement, Asian identity politics, and civil rights struggles over housing, jobs, and urban renewal in Seattle. Domingo and Viernes had family ties to the Alaskan canneries, and as young adults they chose to make the canneries and their union, Local 37 of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, the base for their political work. Though their victories came at a high price, the young reformers in Local 37 rediscovered and revived labor movement traditions of democracy, grassroots organizing, labor feminism, and international solidarity that many observers assumed had been destroyed by the Cold War.

The conclusion tracks recent developments in U.S. labor history and suggests that while the number of trade union members continues to decline, the labor movement is better positioned to take advantage of new organizing opportunities and more capable of addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century. These challenges include the increasing mobility of capital, mass migration and the growing diversity of the labor force, aggressive union busting, privatization, and the growth of contingent labor. That the labor movement is able to be more creative in facing these challenges is due in no small part to the labor radicals of the 1970s. The conclusion also includes some retrospective comments from several of those who dedicated themselves to working-class organizing in the late 1960s and 1970s. While each of them remains committed to working for economic and social justice, they find themselves organizing on very different terrain today.

At the outset of this project I feared that the archival records of the labor struggles of the 1970s had not yet found their way to the repositories. I also surmised that some of that material might never make it to the archives given the obscurity of the turn to the working class and the difficulties of categorization. An archivist can easily identify valuable civil rights papers, 1960s protest movement collections, and the records of individual trade unions. But 1970s labor radicalism? Where does it fit? I was nevertheless fortunate to find relevant records in nearly a dozen archives across the country. At the Reuther Labor Library at Wayne State, for instance, I found valuable material in the recently deposited personal collections of several Detroit movement activists. At the Rand Library of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union in San Francisco and at the University of Washington in Seattle, I found ample documentation for the events of the final chapter in the union's official papers. At the Labor Archives and Research Center at San Francisco State University, I read through and photocopied numerous documents from the organizational papers of Union WAGE—the subject of the fourth chapter. Along the way, I also met several movement veterans who have held on to valuable personal papers related to labor radicalism and the 1970s. I suspect that much of that material will find its way to libraries as archivists begin to collect more regularly in the 1970s and as activists moving into retirement begin to assess their life's work.

I also relied on oral history interviews to fill in gaps in the documentary records. I took two approaches to identifying interviewees. I first contacted a number of people whom I knew to have been active in labor in the 1970s. These

were often personal friends, or friends of friends who were easily accessible and amenable to talking. My second strategy consisted of seeking out those activists who played key roles in each of the four focus studies. I found most movement veterans eager to talk about their activism in the 1970s. Many were also candid about the strategic mistakes they felt they had made and expressed an eagerness to share their experiences with young people and students who in recent years have shown an increased interest in the newly reenergized labor movement. Their hope, like mine, is that the stories of an earlier generation of labor radicals will instruct and inspire a newer group of young people confronting corporate globalization and its human costs to working people.

## Chapter 1: American Petrograd

One year after the Detroit Rebellion and four weeks after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, a series of wildcat strikes rocked the Chrysler Corporation's Dodge Main plant, leading to the formation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM)—a militant black worker organization. To jittery city leaders, plant managers, and union officials, the workplace protests and the emergence of DRUM appeared as a spontaneous outburst of rage, but they were the result of years of careful planning by a group of young African American intellectuals who believed that black workers—by virtue of their concentration at the heart of industrial production—held the key to ending racism and U.S. imperialism, and moving the country's politics to the left.

This group of black radicals built their organization upon deep feelings of anger and desperation among African American workers in the Motor City. Beginning in the mid-1960s, the automakers responded to rising demand and foreign competition by maximizing productivity through assembly line speed ups that caused enormous strain on the workforce, particularly the young black workers who were relegated to the hardest, dirtiest, and most dangerous jobs. The United Auto Workers (UAW), while supportive of the mainstream civil rights movement, did little to challenge the industry's racist employment practices, which kept most black workers out of managerial positions and the skilled trades.

The union's staff and the leadership of many UAW locals also remained overwhelmingly white even though African Americans made up a fourth of the workforce and a majority in many of the plants located in the city. The unrest in the factories was mirrored by discontent in black neighborhoods where housing choices for African Americans were tightly constrained by discriminatory realty, banking, and insurance practices. For decades, white neighborhood associations also re-enforced rigid patterns of housing segregation through grassroots political organizing and acts of intimidation and terror. Moreover, in the minds of many young African Americans, the Detroit Police Department was "an army of occupation."<sup>19</sup>

Within a few months, Revolutionary Union Movements sprung up at dozens of other plants and industries across the city. By 1969 these groups had formed an umbrella group—the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, which at its height gave voice to the demands of young African American workers for an end to job discrimination and unsafe working conditions, while it organized around issues well beyond the workplace. Propelled by a boundless sense of possibility, League members battled police brutality, advocated local control of schools, and provided legal counsel to defendants in several high-profile political trials. They also launched a publishing house and film production company to encourage the formation of Revolutionary Union Movements outside of Detroit,

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<sup>19</sup> "Detroiters Remember the 1967 Rebellion: Kim Hunter Interviews Ed Vaughn and Ron Scott," *Against the Current*, September-October 1997, pp. 20-25. For an overview of Detroit's political economy preceding the 1960s, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

and they attracted attention from some of the country's most prominent radical activists. James Forman who was the executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during its heyday and had served briefly as the minister of foreign affairs for the Black Panther Party, was so impressed by what he had seen of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers that he moved to Detroit. In the work of the League, Forman saw an opportunity to develop a black revolutionary movement that would join black workers from the urban north with African Americans in the South. In a letter he wrote to colleagues in Atlanta, Forman argued that black radicals in the 1970s needed to concentrate their efforts on "those cities where black workers are strategically situated near the centers of mass production of the essentials of any industrialized society, steel, coal, automobiles and oil." The civil rights movement, he asserted, had "concentrated too much on the middle class" and that "most of the gains except the long range political consciousness have resulted in the middle class of the black community entrenching itself further."<sup>20</sup>

In his enthusiasm for the League, Forman was typical of many black and white radicals who had endured the demise of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and SNCC and the fragmentation of the antiwar, civil rights, and student movements into an endless array of political tendencies, factions, and collectives who carried out an equally broad range of activities, including electoral campaigns, international solidarity work, and community organizing. The Detroit factory protests and the League's legal defense campaigns captured

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<sup>20</sup> Forman to Donald and Flora Stone, 21 December 1969, *The Political Thought of James Forman* (Detroit: Black Star 1970) pp. 187-188.

the American left's political imagination as few other locally-based protest movements had done since the height of the southern black freedom struggle. Moreover, a renewed sense of militancy among American workers, who set records for numbers of strikes in 1969 and again in 1970, seemed to signal the potential for creating two, three, many Detroits. Though the League ultimately failed to transform itself into an ongoing labor-based organization, its brief existence represented the high point of a more than ten-year drive to fuse the energy of Detroit's student and civil rights movements with the growing discontent of black workers. These efforts preceded the League's formation by several years, continued well into the 1970s, and inspired hundreds of similar alliances of radical activists and workers.<sup>21</sup>

Young working-class African Americans with links to the full spectrum of the city's vibrant left, stood at the center of the Detroit black workers' movement. General Baker Jr. had deep ties to the black nationalist community and was a member of both the Garveyist African Nationalist Pioneer Movement and a rifle club inspired by the self-defense gun clubs of the fugitive black activist Robert F. Williams.<sup>22</sup> Though Baker's nationalist mentors fed his growing intellectual

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<sup>21</sup> The best overviews of the black worker protests in Detroit include Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press 1998); James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (Boston: Cambridge University Press 1977); and Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2001). See also Ernest Allen, "Dying From the Inside: the Decline of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers," *They Should Have Served that Cup of Coffee*, Dick Cluster, editor (Boston: South End Press 1979), pp. 71-109.

<sup>22</sup> The Pioneers were led by Dominican-born New Yorker Carlos Cooks. Baker joined the organization shortly after hearing Malcolm X address a February 1962 police brutality protest rally at Detroit's Olympia Stadium. He also worked at the Pioneers' bookstore and participated in their reading groups (Baker, Interview by author, 24 May 2004). Through informers and spies, the Detroit Police Department maintained a close watch on Baker and his associates in the Fox and

curiosity with black history books and pamphlets, he came to regard them as “weekend militants who wanted to sit up and talk black shit on Saturday and Sunday and go kiss ass all week.”<sup>23</sup> As a student at Highland Park Community College and Wayne State University—an urban campus with a strong tradition of radical activism—Baker joined protests against police brutality and the war. He also traveled to Cuba in 1964 with a delegation of radical youth. There, he played baseball with the heroes of the revolution—Fidel and Raul Castro and Juan Almeida Bosque—and he met with Che Guevara and dozens of other revolutionaries from around the world. Baker’s discussions with these radicals challenged the narrowness of his black nationalism and pushed him in the direction of multinational Marxism-Leninism. “I just had to go stay in a hotel a couple of days just trying to regroup,” he recalled. “Everything you thought you used to know was gone out the window.”<sup>24</sup> Upon returning to Detroit in the fall,

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Wolf Hunting Club (see *The Black Power Movement*, Part 4, *The League of Revolutionary Black Workers Papers, 1965-1976*. Reel 2, Intelligence Bureau Files General Baker, 1 and 2). Baker was also affiliated with the clandestine Revolutionary Action Movement (see *The League of Revolutionary Black Workers Papers, 1965-1976*. Reel 2, Detroit Police Files, Index Cards). North Carolina NAACP leader and advocate of armed self-defense, Robert Williams, was chased from the state by the police and the FBI following a near race riot in their hometown of Monroe in 1961. He fled with his wife Mabel to Cuba. For more on Williams, see Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Baker, Interview by author, 24 May 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Baker, Interview by author, 24 May 2004. Baker was among a group of eighty-four students who defied the U.S. State Department ban on travel to Cuba. The trip was sponsored by Progressive Labor, an early 1960s off-shoot of the Communist Party. While in Cuba, Baker also spent time at the home of Robert and Mabel Williams, who in exile were becoming important figures in the growing Black Power movement.

Baker drifted away from the black nationalists, but continued to study and organize, while working a new job on the line at Dodge Main.<sup>25</sup>

Mississippi native and former U.S. Army sergeant Mike Hamlin brought to the movement a strong commitment to conflict mediation, organization building, and the development of outside allies. After attending high school in Ecorse just outside of Detroit and a stint in the army, Hamlin returned to the city in 1960 “greatly frustrated, alienated, and disaffected by the conditions” facing African Americans.<sup>26</sup> Were it not for his friendship with a precocious and eccentric black radical John Watson, Hamlin suspects he might have become a “suicidal revolutionary,” perpetrating acts of violence against white people or self-destructing.<sup>27</sup> Watson was eight years younger than Hamlin, but had attended Detroit’s preeminent public high school—Cass Technical High School—and developed contacts with intellectuals and left-wing activists as a teenager in the late 1950s. As they worked together in the distribution department at the *Detroit News*, Watson encouraged Hamlin to study Marxism and convinced him that through organizing the working class he could help make positive change. Both men were active with the mainline civil rights groups, including the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and they were impressed by the

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<sup>25</sup> During this period, Baker and some of his comrades attended presentations at Debs Hall sponsored by the Socialist Workers Party and they developed ties with older Detroit radicals like James and Grace Lee Boggs and Martin Glaberman, all of whom had been close associates of Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James.

<sup>26</sup> “BWC Leader Looks at Past, Sees New Stage of Struggle,” *Guardian*, 28 February 1973.

<sup>27</sup> Mike Hamlin, Interview by author, 19 June 2004. In an earlier interview, Hamlin elaborated on his state of mind as a young man: “I was interested in terrorist kind of activities. It was a response to frustration. A lot of people at that time talked about kamikaze or suicidal attacks. You would end your pain and you would strike a blow” (see Robert H. Mast, *Detroit Lives* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1994] p. 85).

Socialist Workers Party's and the Communist Party's rhetorical commitment to class struggle. But ultimately they felt that neither the civil rights organizations nor the Old Left communist parties had developed a program to match the rising militancy of Detroit's black workers.

Hamlin and Watson were joined at the *Detroit News* by Ken Cockrel, a charismatic law student who became the League's best-known figure. Cockrel was born just outside of Detroit in 1938 and raised in the city by his aunt and uncle after his parents died when he was twelve. He dropped out of high school and joined the Air Force in 1955, but earned undergraduate and law degrees from Wayne State after his discharge. At campus rallies, Cockrel delivered fiery speeches against racism and the war in the early days of the antiwar movement. A smooth talker by all accounts, Cockrel quickly made a name for himself as an impressive orator and a combative debater.

Marian Kramer, who was one of just a handful of women among the leaders of the Detroit black workers' movement, had a more traditional civil rights pedigree than her male counterparts. Born in Port Allen, on the outskirts of Baton Rouge and raised in Dallas, Kramer returned to Louisiana in 1962 to begin her college studies at Southern University. Her mother was active in efforts to desegregate white neighborhoods in Dallas and had encouraged her daughter to join the NAACP youth branch, but she warned her against becoming politically active in Louisiana. Other family members had suffered reprisals for their activism and she worried that Marian's protest activities would interfere with her schooling. Her fears were well founded as Kramer was quickly swept up in the

momentum of the movement. By her second year in Louisiana, she was working full time as a CORE field worker, registering voters, teaching in freedom schools, and organizing demonstrations targeting segregated restaurants. Though committed to nonviolence, she was impressed by the work of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an organization of armed black men who organized in Jonesboro to guard civil rights workers and protect the black community from Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante violence. The Deacons and a handful of black military veterans stood watch over the CORE Freedom House where Kramer and other civil rights workers slept and based their operations.<sup>28</sup> Kramer's work in the South came to an end in 1964 when she married a white CORE organizer. Believing it was too risky to live and work together in Louisiana, they moved to Detroit, where she found work as a secretary for the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE). She also became deeply involved in the growing welfare reform movement and the West Central Organization (WCO), a community group that represented the interests of the poor and working-class residents of neighborhoods bordering the ever-expanding Wayne State. The organization was a locus for various groups of Detroit activists, including white organizers, black nationalists, neighborhood leaders, liberal clergy, and radical students and professors.<sup>29</sup>

By the mid-60s this group of black radicals had attended college classes, campaigned to end the war, participated in Marxist study groups, and worked in

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<sup>28</sup> For more on the Deacons, see Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Marian Kramer, Interview by author, 19 May 2004.

factories together. They had shared apartments and an occasional jail cell. Several of them had also attracted the interest of the FBI and the Detroit Police Department's Red Squad—a special unit that had monitored the activities of “subversive” organizations and individuals since the 1930s. Baker's and Cockrel's Red Squad files, released as the result of a lawsuit, include detailed accounts of meetings and demonstrations they attended, information gathered from informants and spies, and their employment records. Though sometimes heavily redacted, the files indicate that the police had tracked Cockrel, Baker, and many of their comrades for several years, and that informants had penetrated even the most secretive radical groups to which they belonged. In some instances, law enforcement officials harassed protest leaders by intimidating their family members. FBI investigators questioned General Baker's mother on several occasions in 1965, and after pressuring John Watson's mother to reveal her son's whereabouts in March of 1966, they went to the address she had given them and arrested him because of unpaid parking fines. The arresting officer reported that Watson allowed him to enter the apartment, but insisted that he was General Baker and even presented Baker's draft and voter registration cards as proof. Only after the officer threatened to take him to the station did Watson acknowledge his true identity. Upon further inspection of the apartment, he found Baker “lying on a mattress in a bedroom.” The officer also observed that “the living room was papered from floor to ceiling with ‘hate’ posters, with pictures of Stalin, Lenin, Catsro, and several black Muslims,” and that there were “many

pictures of President Johnson with words of 'Hitler', 'Negro Hater' and 'Murder' . . . All 4 walls were covered with this 'hate' material."<sup>30</sup>

While the young radicals were committed to the black freedom struggle, they were critical of the existing protest organizations and the unions, none of which seemed able to connect to black workers and youth. The Old Left political parties offered theoretical rigor, but had few activities beyond educational programs and had only casual ties to black workers in the late 1960s. The city's white youth and student-based radical groups distrusted and at times disdained the working class and geared their efforts toward the swelling movement on college campuses. The black radicals dismissed the UAW as hopelessly racist and found president Walter Reuther's reputation as a civil rights leader hypocritical given his unwillingness to confront racism within his union's ranks.<sup>31</sup> Hamlin, Baker, and their associates agreed that they would have to "create the kind of thing we needed, a new avenue of struggle, a new method of dealing with oppression and exploitation."<sup>32</sup>

Their formation of a black student group—UHURU (the Swahili word for freedom)—at Wayne State in 1963 marked one of their earliest efforts to create

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<sup>30</sup> See Detroit Police Department, "Inter-Office Memorandum," 16 March 1966 and Detroit Police Department, Special Investigation Bureau, Inter-Office Memorandum, 1 March 1965. Both documents included in Baker's police, FBI and IRS files, *The Black Power Movement*, Part 4, *The League of Revolutionary Black Workers Papers, 1965-1976*, Reels 2-3. For Cockrel's Red Squad files, see Box 2, Folders 9-17, Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>31</sup> According to Reuther biographer, Nelson Lichtenstein, the UAW president's fear of the black radicals blinded him to the reality that they shared an "industrial militancy target[ing] shop issues virtually identical to those that had animated UAW radicals from one generation to the next" (see Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* [New York: Basic Books 1995] p. 433).

<sup>32</sup> "BWC Leader Looks at Past, Sees New Stage of Struggle," *Guardian*, 28 February 1973.

such an organization. UHURU members published and distributed *Razor* for students and the worker-oriented *Black Vanguard*, which included essays urging readers to form a “League of Black Workers,” and featured excerpts from Robert Williams’s account of his flight from North Carolina and contributions from autoworkers describing their shop floor experiences with racism.<sup>33</sup> Longer theoretical articles argued that because black workers were clustered at the center of basic industry, they would play a strategic role in a larger revolutionary struggle by disrupting capitalist production. This was a theme to which they would continually return over the next several years. The tone of the publications was deliberately provocative, frequently denouncing the “white crackers,” the “brutes in blue,” and Uncle Toms, who posed “the greatest menace to the black freedom struggle.” The editors believed the incendiary tone accurately reflected the anger and despair of young African Americans in Detroit.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to producing the publications, UHURU members protested Detroit’s failure to pass an open housing ordinance by disrupting a 1963 torch-passing ceremony promoting the city’s bid to host the 1968 Olympic Games. Baker, Watson, and four others were arrested for booing during the national anthem and taunting the torch bearer—an African American medal winner.<sup>35</sup> Two years later, Baker and his associates posted dozens of signs around Detroit

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<sup>33</sup> First published in 1962, Williams’s book was popular among black militants. See Robert F. Williams, *Negroes With Guns* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1998).

<sup>34</sup> See for example, “Traitors,” *Black Vanguard*, August 1965, Reel 1, *The Black Power Movement*, Part 4, *The League of Revolutionary Black Workers Papers, 1965-1976*.

<sup>35</sup> The UHURU protests were part of a larger NAACP demonstration. The accused were later acquitted (see “Five Bias Foes Acquitted in Jeering of National Anthem,” *Detroit Free Press*, 24 February 1966).

promising a major “smash the draft” protest at his upcoming draft hearing. The police kept close tabs on Baker in the weeks before the promised protest, and they were relieved when fewer than a dozen supporters showed up at the Fort Wayne Induction Center on the city’s southwest side. Baker attended his hearing, and was rejected by the draft board to whom he had issued a statement accusing the U.S. military of having on its hands the blood of Angolan and South African freedom fighters, Patrice Lumumba, Medgar Evers and the “defenseless women and children burned in villages from Napalm jelly bombs.”<sup>36</sup>

UHURU attracted relatively little attention beyond that of the Detroit Police Department, but the Detroit Rebellion opened up new possibilities for the kind of mass movement that the black radicals had envisioned. On July 23, 1967 vice officers raided an after hours party at Twelfth Street and Clairmount Avenue on the near west side. A crowd soon gathered and began hurling rocks and smashing windows. The incident spread quickly to the east side and erupted into a citywide rebellion, during which thousands of African Americans took to the streets, attacking the police and looting stores. The National Guard and the US Army 82nd Airborne Division quelled the violence, but after five days of fighting

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<sup>36</sup> Detroit Police observers noted that only nine protestors attended the rally, which followed several weeks of buildup during which Baker and his friends posted inflammatory signs, such as: “Damn the draft-to hell with whities army. Join the Sept. 10 movement” (see *The Black Power Movement*, Part 4, *The League of Revolutionary Black Workers Papers, 1965-1976*. Reel 2, Detroit Police Files, Index Cards; for the text of Baker’s statement to the draft board, see Baker, “Fight for Freedom,” *Inner City Voice*, [1970], Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, The Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit). Baker later reported that the idea had been to scare the police into believing the protest would be much larger, though he had hoped for more support from his friends in the black nationalist community: “It was a lonely trek down there that day because all these nationalists . . . and all these assholes that I done come up through this. They were scared. The reason they didn’t come is because they was chicken shit. They were scared. They were halfway scared of us and damn sure halfway scared of what we were saying.” Their poor showing helped confirm Baker’s suspicions that the nationalists were not serious about making social change (see Baker, Interview by author, 24 May 2004).

more than forty people had been killed and more than one thousand were injured. According to many accounts, it was the most destructive urban upheaval of the 1960s.<sup>37</sup>

General Baker was among the seven thousand people, mostly young and black, who were rounded up and jailed in the midst of the turmoil. For two weeks he was held at Ionia State Penitentiary, where he witnessed generalized feelings of despair and anger transformed into political consciousness among the other prisoners.<sup>38</sup> “People had seen the naked role of the state, and they hated these goddamned police,” he later remarked. “My cellblock looked like the damned assembly line. It had so many people I worked with that were arrested too.” As black workers returned to the plants after the Rebellion, the anger and militancy carried over into the factories. Workers fashioned the bullet casings that littered the city streets into necklaces and wore them as a symbol of resistance. Back at his job at Dodge Main, Baker recalled that “people came back in that plant with their hair grown out [*in afros*], and fifty caliber bullets around their neck and it was a sight to see. They weren’t taking any more shit.”<sup>39</sup>

By the time of the Rebellion, *Razor* and *Black Vanguard* had dissolved. Watson, Hamlin, Baker, and the other black activists who had been frequenting

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<sup>37</sup> For more on the Rebellion, see Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanaugh Administration, Race Relations and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1988); Kerner Commission Report, National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: GPO 1968); and “The 43 Who Died,” *Detroit Free Press*, 3 September 1967.

<sup>38</sup> Baker was arrested on a curfew restriction—a violation of the terms of his parole related to an earlier arrest during what was known as the Kercheval mini-riot of 1966 (see Richard Bragaw, “2 in Kercheval Race Case Get 5-Year Probation Terms,” *Detroit Free Press*, 28 March 1967).

<sup>39</sup> Baker, Interview by author, 24 May 2004.

the West Central Organization office, responded to the rising mood of militancy with a new newspaper—the *Inner City Voice*. They hoped the *Voice*, like the earlier publications, could serve as the tool around which they might “build an organization of black workers, black students both in high schools and colleges, and ultimately to create a black Marxist-Leninist Party.”<sup>40</sup> Beginning with its inaugural issue in September 1967, *Voice* editors made it more accessible than its predecessors and it quickly found a wider audience. Like *Razor* and *Black Vanguard*, it included coverage of incidents of police brutality and discrimination in the plants, but the longer theoretical pieces gave way to articles on the national antiwar movement and local news of interest to African Americans.

Those involved with the new newspaper had held industrial jobs intermittently and had long discussed the need for organizing workers at the point of production, but, as Hamlin admitted, they “had never had a successful entrée into the plants with the workers” and “really didn’t understand how to go about it.”<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, by early 1968, General Baker had begun to attract a small following of black workers at Dodge Main, which employed about 9,000 mostly African American workers. For several weeks, Baker met with a small group of his co-workers to discuss *Voice* articles, racial discrimination, and conditions on

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<sup>40</sup> According to Watson, who served as editor, they believed the newspaper would also serve as the “focus of a permanent organization, it could provide a bridge between the peaks of activity. It creates an organization and organizes the division of labor among revolutionaries. Revolutionaries do something, not just a meeting on Sundays, making speeches and passing resolutions. It creates the kind of division of labor needed not just for the newspaper but for a revolutionary organization (see “Black Editor: An Interview,” *Radical America*, July-August 1968).

<sup>41</sup> “Our Thing is Drum,” Reprinted from *Leviathan*, June 1970, Box 1, Folder 6, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

the shop floor. To prevent any participant from being fingered as a ringleader by company spies, Mike Hamlin, who was not a Dodge employee, chaired the meetings.

Their opportunity to move from discussion to action came unexpectedly a month after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. In May 1968 workers at Dodge Main carried out several spontaneous wildcat strikes over production line speedups. Though the strikes had been instigated by both white and black workers, the focus of the struggle shifted quickly when Dodge laid most of the blame for the strikes on the black workers. Baker and another worker were fired and dozens more black workers were suspended. The UAW declined to defend the fired workers.<sup>42</sup>

It was at this point that Baker and a group of about ten black workers vowed to fight the dismissals and suspensions. They adopted the name Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement to make it clear that theirs was not a reformist approach to change. As Hamlin put it, "we had certain radical ideas and a certain revolutionary line: that black workers would be the vanguard to the liberation struggle in this country."<sup>43</sup> Right away, DRUM leaders made two critical decisions. Because their point of unity was the company's racist application of discipline and the union's unwillingness to defend black workers, they decided to remain exclusively black. DRUM hoped "to prove to black workers that they alone

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<sup>42</sup> The UAW may have been at odds with local union leaders, who together with Chrysler wished to get rid of DRUM (see Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*, p. 90).

<sup>43</sup> "Our Thing is Drum," Reprinted from *Leviathan*, June 1970, Box 1, Folder 6, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit. See also Hamlin, Interview by author, 19 June 2004.

had enough strength to control the productive capacity inside the shop.” DRUM also committed to closing “the communications gap,” which had been an important barrier to organizing in the enormous ten-story facility. Workers seldom had access to reliable information regarding incidents and conditions outside of their own departments. By distributing leaflets at both ends of the plant, DRUM aimed to “consolidate the people around the same issues.”<sup>44</sup>

Over the next several weeks, DRUM issued a series of provocative newsletters and leaflets blasting Chrysler and UAW racism. These charges resonated with young black workers, who began looking to DRUM for leadership. “You can only agitate for so long that people start demanding that you do something because I guess you’ve done perked their consciousness enough so that they’ve moved further from where they used to be and now they want action,” Baker remembered. “By the time you put out leaflets about eight or nine weeks people started saying ‘you’re talking shit. Now what you going to do?’” As a test of strength, DRUM issued a flier urging a boycott of the convenience stores and restaurants across from the plant that had refused to hire African Americans. The surprising success of the boycott indicated to Baker that “these people are ready.”<sup>45</sup>

Those early efforts led to larger rallies and demonstrations and culminated in DRUM’s first strike. On July 8, DRUM called for a walkout of black workers at the plant. In order to avoid further retaliation against its leaders, DRUM arranged

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<sup>44</sup> Baker, Interview by author, 24 May 2004.

<sup>45</sup> Baker, Interview by author, 24 May 2004.

for student and community supporters to distribute fliers at the plant gates.<sup>46</sup> DRUM later boasted that seventy percent of the black workforce stayed out of the plant, crippling Chrysler's production for the better part of three days. Fearing additional wildcat strikes, Chrysler obtained an injunction against DRUM that prevented Baker and other leaders from further picketing. This proved to be a critical blow to the movement and its impact continued to be felt for months, as Baker was the DRUM leader with the most organizing experience and the strongest relationships to the workers.

With Baker no longer working at Dodge Main and DRUM leaders prohibited from picketing, some DRUM members began arguing that they should capitalize on the momentum of the strikes and shift focus to vying for power within Local 3. DRUM had initially viewed the union, UAW Local 3, as hopelessly compromised by its racism and complacency. Ron March was a DRUM activist who had supported an earlier multiracial reform caucus within Local 3, but he and other black radicals believed that the UAW had used their group to "unify black workers behind sell out candidates" for office who failed to confront Chrysler's racist practices and the union's racist culture.<sup>47</sup> After considerable deliberation, DRUM launched a campaign to elect March union trustee in September 1968. His success in a preliminary election stunned UAW leaders, who responded

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<sup>46</sup> The flier included the following slogans: "Strike your blow against racism do your part no work today" and "Black workers strike Only racist honkies and Uncle Tom's Traitors work today" (DRUM, Flier, July 1968, Box 1, Folder 6, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit).

<sup>47</sup> He dismissed the reform effort as "a bourgeois social thing. It created divisions which led into opportunism among some of the members." Excluding whites gave DRUM "a sense of togetherness" and prevented "the kinds of division we had experienced," according to March (see Donna Shoemaker, "Drum Beat," *The Fifth Estate*, 17-30 October 1968).

quickly to prevent his advance to the run-off. Local 3 members ripped DRUM literature from walls and solicited the help of the police, who spied on black workers and disrupted their political and social gatherings. On election day, black workers reported that they had been prevented from voting after being detained by the police for routine traffic violations.<sup>48</sup> March lost in the run-off after Local 3 mobilized a large numbers of white working members as well as retirees, many of whom did not normally vote in union elections. Local 3, often with UAW international support, used similar tactics to defeat DRUM candidates again in 1969 and 1970.<sup>49</sup>

As news of DRUM spread, black workers formed Revolutionary Union Movements at other Detroit-area auto plants, as well as at Blue Cross and Blue Shield, United Parcel Service, Henry Ford Hospital, and the *Detroit News*. These efforts quickly outstripped DRUM's organizational capacity, so Hamlin, Baker, Cockrel, and their comrades formed the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in early 1969 to coordinate the various workplace-based activities. Marian Kramer and other women were also instrumental in the formation of the League—a reflection of their growing importance within the movement. Women had performed many of the behind-the-scenes duties, including clerical work,

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<sup>48</sup> When DRUM supporters inquired about those arrested, they were forcibly turned away from the police station, so they moved across the street to their union hall, where they were soon joined by the mayor and police commissioner. A short while later, a white union official led the police into the hall where they again attacked black workers with clubs and mace in an effort to liberate the city officials who they claimed were being held captive (see DRUM, "Victory, Victory," September 1968, Box 1, Folder 8, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit).

<sup>49</sup> For a detailed account of DRUM's failed electoral efforts in Local 3, see Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, pp. 160-170. For Baker's account of the Ron March campaign, see Horace Harris and Leanna Stiefel, "Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM): A Study Through Interviews," 15 September 1969, Box 1, Folder 10, Enid Eckstein Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

leaflet editing, and literature distribution, but they had also assumed leadership roles on picket lines and at demonstrations in order to shield male workers from plant discipline.<sup>50</sup> Those responsibilities provided women a platform from which they pushed the League to include within its umbrella the grassroots community organizing many of them had been doing since before DRUM's formation. The League's culture, nevertheless, remained strongly masculine to the end. Kramer recalled that "male supremacy was rampant and we never got proper credit," for fighting urban renewal and police brutality, and defending the rights of tenants and welfare recipients.<sup>51</sup>

Over the next year, the League and its various affiliates pulled off a string of audacious protest activities, including additional wildcat strikes, a year-long take over of the student newspaper at Wayne State University, electoral campaigns on behalf of black militants seeking union office, demonstrations at UAW headquarters, and high profile legal defense activities on behalf of black workers and other fellow radicals. Other activities included the operation of a book discussion club, an education reform coalition, a Black Student United Front for high school students, and a national outreach effort to establish Revolutionary Union Movements in other cities.

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<sup>50</sup> The presence of women at League demonstrations is highlighted in the reports of plant security officers: "One female demonstrator was dressed in bright colored kimono, seemed to be leading the others." The same report notes that 12 of 25 demonstrators were women (see H. Archambeau, "Demonstration March in front of General Office building, Highland Park," 12-13 July 1968, Box 4, Folder 31, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit).

<sup>51</sup> Mast, *Detroit Lives*, p. 104. For more on the experiences of women within the League, see Edna Ewell Watson's reflections in Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, pp. 221-227, and Kramer, Interview by author, 19 May 2004.

The League's efforts at Chrysler's Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle—representing its most sustained organizing at one worksite—illustrates some of the strengths and limitations of the organization's factory-based work. In November of 1968, just four months after the formation of DRUM, black workers at Eldon Avenue—who made up about 60 percent of the plant's 4,000 workers—formed ELRUM and began distributing flyers and a newsletter. Within two months, ELRUM had built up enough support among black workers to launch its first action—a meeting at the union hall, where they confronted their union president and presented him with a list of grievances. The following day, dozens of these workers who had taken part in the meeting received written reprimands and suspensions of up to one month for being away from work without authorization.<sup>52</sup>

Shortly after 5am on January 27, ELRUM supporters—including students and other community allies to protect workers from further reprisals—formed pickets of between ten to thirty protestors at each of three plant entrances and asked black workers to stay home for one day to protest the suspensions. Hundreds of black workers honored the picket lines and the strike crippled production at the plant. As Eldon was Chrysler's sole supplier of axles, the disruption had a ripple effect throughout Chrysler's Detroit area plants. The company's response was swift and severe. Twenty-six workers were discharged for their participation in the work stoppage, including an ELRUM cofounder and other key members. Nearly one hundred other black workers were suspended.

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<sup>52</sup> ELRUM, "Calling Black Workers Everywhere!" [1969], Box 1, Folder 15, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

As at Dodge Main, the dismissals undermined the Revolutionary Union Movement's ability to sustain momentum by separating the leaders from their base. Working ELRUM members, now reduced to a handful, kept a low profile for much of the rest of the year until a new round of shop floor conflicts erupted.<sup>53</sup>

In April 1970, a confrontation between a black worker and his white supervisor triggered another series of unauthorized strikes; ELRUM members again took a leading role in these wildcats, but this time they were joined in an uneasy alliance by other radical groups who had also been organizing within the plant. When Chrysler retaliated by suspending many of the union stewards who had called their workers out, ELRUM members formed the Eldon Workers Safety Committee along with white radicals and some of the stewards. After being instructed by their lawyers that workers were not obligated to work under abnormally dangerous conditions, Safety Committee members believed they had found a strategy for carrying out legal work stoppages without fear of violating the law or risking company injunctions. They initiated an extensive research program to document plant conditions and to force the company to make improvements by threatening safety strikes.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Plant security reports from the 27 January protest indicated that picketers, including General Baker, who was battling his dismissal from Dodge Main and restricted from activity there, carried placards with signs such as: "Long live heroic black power struggle" and "All racist honkies and Toms out of the plant" "Be a man strike back only uncle Toms and aunt Susies work today" (see H. Engelbrecht, "Incident Report," 27 January 1969, and H.G. Phipps, "ELRUM pickets," 27 January 1969, Box 2, Folder 25, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit).

<sup>54</sup> John Taylor, Interview, 25 August 1972, Box 3, Folder 17, Dan Georgakas Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

But events in the plant soon provided evidence of the poor safety conditions that was far more compelling than any list of unsafe practices and faulty machinery. On May 26, Gary Thompson died when his faulty jitney malfunctioned and he was buried under three thousand pounds of scrap metal. The twenty-two year old black veteran Thompson had survived Vietnam “only to be crushed” under a pile of steel at Eldon.<sup>55</sup> Thompson was preceded in death by two black women on the line. Two weeks before Thompson’s death, Mamie Williams had been ordered to work despite her physician’s recommendation that she stay home and was rushed from the plant in an ambulance before dying that evening. A few months earlier, Rose Logan, a janitor, was struck in the leg by an overloaded jitney and developed a fatal blood clot.<sup>56</sup>

The day after Thompson’s death, the Safety Committee and ELRUM organized picket lines around the plant urging workers to stay out. This strike, while not as successful as the earlier wildcats, nevertheless crippled Chrysler’s axle production for a day. Once again in retaliation, Chrysler fired three key ELRUM leaders, as well as John Taylor, a white Appalachian worker on the Safety Committee who had worked closely with ELRUM members.

ELRUM never regained a solid presence within the Eldon plant due to the dismissals of key members, its inability to protect its leaders from company discipline, and its failure to develop a structure to support workers’ struggles over

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<sup>55</sup> See ELRUM Workers Safety Committee, “ELRUM Speaks,” [1970], Box 3, Folder 14. Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, The Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit; and Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, p. 107.

<sup>56</sup> See Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, p. 87, and Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, pp. 106-107.

the long haul. Eldon workers continued to battle for better union representation and safe working conditions but, for the most part, ELRUM remained on the sidelines, according to Taylor, who grew critical of ELRUM during this period for disregarding workers who could have been potential allies. Those ELRUM members still in the plant occasionally attended union meetings, but they were “into a program of disruption” that “was insulting to those workers who had come to the hall in good faith to take care of whatever business they thought important.”<sup>57</sup> Older black workers, as well as white members who may have agreed with ELRUM’s criticisms, found their style and rhetoric alienating. The second issue of the ELRUM newsletter, for instance, explained that the exclusion of “stupid ass Honkies” was necessary due to “past traitorist acts and because of their present mental condition.”<sup>58</sup> While that rhetoric may have attracted angry young African American workers and given ELRUM some early momentum, it arrested the organization’s growth when it needed to articulate a long-range strategy for change.

Those weaknesses became especially apparent as ELRUM ventured into union politics. In the spring of 1969 Jordan Sims, a black militant who had worked at Eldon since 1948, ran for the presidency of UAW Local 961. Over the

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<sup>57</sup> John Taylor, Interview, 25 August 1972, Box 3, Folder 17, Dan Georgakas Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>58</sup> The newsletter continued: “For the most part their plan has worked on the stupid ass Honkies in the plant. These fools are getting fucked over almost as badly as the Black workers (almost). But a disease called racism has poisoned their stupid little pea brains beyond help. They would rather receive pitiful little hand outs as a reward for helping keep you down than work with you to better the over all conditions and in the long run would better off themselves. For this reason elrum has taken the position that because of . . . there is no room for honkies in the present Black workers revolution” (see “Hunkies,” *ELRUM*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, The Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit).

years, Sims had participated in various reform efforts within the Local and had built up a strong base of support among black and white workers. During the wildcat strikes of 1970, he was among the principals in the Eldon Workers Safety Committee and was among those fired for their leadership of the protests. Sims shared ELRUM's critique of Chrysler and the UAW and he provided the organization with material for its newsletter. Though he was assumed to be an ELRUM member by management and many white workers, Sims never officially joined, believing that some of the group's rhetoric and practices were counterproductive.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, he disagreed with ELRUM's blanket dismissal of the UAW and its disinterest in sustaining a radical caucus within the union. "I would tell them I got this union thing," he recalled. "They would say, man, 'hell with the union.' I would say well give me something better."<sup>60</sup>

By 1971 ELRUM's power at Eldon had been reduced to such an extent that Sims considered their support more of a liability than an asset. In May of that year, Sims ran for union president and succeeded in advancing to the run-off before losing by 36 votes. Shortly before the election, he asked ELRUM members to refrain from publicly endorsing his candidacy, fearing their support would alienate him from whites and older black workers. "They promised me they

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<sup>59</sup> Political opponents attempted to smear Sims by alleging that he was "the owner and organizer of ELRUM" (see Concerned Eldon Avenue Employees, January 1970, Reel 2, Intelligence Bureau Files-ELRUM, *The Black Power Movement*, Part 4, *The League of Revolutionary Black Workers Papers*, 1965-1976.).

<sup>60</sup> Jordan Sims, Eddie Barksdale and Carla Cooke, Interview by Georgakas and Surkin, 19 August 1972, Box 3, Folder 18, Dan Georgakas Collection, The Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

would,” Sims recalled to an interviewer the following year, “they didn’t, so I lost.”<sup>61</sup> Sims nevertheless challenged the election, contending that UAW armed guards had intimidated voters and that dozens of ballots had been improperly invalidated. The UAW belatedly agreed with some of Sims’s charges and ordered a new election, which Sims lost again before at last winning the union presidency in May of 1973.<sup>62</sup>

Just as their presence in the plants declined, however, League affiliated attorneys pulled off the organization’s most high profile victory—the successful legal defense of thirty-five-year-old James Johnson, an Eldon line worker who had murdered two foremen and a coworker shortly after being suspended in July of 1970. Just hours after his suspension over an allegation of insubordination, Johnson returned to the plant and shot and killed two foremen and a coworker. Leading Johnson’s defense, League attorney Ken Cockrel announced that he would “put Chrysler on trial for damages to this man caused by his working conditions.”<sup>63</sup> Framing the murder in the context of a violent workplace culture created by Chrysler’s racism and callous drive for profits, Cockrel explained to the jury that Chrysler had failed to invest in updating the plant and equipment at Eldon, so that by the mid-1960s working conditions had deteriorated significantly, causing frequent injuries, and even deaths. Cockrel argued that as Chrysler’s

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<sup>61</sup> Jordan Sims, Eddie Barksdale, and Carla Cooke, Interview by Georgakas and Surkin, 19 August 1972, Box 3, Folder 18, Dan Georgakas Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>62</sup> See “UAW Recount Set for Chrysler Local,” *Detroit Free Press*, 8 June 1971; and Ralph Orr, “UAW Election Bias Charged at Eldon,” *Detroit Free Press*, 20 November 1971; Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, p. 103.

<sup>63</sup> Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, p. 86.

sole supplier of gears and axles, management had pushed Eldon workers, including James Johnson, to the breaking point.

Cockrel took the jury, which included several autoworkers and autoworkers' wives, to Eldon Avenue so that they could observe for themselves the conditions that had driven Johnson to murder his coworkers. The trip was effective for the defense. Though Chrysler had shut down the line and cleaned and painted the walls for their visitors, jury members were moved by expressions of solidarity from Johnson's former coworkers. The jury found him not guilty by reason of insanity.<sup>64</sup> A year later, Ronald Glotta, a League-affiliated lawyer made a similar argument at Johnson's workman's compensation trial and won \$75 per week dating from the day of the murder.

The League's legal defense efforts—formalized in the spring of 1971 as the Labor Defense Coalition—grew out of the need to fight police brutality and to protect Revolutionary Union Movement members facing discharges, injunctions, and other legal reprisals stemming from their political activity.<sup>65</sup> Cockrel and other Coalition lawyers believed that well-publicized and politically charged trials offered an opportunity to radicalize thousands of people beyond the factory gates, including the middle class. At the same time, good legal work could put the companies on notice and secure much needed reforms for workers. In the Johnson cases, Cockrel and Glotta transformed their courtrooms into

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<sup>64</sup> See "Hell in the Factory," *Time*, 7 June 1971 and Tom Ricke, "Jurors, Slayer Visit Factory Where 3 Died," *Detroit Free Press*, 15 May 1971.

<sup>65</sup> "Black Coalition Asks Abolition of Detroit Police Spy System," *Detroit News*, 4 May 1971. For the most complete account of the Johnson case and other League-affiliated legal struggles, see Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, Chapters 5-6.

classrooms, using the trials to show how Chrysler's policies had taken their toll on employees, even to the point of killing some of them. Cockrel later used a similar strategy to successfully defend a man accused of killing Detroit police officers from the elite anti-crime unit STRESS (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets). STRESS was feared in the black community because it had killed an astounding number of young black suspects and had a horrifying record of civil rights abuses. Just as he had done to Chrysler, Cockrel put STRESS on trial, exposing the public to its racist practices. Detroit's first black mayor, Coleman Young, made the dismantling of STRESS a key issue in his 1973 election.

During a 1970 conference on police repression, Cockrel elaborated on the significance of the League's legal work, boasting of its ability to keep members out of jail. He compared the League's record favorably to that of the Black Panthers who had been destroyed by costly criminal trials and its inability to defend itself from government attacks. Cockrel argued that League leaders understood their "principle responsibility" and "obligation to conduct themselves in such a way as to avoid incarceration." Moreover, the alliances that the League had so painstakingly developed with black high school students, and other black progressives served as an effective shield against numerous legal complaints and grand jury investigations: "We've got a highly sophisticated black community in the city of Detroit and . . . we relate in such a way as to make it impossible for the MAN to frame us on jive chicken shit charges."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Cockrel, "From Repression to Revolution," *Inner City Voice*, [1970], Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

To solidify the support of the many white radicals who had backed the black workers' movement from the time of the first protests at Dodge Main, Mike Hamlin joined with white civil rights activists Sheila Murphy and Frank Joyce to organize the Motor City Labor League. Sheila Murphy was a Detroit movement prodigy. Her parents were leaders in the city's Catholic Worker movement and she began working at the West Central Organization in her late teens. After the Detroit police broke up a demonstration she had helped organize as part of the Poor People's Campaign in 1968, she founded the Ad Hoc Action Group—a citywide organization to end police brutality.<sup>67</sup> While most of Detroit's young white radicals focused their political activity locally, Frank Joyce was one of the few who had a profile within the larger New Left. His introduction to protest politics came in 1960 when he spontaneously joined a picket line demonstration against segregation at Detroit's Crystal Pool Room. He then helped found the Detroit chapters of the Northern Student Movement, a student-based civil rights group and its successor People Against Racism, a national antiwar and antiracist organization that collapsed just as the antiwar movement was peaking in the late 1960s. Joyce also served as a staff member for the Chicago 8, who were on trial for conspiring to incite a riot during the 1968 Democratic National Convention.<sup>68</sup>

The Motor City Labor League's principal activity was a book reading and discussion club—a format that proved attractive for busy professionals who were not full-time activists. At the club's peak, some program sessions drew more than

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<sup>67</sup> The Ad Hoc Action Group, [1970], Box 4, Folder 5-6, Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>68</sup> Frank Joyce, Interview by author, 17 June 2004.

four hundred attendees, who gathered downtown at Detroit's Central Methodist Church to discuss topics such as "Tom Watson and the History of the Populist Movement" with southern labor and civil rights activist Carl Braden and "Workers and Struggles in the 1930's," with radical historian turned labor lawyer Staughton Lynd.<sup>69</sup> Most Motor City Labor League members were graduate students, or worked in healthcare, law, or education. They were encouraged by the Labor League's leaders to distribute radical literature at auto plant gates and to join picket line protests, but a handful took jobs in the factories in order to organize white workers and to be closer to the black workers movement.<sup>70</sup>

Outside of Detroit, thousands of young radicals discovered the League through "Finally Got the News," a 1970 documentary film that featured jarring black and white footage of production and picket lines, rendered in a deliberately intimate and frenetic style.<sup>71</sup> Others read about the League in the pages of *The Movement*, *Radical America*, or *The Guardian*, which devoted a special section to Detroit's "black worker insurgency" in March of 1969. *The Guardian* correspondent declared that the city's "black workers movement is the most

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<sup>69</sup> Control, Conflict, and Change, "Workers and Struggles in the 1930's," 1 May 1973, Box 2, Folder 19, Dan Georgakas Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit. See also Control, Conflict, and Change, "1971-1972 Book Club Discussions," [1971], Box 11, Folder 7; Control, Conflict, and Change, "Catalog," [1973], Box 11, Folder 8; and Control, Conflict, and Change, various organizational reports, [1971-1973], Box 11, Folder 3, all documents are located in the Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>70</sup> A 1971 plan that would combine in-plant organizing with environmental activism in the area of Chrysler's massive Lynch Road complex never moved far beyond the planning phase (see "The Motor City Labor League and the Huber Area Project," [1971], Box 7, Folders 11-16, Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit).

<sup>71</sup> Black Star Productions, "Finally Got the News," 1970.

important revolutionary action in the country” and that “all the elements are here. The vanguard is here. The workers are here. The guts of monopoly capitalism’s production are here. And the conditions are worsening in Detroit’s auto plants.”<sup>72</sup>

The response to the flattering press and the film was immediate. Speaking invitations, requests for literature, and calls for film showings poured into the League offices from across the country. Graduate students at Pennsylvania State University who were in the midst of a union organizing drive requested “Finally Got the News” to show at their labor arts festival, noting that the failure of teaching assistants to identify with the working class had been one of their “major obstacles to organizing.”<sup>73</sup> Leaders of the Oleo Strut, a GI coffeehouse near Ft. Hood, Texas, hoped to show the film to returning veterans.<sup>74</sup> Members of the Mother Jones collective in Baltimore and the Haymarket collective in Los Angeles ordered League pamphlets for their bookstores and study sessions, while dissident workers in a Portland box factory requested guidance in establishing a rank and file caucus within their union.<sup>75</sup>

Cockrel, Hamlin, and Watson handled much of the outreach. Watson, in particular, spent increasing amounts of time outside of Detroit, meeting with sympathetic radical groups in the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East. During trips

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<sup>72</sup> Robert Dudnick, “Black Workers on the March: Special Supplement on Black Worker Insurgency in Detroit,” *Guardian*, 8 March 1969.

<sup>73</sup> Edward F. Bontempo to Black Star Productions, 2 April 1971, Box 1, Folder 8, Dan Georgakas Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>74</sup> Dan Scott to Brothers and Sisters, 14 March 1971, Box 1, Folder 8, Dan Georgakas Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>75</sup> Mack Faith to League of Revolutionary Black Workers, 6 April 1971; Rachel Bishop to Norman Engelsberg, 9 March 1971; and To comrades, 27 February 1971, all located in Box 1, Folder 8, Dan Georgakas Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

abroad to sell copies of “Finally Got the News,” Watson established ties to Palestinian liberation groups, Italian extra-parliamentary organizations, and other European supporters of the black freedom movement. Sympathetic academics and high-profile friends such as actress Jane Fonda provided additional links to her network of radicals all over the world. Fonda, for instance, forwarded a message from French director Jean Luc Goddard, who reported that “organizers in Paris” had expressed an interest in showing “Finally Got the News.”<sup>76</sup> She also encouraged League leaders to contact her associates in Japan and Guyana and provided helpful advice for negotiating the complex politics of the international left. In facilitating a relationship with left-wing opposition leaders in Guyana, Fonda explained that the country’s black people “form a conservative and pro North American element; hence, the importance of expressing the racism here and the other realities of life for blacks in the US.” She reported that Cheddi Jagan, the Guyanese independence leader who had been repeatedly ousted from power by the British and the U.S., hoped that “a group of black representatives could come there to speak” and she promised to help get “Finally Got the News” shown in Guyana. A proposed film project with Fonda and actor Donald Sutherland, however, never materialized after long discussions.<sup>77</sup>

But even as the organization’s international reputation grew, and Cockrel continued to boast publicly of the League’s superior legal defense capabilities, its

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<sup>76</sup> Fonda to John Watson, 27 May 1971, Box 1, Folder 9, Dan Georgakas Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>77</sup> See Fonda to Cockrel, 26 April 1972 and Cockrel to Fonda, 8 May 1972, Box 1, Folder 22, Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

base among Detroit workers was disintegrating, due in no small part to the dismissals of most of the key leaders in the plants.<sup>78</sup> League leaders recognized these weaknesses, but their personal and strategic differences grew almost as rapidly as their programs, which by 1971 included the operation of a bookstore, a publishing company, and printing press. The establishment of three separate League headquarters—each with a different organizational emphasis—also caused considerable confusion for rank-and-file members. In an effort to impose much needed discipline and structure on the organization, Mike Hamlin persuaded civil rights leader James Forman to relocate to Detroit to assist with some managerial, fundraising, and educational needs. Forman, had a reputation within the movement as a talented administrator and political tactician. He also had connections to many elements of the American left and had recently secured financing from several mainline protestant churches.<sup>79</sup> Forman, however, was a gadfly, whose demanding travel schedule prevented him from developing close ties to all but a few League leaders and he had almost no relationship to the group's base.

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<sup>78</sup> League attorney Ron Glotta later accused Cockrel of failing to properly defend General Baker in July 1968 when he was fired by Chrysler and served with an injunction that kept him away from the plant. Glotta suggested that Cockrel preferred high profile cases to mundane workers' defense cases that "carried no glamour for Cockrel's career" (see Glotta to Dan Georgakas, 25 May 1975, Box 13, Folder 22, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit).

<sup>79</sup> In the Spring of 1969 Forman had been the principle organizer behind the black Economic Development Conference in Detroit, from which emerged a "Black Manifesto" that included demands for reparations from white churches and synagogues (see "Black Manifesto," 26 April 1969, Box 4, Folder 9, Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit, Gerogakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, pp. 78-81).

Despite the fissures within the organization that were becoming obvious to local movement activists, hundreds of young radicals from across the country were nevertheless inspired by the League's reputation to relocate to Detroit, which they referred to only half-jokingly as the American Petrograd—the city in which workers and their intellectual allies would lead a socialist revolution. In 1969 David Riddle, an SDS-affiliated journalist, moved from Berkeley to Detroit after hearing of the city's political movements. "I was part of that generation of '60s radicals who saw Detroit as a very significant place," said Riddle, who worked in several Detroit auto plants before becoming a Teamsters union activist. "People looked at themselves, almost consciously, as Narodniks—the young Russian student intellectuals who wanted to bring the world of revolution to the peasant masses."<sup>80</sup>

In 1970 Richard Feldman arrived in Detroit with thirty five University of Michigan comrades from nearby Ann Arbor. Their decision to move to Detroit followed weeks of intensive study and discussion regarding how to make their campus-based politics "more real, where you could make a revolutionary movement or be part of one because that's where the real people lived."<sup>81</sup> Before choosing Detroit, they sent members to various industrial cities to scout out the organizing terrain and meet with local activists. They settled into a large old house not far from Wayne State University. Though the group quickly split over various political and personal differences, many of them continued to organize in

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<sup>80</sup> Mast, *Detroit Lives*, p. 325.

<sup>81</sup> Richard Feldman, Interview by author, 19 May 2004.

Detroit, focusing their energies on the labor, antiwar, and women's liberation movements.<sup>82</sup>

That same year the International Socialists (IS), a small Trotskyist student group based in Berkeley and New York, relocated their headquarters to Detroit—a decision that coincided with their plans to refocus their activity from organizing on college campuses to building rank-and-file caucuses within industrial unions. IS activists took jobs in the city's auto plants in hopes of working with the League, but they were soon disappointed to learn that it had ceased to have any meaningful presence in the auto plants.<sup>83</sup>

Strategic differences and an unrelenting hostility toward the UAW had undermined the League leadership's ability to transform the Revolutionary Union Movements into a viable labor organization. In June of 1971, Cockrel, Watson, and Hamlin resigned from the League and issued a thirty page polemic detailing their differences with the organization's "petty bourgeois opportunists" and "backward reactionary-nationalist lumpen-proletarians."<sup>84</sup> They explained that their strategy for the League—the necessary and correct broadening of the factory based struggle—had been undermined by constant criticism and even

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<sup>82</sup> Members of the "Ann Arbor 35" also joined various communist groups like the Workers World Party, Revolutionary Communist Party, and the October League. Feldman helped produce a radical newspaper, *Red Times*, and secured work in an auto plant where he remained active in the UAW for many years.

<sup>83</sup> IS members nevertheless worked closely with the progressive UAW reformers within the United National Caucus and assumed leadership positions in various Detroit-area union locals. See Wendy Thompson, Interview by author, 14 June 2004; see also Freda Coodin, "Interview with a Local Union President: The First Woman To Do This and the First Woman To Do That," *Labor Notes*, October 2002. For more on the IS and its relationship to the labor movement, see Chapter 3.

<sup>84</sup> Hamlin, Watson, and Cockrel, "The Split in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers: Three Lines and Three Headquarters," [June 1971], Box 1, Folder 19, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

sabotage from those who felt they were diverting resources from the workers. Cockrel, Watson, and Hamlin argued that far from being diversionary efforts, their recruitment of allies from among the black middle class, white radicals, and supporters outside of the city, had accrued critical resources to the League and built up its defensive capacity. The legal defense work, the book club, the publishing house, and the documentary film drew additional resources into the organization and helped protect workers from reprisals.

Beyond the strategic differences, they also raised strong objections to anti-white tendencies within the organization and the behavior of some members that they believed was “wholly inconsistent with continuance in the ranks of a revolutionary organization.” They asserted that some League members had chased away white film crew members during the filming of “Finally Got the News,” and had sometimes rejected the assistance of white lawyers, journalists, and other supporters. For Mike Hamlin, who was the key to keeping the core group of leaders together, the League’s continuing failure to reign in the “outrageous acts” committed by some of its members represented the final straw. Reflecting on the experience over thirty years later, Mike Hamlin acknowledged that DRUM’s achievements in the summer of 1968 required “some pretty reckless folks” to stand outside the factory gates, facing harassment and intimidation from “reactionary workers” and the police: “To stand up against them and say that you are a revolutionary and you were a communist. You had to be willing to stand there and be prepared to do battle with them.”<sup>85</sup> Many of those

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<sup>85</sup> Hamlin, Interview by author, 18 June 2004.

initially attracted to the League were also drawn by the opportunity to fight white workers, but as the leadership began thinking about a long range strategy for change, those “undisciplined elements in the organization” became a liability. They alienated too many potential supporters and put the organization even further on the defensive.<sup>86</sup> Hamlin, Watson, and Cockrel pledged to continue their efforts through the Black Workers Congress, a national organization intended as an extension of the League and a vehicle through which other cities might establish their own Revolutionary Union Movements. Representing the Black Workers Congress during a 1971 meeting of southern activists gathered in Atlanta, Hamlin observed that the emergence of DRUM and other militant black worker groups indicated that the “objective conditions are right” for similar extra-union organizations across the country, and that the Black Workers Congress would provide overall coordination. “It wasn’t enough simply to organize a Dodge and an Eldon, but . . . we had to move long term,” he explained. “We had to think in terms of protracted struggle and organize Black workers across the country and across industry.” The congress managed to pull together several hundred supporters across the country largely on the strength of the League’s reputation and James Forman’s SNCC networks, but it was plagued by internal divisions and was short lived.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Hamlin, Interview by author 19 June 2004, and Hamlin, “Toward the Organizing of Revolutionary Union Movements,” 1-2 May 1971, Box 4, Folder 14, Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>87</sup> Hamlin, “Toward the Organizing of Revolutionary Union Movements,” 1-2 May 1971, Box 4, Folder 14, Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit. For more on the activities and the demise of the Black Workers Congress, see Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, pp. 131-150, and Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency*, pp. 203-204. Mike Hamlin later became a social worker and

Those who remained in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, including Baker and Kramer, considered the departures an opportunity to consolidate their work around the “organization of black workers” and to “remedy the erroneous tendency . . . to consider it only a part of our general activities.”<sup>88</sup> From their perspective, the “splitters” had become too removed from the worker base; Watson’s filmmaking and foreign travel, Hamlin’s unceasing networking and organization building, and Cockrel’s speechmaking had diverted resources from the factory struggles. By refocusing the League’s resources on the worker organizing they hoped to reestablish their base within the auto plants.

The League loyalists also viewed the split as an opportunity to develop new leadership for the organization from among the workers—a task that they had largely failed to accomplish. According to Baker, that flaw was built into the League at its inception:

It was built out of duress. It was built as a defensive mechanism under attack. Therefore it wasn’t ever really built right. It should’ve had worker representatives from each one of those groups on it. It didn’t have that. It had a group of us around *Inner City Voice* on it as its leadership, which was improper. But we were the most skilled political people at that time to help consolidate and keep the rest of it together.<sup>89</sup>

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provided counseling and crisis management services in the auto plants. Drawing upon his strong reputation in the black community, as well as his support from white radicals who had been associates of the Motor City Labor League, Cockrel was elected to the Detroit City Council in 1977. His name was often raised as a possible successor to Mayor Coleman Young, but he died suddenly in 1989 at age 51. Unlike most of the League leaders, John Watson did not remain politically active. He died in 2001.

<sup>88</sup> League of Revolutionary Black Workers, “On Splits,” [July 1971]; see also John Williams, Rufus Burke, and Clint Marbury to Brothers and Sisters, [August 1971], both documents Box 7, Folder 9, Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>89</sup> Baker, Interview by author, 24 May 2004.

In the rush to sustain the protests and protect black workers from further reprisals, the League founders had failed to cultivate rank-and-file leaders. The decision-making powers within the organization rested largely with the intellectuals and activists who had founded the group.

As a corrective measure, the Baker and the others still loyal to the League embarked on a program to educate members and promote new workers to leadership positions. In January of 1972, following a meeting of the policy committee, the League decided to “go into an organizational strategic retreat.” This would allow members to engage in intensive study, while the leadership restructured the League along Leninist principles of democratic centralism. They believed this shift was necessary to control the breakdown in organizational discipline.<sup>90</sup> The League, however, never really re-emerged from the retreat. Individual activists, notably Baker and Kramer, continued to organize within the labor movement and in a host of other political struggles.<sup>91</sup> Periodically, Detroit area workers assumed the Revolutionary Union Movement mantle, but these groups usually had little or no connection to DRUM or the League.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> See Karl Williams, On the Rationale for Strategic Retreat, January 1972 and League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Agenda, General Meeting, 2 January 1972, Box 1, Folder 25, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>91</sup> Baker and Kramer, who later married, were at the core of Detroit’s small, but very active Communist League chapter. Baker returned to the auto industry, working at Ford under an assumed name; he was eventually elected president of his UAW local. Kramer advocated for welfare recipients and served as president of the Detroit-based National Welfare Rights Union.

<sup>92</sup> A strike wave in the summer of 1973 was triggered by many of the same grievances that had sparked the Revolutionary Union Movement strikes of 1968 and 1969. However, the 1973 protests drew support across racial lines and involved various left organizations and many unaffiliated supporters. For a detailed analysis of the 1973 strikes, see Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, pp. 184-191 and 199-203.

Significant changes in Detroit and in the auto industry within a few short years obviated the need for a League of Revolutionary Black Workers, at least as it had been originally established. Black autoworkers in the 1970s continued to face racism, line speedups, and treacherous working conditions, but they had more resources at their disposal for battling racism and exploitation on the job. A growing body of civil rights law gave black workers “a different framework to fight,” while both the automakers and the UAW managed the League’s disruptions with a combination of brutal opposition and tactful accommodation.<sup>93</sup> As ambitious as the DRUM and ELRUM demands had been in the late 1960s, the automakers and the unions quietly adopted many of them within the first few years of the new decade. Chrysler and the other automakers began opening hundreds of skilled and managerial positions to African Americans; the UAW hired and appointed new black representatives and officials, and dozens more were elected to union offices. “Who would’ve thought?,” asked Baker many years later. “We asked for fifty black general foremen. We were just blowing shit out. A black on the board of directors of Chrysler Corporation. You know, they gave us all of that.”<sup>94</sup>

The years of careful planning, close personal relationships, and resource development could not save the League of Revolutionary Black Workers from the same splits that plagued much of the left in the 1960s. In the final analysis, the League, like many of the 1960s protests movements, proved to be more effective

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<sup>93</sup> Baker, Interview by author, 24 May 2004.

<sup>94</sup> Baker, Interview by author, 24 May 2004.

as a disruptive force and less successful as an ongoing organization. League leaders never achieved a method for harnessing the dynamism, optimism, and spontaneity of a strike or demonstration, while simultaneously developing an institution to provide stability, resources, and leadership for a continuing struggle to build workers' power.

Beyond their ability to secure reforms within the UAW and the industry, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and its host of constituent groups alerted New Left and civil rights movement activists to the potential for an alliance between young radicals and the working class. Over the course of the 1970s thousands of these activists shifted the focus of their organizing from campus and community to the factories. Some secured industrial jobs, while others worked as union staff members or in labor support organizations. But it would be left to each of the individuals and radical groups who made this turn to the working class to resolve important unresolved issues—to define their relationship to their unions; to develop a means of sustaining their efforts over the long haul without losing their sense of movement; to be deliberate about the centrality of gender and race; and to nurture new leadership from among the working class. These were among the unfinished tasks of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

## Chapter 2: The New Left's Southern Strategy

No group of radical activists found more promise in the late 1960s rise in labor militancy and the emergence of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers than those attempting to organize a new American communist party. Proponents of the New Communist Movement, as it came to be known, believed that the establishment of a new party was paramount for radicals in the 1970s.<sup>95</sup> SDS, SNCC, and other 1960s protest organizations had proven themselves inadequate to the task of defeating racism, capitalist exploitation, and U.S. imperialism. The struggles of the new decade would require tightly disciplined organizations that were structured along Leninist principles of democratic centralism and headed by leaders who were grounded in communist theory. The New Communists rejected the Soviet-backed Communist Party USA, which they accused of betraying communism during the Cold War and of being controlled by Moscow. Instead, the New Communists looked to Third World liberation movements and the Chinese Cultural Revolution for inspiration, as well as the 1968 global disruptions that had rocked western democracies and Soviet-bloc

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<sup>95</sup> At its height in the early 1970s, the New Communist Movement had a core of more than ten thousand activists, according to one historian. Thousands of other radical activists worked toward the establishment of a socialist party, but did so through the Communist Party USA and various Trotskyist and other socialist groups (see Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che* [New York: Verso 2002], p. 4).

nations alike.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, mounting evidence of hostility toward the nation's political and social institutions, especially among youth and African Americans, fueled the New Communist's hope for the viability of their movement.<sup>97</sup>

Each of the early-1970s wave of New Communist organizations sought to build a base in the working class by "proletarianizing"—sending members to take jobs in factories—in order to recruit new supporters, provide leadership for on-the-job struggles, and move the labor movement to the left. But few groups were as committed to working within existing trade unions and engaging in workers' struggles as the October League, a small communist group formed by veterans of the student movement in Los Angeles and Atlanta.<sup>98</sup> With its Atlanta base, October League leaders aimed to establish a new southern front composed of a broad alliance of black workers and radical youth that would resemble the 1930s and 1940s-era coalition of intellectuals, students, trade unionists, and civil rights groups. A revitalized southern front, they believed, would help mend the labor movement's Achilles' Heel—the non-union South that provided a safety valve for

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<sup>96</sup> The New Communists in the United States were part of an international "anti-revisionist" movement that opposed the Soviet Union's efforts at peaceful coexistence with capitalism. In the eyes of the New Communists, the Soviet Union had "revised" or abandoned the scientific socialism of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. The New Communists also rejected other socialist parties in the U.S. as reformist. For an overview and analysis of the New Communist Movement, see Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 2002. On the international dimensions of the 1968 protests, see Ronald Fraser, ed., *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt* (New York: Pantheon 1988), Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2003), and George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Cambridge: South End Press 1987).

<sup>97</sup> In a May 1970 poll, seventy-five percent of college students agreed that "basic changes in the system will be necessary" to improve the quality of life in the United States. Forty-four percent believed that "social progress" would require "radical pressure from outside the system" (Kenneth Keniston and Michael Lerner, "The Unholy Alliance Against the Campus," *New York Times*, 8 November 1970).

<sup>98</sup> The efforts of other socialist organizations to implant members in the working class are considered in more depth in chapter three.

corporations seeking to avoid the higher labor costs, taxes, and environmental restrictions they faced in the Northeast and Midwest.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, October League leaders hoped that a southern front could counter the growth of right-wing extremist movements and the racist appeal of George Wallace, who until his shooting in the spring of 1972 was the top vote getter in the Democratic primaries—attracting white votes with his “savage attacks on antiwar demonstrators and busing and ‘forced integration.’”<sup>100</sup> The October League leaders viewed Atlanta, with its large, restive black working class and strong tradition of civil rights protests, as the lynchpin of their “southern strategy.” Like the labor activists who had organized low-wage black workers in Charleston and Memphis in the late 1960s, the October League “had come to believe that the joining of ‘union power’ and ‘soul power’ had unlocked the secret to a whole new tide of labor organizing among America’s poor and unskilled.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> From 1946 to 1953, the Congress of Industrial Organizations carried out Operation Dixie, an ambitious 12-state effort to consolidate wartime gains by organizing southern workers into unions. While the campaign succeeded in some industries, especially among black workers, it foundered on the shoals of race, repression, and the red scare. For more on Operation Dixie, see Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1988). On the South’s role as a magnet for randy northern capital, see James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1993), and Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA’s 70-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1999).

<sup>100</sup> Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press 1996) p. 52.

<sup>101</sup> Leon Fink, “Union Power, Soul Power: The Story of 1199B and Labor’s Search for A Southern Strategy,” *Southern Changes*, March-April, 1983, p. 10. For an account of the Charleston hospital workers struggle, see Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers’ Union, Local 1199* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989). For the most recent account of the sanitation workers campaign in Memphis, see Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company 2007).

The October League arose from the ashes of the two major white student protest groups—SDS and the (SSOC) Southern Student Organizing Committee. The largest and most influential campus-based radical organization of the 1960s, SDS split and fractured just as it was enjoying its strongest support at the peak of the antiwar movement. After a contentious convention in Chicago in June of 1969, many of the organization's national leaders grouped into two factions: the Revolutionary Youth Movement and the (WSA) Worker Student Alliance, which was affiliated with an early 1960s offshoot of the Communist Party USA—the Progressive Labor Party (PL).<sup>102</sup> The Revolutionary Youth Movement soon split into two factions—the more famous of the two being Weatherman, which carried out a string of bombings and other violent acts intended to spark an uprising that would lead to the overthrow of the U.S. government.<sup>103</sup> The remaining RYM members (known as RYMII), advocated the establishment of a national Marxist-Leninist party and embraced a program of organizing working-class students in support of the black freedom movement and third world liberation struggles.

That direction was outlined by SDS national secretary and RYM leader Mike Klonsky in a late December 1968 article that appeared in the SDS journal

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<sup>102</sup> Despite the turmoil that existed among the organization's national leaders, SDS campus chapters had functioned with a good deal of autonomy and continued to do so for a few years after the 1969 convention. The Worker Student Alliance was Progressive Labor's program to bridge the student movement and the labor movement. For more on Progressive Labor and the Worker Student Alliance, see chapter three. For an account of the 1969 SDS convention, see chapter 24, Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Vintage Books 1973). Other standard accounts of SDS include: Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books 1987) and James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1987).

<sup>103</sup> On the Weather Underground, see Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 2004).

*New Left Notes*. Klonsky, who was the son of Communist Party members, had begun organizing poor whites and Mexicans in the Silver Lake area of Los Angeles. It was there that he and his colleagues developed a critique of SDS's focus on "student-power." He argued that any effort to defeat capitalism would require students to "reach out to new constituencies both on and off campus and build SDS in to a youth movement that is revolutionary" and "integrated into the struggles of working people." In order to achieve this goal, he warned: "Many of us are going to have to go through important changes, personally. As students, we have been indoctrinated with many racist and anti-working class notions that in turn have produced racism and class-chauvinism in SDS and [were] responsible largely for the student-power focus which our movement has had for many years." He urged young activists to focus on organizing at working-class colleges, technical and trade schools, and high schools, and to "destudentize" fellow students by attacking their privileges, such as draft deferments. They should also build alliances with non-academic employees on campus and expose the universities as "arm[s] of the corporations that exploit workers." Other activists, he proposed, "should move into factories and shops as well as into working-class communities, to better understand the material oppression of industrial workers, as well as to eradicate prejudices against workers."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Klonsky, "Toward a Revolutionary Youth Movement," *New Left Notes*, 23 December 1968, reprinted in Van Gosse, ed., *The Movements of the New Left, 1950-1975: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's 2005), pp. 129-131. Klonsky's father Robert was an Abraham Lincoln Brigade veteran, who spent a year in prison in the 1950s after being convicted under the Smith Act. After his release, he moved his family from Philadelphia to southern California, where he remained politically active. Michael Klonsky helped organize the SDS chapter at San Fernando Valley State College in the fall of 1965 and he emerged on the national SDS scene in 1967 through his writing in *New Left Notes* and the *Guardian*. See Sale, *SDS*, 1973, pp. 468-469, and Klonsky, Interview by author, 9 April 2004.

Klonsky and his wife Susan Eanet organized a small, but robust group of RYMII activists into a collective in the Los Angeles area. They opened a workers' center and bookstore, and adopted the name October League in honor of the October, or Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Some members obtained jobs at Uniroyal where they formed a radical caucus within the United Rubber Workers Local 44 and distributed a shop floor newsletter—*Blowout*.<sup>105</sup> Other comrades went to work at Chrysler and other Los Angeles-area factories. Collective members allied themselves with radical trends within the labor and black liberation movements, while Klonsky traveled the country working to build the October League into a national organization through the extensive network of associates he had met as an SDS leader.<sup>106</sup>

Among Klonsky's strongest supporters were a handful of Atlanta-based activists who had been leaders of SSOC, which had been initiated in 1964 to provide white support for SNCC's civil rights work. Before SSOC's own acrimonious ending just days prior to SDS's fateful Chicago convention in 1969, it had served as a gateway for southern students seeking to become active in the civil rights and antiwar movements. SSOC leaders believed that the South's history and regional distinctiveness demanded a unique organizing strategy, and that activists needed to approach young southern white liberals with an appreciation for their backgrounds and the social pressures they faced from

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<sup>105</sup> Various copies of *Blowout* in author's possession. See also Klonsky, Interview by author, 9 April 2004.

<sup>106</sup> See "Letters to the OL," *Red Star*, December 1971, copy in author's possession.

family, peers, and neighbors. “A populist feeling infused the group,” according to one SSOC member. “The northern militants saw the ‘red-neck’ only as the enemy, but these students knew him as uncle, cousin, and neighbor. They could reach their fellow southerners with new ideas. For some, this concept of going to the white people offered a dramatic way of serving the movement.”<sup>107</sup>

At SSOC’s peak, forty paid organizers coordinated diverse educational and protest activities on dozens of college campuses. In deference to SSOC, and as an expression of its “fraternal” relationship with the group, SDS limited its presence on southern campuses.<sup>108</sup> But tensions mounted as the Progressive Labor Party established a foothold in both organizations. SDS leaders, headed by Mike Klonsky, feared that Progressive Labor would takeover SSOC and use it as a base to gain control of SDS. As a pre-emptive strike directed at Progressive Labor, Klonsky and other SDSers began advocating SSOC’s dissolution in the spring of 1969. They argued that SSOC was too moderate and insular, and that it had failed to work with radicals outside the South. Some SSOC leaders echoed these SDS criticisms and began attacking the group’s belief in southern exceptionalism—or the notion that the region’s unique history and culture required radicals to take a different approach to organizing the South. During an April meeting at Emory University in Atlanta, a popular SSOC organizer Lynn Wells criticized herself and the group for having accepted the “old SNCC theory that an organizer is someone who sits in the back of the room, finds out what

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<sup>107</sup> See Harlon E. Joye, “Dixie’s New Left,” *Trans-Action*, September 1970, p. 52.

<sup>108</sup> Gregg L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2004), pp. 51-52. Michel’s book provides the most comprehensive overview and analysis of SSOC.

people want to do, and helps them do it. The do-your-own-thing philosophy.” While SSOC had reached many people that way, she had concluded the approach was flawed: “I built on anti-Yankeeism. Even though foremost in my mind has been link-ups with the working class, development of a working class ideology in the student movement, I still used an individualist approach to organization and that’s a bad position.” An observer at the meeting noted sardonically that “perhaps the best organizer SSOC ever had was denouncing the crime of her virtue, openness, and reciting a radical confession of faith before all.”<sup>109</sup>

At a June 5-8 conference in Mt. Beulah, Mississippi, the tensions came to a head. Members of the “pro-SDS” caucus sharpened their criticisms, citing a litany of SSOC shortcomings, including its insufficient radicalism, advocacy of southern exceptionalism, failure to build a membership base, disconnection from the larger movement, and weak relations with the black liberation struggle. These were bitter pills to swallow for many SSOC members. They had worked hard to establish ties to African American radicals, and in many instances those relationships were deeper and more substantive than those of their northern counterparts. Moreover, SSOC’s decentralized organizational structure allowed

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<sup>109</sup> Howard Romaine, “Movement South,” *Great Speckled Bird*, 28 April 1969. The following week, Wells and two other Atlanta activists responded to the criticisms raised in Romaine’s *Bird* article. While acknowledging that “the unorganized condition of Southern workers” undermined wages nationally and allowed “factories to flee the North for our cheap labor,” they charged that SSOC had promoted ideas that had damaged the southern movement: “SSOC has encouraged the mistaken notion that the basic problems we face in the South are not shared by the rest of the nation, that we need a more moderate approach to reach Southerners, or that those problems could be solved in the South, with little regard to what happens in the rest of the country” (David Simpson, Lynn Wells, and Jim Skillman, “Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win,” *Great Speckled Bird*, 5 May 1969).

for a range of grassroots activities on white college campuses that often represented the “first voice of protest at some schools,” according to a historian of the organization. SSOC protests helped to “legitimiz[e] dissent” among southern white students just as SDS had done outside of the South.<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, when confronted by SDS, even SSOC’s staunchest supporters proved unwilling or unable to defend SSOC against the charges. Reflecting a national trend toward movement fragmentation, some older SSOC leaders no longer viewed the group as their primary organizational affiliation, and those who did could not agree on whether to focus primarily on the war, black civil rights, worker organizing, or university reform. A five member liquidating committee was appointed to close the Nashville office and dispose of its records.<sup>111</sup>

The SSOC split divided Atlanta’s white left. A pro-SDS faction led by Lynn Wells and David Simpson attempted to unite all of the city’s SDS supporters under the banner of the Atlanta Revolutionary Youth Movement, aligning themselves with Klonsky and other RYMII forces nationally. From their storefront office and print shop in Little Five Points—a working-class, though soon to be lively bohemian enclave on Atlanta’s east side—they made plans to educate their members through a series of internal study sessions and sketched out a program

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<sup>110</sup> Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, p. 226.

<sup>111</sup> On SSOC’s demise, see Michel, *Struggle for a Better South*, pp. 189-226, Bob Goodman, “SSOC Dissolved,” *Great Speckled Bird*, 16 June 1969, and Joye, “Dixie’s New Left,” *Trans-Action*, September 1970. Soon after the June meeting, SSOC defenders wrote that they found “particularly galling” SDS’s suggestion that they lacked class consciousness: “The educational and economic background of most SDS members is sufficient to give any southerner a sharp insight into the nature of class when contrasted with his own background” (see Sue Thrasher and David Nolan, “SSOC Defended,” *Great Speckled Bird*, 30 June 1969).

of action focused on organizing white workers and staging antiwar demonstrations.<sup>112</sup>

In October 1969, Wells and more than two dozen protesters disrupted a meeting of the World Trade Council at the Marriot Motor Hotel, where David Rockefeller, chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank, was the featured speaker. Accusing Rockefeller of exploiting Latin American countries for the benefit of his oil interests, the demonstrators tossed gravel and eggs at the doors and gained entrance to the hotel. Once inside they upset a waiter's tray, and "maul[ed] a police lieutenant before they were brought under control," according to a press account. An arresting officer explained that the police "started out to arrest them (the pickets) but we ended up having more trouble trying to protect them" from the angry crowd.<sup>113</sup> Wells and thirteen others were found guilty and sentenced to serve several weeks at Atlanta's prison farm.<sup>114</sup> Jim Skillman, an Atlanta RYM member, recalled that the protest was undertaken because the group was "feeling very defensive about Weatherman" and wanted to prove themselves "as serious and as committed" as the highest-profile radical organization. But the protest alienated Atlanta RYM from much of the local left. The liberal lawyers

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<sup>112</sup> Some of those who had been on the losing side of the SSOC debate formed the Atlanta Movement for a Democratic Society and began a Marxist study group. They pledged to join Atlanta RYMII for some political activities, but the groups were never able to overcome their differences. On the growing tensions among Atlanta's white radicals, see Barbara Joye, "SDS," *Great Speckled Bird*, 21 July 1969 and Steve Wise, "Atlanta's Own Anti-War Coalition," *Great Speckled Bird*, 1 September 1969.

<sup>113</sup> Once in jail the protesters "banged on the wall and yelled 'Ho, Ho, Ho, Chi Minh. Ho will win. Get out of Vietnam'" (Keeler McCartney, "14 Held in Melee At Rockefeller Talk," *Atlanta Constitution*, 4 October 1969).

<sup>114</sup> Before sentencing the protesters, Judge Brock pronounced that "this nation was not founded by a bunch of anarchists . . . this nation was founded by hard-working and God-fearing and patriotic people . . . and will never be maintained by any long-haired, slack-jawed hippies" (Bob Malone, "Day in Court," *Great Speckled Bird*, 13 October 1969).

who had supported civil rights and antiwar protesters in the past declined to represent RYM as did nearly every one of the city's bail bondsmen. Upon their release from jail, the protestors acknowledged that their actions had been a major misstep. The protest did little to raise awareness about conditions in South Africa and it "separated us from people inside the movement."<sup>115</sup> Future activities would require strategic planning and stronger community support.

A year later, Atlanta RYM supporters formed the Georgia Communist League, which they hoped would be a preliminary step toward the establishment of an independent communist party. Like Klonsky's Los Angeles group, with whom they would soon affiliate, the Georgia Communist League members focused their organizational efforts on civil rights and antiwar work, as well as the struggles of Atlanta's black workers.<sup>116</sup>

Atlanta in the early 1970s showed promise of developing a mass movement similar to the one that had energized Detroit a few years earlier. The presence of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and SNCC headquarters provided a steady flow of talented organizers through the city, and beginning in the early 1960s, a robust local civil rights movement had begun to dismantle segregation in public accommodations, schools, and housing. With African Americans approaching a majority in the city, black activists forged a political power base within the Democratic Party that culminated in Maynard

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<sup>115</sup> Skillman added that the demonstration "was exactly the kind of thing the Weatherman would have thought was good to do. I don't think there was any doubt after it was over that it was a stupid thing to have done" (Jim Skillman, Interview by author, 7 January 2007).

<sup>116</sup> Regarding the Georgia Communist League's continuing role in the antiwar movement, see Anne Jenkins, "Reawakens Anti-War Efforts," *Great Speckled Bird*, 18 May 1972.

Jackson's 1973 mayoral victory.<sup>117</sup> Yet working conditions for most of Atlanta's black workers had remained largely unchanged since the 1940s. Well into the 1970s African American workers suffered from discriminatory hiring and promotions practices, earned lower wages than their white counterparts, and suffered from unsafe health and safety standards, as well as arbitrary dismissals and discipline at the hands of racist supervisors.

Though it was overshadowed by the high profile student-led protests, African American workers in Atlanta had their own protest tradition.<sup>118</sup> In December of 1964, Martin Luther King, Jr. walked the picket line with striking workers at the Scripto, Inc. plant just blocks from King's Ebenezer Baptist Church. Scripto workers had recently joined the International Chemical Workers Union, but had failed to reach an agreement with management over pay raises for African Americans, who were relegated to low-skilled jobs.<sup>119</sup> In 1968 and again in 1970, black sanitation workers struck for higher wages, better working conditions, and an end to discrimination. Several of King's aides assumed active

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<sup>117</sup> On black politics in Atlanta in the late 1960s and 1970s, see Gary M. Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn: the Saga of Two Families and the Making of Atlanta* (New York: Scribner 1996) and Winston A. Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977* (Durham: Duke University Press 2006).

<sup>118</sup> For more on the fusion of the African American civil rights and labor movements, see Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1993) and Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2003).

<sup>119</sup> "Rev. M.L. King Demands Worldwide 'Scripto' Ban," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 2 January 1965. See also, Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2007) pp. 212-213, and Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, pp. 48-49.

roles in those strikes, the second of which left Atlanta without regular garbage pickup for thirty-six days.<sup>120</sup>

The labor protests reached new heights in 1972 when the city witnessed more than one dozen major job actions beginning with a strike at Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills in January and a walkout at Holy Family Hospital the following month. Subsequent protests included strikes at Church's Fried Chicken, the Regency Hyatt Hotel, Sears Roebuck and Company, and Nabisco. In nearly every one of these situations, black workers complained of being excluded from skilled jobs reserved for white workers or of being unfairly disciplined. Because the existing white-led unions were slow to respond to black demands, African American workers turned to SCLC, black churches, black students, and white sympathizers for strategic assistance and donations of money and food.<sup>121</sup>

The Georgia Communist League viewed the strike wave as an opportunity for expanding the organization and directed many of its fifty or so members to take jobs at the Atlantic Steel Company, General Motors, the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills, and other Atlanta manufacturing companies. Others devoted themselves to the production and distribution of the group's monthly newsletter, *The Red Worker*, each issue of which included news of the black freedom

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<sup>120</sup> "Review of Garbage Strike," *Bay State Banner*, 10 October 1968. King aides Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, and Hosea Williams were among the dozens of protestors arrested during the 1968 strike. The 1970 strike included other municipal workers in streets and sanitation and the Grant Park Zoo (see Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid*, p. 170-171).

<sup>121</sup> For the most comprehensive account and analysis of the 1972 strike wave, see Monica Waugh-Benton, "Strike Fever: Labor Unrest, Civil Rights, and the Left in Atlanta, 1972," (MA Thesis, Georgia State University 2006).

struggle, economic analysis, and reports on the conditions in various local factories.<sup>122</sup>

The earliest members of the Georgia Communist League were predominantly white, and drew heavily from the ranks of former SDS and SSOC members and other student activists. In his activist trajectory, Georgia Communist League member John Fletcher was typical of the college radicals who became factory workers. Fletcher had been a Duke University student and was a Nelson Rockefeller delegate to the 1968 Republican National Convention in Miami. But like many Duke students that year, his politics swung to the left by the Tet Offensive, the assassinations of King and Kennedy, and a week-long silent vigil in support of union recognition for campus workers. In 1969 he dropped out to pursue activism full time. With five other students Fletcher moved fifty miles west of Durham to Greensboro to work in the textile mills there. The six young radicals remained for a year, operating as a cell, gaining working-class experience, meeting regularly to read Marx, and searching for a larger formation with which to affiliate. At the end of 1970, Fletcher headed to Atlanta with some friends where he was quickly drawn into Georgia Communist League circles and began working at a shipping company.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> *The Red Worker* began publication in October 1971, copies of various issues in author's possession.

<sup>123</sup> Fletcher, Interview by author, 22 October 2006. More than 1,500 students, faculty, and employees took part in the vigil that began in the wake of King's assassination. For more on the Duke vigil and its impact on the students, see Sally Avery Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors' Eyes: From the Sixties to the Greensboro Massacre* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press 2003), pp. 81-87.

Lynn Wells was the central figure in the transition from SSOC to RYM to the Georgia Communist League. She was the daughter of a labor organizer and had gained a high profile within the civil rights movement before she was twenty. As a ninth grader in Maryland, she organized classmates to donate their lunch money to southern Freedom Schools and she soon began working at SNCC's Washington, D.C. office. Still in her teens, Wells was among a handful of youthful demonstrators arrested in March of 1965 in what may be the only sit-in protest inside the White House; the protestors had joined a regular White House tour and stayed for seven hours, demanding that the federal government intervene on behalf of civil rights workers in Selma, Alabama. Wells later went to work for SSOC and served as a North Carolina organizer for the Vietnam Summer project, an effort to move off campus to build opposition to the war.<sup>124</sup>

Sherman Miller was one of the very few African Americans in the Georgia Communist League. Miller joined the organization after taking part in civil rights protests in his native state of West Virginia and in Atlanta. A dynamic orator and talented organizer, Miller's charisma was essential to establishing the Georgia Communist League's credibility among black workers in Atlanta. As one coworker later put it, black workers would have followed Miller until "hell freezes over."<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Charles Mohr, "Sitdown Inside White House Protests Selma," *New York Times*, 12 March 1965. For more on Wells's background, see Leon Fink, "When Community Comes Home to Roost: The Southern Milltown as Lost Cause," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 40, No. 1, Fall 2006, pp. 122-124.

<sup>125</sup> Gary Washington, Interview by author, 18 August 2007.

In the early weeks of 1972, Miller and several white comrades began working at Atlanta's Mead Packaging Corporation where they found no shortage of issues around which to organize. The Dayton, Ohio company, which supplied paper-based containers for food and beverage packagers, operated a manufacturing plant and warehouse facility just northwest of downtown. Workers complained of the poor ventilation system that chilled the plant during the winter and made it swelter in the summer. A thick and ever present fog of paper dust caught in the workers' mouths and noses. The seven hundred black workers, who made up about sixty-five percent of the workforce, complained of being denied heat breaks and forced to stay on the production line by overbearing white supervisors. Several women who passed out were denied compensation for lost time. Moreover, the plant was abuzz from the recent conviction of Melvin Crawford, a black line worker who was sentenced to fourteen years in prison for shooting a shift manager, a floor superintendent, and a union steward during a meeting to discuss working conditions.<sup>126</sup> According to coworkers, as Crawford was being led off to jail, he exclaimed: "I'm not sorry for what I've done. Even if I have to go to jail this will help keep the bosses off of the backs of the other workers."<sup>127</sup>

As tensions mounted that spring, black workers began threatening to shut down Mead just as the workers had done to Sears and other employers in the

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<sup>126</sup> "Melvin Crawford, Worker at Mead," *The Red Worker*, January 1972, Box 679, Folder 3, Joseph Nelson Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Pullen Library, Georgia State University.

<sup>127</sup> "Free Melvin Crawford, Free Henry Whitlock, Free Emily Butler," *Take-Off: Voice of the Mead Workers*, [1972], Box 679, Folder 4, Joseph Nelson Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Pullen Library, Georgia State University.

city.<sup>128</sup> Miller and several white Georgia Communist League comrades who had developed rapport with the workers, spearheaded the formation of the Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers. They arranged for the Mead Caucus to meet each week at Emmaus House, a community center south of downtown, where the workers could share information and develop a strategy for having their grievances addressed. The caucus members also elected Sherman Miller chairman, though he had only been on the job at Mead for a few months.

Among the earliest supporters of the Mead Caucus was Gary Washington, a twenty-one-year-old African American worker who had been involved with the Black Panther Party in New York City and whose participation in campus protests had led to his expulsion from Morehouse College and Georgia State University, both in Atlanta. According to Washington, Miller and the Georgia Communist League members attempted to persuade the black workers to build up the caucus as a voice for black workers and to eventually vie for power within the conservative and white-dominated Local 527 of the Atlanta Printing Specialties and Paper Products Union. Though black workers outnumbered whites in the plant by a nearly 2-1 ratio, nearly every union steward and elected officer was white, including two union stewards who headed up rival factions of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>129</sup> The Georgia Communist League wanted the Mead Caucus “to take over

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<sup>128</sup> On the protests at Sears, see “Sears Boycott Threaten to Escalate Nationwide,” *Atlanta Voice*, 29 July 1972 and Edgar Smith, “Sears Strike Over, Black Workers Win Significant Concessions to Their Demands,” *Atlanta Voice*, 5 August 1972.

<sup>129</sup> These two Klan leaders served as stewards at Mead well into the 1980s. Union steward and Georgia Imperial Wizard of the True Knights of the Ku Klux Klan David Lee Craig was convicted of murder in 1990 for his role in killing his girlfriend’s husband who was also a fellow Klan member. He died under mysterious circumstances in prison a few weeks after sentencing. Union steward and Grand Dragon of the White Imperial Knights James W. Spivey died in a car crash

the union,” and “straighten [*it*] out,” but the black workers expressed little interest in a union reform campaign, Washington recalled. Having lost patience with the union and with Mead, they demanded immediate action. “There was just so much discrimination that the blacks wanted to go out on strike” and the Georgia Communist League “ended up going along with the program.”<sup>130</sup>

To avoid the almost certain disaster of an unplanned strike, the Georgia Communist League members within the Mead Caucus persuaded the group to methodically gather unresolved grievances and shape them into a set of more than forty demands that came to be known as the Black Manifesto. Much of the Manifesto centered on health and safety issues, including the installation of a proper ventilation system, an end to compulsory overtime, and the employment of a full-time nurse. Other demands focused on the historical impact of Mead’s discriminatory employment practices. The Manifesto called for the dismissal of white managers, supervisors, and clerical workers and their replacement with black workers until the balance equaled that of the city’s racial makeup. To prevent the company from pitting black and white union workers against one another, caucus members added that “there must not be any benefits granted to Black hourly employees that will discriminate against or repress the White hourly employees.” The caucus also demanded that Martin Luther King’s birthday be a

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shortly after being arrested in Fort Payne, Alabama during a clash with African American residents (see Peter Applebome, “Atlanta Journal: The Killing was Real, the Story was a Lie,” *New York Times*, 29 March 1990 and “KKK Grand Wizard Dies In Alabama Car Crash,” *Chattanooga Free Press*, 19 September 1995).

<sup>130</sup> Gary Washington, Interview by author, 18 August 2007.

paid holiday and that supervisors using profane and racist language be subject to disciplinary action.

Other, more far-reaching demands, reflected workers' desires for a radical re-visioning of the employer-employee relationship. The caucus proposed that any supervisor be released if two-thirds of the workers in his department voted for his firing. They asked that labor contracts be renewed every year, and that workers be given two weeks notice of layoffs. Finally, they demanded a new grievance policy in which union stewards in each department and on each shift would meet with company officials to resolve disputes on the spot.<sup>131</sup> Before unveiling the Manifesto publicly, caucus members circulated the proposals among sympathetic Mead workers, refining and adding to the document. Through this process, they guaranteed that the document reflected the workers' needs, while expanding their base of supporters.

The caucus also enlisted the assistance of civil rights leader Hosea Williams, an associate of Martin Luther King, Jr. and longtime leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Williams had been involved in several other black workers' struggles in Atlanta, including the Atlanta sanitation workers strikes, and within SCLC he had been among the strongest proponents of workers' issues.<sup>132</sup> In the summer of 1972, he began holding weekly "Saturday People's Rallies" to serve as "a forum for people to advocate various causes,"

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<sup>131</sup> Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers, "Black Manifesto," August 1972, Box 679, Folder 2, Joseph Nelson Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Pullen Library, Georgia State University.

<sup>132</sup> In the wake of King's assassination, SCLC leaders debated over whether to continue focusing on workers' rights or to emphasize other arenas of struggle. On the SCLC debates, see Benjamin Chavis Muhammad, Interview by author, 3 February 2006.

most of which centered on issues of employment discrimination.<sup>133</sup> Due to his association with King, Williams enjoyed a strong following among some elements of Atlanta's black community, including many workers at Mead. Even among the SCLC circle of tremendous orators, Williams stood out for his ability to deliver a stump speech and to articulate the hopes and frustrations of the city's poor black masses. But Williams also had a prickly personality that made working with him difficult. Earlier in the year, he had split from SCLC and formed the Metro Atlanta/Dekalb SCLC as a vehicle that would allow him to focus on local civil rights and economic justice issues.

As Mead Caucus members honed their demands, the Georgia Communist League joined Klonsky's October League, and adopted the latter group's name in May 1972. Following a meeting in Texas, where the Atlanta and Los Angeles groups were joined by representatives from a handful of other radical collectives, the newly constituted October League (Marxist-Leninist) issued a statement explaining that this merger represented an important step "towards the construction of a new communist party in the U.S. based on the guiding principles of the revolutionary theory of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought." Such a vanguard organization was necessary, they argued, to prevent "the spontaneous struggles of the masses" from being "confined within the limits of reforming capitalism and . . . brutally crushed." The groups pledged "to go deep among the working masses at the factories and in the communities in order

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<sup>133</sup> Williams explained that while Saturday had often been a day for African Americans to "engage in self-destruction," he aimed to "change Saturday from a day of shame into a day of truth and honor" (see "People's Rally Brings Community Closer Together," *Atlanta Voice*, 12 August 1972).

to unite with the advanced workers and to keep clear of idealism and all types of thinking which do not coincide with objective reality.”<sup>134</sup>

Following the announcement of the new organization, a five-member delegation with Klonsky and Wells as its leaders visited China to discuss the new development with Chinese officials.<sup>135</sup> Since the late 1960s, China had held a strong appeal for some American radicals because of its support for Vietnam and other anti-colonial movements. Moreover, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—with its populist and anti-authoritarian rhetoric—seemed to offer a more robust and democratic alternative to Soviet communism.<sup>136</sup> As they proceeded with their efforts to establish a communist party in the United States, the New Communists looked to the Communist Party of China for a model and adopted some of its rhetoric, ideas, and organizational practices. While Chinese communism was attractive and sometimes useful to the New Communist intellectuals, it was no draw for American workers.

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<sup>134</sup> October League, Marxist-Leninist, Statement of Unity, May 1972, copy in author’s possession. See also October League, Marxist-Leninist, “Resolutions Adopted at the First Congress of the October League, Marxist-Leninist,” [May-November 1972], copy in author’s possession.

<sup>135</sup> The delegation spent a month in China beginning on 7 June (see *Peking Review*, 14 July 1972, Vol. 15, No. 28). Klonsky and another October League member had also met with Chinese officials in December 1971. In a written greeting to Mao Tsetung, Klonsky expressed his “hope that this trip will further strengthen the great unity that exists between the peoples of the U.S. and China as well as between the communists of these two countries in the spirit of proletarian internationalism.” He also reported that the October League had “taken up the call issued May 20, 1970 by Comrade Mao Tsetung and have begun to apply the teachings of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Tsetung Thought to the concrete conditions here in the United States,” and committed to “the building of a revolutionary communist party which can lead the working class and the revolutionary masses in the class struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat” (Klonsky to Mao Tsetung, December 1971, reprinted in *Red Star*, December 1971, copy in author’s possession).

<sup>136</sup> On China’s appeal to U.S. radicals, see Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, pp. 45-46. The Chinese government continued to welcome delegations of American radicals even as they moved toward détente with the United States government. On the China’s pursuit of détente, see Suri, *Power and Protest*, pp. 226-245.

With Hosea Williams acting as their spokesman, Mead Caucus members met with company officials as well as the officers of Local 527 on the morning of August 16. Asserting that they had tried the “existing channels” for settling grievances “without success,” the caucus members presented their Manifesto. Acknowledging that many of their complaints centered around racism at Mead, they insisted that they viewed the situation not as “a dispute between Black and white workers, but rather one between workers and management.” They gave the company until 10am on August 18 to meet the demands—all of two days.<sup>137</sup>

Mead’s response reflected its understanding of the urgency of the situation and its need to contain the spread of dissent, while allowing as few concessions as possible. Company president Robert M. O’Hara, who had been out of town and missed the meeting with the caucus, dashed off a memorandum to the employees explaining that the company was prohibited by labor law and the existing union contract from bargaining “with individual employees or groups of employees, or outsiders.” O’Hara noted, however, that he had agreed to a request for a meeting from Local 527 to discuss some of the workers’ concerns. That meeting had already been held, he wrote, and because of it the company would soon provide “a better way for employees to voice their complaints and concerns.” He also pledged that he would work hard to eliminate gender and

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<sup>137</sup> In a cover letter to the Manifesto, the Mead Caucus workers charged the corporation with “blatant acts of discrimination against Black people and against women in particular,” which “is apparent in the present policies concerning hiring, advancement, and training of employees.” They also blasted the intolerable working conditions that included “excessive dust, lack of proper ventilation, lack of adequate medical facilities, and general hazardous safety conditions are made more intolerable by constant intimidation and harassment by supervision” (Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers, cover letter, Mead Worker’s Manifesto, [August 1972], Box 679, Folder 2, Joseph Nelson Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Pullen Library, Georgia State University).

racial discrimination at Mead and promised to do everything he could to “resolve every legitimate complaint and problem and . . . do everything we can to continue our operations and provide uninterrupted employment for all our employees.”<sup>138</sup>

O’Hara issued a second letter to the employees that day, in which he unveiled the new “expanded labor-management committee” and announced that it would begin meeting Monday morning. “This group will try to find out what our employees are concerned about,” he explained. “It will try to resolve those reasonable concerns quickly. We want you to know that we are determined to attack problems with action. Not just words. We think this way will solve problems. We do not want solutions which are just for today. We want solutions which will last a long time. We want Mead to be a better place to work. For everyone.”<sup>139</sup> Speaking for the caucus, Sherman Miller dismissed the company’s pledge to expand the union-management committee because it had failed to involve black workers. He complained that the committee was the “same kind we have had in the past” and that it was arranged by the company and the union.<sup>140</sup>

The following day, Friday, August 18, more than four hundred black workers walked off the job. Workers on subsequent shifts followed, and within a day, seven hundred of Mead’s 1,100 employees, including nearly the entire black

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<sup>138</sup> Robert M. O’Hara to employees, 17 August 1972, Box 679, Folder 2, Joseph Nelson Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Pullen Library, Georgia State University. O’Hara also wrote to Hosea Williams, thanking him for his interest in the matter, but notifying him that Mead intended to “resolve our real problems with our employees, their legally elected labor officials and government agencies” (O’Hara to Williams, 17 August 1972, in same location).

<sup>139</sup> O’Hara to employees, 17 August 1972, Box 679, Folder 2, Joseph Nelson Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Pullen Library, Georgia State University.

<sup>140</sup> Ken Wills, *Atlanta Constitution*, “Hosea-Led Pickets Close Mead Corp.,” 19 August 1972.

workforce, had walked out in support of a strike. When about one hundred of them formed picket lines at the plant gates, Mead officials shut the plant down at the end of the first shift with plans to reopen Monday. They then worked phone trees all weekend in an effort to coax employees back to work, while company lawyers obtained an injunction prohibiting pickets from interfering with normal business operations by “force, violence, intimidation, coercion or threats.” Strike leaders brushed off the injunction, and the phone calls largely failed to persuade black workers to return to work.<sup>141</sup>

A reporter visiting Mead on Monday spoke to picketers who explained that the few workers inside were “country white folk” from outlying areas who “think that the working conditions and the pay are good cause they haven’t had anything better. They don’t have to pay but maybe \$80 a month rent while we who live in the city must pay \$130 to \$180 in rent each month.” Inside the plant, company officials asserted that nearly half of the workforce had returned to work, and they boasted that the new union-management committee had been expanded to include some of the picketers. The committee had already met that morning and they expressed confidence that a quick settlement could be reached. But Sherman Miller told reporters that any talk of an end to the strike was premature until Hosea Williams was permitted to participate in the meetings with Mead. He put the number of workers who had crossed the line at a few hundred, or less than a third of the workforce.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> “Mead Corp. Gets Antipicket Order,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 20 August 1972.

<sup>142</sup> See “White Mead Worker Threaten Voice Reporter,” *Atlanta Voice*, 26 August 1972 and Harmon Perry, “Meets Resuming In Mead Dispute,” *Atlanta Journal*, 20 August 1972.

At the strike's peak, perhaps seventy-five white workers stayed home from work, but these workers were generally not strike supporters. Rather, they wished to avoid the inconvenience of crossing the picket line. In some cases, their department had been idled. Few white workers aside from October League members appeared on the picket line. The strike was largely an expression of black grievances, and the Mead Caucus's manifesto and its steady stream of public statements and leaflets reflected that reality by emphasizing the civil rights dimension of the struggle. At the same time, the October League members within the Mead Caucus consistently cast the strike in a larger political framework aimed at forging unity across racial lines, such as in this flier:

In the South, Black people face greater poverty, oppression and lack of basic democratic rights than anywhere else in the country. The oppression of this great nation of people is the basis of discrimination against Black people both in the South and the rest of the country. It is the basis for discrimination at Mead. It is also the basis of the extreme exploitation of all Southern workers. Ninety per cent of the Afro-American people are workers. This oppression of one section of our class weakens our whole class. As the Manifesto points out: This is not a struggle between Black and white workers, but a struggle between workers and management.

Other language in the flier targeted white workers more directly: "White racism, which divides workers and leaves white workers neutral or fighting on the side of their enemies, must be sharply struggled against. The company puts forward these ideas for one reason—to divide and weaken us and to strengthen themselves." At the same time, the October League also warned black workers to "guard against the view that being white means being the enemy" because both racism and a blanket dismissal of all white workers "divide and weaken our

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struggle and strengthen the enemy.”<sup>143</sup> Racial harmony proved to be a tough sell in the context of a strike built largely on black grievances, and white Mead workers were largely immune to the appeal. They may have shared some of their black coworkers’ complaints concerning working conditions, but they were unwilling to join what they viewed as a black civil rights protest led by black leaders. The October League’s sensitivity to the attitudes of white workers, however, was undercut by their proselytizing. Mead Caucus members operating as open communists and members of the October League limited most of their public comments to issues that reflected concrete realities in the plant. October League literature, however, was often abstruse and ideological. For example, in encouraging strikers to “take our struggle to others in the Atlanta community—especially to our fellow workers in other plants,” the October League predicted success because “our cause is just and, as Mao Tsetun, leader of the Chinese people has said, ‘A just cause enjoys abundant support.’” Other Maoist references would have been even more obscure for anyone not already familiar with Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought: “Mead, like all reactionaries, appears to be a powerful man-eating tiger—swallowing whole its workers. But we will prove that Mead Paper Co., like other imperialists, is in reality a paper tiger, which in the long run is doomed!”<sup>144</sup> That these appeals were not more immediately damaging is a credit to Sherman Miller and the other in-plant

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<sup>143</sup> October League, “Unity is Our Strength,” [August 1972], Box 679, Folder 4, Joseph Nelson Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Pullen Library, Georgia State University.

<sup>144</sup> October League, “Unity is Our Strength,” [August 1972], Box 679, Folder 4, Joseph Nelson Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Pullen Library, Georgia State University.

October League members and the intense relationship building and careful organizing they had carried out. Black workers respected the October League activists, but only because they were able to separate their commitment to the struggle from their communist ideology.

The October League walked a similar fine line in negotiating its relationship to Local 527 and its white leaders. Mead Caucus members maintained that they had first attempted to address their issues through the union's official channels, but that union indifference had forced them to form their reform caucus. While white October League activists within the caucus had hoped to identify some progressive members within Local 527, they were also constrained by the majority of the black workers who had given up on the union. The tensions rose to a new level when union president Ralph Meers endorsed the joint labor-management committee's initial list of proposed reforms. These included the formation of a human relations council to handle unresolved discrimination complaints; faster processing of grievances involving suspensions and dismissals; the purchase of new dust handling equipment; monthly meetings for employees, union officials, and supervisors to discuss individual job or personnel problems; and an independent survey of two key plant areas to gauge if they were adequately outfitted with safety equipment.<sup>145</sup> Caucus members again dismissed the proposals and the committee as an extension of the old,

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<sup>145</sup> "Mead Grievance Solutions Listed," *Atlanta Journal*, 25 August 1972 and "Give Changes a Try—Mead," *Atlanta Constitution*, 25 August 1972.

ineffective union. Moreover, they demanded that Mead remove the injunction that limited their ability to picket the plant.<sup>146</sup>

But as the strike moved into its third week and with the plant operating only one shift, Fulton County Superior Court Judge Elmo Holt continued the injunction. He limited the number of pickets at each of three plant gates to five—with two picketers permitted to stand on each side of the gate while one paraded in between, and prohibited demonstrations from within fifty yards of the of the main gates. The new restrictions, nevertheless failed to deter protestors.<sup>147</sup> The following week, Mead lawyers returned to court with a list of demonstrators who had violated the injunction several times in the previous week by crowding near the gates at beginning and end of the day shift. One protestor reportedly wore a holster with a revolver, and after police asked to see his permit, “the crowd jeered and another demonstrator shouted, ‘Gun Power!’”<sup>148</sup>

The strikers also continued to hold rallies near the plant gates and began taking their case to the larger community, enlisting the support of African American students, workers at other area factories, and local white leftists. Black church members also provided food and money for a strike fund. Mead Caucus members visited other Atlanta union halls and picket lines, and encouraged

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<sup>146</sup> At a mass rally of workers on 27 August, a spokesman for the Metro Atlanta/DeKalb SCLC encouraged them to ignore the injunction: “This is nothing but a bunch of rich folk’s mess. It’s designed to scare you back to work like the ‘boogie man’ scares little children to bed at night. It does not enjoin us from doing anything we’ve been doing—we have not physically kept anyone from going to work and must not” (Marjorie Jordan and Edmund Marshall, “Mead Strike,” *Great Speckled Bird*, 4 September 1972).

<sup>147</sup> “Judge Keeps Curb on Mead Strikers,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 September 1972.

<sup>148</sup> Steve Stewart, “Mead Seeks Contempt Rule,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 September 1972.

consumers to boycott products packaged in Mead materials, including Coca Cola, Pepsi, Budweiser, Black Label, Schlitz, and Morton Frozen Foods.<sup>149</sup>

Mead managers countered with their own efforts to sway the black community. They hired a black-owned public relations firm that purchased advertisements in black newspapers urging workers to return to their jobs. Commercial spots on black radio stations offered a similar message. At a press conference in front of the firm's office, Sherman Miller dismissed the public relations campaign as "sweet talk." He accused the firm of "trying to brainwash" the workers, and labeled the black owners "traitors to the people." State Representative Ben Brown, a co-owner of the firm and a civil rights movement veteran, denied that the company would "engage in any activity that would be detrimental to anybody, black or white," and explained that their contract with Mead predated the strike.<sup>150</sup>

On Monday September 18, a contingent of about three hundred workers and their supporters walked north from the Atlanta University Center with two mules at the lead. The mules had powerful resonance for Atlanta's black community. Two had pulled the wooden cart carrying Martin Luther King, Jr.'s casket during his funeral march in 1968. A few weeks after King's funeral, they passed through the city again at the head of a caravan of pilgrims and wagons from Mississippi on their way to the Poor People's protests in Washington D.C.

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<sup>149</sup> On the boycott, see Marjorie Jordan and Edmund Marshall, "Mead Strike," *Great Speckled Bird*, 4 September 1972. For more on Atlanta's growing counterculture and white left, see James T. Wooten, "The Life and Death Of Atlanta's Hip Strip," *New York Times*, 14 March 1971.

<sup>150</sup> Chuck Bell and Keeler McCartney, "66 are Arrested at Mead Protest," *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 September 1972.

The mules underscored the humble origins of the poor and mostly black protesters and connected their plight to that of their slave and sharecropping ancestors. They also symbolized hard work and even the federal government's broken promise to the freedmen of forty acres and a mule. The Mead marchers snaked their way through the city streets singing "We Shall Not be Moved" and other civil rights songs, and inviting onlookers to join them. By the time they reached the plant gates the caravan included about 500 protesters, according to press accounts.<sup>151</sup>

The tension climbed as rows of police faced off against the protestors. Hosea Williams taunted the police and security guards through a megaphone: "If you tell me I'm under arrest I'll go to jail, but if you hit me with that black jack, I'll tear your ass up."<sup>152</sup> At shift change, strikers began rocking the cars of those trying to exit the plant, and rocks, sticks, and bottles flew from the lines toward the policemen. Three policemen and two strikers sustained minor injuries, though police made just seven arrests. Among those taken to Fulton County Jail were several white October League members, including the seventy-two-year-old Nannie Leah Washburn, who was arrested after she lay down on the street in front of the plant gates before being hauled off by Atlanta police.

Washburn was one of several senior members in the October League—an organization that was dominated by young adults in their 20s and 30s. She and a

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<sup>151</sup> For coverage of the demonstration, see Becky Hamilton, "Mead Conflict Grows," *Great Speckled Bird*, 25 September 1972, "Mead Plant Melee Hurts 3 as 7 Arrested," *Atlanta Journal*, 19 September 1972, and Frank Wells, "5 Injured, 7 Arrested in Protest at Plant," *Atlanta Constitution*, 19 September 1972.

<sup>152</sup> Becky Hamilton, "Mead Conflict Grows," *Great Speckled Bird*, 25 September 1972.

few other Communist Party veterans from the 1930s and 1940s provided the October League with a link to a rich tradition of labor and anti-racist struggles.<sup>153</sup> Born in Douglasville, Georgia in 1900 to a family of sharecroppers, Washburn began working in textile mills as a child. During the Depression, she joined the Communist Party through which she organized textile and WPA workers, as well as the unemployed. She also participated in the party's campaigns to free political prisoner Angelo Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys, nine African American teenagers wrongly accused of raping two white women in Alabama. In the fall of 1934, Washburn and her sister were snatched from a picket line in front of Exposition Mill in Atlanta and thrown in Fulton Tower Prison for "circulating insurrectionary literature."<sup>154</sup> While she drifted away from the Communist Party, Washburn had remained active in labor and civil rights activities in Atlanta, and she was a fixture at political demonstrations into the 1990s.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Harry Haywood was the most prominent October League member to have been in the Communist Party. He had joined the party in 1925, and held leadership positions in both the American and Soviet communist parties before leaving in the late 1950s. One of the Communist Party's leading black members, Haywood helped develop the party's "black belt" thesis—the notion that African Americans in the South represented a separate nation and were entitled to self-determination. The black belt thesis provided the ideological basis for the party's organizing efforts among southern African Americans in the late 1920s and early 1930s. For more on his life, see Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: the Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press 1978). Haywood protégé Odis Hyde was born to a family of Louisiana sharecroppers in 1908, and spent much of his young adulthood searching for work. Like Washburn, Hyde was radicalized during the Great Depression, when he joined the Communist Party in Chicago. As an October League member, Hyde was an invaluable older comrade and mentor to his comrades. For more on Hyde, see Odis Hyde, autobiography, Box 7, Folder 12, Komozi Woodard and Amiri Baraka Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.

<sup>154</sup> "Let's Don't Put up With This," *Labor Defender*, December 1935.

<sup>155</sup> For more on Washburn's life, see October League, *75 Years of Struggle! The Life of Nanny Washburn*, (Chicago: Liberator Press 1975) and Ellen Howle, "Nannie Washburn, 95, Crusader for Civil Rights," *Atlanta Constitution*, 4 May 1996.

With their leaders now out on bail, the Mead strikers launched a second mule train march just three days after the first. A documentary film crew sympathetic to the strike captured the event as the protestors left from the Atlanta University Center, walking slowly behind a wagon pulled by mules before reaching the plant at about 6:30pm. In front of the entrance to the Mead offices, they unloaded a coffin on the front steps of the building. Sherman Miller and other strike leaders mounted the wagon and began to lead chants and to make speeches. Miller delivered a version of "I am Somebody," a poem that the Rev. Jesse Jackson had recently written and had begun reciting at demonstrations. As he concluded, Miller raised his fist as the crowd delivered an increasingly loud crescendo of "Soul Power." The Mead strike film captured the rising tension as a black police officer waded through the crowd before mounting the cart and standing over Miller's left shoulder, who continued with his chants. Mead Caucus leader and October League member Wayne Draznin, wearing a head bandage to cover wounds he had received at the previous protestk, stood over Miller's right shoulder and helped lead the cheers. With little resistance, outside of some jostling of an officer's hat, the police arrested Miller, Draznin, and three other October League members and charged them with violating the court order against picketing. Nannie Washburn grabbed Miller as he was being led to the police wagon, but she was brushed aside by the officers as the crowd continued its "Soul Power" chant.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> "Wildcat at Mead," copy of film in author's possession.

With the key October League activists in jail, Hosea Williams and his SCLC staff members assumed the leadership of the demonstration. Williams reminded the assembled demonstrators that “Martin Luther King said if you haven’t found something you’re willing to die for you’re not fit to live.” To which he added a corollary: “If you’ve found something you’re willing to die for, you certainly should be willing to go to jail for it.” Williams then directed those protestors willing to go to jail to move to the plant gates where they joined arm in arm and attempted to block traffic moving in and out of the entrance. Police issued a warning before pulling protestors from the driveway and depositing them in police vans to be transported to jail. Sixty-six protestors were arrested, including at least five Mead workers. As Williams was hauled off to jail he instructed his supporters to make arrangements for another protest for the following day. Instead, many of the protestors made their way to the police station, where they kept vigil through the night. The following day fifty marchers walked from downtown with the mule train to the jail demanding that jailers “Free Hosea.” A short time later, all of those who were jailed had posted bail.<sup>157</sup>

Hosea Williams’s role in the strike was an increasing source of tension for the October League and the members of the Mead Caucus. They appreciated his willingness to support the strikers and they recognized that he and his SCLC branch provided immediate access to a base of support among Atlanta’s black poor due to his tireless efforts on behalf of civil rights dating back to the early

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<sup>157</sup> Chuck Bell and Keller McCarthy, “66 are Arrested at Mead Protest,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 September 1972.

1960s.<sup>158</sup> He also gave the strike a higher profile by virtue of his affiliation with King and his reputation as a strong advocate of nonviolent resistance. Publicly, October League members praised Williams's leadership and brushed aside suggestions of divisions among the strike leadership. In private, however, October League members bristled at Williams's tendency to draw attention to himself, believing that it inhibited the development of grassroots leaders. They also felt that he was too willing to negotiate with the company without the approval of the strikers and they took issue with his profession of nonviolence, which they rejected and believed was out of step with the growing militancy of black workers.

Williams, for his part, never hesitated to use the October League's communism to strengthen his hand with the company and the negotiators from the City's Community Relations Council, who had entered into the dispute to facilitate a settlement. Facing a barrage of criticism from the press for allying himself with young communists, Williams distanced himself from the October League and downplayed their contributions to the strike. "They're just trying to ride the back of the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) to respectability," he told reporters. "They're only some kids who started reading philosophy and caught up on the first thing they read and don't know what in the hell they're talking about."<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> In addition to his efforts on behalf of Atlanta's black workers, Williams had recently founded the "Hosea Feed the Homeless and Hungry" program, which subsequently grew into one of the largest and most successful programs for meeting basic needs of Atlanta's poor.

<sup>159</sup> Jim Stewart, "New Mead Disorders Predicted," *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 October 1972.

Ultimately it was the Mead workers' pragmatism that kept Williams and the October League from reaching a breaking point. Jim Skillman, an October League member who worked to solicit community support for the strike, acknowledged that the black workers "were more all-sided about" Hosea Williams than his comrades. They knew "he wasn't just an opportunist. He was an opportunist, but he wasn't just an opportunist. He was also a leader, someone who could bring something to the struggle. When Hosea would try to tell these people that we were bad news. They would say 'no, no, no.' And if we . . . had tried to tell them that Hosea is an opportunist. They'd say, 'maybe he is, but we need this.'"<sup>160</sup>

Three days after the mass arrests, the *Atlanta Constitution* reported that the Atlanta Police Department had been investigating the October League and its ties to area strike activity and to Williams. A special investigator from Fulton County District Attorney's office, H.G. Bailey labeled the October League "a well-educated, well financed militant group that has just filtered into Atlanta in the past year." Bailey tied them to recent bomb threats and asserted that the police had "been equating them as the Weatherman portion of the new Communist party."<sup>161</sup> Hosea Williams rejected Bailey's allegations that his work was being financed by communists. He admitted that "not too long ago somebody offered us around \$1,000 in contributions from an anonymous source, but I told them I had to know

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<sup>160</sup> Skillman, Interview by author 7 January 2007.

<sup>161</sup> Bailey also reported that the October League members "don't carry cards and they don't make a lot of noise about belonging. . . . In fact, they deny it. They just don't want any publicity." Lt. W.W. Holley of the Atlanta Police Department Intelligence Division acknowledged that they had been investigating the October League and its relationship to SCLC, but he declined to discuss details (see Jim Stewart, "Red Activist Cell Under Probe Here," *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 September 1972).

where any money came from that I was going to touch.” He suspected that the money may have been from an October League source and went on to state that “they almost ruined [*the strike*] by trying to take over the show themselves. . . . they never do any work, all they do is sit around and philosophize. . . . I don’t think those folks could raise ten people this afternoon if their lives depended on it.”<sup>162</sup>

The October League quickly moved to counteract the impact of the *Constitution* article, but refrained from responding publicly to Williams’s charges. On the day of the article’s publication, Sherman Miller called the strikers together for a discussion and a vote on the presence of the October League within the Mead Caucus. He made the case for the October League’s continuing support, but promised to follow the wishes of the workers. Twenty-five workers addressed the meeting and reiterated their support of the October League’s presence within the strike. When the vote was tallied, 100 workers affirmed the October League’s efforts and Sherman Miller’s caucus leadership. Three workers voted to sever the relationship.<sup>163</sup>

In the pages of the *Great Speckled Bird*, Atlanta’s leftist underground newspaper, the October League issued a response to the *Constitution*’s “vicious attack.” They accused the newspaper of “trying to isolate the October League members in the Mead strike and split them away from the other workers who they have been fighting side by side with.” After failing to break the strike using

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<sup>162</sup> Jim Stewart, “Red Activist Cell Under Probe Here,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 September 1972. According to Gary Washington, who served as treasurer for the Mead Caucus, Williams failed in an attempt to secure control of donations that were made to the strike from friends of the October League (see Washington, Interview by author, 18 August 2007).

<sup>163</sup> Carroll Crawford, “Mead Strike Continues,” *Great Speckled Bird*, 9 October 1972.

injunctions and police force, “these greedy exploiters, who have their backs to the wall, have stooped to the low tactic of red-baiting.” The statement also acknowledged that “ideological differences do exist between the October League and S.C.L.C. on the question of achieving a final solution to the problems of the masses of poor and oppressed of all nationalities,” but noted that “a working relationship has been built on the basis of common support for the Mead workers’ struggle.”<sup>164</sup>

Despite these apparent cracks between the caucus and their supporters, the continued refusal of black workers to return to their jobs and the pressure created by the demonstrations forced Mead to bargain with the strikers. Serious discussions began in early September, and by the end of the month the caucus presented a company proposal to their supporters. On September 26 the strikers voted to reject a Mead offer because it did not include back pay for hours lost during the strike, nor did it include a guarantee that all of the strikers would be rehired. Following the vote, company and union officials as well as caucus members agreed to meet at Central Presbyterian Church and allowed Andrew Young of the Community Relations Council to facilitate the continued negotiations. Young, a close associate of Martin Luther King who was then running for Congress, brokered a deal that included a promise to purchase equipment to remove dust from the finishing area; the establishment of a new grievance procedure; and a permanent union-management committee to address employee problems. The company additionally agreed to work to end

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<sup>164</sup> “October League Responds to Red-Baiting,” *Great Speckled Bird*, 9 October 1972.

discrimination in hiring, training, and promotions, to open up supervisory and salaried positions to all interested workers, and to combat the use of racist language. No back pay was included, but the strikers gained a \$250 no-interest loan for any worker in need. Finally, the company agreed to allow a federal mediation board nominated by the Community Relations Council to hear the cases of those workers who had been fired during the strike.<sup>165</sup> Mead Caucus leaders, knowing that they could not sustain the strike indefinitely, also moved to accept the agreement. On the evening of Tuesday October 3, the remaining strikers voted 124-36 to accept the company's proposals. Two days later, the strike officially ended as the union and the company signed the agreement at the office of the Atlanta Community Relations Commission. Local 527 president Ralph Meers defended his union's refusal to support the strike, explaining that more could have been achieved "if the illegal strike had never occurred." Nevertheless, he pledged to represent all of the returning workers and to "make every effort to soothe the wounds that have resulted from the illegal strike."<sup>166</sup> During a press conference at the Wheat St. Baptist Church Education Building, Hosea Williams acknowledged that "we did not gain everything sought, but we gained a whole lot more than we had when we began."<sup>167</sup>

As word spread of the strike's end, October League national chairman Mike Klonsky, who had been spending increasing amounts of time in Atlanta,

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<sup>165</sup> On the settlement, see Chuck Bell, "Signing of Pact Ends 7-Week Dispute," *Atlanta Constitution*, 6 October 1972, "Late Flash," *Great Speckled Bird*, 9 October 1972 and "Mead Settlement," *Great Speckled Bird*, 16 October 1972.

<sup>166</sup> Chuck Bell, "Signing of Pact Ends 7-Week Dispute," *Atlanta Constitution*, 6 October 1972.

<sup>167</sup> *Atlanta Voice*, "SCLC Signs Covenant," 14 October 1972.

held a press conference to address the mounting criticisms of his organization and the attempts to smear the strikers as communist dupes. According to one press account, the audience was mainly composed of government investigators who listened as Klonsky rejected the claims that the strike had been instigated by the October League:

The truth is that Mead and the companies like them are to blame for this unrest—unrest which will never cease until the real causes are changed. It is not the October league which has been forcing workers to work in air that is so filthy and polluted with dust that several women have passed out, only to be immediately sent back on the line when they were revived. This crime has been done by Mead. It is not the October League which has practiced racial discrimination in their policies of hiring and promotions, reserving all or most of the better paying, skilled jobs for the white workers, while Black workers are kept in the dirtiest, lowest paying jobs.<sup>168</sup>

Klonsky reminded the audience that “it was Mead and not the October League who directed the Atlanta Police Department to attack the Mead workers on September 21, jailing more than 100 workers and brutally clubbing the arrested workers to the ground, possibly blinding one black worker. . . . To the charges of fighting to put an end to these conditions and to this oppressive system, we in the October League plead ‘guilty!’”<sup>169</sup>

Fully one month after the strike, the *Great Speckled Bird* reported that forty members of the Mead Caucus were still out of work. Following the arbitration hearings, that number was whittled down to a handful of Mead Caucus leaders, including Wayne Draznin and Sherman Miller, who never returned to

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<sup>168</sup> Carroll Crawford, “October League and Mead,” *Great Speckled Bird*, 16 October 1972.

<sup>169</sup> Jim Stewart, “New Mead Disorders Predicted,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 October 1972.

their jobs and were eventually forced to leave Atlanta to find work.<sup>170</sup> Capitalizing on the publicity surrounding the Mead strike, Miller went on a nationwide speaking tour and the October League expanded, absorbing dozens of small Marxist study and action collectives made up of veterans of SDS, SNCC, SSOC, women's liberation, black freedoms struggle and other assorted radicals. The documentary film "Wildcat at Mead" made the rounds among radical groups, serving as an effective recruiting tool just as had the League of Revolutionary Black Workers' "Finally Got the News" two years earlier.

The Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers continued to meet, but it had been badly weakened by the dismissals of its strongest members. Some within the October League came to believe that their decision to pull their white members out of the plant during the strike was a tactical error. At the time, they thought that the presence of white workers on the picket line would encourage other whites to join the strike. That did not happen. In retrospect, those workers might have been more effective by agitating from within the plant, and they would have kept their jobs. "Organizationally, for us it was a defeat in the sense that you had no one left because we had pulled our white workers out in solidarity," October League member Jim Skillman later recalled.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Teddi Lane, "Mead Struggle," *Great Speckled Bird*, 13 November 1972.

<sup>171</sup> Skillman continued: "We left them in for a little while, and then we said no let's just bring them out so we could have them on the line. At least the white people crossing the line would see our comrades there. There was discussion about well maybe its better to leave the white comrades in to continue to talk about it and everything. But we didn't know where it was going. So we said well, no, let's pull them out. Maybe if we pull them out it will pull a few more white people out. That didn't happen or it didn't happen to the extent that we could capitalize on it" (Jim Skillman, Interview by author 7 January 2007).

The October League attempted to revivify the caucus by sending new cadre into the plant, but they found organizing tough going in the months after the strike. The workers involved themselves in the union and pursued other avenues for voicing their grievances that had been opened up by the strike. Just after the strike, John Fletcher, a white October League member, took a job in Mead's print shop, where the League hoped to build support among white workers. But the print shop workers had strong representation from the union, according to Fletcher, and the workers there were still mostly unwilling to ally themselves with black workers. After a few years in the plant, Fletcher accepted an assignment to go to Birmingham to launch an October League cell in the steel industry.<sup>172</sup> After returning to his job following a year-long suspension for strike activity, Mead Caucus member Gary Washington noticed strong improvements in the working conditions. Still working at Mead as of this writing and serving Local 527 as a union steward, he notes that the labor-management committee that emerged from the strike is still active serves as an important source of information for workers and a vehicle for problem solving at the plant.<sup>173</sup>

Less than a year after the Mead strike's conclusion, October League national leaders assessed the state of their "labor work" and presented their findings in the form of a "resolution on labor work" at the organization's second congress in the summer of 1973. The resolution demonstrated the group's ability to be self-critical and to develop new strategies based on their members'

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<sup>172</sup> Fletcher, Interview by author, 22 October 2006.

<sup>173</sup> Washington, Interview by author, 18 August 2007.

organizing experiences. They observed that over the past year they had become a “proletarian organization” as the vast majority of their base of students and intellectuals had become factory workers, some of whom had “become indispensable leaders in many areas of the working class movement.” Members had been active in distributing shop floor newsletters and in supporting the struggles for the rights of women and minority workers. A few, like Sherman Miller, had been recognized as leaders and some were even elected to office in unions, caucuses, and other worker organizations. These positive developments, they noted, came about as a result of having corrected earlier errors that had isolated the October League from workers, including a purist refusal to “work in the reactionary trade unions” and “an over-emphasis on communist propaganda work.” The resolution urged members to guard against these errors and to rededicate themselves to rooting their work in the concrete realities of their coworkers.<sup>174</sup>

The October League’s plans to deepen their involvement in the labor movement never came to pass. Events in the world of the New Communist Movement diverted members’ energies from shop-floor activism toward an increasing emphasis on party building and ideological rigidity. As the October League leaders competed with other Marxist-Leninist groups to establish the first

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<sup>174</sup> The resolution also chastised white comrades for sometimes dismissing white workers as irredeemably conservative and racist, and noted that “white comrades have a special responsibility to work with the white workers, winning them to unite in struggle with the minority workers, to oppose discrimination and to support the freedom struggles of the nationally oppressed peoples.” Minority comrades, on the other hand, “have the special responsibility to organize and activate the minority workers and combat narrow nationalism among them” (October League, “Resolution on Labor Work,” Adopted at Second Congress of the October League, [1973], copy in author’s possession).

national New Communist Party, they pressed cadre into recruiting new members through expansion of their study circles and wider distribution of *The Call (El Clarin)*, their weekly national newspaper. Campaigns to root out “white chauvinism” and other personal and ideological defects demonstrated an admirable deliberateness with which the organization confronted racism, sexism, and elitism among its members. But the mechanical application of ideological litmus tests reduced human frailties to slogans; the required “self-criticisms” often turned into counterproductive breast-beating rituals, during which comrades exorcised guilt regarding their “bourgeois world outlook,” “petit-bourgeois class origin,” and “basic contempt for the masses.”<sup>175</sup> As the October League’s program ran up against the realities of plant closings, mass layoffs, and the decline of worker militancy, members turned on one another in frustration.

Among all of the New Communist groups, the October League allied itself most closely with the Communist Party of China, parroting the CPC’s consuming opposition to the alleged “revisionist” errors of the post-Stalin Soviet Union. The Chinese eventually rewarded the October League for its unswerving support by extending fraternal recognition to it during a state visit to Beijing by Mike Klonsky.<sup>176</sup> The Chinese “franchise” drew some unaffiliated communists into the October League, but the party- building campaign diverted energy from

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<sup>175</sup> After being confronted with alleged behavioral or ideological errors, guilty comrades wrote detailed self-criticisms that were published in *Spark!*, the October League’s internal newsletter. Members confessed to over-editing articles submitted by minority comrades, marital infidelities, substance abuse, and failures to carry out organizational directives (see for example, S. Turner, “Letter of Criticism and Response,” *Spark* 7, October-November 1974, copy in author’s possession).

<sup>176</sup> On the October League’s lurch to the left, and Klonsky’s 1977 visit to China, see Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, pp. 197-198, and 228.

grassroots activity. Moreover, its opposition to the American “revisionists” in the Communist Party USA made it next to impossible for the October League to function within the labor movement or any other broad alliance on the left.

Nowhere was the October League’s sectarianism and unyielding opposition to the Communist Party USA more destructive to their ability to establish a presence in the South than in their work in the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), an interracial Louisville-based group that had worked for racial and economic justice since its founding in 1946.<sup>177</sup> Since the late 1950s two left-wing journalists, Carl and Anne Braden, had worked as SCEF organizers and devoted their lives to creating the kind of southern front that the October League professed to support. The Bradens had survived unrelenting attacks from racist and right-wing forces, including charges of sedition for which Carl Braden served eight months in a federal prison. They had also frequently been accused of being members of the Communist Party, though they refused to answer whether or not they were members. By the late 1960s, the Bradens and SCEF were enjoying a resurgence due to the changed political climate and the infusion of new energy from young southern radicals, many of whom were mentored by Anne Braden.

In the fall of 1972, three October League members rejoined SCEF after having resigned from the organization the previous year. Upon returning, the October League members acknowledged that they had mistakenly dismissed the

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<sup>177</sup> On the history of SCEF, see Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner, Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2002) and Irwin Klibaner, *Conscience of a Troubled South: The Southern Conference Educational Fund, 1946-1966* (Brooklyn: Carlson 1989).

organization as a front group for the Communist Party and they pledged to “again be a part of SCEF in order to build a strong movement against oppression in the South.” Internally, the October League admitted that they had failed to appreciate SCEF’s ideological diversity and that it had been a mistake to “[hand] the organization and all these people over to the revisionists without even a struggle.”<sup>178</sup>

A few months later, mounting tensions between a Louisville chapter of the Black Panthers and SCEF led to the Panthers kidnapping SCEF’s executive director, Helen Greever, and her husband, Earl Scott, and holding them hostage overnight.<sup>179</sup> The couple escaped when Scott faked a heart attack and convinced one of the Panthers to call an ambulance. Once freed, SCEF members called the police and two of the assailants were arrested. Various SCEF leaders protested the decision to involve law enforcement given that both SCEF and the Panthers had been constant targets of state repression. Over the next year, the October League cadre used the incident and the turmoil it had caused within SCEF to consolidate their hold on the group and to drive out those they accused of being unduly influenced by the Communist Party USA.

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<sup>178</sup> In the group’s internal newsletter, an October League leader summarized the lesson of its error in leaving SCEF: “In all of our liaison and united front work, we must make distinctions between: the CP itself and the organizations they are in leadership of; between the way we criticize mass organizations; and communist organizations; and between anti-imperialists and opportunists. If we do this, we can isolate the revisionists from their base, unite the movement and build a broad united front against imperialism” (J.S., “Our Work in SCEF,” *Spark*, July 1973, copy in author’s possession).

<sup>179</sup> The Panthers demanded \$29,000 and explained that the kidnapping was retribution for SCEF’s role in having a Panther comrade committed to psychiatric care following an earlier confrontation at the SCEF office. For a full account of the incident, see Irwin Kilbaner, “The Travail of Southern Radicals: The Southern Conference Educational Fund, 1946-1976,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Volume 49, Issue 2 (May 1983), 197-201.

Carl Braden resigned from SCEF in October 1973, lashing out against the “atmosphere of political hysteria” that “reminded him of a hearing before HUAC at which” he had appeared in the early 1960s: “I pointed out to the board that I had gone to prison for resisting such an inquisition, and I didn’t intend to put up with it in an organization that had been fighting such hysteria for 35 years.”<sup>180</sup> Anne Braden echoed her husband’s criticisms and denounced the SCEF board for engaging in “red-baiting from the left.” She observed that while many of her younger colleagues professed to reject anti-communism, they nevertheless grew up in the “saturated atmosphere” of the Red Scare, which had “seriously crippled” their ability to deal “honestly and frankly” with real ideological complexities: “You still carry with you a view of the CP as a conspiracy instead of a valid organization that you can deal with, discuss with, struggle with.”<sup>181</sup> She resigned a short time later, and under the October League’s leadership, SCEF changed the name of its newspaper from *Southern Patriot*—with its “connotations of patriotism to this system of exploitation and to the white supremacy of the Klan and the confederacy”—to *Southern Struggle*.<sup>182</sup> Subscriptions declined, additional board members and staff resigned, programmatic work fell off, and SCEF faded into oblivion.

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<sup>180</sup> Carl Braden to Board, Staff, and Advisory Committee of SCEF, 1 November 1973, Box 2, Folder 4, T. J. Reddy Papers, Special Collections, J. Murrey Atkins Library, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

<sup>181</sup> Anne Braden, “My view of recent events in Louisville and the crisis in SCEF,” [13 November 1973], Box 2, Folder 4, T. J. Reddy Papers, Special Collections, J. Murrey Atkins Library, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

<sup>182</sup> “Important Changes in SCEF’s Newspaper,” *Southern Struggle*, January 1977.

As late as December 1976, Atlanta business groups and law enforcement agencies continued to fear disruptions by communists in the city's factories. The Georgia Business and Industry Association announced that they had gathered evidence of a communist presence in seven area companies, and that the FBI and GBI were investigating reports of industrial sabotage. The Association warned human resource professionals to watch out for articulate applicants in their twenties looking for low level jobs that offer mobility within the plant.<sup>183</sup>

The threat was wildly overstated. The vast majority of October League members and other radicals who had entered the plants in the early 1970s had moved on with their lives. Some returned to school, others pursued professional careers that had been interrupted by their foray into factory work. Many others involved themselves in electoral politics, or became full-time community organizers, teachers, and human rights advocates. Those individual activists who remained in the factories and hoped to be politically relevant after the economic dislocations of the 1970s were more willing to work within the trade union bureaucracies than they had earlier. Among the veterans of the October League with whom I spoke were labor educators, a UAW staff member, and a teachers union activist. All of them had to varying degrees found some niche within the larger tent of the labor movement.

The October League—remade as the (CPML) Communist Party Marxist-Leninist in 1977—had no significant presence in Atlanta's factories after the strike wave of 1972. Though they had been among the most flexible and

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<sup>183</sup> Sam Hopkins, "Red Sabotage Feared by Business Group," *Atlanta Constitution*, 24 December 1976.

ecumenical of the New Communist groups of the early 1970s, their growing sectarianism marginalized them from most workers and most of the left. Most importantly they misread the shifting political undercurrents and assumed that the era of mass action of the late 1960s would continue into the 1970s. In the face of mounting evidence that contradicted their hope for an impending upsurge of grassroots militancy, they pursued increasingly sectarian, dogmatic, and ultimately marginal strategies that prevented them from building a base among the working class. The bit of creativity and flexibility that they had exhibited in Atlanta was an un-sustained flash. Their commitment to identifying and nurturing grassroots labor leaders was overwhelmed by the organizational demand to focus on “party building”—or the recruitment of “advanced workers” into the October League. Too much of their energy was directed at exposing and opposing “labor misleaders” and “revisionists”—some of whom had strong followings among the workers—rather than the employers.

In Chicago and Northwest Indiana, for instance, October League/CPML steelworkers sat on the sidelines and sometimes actively opposed the most successful and broad-based reform movement in the history of the United Steelworkers of America. They derided militant steelworker Ed Sadlowski and his “Fight Back” supporters as “union bureaucrats . . . the main promoters of racism in the labor movement, using it to try to split any opposition that develops to their anti-worker policies.” Sadlowski’s program had much in common with the October League’s notion of class-struggle unionism, but in its eyes, his support from the Communist Party made him more dangerous to the working class than

the capitalists because he threatened to divert the workers toward reform and away from their true class interests. To their credit, the steelworker members of the party eventually repudiated the organization's sectarianism and began working closely with other progressive elements in the union.<sup>184</sup>

The October League/CPML's ability to react and respond to the changing realities on the shop floor were undermined by a rigid overemphasis on ideological purity that left workers feeling alienated or at best perplexed. The constantly changing political lines and political infighting left many members badly bruised and sometimes bitter for years to come. Under mounting pressure, Klonsky quit the Central Committee in 1980, acknowledging that his "methods of work have increasingly been singled out for criticism and have been closely connected to the ultra-'Left' deviation in our work." Those errors had "increased division in the ranks and weakness in understanding the need to root out every aspect of the ultra-left line which I helped promote."<sup>185</sup>

With few exceptions, black and white workers rejected the October League/CPML's Marxism-Leninism in favor of their own more pragmatic strategies and goals. Even the militant black workers at Mead who found the group valuable during the strike ultimately had little use for the October

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<sup>184</sup> October League, "Sadlowski is No Answer," [February 1977], copy in author's possession. See also Jerry Harris, Interview by author, 6 May 2004.

<sup>185</sup> Klonsky added that he had resigned "at the suggestion of some of my closest comrades in the party, accepting fully the criticisms of my party comrades and their ideas about the future of the organization." He urged the organization to continue with its plans for building the party: "As always, the precondition for fulfilling the potential that the struggle of the masses holds, is the existence of the Marxist-Leninist party. Without that we cannot succeed. The times are hard and complicated and many forces are acting to tear us apart. But I am confident that we will succeed" (Mike Klonsky to Central Committee, 25 November 1980, copy in author's possession).

League/CPML's communist ideology. Though at its peak they had several dozen energetic and committed young comrades organizing in Atlanta, Mississippi, Louisville, Birmingham, and North Carolina, they left no institutional legacy. Their southern strategy joined a long list of failed attempts to organize the South.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> The unraveling of the Communist Party Marxist-Leninist in the late 1970s and early 1980s, opened up space for a lively debate regarding the organization's work, much of which stressed the errors of "ultra-leftism" that I have outlined above. During an October 1980 meeting to evaluate their labor work, CPML activists admitted that they had "tended to underestimate some of the conservatism in thinking, and . . . overestimated the consciousness of the workers and their interest in revolutionary ideas." They also acknowledged that their "dogmatism and super revolutionary approach" had marginalized themselves within the labor movement, and suggested that perhaps "the fact that so many of us came into the movement in a period of relative upsurge in the late 60s affected our thinking, trained us in some methods, tactics and also expectations which did not conform to the realities of the working class movement in the 70s" (see Notes from the Recent NTUC meeting, October 1980, copy in author's possession).

### Chapter 3: A Working Class Hero Is Something to Be

On his first day of work as a longshoreman on the San Francisco waterfront, Bruce Hartford, a veteran of the civil rights movement in Alabama and Mississippi and antiwar activist, climbed down a long grimy ladder in to a ship's hold. As he landed he was surprised by an older worker in the shadows who introduced himself as the gang boss and proceeded to explain the job expectations: "Now here's the way it is. You see them guys up top? Them looking over us? They got those white hats on? They're the bosses. Down here in the hold, we are the workers. They are your enemy. We are your allies. You don't have no loyalty to them. Your loyalty is to us down here. . . . Now, at any time, two of our six people are sleeping over there in the wings where they can't be seen. So you . . . go take a nap for a half-hour, and then you'll work. And of course you don't tell nobody about this." Hartford worked part-time on the waterfront for several years to support himself through school. During the long student strike at San Francisco State College, he had no trouble finding longshoremen sympathetic to the strike's anti-racism, anti-war, and anti-authority themes—those themes resonated strongly with the rank and file of the leftist ILWU who had been fighting similar battles on the waterfront for three decades. Defying the New Left's stereotypes regarding either their presumed conservatism or their readiness for revolution, the longshoremen taught Hartford that they had

their own traditions of resistance and protest shaped by their day-to-day work realities.<sup>187</sup>

As young radicals immersed themselves in their new jobs and communities, they met workers—like Hartford’s gang boss—whose politics were complex and sometimes contradictory. Borrowing a phrase from socialist-activist Michael Harrington, historian Jefferson Cowie has described the political culture of blue collar workers of the 1970s as being “vigorously left, right and center.”<sup>188</sup> How else to describe American workers’ paradoxical support for wildcat strikes and Spiro Agnew’s appeals to law and order, or their opposition to the Vietnam war and hostility toward the antiwar protestors? While the mass strikes and on-the-job protests of the early 1970s suggested a high degree of labor militancy and a renewed openness to radical politics, white workers especially exhibited a growing conservatism demonstrated by their support for George Wallace and Ronald Reagan. That conservatism was only reinforced by the economic events and trends of the mid-1970s, including the energy crisis, deindustrialization, inflation, and an emerging cynicism regarding the role of the federal government—a sensibility best summed up in Ronald Reagan’s 1981 inaugural address in which he pronounced that “government is the problem.”<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Bruce Hartford, Interview by author, 11 July 2002.

<sup>188</sup> Cowie, “‘Vigorously Left, Right, and Center at the Same Time’: The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s,” in *America in the Seventies*, ed. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press 2004), 75-106.

<sup>189</sup> For Reagan’s address, see “Let Us Begin an Era of National Renewal,” *New York Times*, 21 January 1981. On the energy crises of the 1970s and its impact on workers, see David M. Anderson, “Levittown is Burning! The 1979 Levittown, Pennsylvania, Gas Line Riot and the Decline of the Blue-Collar American Dream,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Fall 2005, pp. 47-65.

Those who made the turn to the working class had to negotiate these contradictions and complexities whether they were organizing against racist hiring practices, building the peace movement, forming dissident union caucuses, or identifying leaders for a new communist party. They succeeded to the extent that they were able to establish trust and credibility through their hard work on the job and by being dependable coworkers. They succeeded when they listened to coworkers and when they were attentive to their new work cultures. They succeeded as they learned to eschew theoretical polemics and talk to workers about radical politics in language that was relevant to workers' experiences. Those radical intellectuals who committed to working-class politics over the long haul, particularly those who persisted beyond the economic dislocations of the mid-1970s, reconciled themselves to the reality that long-term social change sometimes required compromise and the sacrificing of revolutionary goals for reformist victories.

SDS's annual summer work-ins served as a gateway to factory work and working-class politics for thousands of young white radicals. During the program's first year in 1967, students were encouraged to take manufacturing jobs for the summer to talk to workers about the Vietnam War in cities such as Chicago, Boston, Newark, and Rochester.<sup>190</sup> Subsequent summer work-ins emphasized the importance of exposing middle-class students to working-class

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<sup>190</sup> The first year, work-in cities also included: Ann Arbor, Baltimore, Washington, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco (see SDS, "The Vietnam Work-In Organizers Manual," [Spring 1967], Box 64, Folder SDS, New Left Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA).

realities, though students were also expected to talk to their coworkers about the war, the black freedom struggle, and the student movement. The work-ins were initiated by the Progressive Labor (PL) faction within SDS and represented an extension of PL's efforts to forge a worker-student alliance. While Progressive Labor was reviled by its opponents within SDS and has often been dismissed by historians of the New Left for its unrelenting dogmatism and divisive political tactics, its influence on student politics in the 1960s and the turn to the working class was nevertheless considerable.

The Progressive Labor Movement emerged in the early-1960s as a splinter group from the New York state Communist Party. Its founding members, who numbered no more than two dozen, sided with the Chinese in the Sino-Soviet split and believed that the Communist Party USA had fallen prey to "revisionism." In the eyes of PL, the CPUSA had betrayed Lenin and Stalin by endorsing the Soviet Union's policies of peaceful coexistence with capitalism.<sup>191</sup> The organization coupled an Old Left trade union orientation, as represented by its early support for striking miners in Hazard, Kentucky, with an aggressive critique of U.S. imperialism that was becoming increasingly attractive to students as the war in Vietnam escalated. In a bid to wield influence within the growing student movement in the spring of 1966, PL dissolved its antiwar organization, the May 2<sup>nd</sup> Movement, renamed itself the Progressive Labor Party, and dispatched its cadre into SDS. Over the next three years, PL vied for control over SDS within the organization's National Committee—a contest that turned

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<sup>191</sup> Progressive Labor also favored a more open approach to communist work and accused the CPUSA of failing to sufficiently defend itself during the postwar Red Scare.

increasingly disruptive and ultimately left the student movement without national leadership just as it was reaching its broadest level of popularity and influence. Despite the growing friction within SDS, PL secured the organization's sponsorship of work-in programs for three straight summers.<sup>192</sup>

Business and media leaders quickly realized that student radicals were using the factories as a staging ground to advance left-wing politics. After the 1968 SDS work-in, nationally syndicated columnist Victor Riesel warned of imminent student-led labor disruptions “in transit, steel, auto, on the rails, waterfront, and in city commerce” that would “catch fire like confrontations at Columbia or Berkeley.” Riesel explained that SDS's goal was to “catch the spirit of Paris in the spring,” reminding his readers ominously that “no one thought it could happen there either.”<sup>193</sup> The following spring, Berkeley Chamber of Commerce leader Rene Jope alerted local businesses to an “insidious plan to disrupt our national economy [that], if successful, will have an ugly impact on your business and the business community of Berkeley.” He accused left wing activists of aiming for “a complete disruption of this country similar to that which paralyzed France in the recent past—which caused havoc in world money

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<sup>192</sup> On the relationship between Progressive Labor and SDS, see chapter 24, Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Vintage Books 1973). On PL history, see Leigh David Benin, *The New Labor Radicalism and New York City's Garment Industry: Progressive Labor Insurgents in the 1960s* (New York: Garland Publishing 2000); “History of the Progressive Labor Party: Part One,” *PL Magazine*, Vol. 10. No. 1. August-September 1975; and D.S. Sumner and R.S. Butler, *The Five Retreats: A History of the Failure of the Progressive Labor Party*, unpublished manuscript ca. 1977, copy in author's possession.

<sup>193</sup> Victor Riesel, “SDS Spreads Revolt From Campus to Labor,” *Washington Post*, 25 September 1968.

markets—which brought French President de Gaulle crashing to defeat and has left France in a state of economic jeopardy.”<sup>194</sup>

The corporate high alerts and the growing sophistication of human resource professionals forced radicals to take increased precautions. Whether she was a sociology major or a black militant, a young radical’s attempt to secure an industrial job posed immediate logistical problems. A previous arrest record, unexplained gaps in a candidate’s work history, or the inclusion of college classes or advanced degrees on an application raised suspicion and often led to rejection. SDS recommended to its work-in students that they omit their college background and solicit friends to supply phony employment references. The 1967 work-in manual also advised students to stress that “whatever you did on your ‘previous job’ involved some kind of manual heavy work,” and warned against showing off on aptitude tests: “If there are 100 questions and it’s a time test, don’t answer more than 50. That’s a rule of thumb. If you do too well, they’ll either be suspicious or want to use you in the ‘front office.’”<sup>195</sup>

Despite the growing alarm, the students for the most part kept a low-profile during their summer work experiences in the late 1960s. More than 350

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<sup>194</sup> To underscore the letter’s urgency Jope wrote at the top: “The following message is of such major importance that you are urgently requested to read it carefully” (Rene Jope to Chamber Member, 1 May 1969, Box 64, Folder SDS, New Left Collection, Hoover Institution, Stanford, CA). The Illinois Manufacturers’ Association distributed a similar warning to its members with a copy of SDS’s work-in manual: “It is to be hoped that this SDS program will not prejudice the chances of college students to obtain summer employment in industry, since SDS is a very small minority of college students. But employers should be alert to the problems posed by this program, and should make plans as to the best manner of handling suspected trouble-makers in their plants (E. Edgerton Hart, “Students for a Democratic Society Plan Summer Work-In at Manufacturing Plants,” *IMA Bulletin*, 25 March 1969, Box 2, Folder 26, Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit).

<sup>195</sup> SDS, “The Vietnam Work-In Organizers Manual,” [Spring 1967], Box 64, Folder SDS, New Left Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA.

students participated in the summer of 1968. They provided picket line support for striking garment workers in New York City and truck drivers in Chicago, some of whom they invited to a showing of the radical labor film—*Salt of the Earth*. Forty work-in students and eight drivers sat in silence after the film until one driver broke the ice by drawing parallels between their strike and the movie. “It was really a new and exciting experience on both sides,” the students later wrote. “The students came to understand the struggles of workers, and their political potential, in a real and different way. The workers came to see a potential ally in a force usually used as grounds for getting scabs—the students—and at the same time began to understand what the student movement is all about and how in a very real way it relates to them.”<sup>196</sup>

Employers continued in their vigilance even after SDS’s demise, but radicals found work where jobs were abundant. Despite his public notoriety and an activist history well-documented by the FBI and the Detroit police department’s anti-subversive unit, General Baker returned to the automobile industry in 1973 using an assumed name and a new social security number. He successfully avoided detection for nearly two years until he was discovered and fired for falsifying his employment application at Ford’s River Rouge plant. It was another sixteen months before the case was arbitrated in his favor; Ford had taken too long to discover the discrepancy and to take action against Baker.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Nina Shapiro, Cathy Fisher, and Carol Shick, “Chicago Work-In Supports Wildcat REA Strike” and Dennis Kamensky, “Work-In Supports Garment Strike,” *SDS Work-In 1968: Towards a Worker-Student Alliance* [1968], copy in author’s possession.

<sup>197</sup> Baker, Interview by author, 24 May 2004.

The American Tobacco Company in Durham, North Carolina, hired Ray Eurquhart not realizing that he had been distributing political literature and shouting slogans through a bullhorn outside the factory gates for weeks. His political associates had told him he had no chance of being hired, to which Eurquhart predicted correctly that the white managers could not distinguish him from hundreds of other black job seekers. Even before the end of his probationary period, Eurquhart risked attending union meetings and raising issues about conditions in the plant. Only after his probation period ended did his supervisor realize his mistake, leaving Eurquhart to conclude that “we give the boss too much credit that the boss has his or her ducks in a row. It isn’t always that case.”<sup>198</sup>

Once on the job, young activists had to earn the respect of their coworkers. That required them to blend in as smoothly as possible and to downplay any mistrust that might arise when coworkers discovered they had motivations for working that extended beyond making money. Mathematics graduate student turned longshoreman Thurman Wenzel recalls the tension he experienced when he went to work on the docks in Baltimore in the early 1970s to “organize more effective unions and combine that with efforts against Vietnam-like interventions by the US military.” As a student, Wenzel had been part of a small group of antiwar activists clustered around an alternative newspaper in Charlottesville, Virginia. In 1972, he and several comrades set out to join the working class. Wenzel took a job at the post office before moving to east

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<sup>198</sup> Eurquhart recalled that white workers would frequently ask their black coworkers whether they were interested in making extra money on the weekends doing yard work (see Raymond Lee Eurquhart, Interview by author, March 24, 2002).

Baltimore, enrolling in a night welding class, and finding work in a shipyard in 1974. In an unpublished memoir, he recalled feeling that on the docks “it was important to me that I ‘fit in,’ so sometimes I was uncomfortable distributing our union paper openly—instead leaving it anonymously in break rooms.” On some “lifestyle and cultural” issues, however, he “refused to try to fit in.” For instance, following a trip to study Spanish in Mexico, Wenzel’s coworkers quizzed him about his sexual adventures during his vacation. “I objected and told my coworkers that I’d be glad to talk about the language school and the about the students I had met there,” but they were not interested in his desire to improve his Spanish and or to learn more about Central American politics. Ultimately, Wenzel never resolved whether he was “a ‘visitor’ on the docks, as opposed to a ‘real’ worker.” On one hand, he and other young leftists “were perceived as ‘outsiders’ in an environment where people tended to vote for their friends in union elections.” On the other hand, Wenzel and three other associates spent more than 8 years on the docks, they “regularly attended union meetings, voiced our opinions and found a small but receptive audience.”<sup>199</sup>

Those radicals who came from a working-class background or with factory experience made the adjustment most easily. Others sometimes relied on romanticized images of the working class—“On the Waterfront,” Woody Guthrie songs, and labor murals from the Popular Front—to guide their behavior. More

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<sup>199</sup> Wenzel also wrote that he and his associates “learned how hard it was to make a dent in reforming a very old-school AFL union. Part of the problem was that the ILA had seen itself as a labor supply agency with a limited role in regulating hiring, and definitely not a collective force to organize and involve workers in improving working conditions and job security” (see Wenzel, *From the University to the Baltimore Docks*, 2004, unpublished manuscript, copy in author’s possession).

current stereotypes of workers, embodied by the television longshoreman Archie Bunker and the New York hard hats who beat up anti-war protestors, reinforced strong New Left sentiments that the white working class was reactionary and racist.

When the Progressive Labor Party sent its members to distribute literature at factory gates they encouraged members to shave their moustaches, keep their hair short, and dress conservatively so as not to alienate workers. The organization frowned upon rock music and the free-wheeling sexuality of the counterculture, which they believed American workers disdained. Over the course of the 1970s, other socialist groups hoping to make inroads among workers adopted similar guidelines for their members. They discouraged unmarried couples from living together and forbade homosexual relationships that might alienate or offend workers. These constraints—what new communist movement historian Max Elbaum refers to as a strain of “cultural conservatism” on the left—may have forced activists to be sensitive to the ways in which they were perceived by their coworkers, but they also defied sweeping cultural trends challenging traditional sexual mores and gender roles. The policies were also often applied so mechanically and clumsily that they alienated activists, especially feminist women and gays and lesbians.<sup>200</sup>

Moreover, the left’s cultural conservatism badly underestimated the growing diversity of the American workforce over the course of the decade.

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<sup>200</sup> On the New Communist Movement’s cultural conservatism and homophobia, see Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che* (New York: Verso 2002) pp. 137-139 and 167-171.

Young American workers of all political tendencies were embracing the fashions, music, language, and lifestyles of the counterculture and of the Black Power movement just as the students were. Working-class southern white men listened to the long-haired “rebel rock” of Lynryd Skynryd and the Allman Brothers, just as moderate African American workers began wearing afros in the 1970s. After women gained wider access to steel jobs following a 1975 consent decree, the Steelworkers District 31 Women’s Caucus from Northwest Indiana and South Chicago attracted middle-class socialist-feminists, as well as lesbian, straight, black, white, and Latina working-class women who bonded one night a week at Gary’s Blue Room Lounge and at disco dance fundraisers.<sup>201</sup> The very makeup of the working class underwent tremendous changes in the 1970s, and new workers adopted an ever increasing range of cultural identities.

Progressive Labor Party activist Yonni Chapman remembers encountering this cultural dissonance as he was selling copies of his organization’s newspaper outside of the Ford factory in Hapeville near Atlanta in 1971. When he and a female comrade were approached by one of the plant’s few long-haired white workers, they thought they had a sure sale and possibly a new recruit to the movement. The worker requested a copy of the newspaper from Chapman’s comrade, held it aloft and lit it with his lighter, as Chapman was physically attacked by several other white workers who were thwarted only by the

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<sup>201</sup> “Steelworkers Fight Back: Inland’s Local Union 1010 and the Sadlowski/Balanoff Campaigns,” *Steel Shavings*, James B. Lane and Mike Olszanski ed., Vol. 30, 2000, pp. 102-106. See also James B. Lane, “Feminism, Radicalism, and Unionism: The Calumet District Women’s Caucus and its Fight against Sex Discrimination in American Steel Mills,” *International Oral History Association Proceedings*, Groteborg 1996, pp. 541-547.

intervention of a worker who had been a member of the Black Panthers.

Chapman later learned that the white attackers were Klansmen and union officials.<sup>202</sup>

A more serious barrier to making inroads among the working class was the dismissal by some elements of the New Left of the trade unions as either irrelevant or reactionary. These New Left suspicions had their roots in the AFL-CIO's historical failure to confront discrimination in its member unions, its erratic support for the black freedom struggle, and its endorsement of Johnson's war in Vietnam.<sup>203</sup> As early as May of 1965, George Meany had pledged AFL-CIO support for the war "no matter what the academic do-gooders may say, no matter what the apostles of appeasement may say."<sup>204</sup> Hostility to the labor movement only grew as activist-scholars uncovered the AFL-CIO's foreign policy ties to the CIA, and its role in overthrowing popularly elected regimes in Brazil, Guyana, Chile, and the Dominican Republic under the guise of promoting free trade unions.<sup>205</sup> While the criticisms of the AFL-CIO were on the mark, the blanket dismissal of the labor movement failed to take into account its breadth, diversity, and its dissidents. It was only as radical activists engaged in local struggles and

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<sup>202</sup> Chapman, Interview by author, 12 June 2007.

<sup>203</sup> For an expose of the AFL-CIO's foreign policy, see Daniel Cantor and Juliet Schor, *Tunnel Vision; Labor, the World Economy, and Central America* (Boston: South End Press 1987). See also Kim Scipes, "It's Time to Come Clean: Open the AFL-CIO Archives on International Labor Operations." *Labor Studies Journal* 25, no. 2, Summer 2000: 4-25 and Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1999).

<sup>204</sup> Philip S. Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Vietnam War* (New York: International Publishers 1989) p. 20-21.

<sup>205</sup> Canto and Schor, *Tunnel Vision*, pp. 42-43.

involved themselves with working-class communities that they realized that the labor movement offered substantial room for carrying out political work.

San Francisco Bay Area antiwar protestor Frank Bardacke, who has spent much of his adult life working as a labor activist, admits that in the 1960s he and other New Leftists saw the “the working class as hopelessly compromised,” and believed “that it was a mistake to think of them as any kind of revolutionary vanguard or revolutionary force.” That changed as he immersed himself in the struggles of the United Farm Workers (UFW) in California’s Central Coast region. At the age of thirty in 1971, Bardacke was facing a severe case of movement burnout, the breakup of his marriage, and his third suspension from graduate school. Following his acquittal on felony charges related to the highly publicized protests that shut down the Oakland Military Induction Center in the fall of 1967, Bardacke grew increasingly dispirited about the state of the movement.<sup>206</sup> While working at a GI coffeehouse near Santa Cruz, Bardacke stopped for a hitchhiker who said he had been picking vegetables in the nearby fields of the Salinas Valley “salad bowl.” The hitchhiker reported that the money was good and he explained how to get a dispatch from the United Farmworkers union hall. If he was looking for a break from politics, Bardacke had picked the wrong time and place for work. The fields were filled with strife in the summer of 1971. “It was a little like walking into Detroit into an automobile plant in 1937 the year after the sit downs,” Bardacke recalled. The previous fall the UFW had won contracts after

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<sup>206</sup> Felony charges had hung over his head for almost two years before the Oakland 7’s lengthy trial and eventual acquittal in March 1969 (see “7 Youths Freed in Oakland in 1967 Draft Disorders,” *New York Times*, 30 March 1969).

one of the most successful agricultural strikes in California labor history. The workers were jubilant in victory, but unsure as to how much they had won. A system of disciplinary warnings replaced arbitrary dismissals, leaving foremen especially confused and frustrated by the new policies. Everything was contested and everything was political, and Bardacke was delighted to be re-immersed in politics. “There it was before my very eyes,” he remembers. “Daily struggle. Refusing to work. Refusing to accept warning tickets.” Bardacke learned Spanish, served as a union steward, and became deeply involved in UFW politics for most of the next ten years.<sup>207</sup>

While hundreds of intellectual-activists joined the UFW staff and served Cesar Chavez’s union as organizers, regional boycott coordinators, writers, lawyers, and advisors, only a few followed Bardacke’s route into the fields. Part of what kept him there for seven seasons between 1971 and 1979 was that the work appealed to his masculinity. “Piece work in the fields is about as macho as you can get,” he admits. “You’re proud of your ability to work hard and earn a decent wage.”<sup>208</sup> Moreover, working in the fields allowed him to talk to coworkers as they chopped vegetables and to practice some level of control over the pace of work. His later stints inside factories proved to be short-lived because of the

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<sup>207</sup> After being blacklisted during a strike in 1979, Bardacke worked as a lumper—unloading trucks at warehouses—and became deeply involved in the Teamsters for a Democratic Union and its efforts to reform the national union and Local 912.

<sup>208</sup> Between 1971 and 1979 Bardacke worked seven seasons in the field, earning as much as \$15 an hour cutting celery and allowing him to collect unemployment for six months in the off-season.

noise, the speed of the machinery, and a regimentation that he found unbearable.<sup>209</sup>

Many other young radicals similarly found the physical demands, the dangerous conditions, and the dirty environment of the factory to be an insurmountable barrier to working-class organizing. In 1969 the San Francisco-based radical newspaper *The Movement* featured an anonymous account of one radical's struggles at work in a Midwest factory. He reported that the work "was the hardest physical labor I had done in ten years," and that after his first day he was sure he would either lose his fingers from heavy lifting or "die of exhaustion." More important, he worried that the work demands left him precious few opportunities for political work: "Sometimes you feel you spend 8 hours in the fucking place and lots of times you only get to talk to people on your half hour break and ten minutes of your lunch hour. You figure you're wasting 8 hours plus the time it takes you to get there, learning and doing nothing, when you could be doing political work." While he and the members of his radical collective had been discussing these problems, they had not reached any conclusions about how to deal with the tensions between meeting the job's demands and finding enough time to organize.<sup>210</sup>

As long as activists chose their factory jobs and exercised some control over where they worked, the personal risks were relatively low. Facing excessive boredom or fatigue, an activist could quit a job after a few weeks or a few months and return to school, find a different job, or serve the movement in another

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<sup>209</sup> Frank Bardacke, Interview by author, 23 October 2003.

<sup>210</sup> "Changing Classes," *The Movement*, December 1969.

capacity. However, as various socialist organizations attempted to “proletarianize” their members—sending them into industry en masse to establish a radical base in the working class—they sometimes exerted pressure on their comrades to take jobs for which they were ill-suited. Peter Olney, who left Harvard in 1971 to work in Boston-area factories, remembered one situation in which a highly sensitive friend was sent into a kosher sausage plant, where she was exposed to extreme heat and cold and brine: “You’re in the rough-and-tumble world of a meat packing plant and somebody looks at you cross-eyed and you break down in tears, that was what was happening to her.” Olney believes that one of the great failings of the socialist organizations that sent members into industry in the 1970s was that they sent too many people into factory work “who just shouldn’t have been there” because “physically it was too taxing for them.” The organizations’ overemphasis on placing members in industrial jobs drove away recruits who might have made valuable contributions as writers or community organizers outside of the factories. Moreover, many of those who worked as community organizers or in professional jobs in healthcare and education, reported feeling that their work was devalued by their “proletarian” comrades.

Before Mike Parker took a job as an autoworker, he had watched dozens of his comrades in the International Socialists leave California to work in various industries in the Midwest, including transportation, auto, steel, and communications. He was finally persuaded to go to Detroit in 1975, but he insisted that he be allowed to take a job as a skilled autoworker even though the

organization concentrated its forces among production workers. Parker, who had training as an electrician, knew that he would not last on the assembly line and that he would have more longevity in the plant as a skilled tradesman. That was a personal decision, though it proved to be fortuitous as many of the IS members who had been sent to the auto industry earlier were directed to the plants where the League of Revolutionary Black Workers had been active. Not coincidentally those were older plants at the end of their lifespan. As those factories closed in the late 1970s, many of Parker's IS comrades were turned out of the industry and were unable to find new auto jobs.<sup>211</sup>

Despite receiving guidance from wiser and more experienced comrades, as well as warnings from the SDS manual to avoid "storming the plant like a preacher and abstract college know-it-all," radical activists were frequently undermined by their own revolutionary enthusiasms.<sup>212</sup> The summer rebellions in the cities, campus unrest, the failure of Vietnam, and the bombing of Cambodia all contributed to a sense that the nation was headed for a cataclysmic change. According to sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, seventy-five percent of all students in May of 1970 "endorsed the need for fundamental changes," and on the left many hoped for and predicted a socialist revolution.<sup>213</sup> Into the early 1970s many of them, especially those on the left, shared Frank Bardacke's sense that "capitalism was on its last legs." Bardacke thought at the time that by

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<sup>211</sup> Mike Parker, Interview by author, 15 May 2005.

<sup>212</sup> SDS, *Work-in Organizers Manual*, [1969], Box 64, Folder SDS, New Left Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA.

<sup>213</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *Rebellion in the University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1976) p. 58.

1990 “everyone in the world would be some kind of socialist” and that “the big debates would be over the type of socialist you were.”<sup>214</sup> Believing that the revolution was just around the corner, radicals in the factories could be overzealous in their pronouncements, “ultra-left” in their practice, and condescending and dismissive toward moderate workers.

Just before his freshman year at Harvard, Peter Olney worked as a janitor at Boston’s Charles River Park apartments, where one summer evening in 1969 he gathered with a group of coworkers in the break room. The crew leader from South Boston offered a curse-laden litany of job-related complaints and remarked that he would be unable to make his rent for the coming month. As the other janitors voiced agreement, Olney thought this would be the perfect the moment to explain why America needed socialism. He jumped on a table and began his oration, but before he could proceed too far, the crew leader cut him short with a sharp “shut the fuck up, kid,” which “was the end of my discourse on that,” he later recounted.<sup>215</sup> The SDS student reports from their summer work-in experiences are filled with similar stories of radical activists misjudging their coworkers—revealing to them that they were communists in their first days of work, offering lectures on socialism, and calling for strikes over slight violations of the union contract.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Frank Bardacke, Interview by author, 23 October 2003.

<sup>215</sup> Olney, Interview by author, 5 November 2003.

<sup>216</sup> See for example, “N.Y. Work-In: Student Tells Workers ‘I’m a Communist,’” *SDS Work-In 1968: Towards a Worker-Student Alliance* [1968], copy in author’s possession.

Most of these incidents were innocuous or humorous and only underscored the distance between the left-wing activists and the workers. But those revolutionary enthusiasms could sometimes damage reform efforts and democratic movements within the unions. Marty Nathans was a member of the North Carolina branch of the Workers' Viewpoint Organization, which carried out vigorous campaigns for workers' rights and black civil rights in the 1970s. In the small Eastern North Carolina town of Whitakers, for instance, they organized a campaign to bring to justice a white store owner who murdered a young black man in a dispute over change. Workers' Viewpoint also spearheaded opposition to the implementation of a state-wide exam for high school students that would have prevented thousands of poor white and black North Carolinians from graduating. The organization's New York leadership recognized the North Carolina cadre's successes, but it also pressed them to more aggressively promote communism in their organizing. That proved to be a significant barrier to working within broader progressive coalitions. "When we openly advocated revolution in the trade unions, it was a disaster," Nathans recalled years later. She and other comrades had been conducting health screening clinics for rubber workers at the Kelly Springfield Company, who were in the midst of a union organizing drive. During an educational meeting, Nathans made some remarks advocating socialism, which an international union representative then used to redbait the local union leadership and organizers. The organizing drive suffered due to Nathan's "naïve mistake," and she later acknowledged that she and her

fellow Workers' Viewpoint Members had not been "sensitive to the immediate potential harm that could happen."<sup>217</sup>

In other instances, the dogmatism of left-wing activists kept them on the sidelines of some significant progressive movements. Beginning in the mid-1970s, dissident Steelworkers in the Chicago area spearheaded a national reform campaign—"Fight Back"—to end corruption in the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), oppose concessionary bargaining, and elect new union leadership. Their leader Ed Sadlowski was a handsome third-generation steelworker from South Chicago who articulated the frustrations of the old-timers "who'd fought to establish the union and felt something was missing from the old days, when the rank-and-file used to mass on the street and get contract demands settled themselves instead of relying on Pittsburgh."<sup>218</sup> But "Oilcan Eddie" also appealed to young idealists inside and outside of the USWA as he quoted Eugene Debs, critiqued American materialism, and spoke of the need to re-evaluate the very meaning of work. "There are workers there right now who are full of poems and doctors who are operating cranes," he said of the mill workers. "A doctor is more useful than a man with the capacity to be a doctor

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<sup>217</sup> Marty Nathans quoted in Sally Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors Eyes: From the Sixties to the Greensboro Massacre* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press 2003) pp. 166-167. Albert Vetere Lannon, who was an official in the longshoreman's union has written about the fatal consequences of a clash between leftist groups in his local (see Lannon "Angela's children: How the Communist Legacy Turned Against Itself in ILWU Local 6," unpublished manuscript in author's possession).

<sup>218</sup> Mike Mezo quoted in "Steelworkers Fight Back: Inland's Local Union 1010 and the Sadlowski/Balanoff Campaigns," *Steel Shavings*, ed. James B. Lane and Mike Olszanski, Vol. 30, 2000, pp. 43.

spending his life on the crane.”<sup>219</sup> Sadlowski’s forthrightness—together with thousands of dollars in campaign money for the incumbent and a good deal of election fraud—cost him the USWA presidency, though he was able to forge a coalition that included a majority of the union workers in the largest steel mills, the Communist Party, at least two Trotskyist groups, and several new communist organizations, who agreed to put aside their differences for the sake of Sadlowski and the “Steelworkers Fight Back” movement.<sup>220</sup>

At least one left-wing group nevertheless refused to support Sadlowski, arguing that his reformist program contained, rather than promoted working-class militancy. While they failed to do any substantial damage to the campaign, they were an irritant. “I had a confrontation with three of them while going into a drug store,” he later recalled. “One guy threw chocolate milk on me, and I nailed him good in the mouth. Another guy started in, and I nailed him and kicked him. The store manager called the cops, and they came with a paddy wagon. I knew the cop, and he arrested them for assaulting me. Which they did; they threw milk on me.” Sadlowski remains convinced that they worked for either the steelmakers or the FBI.<sup>221</sup>

Not all of the young radicals who committed to organizing workers as a strategy for social change came from outside of labor’s ranks. Steelworker Mike

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<sup>219</sup> Ken Kelley, “Penthouse Interview: Ed Sadlowski,” *Penthouse*, January 1977, p. 162. On Sadlowski’s charisma, see Thomas Geoghegan, *Which Side Are You On? Trying to be for Labor When it’s Flat on its Back* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux 1991) pp. 60-62.

<sup>220</sup> “No Go for Oilcan Eddie,” *Time*, 21 February 1977.

<sup>221</sup> Ed Sadlowski, “Steelworkers Fight Back: Inland’s Local Union 1010 and the Sadlowski/Balanoff Campaigns,” *Steel Shavings*, ed. James B. Lane and Mike Olszanski, Vol. 30, 2000, p. 44.

Olszanski was infected by the same spirit of rebellion in the 1960s and 1970s that politicized so many students and black activists, but his politics developed in the mill. Shortly after graduating from high school, he followed many of his male friends to Inland Steel in East Chicago, Indiana. With a few years of experience under his belt, he was invited to get involved in USWA Local 1010, and he was quickly swept up into the national steelworkers reform campaign and the political ferment within the local. Olszanski recalls that delicate negotiations were required to balance the demands and ideologies of various political tendencies within the union caucus he supported. One Trotskyist group supported the positions of the caucus, but declined to engage in caucus work or attend its meetings. “The Maoists were in and out. They’d come, make demands, go off in a huff, and be back in six months,” he recalled. “They’d support us in elections sometimes, and other times would get in a tiff and be gone. They were erratic.” While they could be difficult to work with, Olszanski acknowledges that “the guys in the mill really respected them. A Maoist in the coke plant was always wanting to go out on wildcat strikes. He was crazy but had the workers’ interests at heart.”

Olszanski never saw fit to join a radical group outside of the union, but as a second generation steelworker with left-wing politics and a following in the mill, Olszanski was much sought after by various socialist groups. He was open to their appeals “until they started telling me what was wrong with every group except their own.” Olszanski remembers one persistent recruiter who called his house and lectured him for hours: “He didn’t speak in sentences where you could stop him. There was never a pause. He’d preach and preach and preach. He had

all this knowledge to impart to the working class. Finally, I'd say, 'I have to go.' He'd say, 'We're talking world revolution here.' I'd say 'the Revolution is going to have to wait 'til tomorrow.'"<sup>222</sup>

Twenty-year-old Paul Krehbiel was a Buffalo glass factory worker whose on-the-job experiences, like those of Olszanski, served as his gateway to the world of left-wing politics and a lifelong commitment to organizing workers. In the summer of 1968, he began working as a fine grinder operator on the second shift at Standard Mirror in south Buffalo. Krehbiel was apolitical and initially had no strong feelings about unions or his union, United Glass and Ceramic Workers Local 44. That quickly changed. "When I first started to work in the glass factory, I was struck by the environment—the loud noises, the hard physical labor, the fast and steady pace of work, the screaming abusive bosses, and the finely ground up glass that we breathed in the air," he later recalled in an unpublished memoir.<sup>223</sup> As company managers attempted to implement a production increase, Krehbiel and many of his coworkers witnessed a popular steward "rip into the personnel manager on the shop floor, screaming that the workers in the beveling department were NOT going to go over their quota." Deeply impressed, Krehbiel decided to attend a union meeting where he "learned that we didn't just have to take whatever management dished out to us; we could stand up and fight

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<sup>222</sup> Olszanski, quoted in "Steelworkers Fight Back: Inland's Local Union 1010 and the Sadlowski/Balanoff Campaigns," *Steel Shavings*, ed. James B. Lane and Mike Olszanski, Vol. 30, 2000, p. 66.

<sup>223</sup> Paul Krehbiel, "The Radical 1960s: Empowering Workers from the Bottom Up, Notes from Buffalo, New York, 1968-1971 and Beyond," Paper delivered at the 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Southwest Labor Studies Association Conference, University of California-Santa Barbara, 7 May 2005, copy in author's possession.

back.” Over the following weeks, Krehbiel and his coworkers successfully coordinated a work slow-down that put an end to the company’s effort to increase production. He credits those events for being “the beginning of my radicalization.”<sup>224</sup>

That same year, Krehbiel began attending classes at the University of Buffalo where he met student radicals who further encouraged his political development. Over the next several years, he left the factory, became a full-time student, and joined the Buffalo Draft Resistance Union, SDS, and the Student Strike Committee which shut down the university in the spring of 1970. After twelve Buffalo student protestors were shot around the same time as the Kent State killings, Krehbiel and a small group of male and female working-class students decided to return to the factories to organize. After much discussion, the group agreed on three principles of unity: to encourage workers on the job to assume more control over their lives through direct action as a means of revitalizing the Buffalo area labor movement; to build links between the labor and civil rights movements; and to build alliances between labor and the anti-war movement. Krehbiel acknowledges that it “was quite a lofty agenda for a group of young workers in our twenties in 1970. But that was an era of massive social turmoil and rebellion, and there was great hope in the air.” As a first step they focused on worker education and outreach through the publication of *New Age*, a monthly labor newspaper that promised to “help build a new age in America”

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<sup>224</sup> For an account of the campaign, see Krehbiel, “The Quota,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Vol. 2 No. 4, Winter 2005, pp. 25-38.

during which “workers and their families control their own lives.”<sup>225</sup> In its year of existence the paper highlighted news of local strikes, the antiwar movement, and the black liberation struggle. The February 1971 issue, for example, included an interview with a shop steward at Bethlehem Steel’s Lackawanna Plant, reports on pollution in Lake Erie and a strike by the local news broadcasters and technicians at WGR-TV and Radio, and a first-hand account of a “Free Angela Davis” rally in New York City.<sup>226</sup> The paper was distributed widely throughout Buffalo area factories, peaking at 10,000 copies, and the group succeeded in recruiting a handful of new members to their project. Their more ambitious plans, however, were never realized. A rebellion on the part of the women in the group, who contended that the newspaper slighted women workers, effectively ended the publication of *New Age* in September 1971.<sup>227</sup> Many of those most active in *New Age* remained active in their unions and a number of them joined other left wing political groups. Nevertheless, Krehbiel believes that in its brief life the newspaper had a positive impact on Buffalo’s labor movement based on feedback he received from coworkers at Standard Mirror and other area workers. Since the 1960s, Krehbiel has continued as a labor movement activist as a rank

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<sup>225</sup> Quotes from the front page of the first issue of *New Age*, September 1970, copy in author’s possession. The paper took its name from a Buffalo socialist newspaper from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>226</sup> “Interview with a Steward at Bethlehem Steel,” “The Death of Lake Erie,” and “N.A.B.E.T. Strikes WGR,” and “Angela Must be Set Free,” *New Age*, February 1971, copy in author’s possession. Davis’s imprisonment in connection with the murder of a California judge had become a rallying point for the left. She was later acquitted of all charges. On the Davis case, see Bettina Aptheker, *The Morning Breaks: the Trial of Angela Davis* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1999).

<sup>227</sup> According to Krehbiel, the men in the group agreed to the women’s demand for complete editorial control over the publication of the newspaper’s twelfth issue. Following publication, they disagreed upon an appropriate gender balance regarding the newspaper’s content.

and file union member, organizer, staff representative, and writer. After stints as a staff representative for the United Furniture Workers Union in Nashville, and as a legislative aide to a congresswoman, he worked for SEIU Local 660 in Los Angeles from 1998 until 2007.

Other young workers who were radicalized on the job in the late 1960s and early 1970s included women, who were new to the workforce and facing sexual harassment and job discrimination, and African Americans, who were frustrated by their limited opportunities for advancement and by racist supervision. Vietnam Veterans, still smarting from the sting of betrayal and suspicious of all authority, proved to be especially militant. For some of these young workers, the spark was the corruption and stagnation of their local unions. Others were driven by job instability and mass layoffs to take part in efforts to stop plant closures. Still others were motivated by traditional trade union goals. They simply sought a mechanism for responding to overbearing supervisors, unfair treatment, and brutal working conditions.

Nurse Pat Hendricks's frustration with her union and her experiences with gender discrimination triggered her lifelong commitment to labor activism. In 1967 she moved from Iowa to San Francisco to be closer to her sister and aging parents. While she had had some contact with the counterculture in Chicago, and had read about the growing antiwar movement, she was not involved in protest politics in the 1960s. After taking a permanent nursing job at Presbyterian Hospital in 1970, Hendricks began paying dues to Local 250 of the Service Employees International Union, but felt that the union was unresponsive to her

needs and those of most hospital workers. Shortly before the union contract was due to expire, Hendricks suggested to Local 250 leaders that they contest Presbyterian's requirement that female nurse attendants wear green uniforms, while allowing male nurses to wear the standard white. Hendricks felt this would be a popular bargaining issue because she knew many women resented that rule and the hospital's policy of laundering the men's uniforms. The union disagreed, but Hendrick's assessment was correct. She quickly spearheaded a petition drive protesting the uniform policies. Three years later, the Equal Opportunity Commission (EEOC) ruled in her favor.

Her leadership of the petition drive put her in touch with other Local 250 members who were dissatisfied with the union's leadership. Over the next twenty years, Hendricks worked closely with opposition caucuses, the most successful of which was the Committee for a Democratic Union. CDU eventually succeeded in pressing SEIU to put the local into receivership to rid it of corruption. The CDU was part of a national wave of union reform efforts carried out by rank and filers to rid their unions of corrupt and incompetent leaders. The best known of these efforts included the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, Steelworkers Fight Back, the Miners for Democracy, and New Directions in the UAW. In addition to her work in CDU, Hendricks was involved in the women's movement and she was active in Central American solidarity work opposing U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. She never separated this work from her identity as a rank and file union member.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Pat Hendricks, Interview by author, 1 February 2004.

A number of leftists who chose to go to the factories were first exposed to working-class politics abroad. Due to the increasing popularity of study abroad programs as well as the mass mobilization for the war in Southeast Asia, many American students witnessed first hand the political and social upheavals that taking place across globe beginning in 1968. In May and June of that year student demonstrations in Paris turned into a general protest of workers and students that nearly brought down the government of Charles De Gaulle. As a French major at the University of Southern California, Wendy Thompson kept close track of the events in Paris as she prepared for her year in Aix-en Provence near Marseilles beginning in the fall of 1968. The daughter of a liberal Methodist minister, Thompson had marched for open housing and was active in the Urban League as a high school student in Evanston, Illinois. She was sorely disappointed by the conservative climate on campus when she arrived in 1966, but nevertheless joined the Young Democrats and collaborated with the SDS chapter in staging the first Vietnam teach-in. By the time she arrived in France, De Gaulle had reestablished control through the brutal suppression of the strikers and student groups, as well as a June election victory, but there was lingering discontent on the campuses and in the factories. It was also a time of tremendous intellectual ferment on the left as activists debated lessons learned and plotted future directions. Radical students believed that the movement had been sold out by the Communist-led labor unions of the CGT (Confederation Generale du Travail), which had discouraged its members from participating in wildcat strikes in support of the students and ultimately accepted the

government's offer of wage and benefit hikes in exchange for labor peace. In response, students formed new organizations independent of the French Communist Party and the traditional students union. Some participated in *etablissement*, the French equivalent of the turn to the working class whereby students took jobs in factories to connect intellectuals and workers.<sup>229</sup>

As an American student, Thompson worked hard to find the French movement. She tested out of her classes at the American institute so that she might attend a French university. She also insisted on having a French roommate, who fortuitously was politically active and whose best friend was the daughter of an exiled Spanish anarchist. By Thompson's second term her French friends had invited her to participate in their *groupuscule*, a small circle of radicals who studied together and planned political actions. Thompson's experience with the French movement shifted her perceptions of the white working class back home, which she had previously associated with the politics of George Meany and reactionary construction workers. She recalled campus rallies in France on behalf of striking workers "where the whole hall would be jammed with people." She and her young student friends went to the plants

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<sup>229</sup> Donald Reid, "Working in the Factory to Make Revolution in France," *Radical History Review*, No. 88, Winter 2004, pp. 83-111. For a powerful account of a young French radical's experiences in an auto plant, see Robert Linhart, *The Assembly Line* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1981). In 1969, groups of students affiliated with the Free University and the Technical University in Berlin took factory jobs to "create vanguard workers' groups and join with them in building a communist organization 'rooted in the base.'" Like many of his American counterparts, one participant discovered that workers "have a far more precise and comprehensive (even if latent) consciousness of their oppression and exploitation than we student cadres, with out "Leninist" blinders, might suspect. They express insubordination in a whole range of different ways, running the gamut from unconscious protest (glowering looks, insolent jokes, an exaggerated sluggishness or extreme apathy) up to conscious resistance (angry outbursts against foremen and timekeepers or individual boycotts of overtime and speedup)," see Michael Schneider, "Vanguard, Vanguard, Who's Got the Vanguard," *Liberation* (May 1972) 21-29.

where they were warmly received by the workers: “I remember once a whole bus of workers stopped and somebody ran out to get a pile of leaflets from us to take into the factory. I thought that was real impressive.”

Thompson returned to USC in the fall of 1969 with a strong desire to join a socialist organization. In part, because of her positive encounters with French Trotskyists, Thompson joined the (IS) International Socialists, a newly formed group with deep roots within the American Trotskyist tradition. The International Socialists had formed that year from the merger of a dozen campus-based International Socialist Clubs, the strongest of which was at Berkeley where veterans of the Free Speech Movement clustered around socialist intellectuals Hal and Anne Draper.<sup>230</sup>

Not long after the establishment of IS, the Drapers left in part in opposition to the majority’s decision to “Bolshevize” its student members, sending them into trucking, steel, communications, public service, teaching, and auto. Once inside these industries, cadre were expected to build militant “struggle groups” around workplace issues. They were also encouraged to promote rank and file democracy and to remain independent of the union bureaucracy. Though IS never had more than a few hundred members in its fifteen year existence, it had a lasting impact on the labor movement—laying the groundwork for reform in the

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<sup>230</sup> The group had its origins in a 1940 split from the Socialist Workers Party in which Max Shachtman moved from the Socialist Workers Party to form the Workers Party and later the Independent Socialist League. Shachtman left the group as he became more conservative and Hal Draper became the leader providing left wing leadership. The Drapers served as mentors to a number of Berkeley students who were involved in the Free Speech Movement and other campus struggles. On Shachtman and his role in the establishment of the Independent Socialist League, see Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist’s Odyssey Through the ‘American Century’* (New York: Humanity Books 1999).

Teamsters Union, while having a considerable influence on labor educators and intellectuals through its publications and conferences.<sup>231</sup>

As she completed her studies at USC, Thompson organized labor solidarity rallies for striking autoworkers at General Motors Southgate plant. With her husband, who was an IS leader and GM worker, she moved to Detroit in 1971 to help establish an IS colony there and publish the group's labor paper, *Workers Power*. After taking jobs as a nurse and other service jobs, Thompson began working at Chevrolet Gear and Axle plant. Women had worked in the plant for two years, but she was among the first to hold a production job in her plant. She later recalled that on her first day of work she was one of four women who walked down the line "to a big cheer that came up from the male workers . . . like they had been on a desert island for ten years and hadn't seen a woman in all that time." As more women came into the plant, however, the tension increased dramatically as men perceived that women were taking the easiest, best jobs. "There was a reality to that," Thompson acknowledged. "The work here is very heavy and difficult, so they were looking specifically for lighter jobs to place women on. Men would just come up and say to you that you shouldn't be working there. Sexual harassment was a real issue."<sup>232</sup>

Within months of her hiring, she became involved in union politics, and with a small group of coworkers, several of whom were IS members, they began

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<sup>231</sup> The IS initiated both *Labor Notes* magazine—a monthly publication of news and analysis of contemporary labor issues—as well as a biannual conference in Detroit of the same name that brings together much of the labor left.

<sup>232</sup> Freda Coodin, "Interview with a Local Union President: The First Woman To Do This and the First Woman To Do That," *Labor Notes*, October 2002.

distributing a shop-floor newsletter *Shifting Gears* to fight “speed-up, pollution, forced overtime . . . the harassment from foremen” and “all the things that can drive us nuts and destroy our health.”<sup>233</sup> Within weeks of launching the newsletter, she was fired for falsifying her job application, though she believed she was targeted for filing “harassment and discrimination grievances” against her foremen, one of whom had once explained to her “how nice he had been to put us women on easy jobs.” She clashed with a second foreman who was unsuccessful in his efforts to date her. The union secured her reinstatement after eight months and Thompson continued to be involved in the politics of the local over the next three decades. Until her recent retirement, she served as the president of UAW Local 235, but she remains active in union politics.<sup>234</sup>

Other American students witnessed similar upheavals that rocked West Germany, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, and Italy over the next several years. Harvard student Peter Olney’s commitment to organizing workers crystallized during his study abroad year in Florence. Olney had prior exposure to working-class politics through his summer jobs and his contact with the Worker Student Alliance at Harvard. Olney remembers the Worker Student Alliance as “very clumsy” and “faulty on many levels,” but he credits the Progressive Labor Party with making him and many other students more aware of class and worker

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<sup>233</sup> “Who we are,” *Shifting Gears: A Rank and File Newsletter of UAW Local 235*, April 1973, Vol. 1, No. 1, Box 1, Folder 11, Enid Eckstein Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

<sup>234</sup> “Fired Militant Speaks,” *Shifting Gears: A Rank and File Newsletter of UAW Local 235*, September 1973, Vol. 1, No. 4, Box 1, Folder 11, Enid Eckstein Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit. See also Thompson, Interview by author, 14 June 2004.

issues. His experiences in Italy in 1971 brought this understanding to a new level. Almost as soon as he arrived at the University of Florence the country erupted in a series of student and labor strikes that challenged his presumptions about workers and student-worker alliances. “Oh, this isn’t just a couple of guys yelling over a megaphone in an empty square,” he remembered thinking. “This is like hundreds of thousands of workers marching with red carnations on May Day, or marching against the war in Vietnam in their Sunday suits.” With no classes to attend Olney divided his time that year between playing rugby with an Italian rugby team and “participating in Italian extra-parliamentary working-class politics,” an experience that made him view his further studies as “irrelevant and kind of petty compared to going into the working class and trying to organize for revolution, which is what I was about at that point.”<sup>235</sup>

Upon returning to Boston Olney moved into a communal house in Cambridge and began working at the New England Confectionary Company (Necco) as a means of connecting to the working class. Over the next decade Olney took jobs in Boston area electronics factories, food production plants, metal fabricators, machine shops, and hospitals with the intention of organizing workers into militant trade unions. He later organized community-labor coalitions to respond to plant closings in Los Angeles in the 1980s, worked as a labor educator, and is currently director of organizing for the International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

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<sup>235</sup> Olney, Interview by author, 5 November 2003.

Ray Eurquhart developed an orientation to working-class politics as an American serviceman stationed in England, where he became active in both the antiwar movement and the struggle for black GI rights. His extraordinary activist experiences underscore the interconnectedness of black liberation, labor struggles, and antiwar protests, as well as the international dimensions of the turn to the working class. The son of a Durham, North Carolina waitress, Eurquhart enlisted in the Air Force in 1966 as an alternative to the certainty of being drafted in the Army. Almost immediately after being sent to Chimea, a US Air Force base near Siberia, eighteen-year old Eurquhart experienced racism within the military. Racial epithets flew freely from the lips of white GIs and commanding officers, who constituted a large majority within the Air Force. On at least one occasion Eurquhart was subjected to a racist attack by soldiers disguised in white sheets. With fellow black soldiers, Eurquhart began isolating racist commanding officers by giving them “the silent treatment,” and threatening retaliation. He also soaked up politics like a sponge, listening to the experiences of servicemen who had witnessed the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley and others who identified as Black Panthers and Black Muslims. Some African American GIs had also witnessed race riots on bases in Oakland and New Jersey and had been sent to Chimea for their alleged participation. Black old timers shared advice and their own stories of discrimination in the service.

As the end of his one-year stint at Chimea drew near in 1968, Eurquhart lobbied for an assignment to Vietnam or Thailand, where he hoped to “witness all

this racism on the front lines” and to “organize.”<sup>236</sup> But the Air Force sent Eurquhart to Croughton, one of eight U.S. Air Force bases in England, where he quickly immersed himself in efforts to improve living and working conditions. Among African Americans, Latinos, “hippies, potheads that are working class who don’t conform to authority” there was a clear sense that “we’re all getting screwed,” recalled Eurquhart. They were “all trying to get a handle on why we’re having such a bad experience in the military.”<sup>237</sup> A loose group of soldiers pooled their money to hire private lawyers for servicemen facing court martial rather than relying upon official representation. His fellow soldiers began calling Eurquhart “the attorney” because of his mastery of the military justice system and his willingness to assist those who were facing sanctions. On more than one occasion he used his skills on his own behalf. After receiving a reprimand for wearing his Air Force fatigue shirt with civilian clothing at the officers club, Eurquhart filed countercharges against Sergeant John O. Raney for using “provoking speeches or gestures” and charged “cruelty and maltreatment” because Raney cited him in the presence of two other soldiers and the wife of one of the servicemen. In his complaint to Raney’s superior, Eurquhart asserted that his actions “make one wonder or question his being able (capable) to function as a Commander that would reflect favorable upon the United States Air

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<sup>236</sup> Eurquhart, Interview by author, 9 March 2002.

<sup>237</sup> Eurquhart, Interview by author, 24 March 2002.

Force,” and charged the sergeant with racism and violation of Article 133 of the UCMJ, referring to conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.<sup>238</sup>

Eurquhart’s commitment to social change deepened after meeting black Airforceman John Adkins at a bookstore in London. Realizing they shared a passion for books and radicalism, they met frequently to investigate the city’s left wing political movements and counterculture. During one visit they stumbled upon a protest of Cambridge students returning their Rhodes scholarships.<sup>239</sup> Adkins and Eurquhart approached the students who were elated to learn that they were American GIs. The Cambridge students belonged to a budding peace organization centered around the publication of an antiwar newspaper and had been looking to establish connections with American servicemen. Adkins and Eurquhart began contributing articles to the group’s newspaper and coordinating distribution of *PEACE*—People Emerging Against Corrupt Establishment at all eight US Air Force bases in England. Eurquhart used his participation on the military’s boxing team as an opportunity to distribute the paper to across England and to solicit material from other GIs. A traveling football team smuggled *PEACE* to bases as far away as Stuttgart.<sup>240</sup>

On May 31, 1971 Eurquhart helped organize a protest in London during which more than two hundred American GIs presented the US Ambassador to

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<sup>238</sup> Eurquhart to Samuel Greene, 29 October 1971, and Greene to Eurquhart, 1 November 1971, copies in author’s possession.

<sup>239</sup> Eurquhart, Interview by author, 24 March 2002.

<sup>240</sup> Eurquhart, Interview by author, 24 March 2002. *PEACE* began publication in August 1970 and continued for at least nine issues. For copies of *PEACE*, see Box 4, Folders 24 and 25, GI Underground Press Collection, the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit.

Great Britain with petitions demanding an end to the war signed by more than one thousand members of the United States Air Force and Navy stationed in England. To avoid violating the military's definition of an illegal demonstration, the GIs divided into groups of six before presenting the petitions to an embassy official. Before the presentation the protestors gathered at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, where a representative of each base read a statement. "The US Air Force is probably the most powerful organisation in the world, and we feel that in Indo-China it is being used amorally and irresponsibly," one of the GIs said. "We are therefore sceptical of current policies towards ending the US involvement there." The protestors then traveled by bus to Victoria Park and attended an antiwar rally featuring theater performances by Vanessa Redgrave, Mia Farrow, and Barbara Dane.<sup>241</sup> Back on base Eurquhart received a formal reprimand; Major Samuel J. Greene reminded Eurquhart that he had been "made well aware of the prohibition against such demonstrations," and that his "deliberate violation of same raises a question in my mind as to your fitness to continue to serve" in the Air Force.<sup>242</sup> The following day, Greene placed Eurquhart on the Airman Control Roster making him ineligible for a promotion or raise for ninety days.<sup>243</sup>

An even more important intellectual connection for Eurquhart came through his involvement with the Black Panther Movement, a growing collective of East Indian nationalists and Marxists unaffiliated with the American group of

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<sup>241</sup> Jackie Leishman, "US servicemen protest against the Vietnam war," *The Guardian* (London), 1 June 1971.

<sup>242</sup> Greene to Eurquhart, 28 July 1971.

<sup>243</sup> Greene to Eurquhart, 29 July 1971.

the same name. The Panthers frequented the Mangrove Café in London's Notting Hill and were loosely centered around Trinidadian writer Darcus Howe and Howe's uncle, the anti-colonial writer and activist C. L. R. James. Born in Trinidad in 1901, James was a historian, novelist, Trotskyist theoretician and activist in the anti-colonial and the pan-Africanist movements. While living in the United States between 1938 and 1953, James led the Johnson-Forrest Tendency, a small group of US labor radicals and Marxist theorists who took jobs in American factories, mostly in Detroit's auto plants. Johnson-Forrest rejected the need for vanguard parties and celebrated spontaneous worker revolts and nationalist uprisings, believing that revolutionary activity prepared workers for assuming power in a transformed society.

James, Howe, and their followers fed Eurquhart's growing interest in nationalist politics, anti-imperialism, Marxism, African culture, and the labor movement. There were poetry readings in the evening, radical films and theater, and courses on capitalism with James on Saturdays. Visitors from anti-colonial movements across the globe came to Notting Hill to publicize their causes. Eurquhart met dissident Iraqi, Iranian, and Pakistani intellectuals, and he learned about the anti-Apartheid movement and the Algerian independence struggle. BPM members also provided support for striking miners and following James's lead, they made special efforts to make alliances with other trade unionists. Following an August 1970 demonstration to protest government harassment of black radicals in Notting Hill, police raided the Mangrove Café and jailed nine leaders of the Black Panther Movement for possession of marijuana. Eurquhart

threw himself into the campaign to free the Mangrove Nine, attending their trial each day at Old Bailey and building support for the cause among his growing network of activists.

The Panthers represented Eurquhart's first official membership in a political organization and he was very eager to please. It came as a bitter disappointment a year and a half later when he was suspended from the organization for participating in a march that had not been sanctioned by the group. It was January 1972 and the British Army's 1st Parachute Regiment had just massacred thirteen peaceful demonstrators in the Bogside, Derry, Ireland. Eurquhart joined an IRA-sponsored protest in London during which police barely kept protestors from the doors of 10 Downing Street. He later recalled "trying to turn over horses and fighting and total nonsense, I lost it." For this breach of organizational discipline, Eurquhart was suspended by the Panthers, who believed that support for the IRA would jeopardize their own program and risked alienating white workers with whom they hoped to work in coalition.<sup>244</sup> Following his term of duty, Eurquhart returned to Durham in 1972, where he joined the Progressive Labor Party and began organizing tobacco workers. He later led the union representing Durham's municipal employees and has been in the thick of nearly every major left-labor cause of the past thirty-five years.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Eurquhart, Interview by author, 24 March 2002.

<sup>245</sup> For example, Eurquhart recently coordinated the City of Durham's response to the survivors of Hurricane Katrina.

The economic dislocations of the 1970s had a devastating impact on the turn to the working class as a political project, and the rapidly shifting political landscape posed new challenges for radical activists organizing within the labor movement. As inflation rose and wages stagnated, Americans weathered two energy crises and the onset of a wave of plant closings and mass layoffs due to automation and foreign competition. The labor left attempted to meet these challenges by organizing the unemployed and fighting plant closings and concessionary bargaining, but American workers had largely lost the rebellious spirit of the early 1970s. The number of major labor strikes dropped considerably as the 1970s came to a close, and the American labor movement as a whole emerged from the decade badly weakened.<sup>246</sup> Also gone were the days of the mass antiwar demonstrations and high-profile civil rights protests. Even student activism waned. At the close of the 1974 school year, *Time* magazine heralded the return to campus in large numbers of business recruiters after being met with hostility over previous years. “When I started college, I wanted to help people,” a Syracuse University senior told a reporter. “Now I want to help myself.”<sup>247</sup>

As the last hired and first fired, hundreds of radicals who had taken manufacturing jobs in the early 1970s soon found themselves on the outside looking in. Many took part in labor and community coalitions that fought plant

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<sup>246</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Work Stoppages Involving 1,000 or More Workers, 1947-2005* (Washington: Government Printing Office 2007).

<sup>247</sup> “Return of the Campus Recruiter,” *Time*, 6 May 1974. Historian Bruce Schulman argues that over the course of the 1970s, Americans began turning inward or looking to private sector solutions to social problems as a response to both government and societal corruption and the perceived failures of liberalism—including the economy, Vietnam, and racial integration (Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* [New York: the Free Press 2001]).

closings and for the rights of displaced workers.<sup>248</sup> Others gravitated to the environmental movement or community organizing, or resumed their education or professional careers. Those who were able to hold on to their jobs faced the reality that real change would require a long haul struggle and a careful program of base building. Their white coworkers were as likely to be followers of George Wallace or Ronald Reagan as they were Jimmy Carter or the Democratic Party of the New Deal. Committed labor radicals, many of whom began to rise to positions of leadership within their unions, learned how to push progressive politics without alienating coworkers.

Autoworker Shelley Kessler remembers the struggles she faced in confronting sexism at work and within the labor movement in the late 1970s. Kessler had left law school to organize in factories in the San Francisco Bay area in the mid-1970s. After holding a series of manufacturing jobs, she began working on the line at the General Motors plant in Fremont, California in 1977. She was among the first group of women hired after the company and union settled a sex discrimination lawsuit. Male coworkers were less than welcoming and their harassment drove one woman who was hired the same day as Kessler to leave before lunchtime. Other men openly bet on how long each new hire would last. Before the plant's shutdown in 1982 Kessler was the first woman elected to a plant-wide union position despite intense harassment that included

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<sup>248</sup> On the role of leftists in plant closing struggles, see Robert L. Anderson, "Voices of Steel: New Left and Worker Resistance to Steel Industry Restructuring, Western Pennsylvania," Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, 2000. On grassroots efforts to respond to plant closings, see Bruce Nissen, *Fighting for Jobs: Case Studies of Labor-Community Coalitions Confronting Plant Closings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) and Staughton Lynd, *The Fight Against Shutdowns: Youngstown's Steel Mill Closings* (San Pedro: Singlejack Books 1982).

rumors regarding her sexual orientation. Her nickname—“committee cunt”—revealed deep insecurities male coworkers felt regarding her participation in union politics.<sup>249</sup> Addressing sexism proved to be especially tricky and required a good deal of tact, humor, and clever alliance building. Kessler first turned her attention to ridding men’s lockers of pictures of naked women. She learned to confront men with humor, asking to see the pictures and inquiring whether they were of daughters or wives or sisters.

“Some guys would say go put up pictures of nude men. And I would say, ‘no, I’m not going to do it on the other side because to me it’s all wrong anyway. It objectifies people. But I wasn’t going to have that whole objectification conversation with these guys because that was going nowhere. So we had to find ways of conversing with people so that they got what the issue was without them feeling like I was on the attack. And using humor. So when I said let me see is your daughter or your mother in there. They started to get it. Your sister or whatever.”

What began as Kessler’s individual effort to shape a more tolerable work environment eventually led to changes within the AFL-CIO. During a regional union trade show, Kessler raised objections to the distribution of sexist posters and calendars by various AFL-CIO affiliated union. During a heated meeting at the trade show, Kessler argued that the materials were every bit as sexist as Little Black Sambos and Frito Bandito were racist. But she made her points in vain with various AFL-CIO officials, including the head of the union label department. When Kessler removed her jacket one of the men made a sexist wisecrack that proved to be decisive with the head of the Alameda Labor

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<sup>249</sup> Kessler later recalled that once in union office, her zeal was checked by the realization that she had been unable to settle any of the dozens of grievances she had written: “I was tough and I was mean and . . . buried under my own paperwork” (Kessler, Interview by author, 2 December 2003).

Council. He said, “I get your point and we’re out of here.” He invited Kessler to write a resolution that passed in Alameda County, then went to the state labor federation and eventually the national AFL-CIO eliminating sexist material at the trade shows.<sup>250</sup>

Kessler succeeded in challenging her coworkers’ sexism and changing the culture of the union by being persistent and strategic—choosing her battles and adopting a style and language that would resonate with the men whose behavior she hoped to change. Given the increasingly bleak economic and political realities of the late 1970s, every labor radical who hoped to make change through the labor movement was forced to make similar strategic adjustment. As levels of labor militancy fell and the overall power of the labor movement waned, left-wing caucuses and progressive labor groups withered away and those that remained had less power and fewer resources with which to confront the employers. Increasingly, they found traction by organizing around the protection of individual rights based on gender, race, and age on the job and in the unions. As Nelson Lichtenstein has argued, the “rights consciousness” unionism of the 1970s virtually supplanted the historic centrality of the “labor question,” leaving the AFL-CIO and American workers highly vulnerable to the economic dislocations caused by technological change and the new era of global competition.<sup>251</sup> While the failure of the labor movement to defend workers’ rights on the job or to articulate a social democratic alternative to corporate

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<sup>250</sup> Kessler, Interview by author, 2 December 2003.

<sup>251</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: a Century of American Labor* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

globalization had devastating consequences, the “rights conscious” organizing of the 1970s that was spearheaded by the left led directly to the broader reforms within the AFL-CIO in the 1990s. Those reforms were a necessary for any labor-based mass movement for economic justice.

## Chapter 4: The New Left's Labor Feminism

On January 31, 1973 an unlikely alliance of San Francisco taxicab drivers, data processing clerks, labor organizers, and feminist activists protested the Bank of America's decision to end free taxi service for women working the night shift. Outside the bank's international headquarters, women paraded around the building waving placards as black and yellow taxis circled slowly and honked, bringing Kearney Street traffic to a near halt. Concerned men in suits looked on from the entrance and a harried bank official explained to reporters that male employees had complained that the taxi service was discriminatory and that the Equal Rights Amendment, recently ratified by the state legislature in Sacramento, likely made it illegal.<sup>252</sup>

Members of an employees association, who were leading a drive to unionize the bank's computer center workers, argued that the Bank of America's decision to end the taxi rides for women was an attempt to divide the workforce by scapegoating the male clerks. Cab drivers in Local 256 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters complained that they stood to lose more than three hundred steady fares each night and dozens of late shift jobs. Activists from Union WAGE (Women's Alliance to Gain Equality), the San Francisco Bay area

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<sup>252</sup> Jackson Rannells, "Another Side to 'Equal Rights' Fight," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 November 1972. California ratified the ERA in November 1972, eight months after its passage by Congress.

feminist workers group that pulled the coalition together, denounced the bank's decision and argued that it illustrated the threat to workers' rights posed by the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and earlier civil rights reforms.<sup>253</sup>

WAGE leaders recognized that the Civil Rights Act of 1964, with its language barring sex discrimination and provisions for creating the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), had been an essential tool for working women and minorities in their efforts to strike down discriminatory hiring, pay, and promotions practices. But employers in California and throughout the country had also used that same language to roll back protections for women and children workers that trade unionists and other social reformers had fought to secure over the previous sixty years. WAGE and many others in the labor movement believed that the ERA would deliver the final blow to protective laws and thus undermine the working conditions of all workers. Though not quite two years old, Union WAGE had made its mark on California politics by spearheading the campaign for a "labor ERA" that would safeguard special work rules for women and children by extending protective legislation to men.<sup>254</sup> Believing that

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<sup>253</sup> On the protest, see "No Fare Ain't Fair!," *Change*, February-March 1973, and Coalition for Equal Rights, "Protest Bank of America's Attack on Working Conditions of Women," 31 January 1973, Box 8, Folder 13, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University. WAGE had organized an earlier protest at the Powell and Market St. branch of Bank of America in San Francisco (see Anne Lipow, Press release for demonstration, 8 December 1972, Box 8, Folder 13, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University, and Joyce Maupin, "Clerks and Cabbies Take on Bank," *UNION W.A.G.E.*, January-February 1973. Copies of the Union WAGE newspaper are located in the Union WAGE Collection at the Labor Archives and Research Center).

<sup>254</sup> The labor movement split on ERA; the AFL-CIO dropped its long-standing opposition in 1973, but it was slow to back the amendment and some constituent unions continued to resist passage. For an account of the AFL-CIO's shifting stance on ERA, see Dennis A. Deslippe, *Rights Not Roses: Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2000).

the building of militant and democratic unions in which women played leading roles was the best guaranty of economic justice for working women, WAGE activists also assisted in the formation of new unions and encouraged women to take leadership roles in existing unions.

Older feminists with deep trade union connections and experience initiated Union WAGE, but younger socialists and feminists who had been politicized in the antiwar, women's liberation, and civil rights movements, gravitated to its program and sustained its momentum. Many of these younger women were college-educated and middle-class. Virtually all of them were white and they viewed WAGE as a vehicle through which they might organize working-class women.<sup>255</sup> Some were already active on the job or in unions and found that WAGE provided important resources for their struggles for economic and gender equality. While WAGE's most ambitious goals of revitalizing the left through a fusion of women's liberation and the trade union movement was undermined by the economic crises of the mid-1970s and an increasingly hostile political climate, it nevertheless carved out an important niche advocating and agitating on behalf of working women in the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>256</sup> By the time of the group's demise more than eleven years after its founding, WAGE had made major contributions to the State of California's labor laws and policies. WAGE activists

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<sup>255</sup> While the organization's members were overwhelmingly white, its public programs were broadly appealing and its solidarity work often supported struggles involving Latinos, Asians, and African Americans.

<sup>256</sup> At various times in the organization's history, WAGE had chapters in Eugene and Portland, Oregon, Seattle, Washington, Lafayette, Indiana, and New York City. It originated and had its strongest support in the San Francisco Bay area, which is also where its newspaper was published.

had helped to shape the organizational culture and gender politics of several of the Bay Area's largest union locals and empowered thousands of working-class women with whom they came into contact.

Union WAGE was founded at a National Organization of Women conference on the University of California at Berkeley campus in March of 1971. After complaining that working-class women were poorly represented at the conference and that their issues were largely ignored by NOW, a handful of conferees representing various labor groups decided to form a new organization.<sup>257</sup> Three women with long histories of labor activism and leftist party politics provided WAGE with its initial programmatic and ideological direction. Anne Draper, Jean Maddox, and Joyce Maupin came from socialist traditions that had frequently been antagonistic toward one another, but the women were nevertheless united in their feminism as well as their critique of the women's liberation movement, much of which they found to be too oriented toward professional women and divorced from the experiences of the working class. As Anne Draper explained in the pages of the WAGE newspaper, "ongoing organization and movement, as distinct from mere flashes of protest, need to be rooted in the realities of daily life . . . and for working women the organizing reality is the condition of the workplace more than the home."<sup>258</sup> Draper (1917-1973) had graduated from Hunter College in 1938 before becoming an

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<sup>257</sup> For an account of WAGE's founding, see Diane Balsler, *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Feminism and Labor in Modern Times* (Boston: South End Press 1987) pp. 88-89.

<sup>258</sup> Draper, "Women in Struggle: A Point of View," *Union W.A.G.E.*, March-April 1973.

organizer for the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, which was then in the midst of a monumental campaign to establish an industrial union in steel. During the war she was a shipyard welder in San Pedro, California, and later worked as a staff member for the United Cap, Hatters, and Millinery Workers International Union, and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, for which she was the west coast director of their union label program. A veteran of various socialist organizations, she and her husband Hal served as mentors to a group of students at the University of California at Berkeley, many of whom had been active in the Free Speech Movement in 1964 and had followed the Drapers into the International Socialist Clubs, a left-wing offshoot of the Socialist Party of America.<sup>259</sup>

WAGE's first president Jean Maddox (1915-1976) dropped out of high school at 17 to become a waitress after her father was murdered. Moving from her native Idaho to California during the war, Maddox drove a milk truck and became a Teamster member—an experience that taught her “what it was to be a second class citizen in a union.” The night of her initiation, she and the other women sat in a cloak room as the men debated whether or not to accept women as members. “They finally agreed we could join,” she later told an interviewer. “But we could not attend meetings, had no voice or vote, and had to agree to leave our jobs as soon as the war was over.” Maddox was active in the Communist Party in the 1940s and 1950s, and was a rank-and-file member of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (Local 6) and the

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<sup>259</sup> See Hal Draper, “Modern Labor Heroine Dies,” *UNION W.A.G.E.*, May-June 1973.

Office and Professional Employees Union (OPEU Local 29), which was among the largest locals of office workers in the country at the time. When she was elected president of Local 29 in 1969, the union quickly developed a reputation for labor militancy and a commitment to left-wing causes, including support for migrant farm workers and the antiwar movement. As president, Maddox also led several successful strikes, but her leadership of the union was also marked by considerable friction with the international union, who attempted to undermine her presidency by placing Local 29 under trusteeship.<sup>260</sup>

Joyce Maupin (1914-1998) was born into a socialist family in New Jersey and was swept up in the political and cultural ferment of the 1930s. In her late teens, she studied briefly at the Sorbonne, though she never finished her college studies. Returning to the states she lived in New York City, where she worked as a typist for Thomas Wolfe and secretary to the Marxist literary critic V. F. Calverton. She joined the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), contributing columns on women's issues to the SWP newspaper, and standing as the party's candidate for Senate in New York in 1956. Maupin was a veteran of an historic five-month long machinists strike at Boeing Aircraft in Seattle in 1948 and had also worked as a waitress, a textile worker, and a shoemaker before relocating to the Bay Area in the early 1960s. As a member of OPEU Local 29, she met Jean Maddox and admired her leadership of the union, especially her ability to raise women's issues at the collective bargaining table and her efforts to draw support

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<sup>260</sup> For more on Maddox's life, see Pamela Allen, *Jean Maddox: The Fight for Rank and File Democracy* (Berkeley: Union WAGE Educational Committee 1976), and "Introducing Union W.A.G.E. Candidates," 1976, Box 3, Folder 5, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

for workers' struggles from the area's growing feminist movement. "This was a whole new departure for me," said Maupin, reflecting on Maddox's leadership many years later, "a woman president in a local union, fighting for women's rights. She was raising issues like child care and maternity leave."<sup>261</sup>

Union WAGE's timing was excellent. The organization drew its base from among the thousands of women who took advantage of the rapid expansion of the San Francisco Bay Area's government services, education, retail, insurance, finance, communications, and health care sectors in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>262</sup> New workers were animated by the era's protest spirit and readily took advantage of new anti-discrimination laws and policies. Because California government employees gained the right to collective bargaining just three years before the organization's founding, WAGE also benefited from a surge in public sector unionism that brought thousands of women into unions.<sup>263</sup> The public sector unions initially organized women as they would male workers—emphasizing their ability to secure higher wages and benefits. But as women asserted themselves on the job, the unions began to organize around women's issues, such as childcare, pay equity, limited opportunities for advancement, and

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<sup>261</sup> Barbara Mahan, "The Unions Wouldn't Let Women Walk the Picketline," *Plexus*, August 1982. On Maupin's relationship with Thomas Wolfe, see Joyce Maupin, "Typing for Thomas Wolfe: A Memoir," *The Thomas Wolfe Review*, Volume 26, Nos. 1 and 2, 2002.

<sup>262</sup> The job growth in North California was indicative of national economic trends. Between 1964 and 1979 the national economy generated nearly twenty-six million new service sector jobs, representing a nearly sixty-eight percent leap (see U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings*, Vol. 53, No. 1, January 2006).

<sup>263</sup> The Meyers Milias Brown Act of 1968 provided California public sector workers with the right to collectively bargain.

harassment by male supervisors and coworkers.<sup>264</sup> Until the union's belatedly caught up to their members, Union WAGE offered resources and assistance that even the most progressive unions were slow or unwilling to provide.

After Draper's death in 1973 and Maddox's three years later, young feminist activists, including veterans of the southern civil rights struggle, women's liberation, and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, increasingly shaped WAGE's direction.<sup>265</sup> The younger WAGE women valued its commitments to internal democracy, leadership development, and direct action, and they shared the founders' class critique of mainstream feminism. Moreover, they viewed the chance to engage in grassroots political struggles with working-class women as an extension of their earlier work in the Deep South, on campus, and in feminist collectives.

Cathy Cade, WAGE's semi-official photographer, was typical of the younger feminists who found a welcoming and supportive organizational home in WAGE. Before moving to San Francisco in 1970, she had been involved in the civil rights movement in Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana for the better part of eight years, and she was a member of one of the earliest women's consciousness raising groups in New Orleans. Suffering movement burnout and

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<sup>264</sup> On women's increased levels of participation in public sector unions, see Deborah E. Bell, "Unionized Women in State and Local Government," *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, Ruth Milkman, ed. (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1985) pp. 280-299.

<sup>265</sup> On the rise of the women's liberation movement see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf 1979), Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking 2000), and Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1989).

feeling marginalized as black separatism emerged as a dominant trend in the civil rights movement, Cade jumped at the chance to work with WAGE because it provided “access to working-class people and supporting working-class causes that some of us didn’t have in another way.” Cade later reflected that WAGE “gave us a way to participate and to support and be an ally and be active and to act out our working-class politics.”<sup>266</sup> Many young WAGE activists, including Cade, were either lesbians or in the process of coming out, and for them, the opportunity to work in an all-women’s organization proved especially appealing. “I was being with feminist women and seeing this stronger side of me come out. I still had boyfriends, but when I would be with men whether they were boyfriends or not I would watch myself fall into old ways of relating,” she said. Though she and most of her WAGE sisters never adopted a separatist position, Cade decided she “needed a period to be away” from men, and she developed a new appreciation for the decision of African American activists to exclude white people from the black liberation movement.<sup>267</sup>

Janet Arnold, who served as WAGE president in the late 1970s, had been a student activist at Cornell University in the early 1960s. By the time she graduated in 1965 she was a “committed Marxist” and had decided that she “should be in the labor movement because being a Marxist meant you were

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<sup>266</sup> Through their participation in WAGE, Cade and other civil rights movement veterans sought to continue working with working-class people as they had in the South: “Part of our heritage was being in the civil rights movement. And part of that heritage is a strong working class. We weren’t in a middle-class black movement. We were with middle-class black people sometimes, but the ideology and the reality was about poor and working-class people. And we wanted to keep supporting that for both . . . humanistic reasons . . . and also because that’s what we believed in” (Cathy Cade, Interview by author, 24 September 2003).

<sup>267</sup> Cade, Interview by author, 24 September 2003. A handful of men joined WAGE as associate members.

supposed to get involved in working class struggle.” She took a job as a case worker in New York City and became deeply involved in the Social Service Employees Union (SSEU), which represented the city’s War on Poverty workers. Many of her coworkers were also recent college graduates who had participated in the civil rights and antiwar movements, and they brought to their jobs a good deal of idealism and militancy. In addition to battling for higher wages and manageable case loads, they supported recipients’ demands for higher benefits. Arnold moved to Northern California in 1969 and worked as a telephone operator, a delivery truck driver, and a substitute teacher as part of the International Socialists’ (IS) efforts to gain a foothold in the working-class. But after her expulsion from the party in a bitter factional fight in 1976, Arnold felt “defeated” and she gave up on the idea of taking a job “based on its political meaning.” A friend invited her to join Union WAGE, which welcomed her into the fold and immediately put her to work. Exhausted by the sectarian politics of the left, Arnold appreciated that WAGE had no ideological litmus tests and did not quiz her about her politics. “They assumed they knew what my politics were,” she later recalled. “They were correct of course, but they weren’t fighting with me about details.”<sup>268</sup>

Like WAGE’s founders, most of these younger members viewed organizing working women as part of a larger effort to build a socialist movement. Nevertheless, they were critical of the factionalism on the left and as wary of its male leaders as they were of union bureaucrats. They took precautions to make

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<sup>268</sup> Janet Arnold, Interview by author, 18 November 2003.

sure that WAGE did not “get bogged down in endless internal discussions which would prevent us from getting concrete things done” and guarded against the possibility of any one political tendency dominating WAGE. For some San Francisco Bay Area radicals, WAGE lacked sufficient ideological rigor. Responding to complaints from a new member that the group was not explicitly socialist, Joyce Maupin acknowledged that while many WAGE women considered themselves to be socialists, they aimed “to represent working women in as broad and non-exclusive a way as we can,” demanding only agreement with the group’s goals and constitution. Maupin added that she believed an organized working class was a necessary precursor to socialism, but that it was important to reach out to apolitical women who are ready “to take some immediate steps to improve their pay and working environment.”<sup>269</sup>

That commitment to non-exclusion sometimes came at a cost. After several New York WAGE members were publicly identified as members of the International Workers Party—an organization allegedly controlled by the cultish political figure Lyndon Larouche—the WAGE executive board rejected calls to expel the women even though they acknowledged that the rumors had affected their East Coast fundraising capacity. The board further affirmed their commitment to non-exclusion and asserted that the appropriate way to deal with

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<sup>269</sup> Maupin added that the newspaper included “articles with many different viewpoints and anyone who disagrees strongly with an article is invited to respond to it” (see Maupin to Natasha Beck, 28 May 1978 and Beck to Maupin, 24 May 1978, Box 15, Folder 7, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University Union WAGE papers).

“disruptive or otherwise . . . left tendencies who repeatedly try to alter the direction of Union WAGE” is “through democratic discussions and votes.”<sup>270</sup>

WAGE similarly negotiated the generational divisions that had frustrated other protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Over the course of the 1960s, older and sometimes well-meaning socialists and liberals repeatedly attempted to guide and direct young radicals to help them avoid tactical errors and to guard against alienating potential allies. But their interventions were often rebuffed by the youth, who believed that the Old Left had been rendered irrelevant by Cold War anti-Communism and found many of the older comrades condescending. These dynamics emerged at the symbolic birth of the New Left when a group of irate socialists held hearings to pressure SDS to re-write their seminal Port Huron statement because they felt it was insufficiently critical of the Soviet Union and overly critical of the labor movement.<sup>271</sup> The same tensions plagued the African American freedom movement. SNCC activists squabbled with the civil rights and ministerial leaders of the NAACP and SCLC, whom younger activists saw as too cautious, too willing to cut a deal, and too quick to claim credit for SNCC work. For their part, the mainline civil rights leaders often found the younger activists’ rhetoric brash and counterproductive.

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<sup>270</sup> See WAGE executive board, “Union WAGE and the International Workers Party: Rumors and Replies,” *Inter-Chapter Newsletter*, March 1978, Box 14, Folder 4, and Union WAGE, Executive board minutes, 6 February 1978, Box 1, Folder 9 both in Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University. The incident was triggered by the publication of a magazine expose of Larouche that alleged that WAGE was a front group for the International Workers Party and his National Caucus of Labor Committees (see “Political Chameleon to Right Wing Spy,” *Public Eye*, Fall 1977, Vol. 1 No. 1) 6-37.

<sup>271</sup> For accounts of the event, see Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) pp. 211-212, and James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Touchstone 1987) pp. 127-135.

WAGE women avoided these tensions by creating an organizational culture that was equal parts labor education program, trade union local, and feminist consciousness raising group. Many of the younger feminists later reported that WAGE's inter-generational character was among the aspects of the organization they most valued, and they appreciated that the older women were deliberately grooming them for leadership. The older WAGE women pushed younger women into positions of responsibility, while encouraging them to develop their public speaking abilities and their organizational skills.<sup>272</sup> For their part, Draper, Maddox, and Maupin were bolstered by the energy and optimism of their younger sisters. According to a brief biography of Maddox published after her death, she credited women's liberation with "raising her consciousness about herself as a woman," and "help[ing] her learn how to be open and affectionate with women."<sup>273</sup>

Programmatically, WAGE's campaign to extend the state's protective legislation to men remained the single constant of its eleven-year existence. The group's strategy centered on pressuring and monitoring the California Industrial Welfare Commission (IWC), a quasi-legislative agency set up in 1913 to administer the state's minimum wage and working standards for women and children workers. Under pressure from trade unionists and reformers over the years, the IWC had issued industry orders that provided some fifty protections to

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<sup>272</sup> Several WAGE women credit Anne Draper with encouraging them to do more public speaking. See, for example, Diane Balsler, *Sisterhood Solidarity: Feminism and Labor in Modern Times* (Boston: South End Press 1987) pp. 90-91, and Kay Eisenhower, Interview by author, 31 October 2003.

<sup>273</sup> Pamela Allen, *Jean Maddox: The Fight for Rank and File Democracy* (Berkeley: Union WAGE Educational Committee 1976).

women and minors, including: mandatory meal and rest periods, prohibitions against deducting tips from wages, a guaranteed minimum wage and premium rates for overtime and split shifts, limits on the costs of tools and uniforms, and standards for lighting, ventilation, rest rooms, and locker rooms. These work rules were especially beneficial to the eighty percent of California's women workers who did not work under a union contract, and they helped men as well because employers often extended benefits such as coffee breaks and overtime pay to all of their employees.

WAGE members continually debated whether this focus on a public policy matter diverted energy from their emphasis on union organizing, but they generally agreed that the protective laws, however inadequate, were vitally important for the majority of the state's unorganized working women. Moreover, WAGE women believed that because of the AFL-CIO's orientation toward white male trade union members, unions required cajoling from the outside to help them "overcome [*their*] historical sexism and racism and aid in organizing the unorganized and work on such class-wide issues as strengthening protective laws," as WAGE leader Manja Argue once explained. "If the present leaders cannot be made to see this, they will have to be replaced."<sup>274</sup>

By the early 1970s, protective laws in more than twenty states had been nullified where they were determined to conflict with the 1964 Civil Rights Act's provisions barring sex discrimination. While California had retained nearly all of its legislation, some of the state's employers hoped that the Equal Rights

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<sup>274</sup> Manja Argue, "WAGE Moves Forward," *Union W.A.G.E.*, November-December 1976.

Amendment—passed by the federal government in March of 1972 and awaiting ratification from the required thirty-eight states—would free them from their obligations under the IWC work orders. The battle lines over the work orders were thus drawn with WAGE’s labor feminists and their allies among the leadership of the California Labor Federation pitted against the employers and Republican Governor Ronald Reagan’s business-friendly appointees to the Industrial Welfare Commission.<sup>275</sup>

Just two weeks after its founding, WAGE members descended upon IWC hearings in San Francisco to demand that the Commissioners revisit the minimum wage for women, which they had set three years earlier at \$1.65 or just five cents over the federal minimum. As several dozen women protested outside the State Annex Building, Anne Lipow, a young librarian recruited into WAGE by Anne Draper, lashed out at the antiquated budget guidelines by which the Commissioners set the minimum wage: “To arrive at this Minnie budget . . . you create a woman who in the labor force of the last 10 years hardly exists.”<sup>276</sup> To survive on the California minimum wage, Lipow argued, a woman would have to be “illiterate, uncultured, virtually friendless . . . and dressed in clothes that turn into rags soon after they are bought” because the suggested budget provided little money for clothes, a phone, reading material, recreation, or

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<sup>275</sup> Breaking from tradition, Reagan’s IWC included just one woman and one representative from labor—a Teamster official who the WAGE women dismissed as a “bureaucrat.” All of the other representatives came from the ranks of the employers.

<sup>276</sup> To arrive at the guidelines, the IWC used their 1961 pamphlet, *Budget for a Self-Supporting Woman* (San Francisco: Industrial Welfare Commission 1961).

entertainment.<sup>277</sup> Lipow and other WAGE speakers repeated their demands for a \$3.00 an hour minimum wage, and a 35 hour work week with double pay for overtime. They also demanded that the state's household workers—maids, gardeners, cooks, chauffeurs, child care providers, and tutors—be included under the existing protections and that the lower provisions for farm workers be raised to those of other employees.<sup>278</sup>

The IWC quickly agreed to revisit the work orders pertaining to the minimum wage, but another three years passed before it took action. The Commissioners, all of whom were Reagan appointees, complained that the governor had tied their hands by attempting to turn over their responsibilities to other state agencies and eliminating their budget for the hearings required for a wage increase.<sup>279</sup> With the work of the Commission on hold, WAGE turned its attention to the state legislature, where they lobbied for the passage of legislation to extend the protective laws to men. The bill passed before being vetoed by Reagan in 1972. Under intense pressure the following year, Reagan approved a measure authorizing the Commission to determine wages, hours, and working conditions for all of the state's workers. But instead of expanding the protections

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<sup>277</sup> Lipow added: "Your average woman who is to live on the minimum wage is single, childless, and supports no dependents such as aging parents. Such a woman is very hard to find." She also objected to the time of the hearing, arguing that most low-wage workers could not afford to take a day off from work to attend or testify (Anne Lipow, Typescript of remarks to IWC, [March 30 1971], Box 16, Folder 5, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University).

<sup>278</sup> Mike Friedman, Press release, "Union Women Demand the Strengthening and Extension of Protective Laws" [30 March 1971], Box 3, Folder 11, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

<sup>279</sup> Harry Bernstein, "Women's Protection Unit Hits Reagan Cut," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 March 1972.

and extending them to men, the IWC announced a new set of employer-friendly measures that bumped overtime from eight to ten hours, removed restrictions on the number of hours worked, and eliminated rest periods. The AFL-CIO filed an injunction (with WAGE offering a friend of the court brief) and won. The Commissioners were forced to reopen the wage orders because they had failed to hold proper hearings.<sup>280</sup>

By the time the wage orders were reconsidered in June of 1975, California had a new Democratic governor, Jerry Brown. WAGE's relationship to Brown's appointees on the Commission was less adversarial; some commissioners even welcomed WAGE's input to counterbalance the heavy pressure exerted by industry interests. However, after the IWC issued new wage orders favorable to workers in October 1976, the California Manufacturers Association and the California Hotel and Motel Association, among other employer groups, won injunctions that delayed implementation of the new rules for months. Three years later, they again attempted to halt new work orders that were to become effective on January 1, 1980. The California Supreme Court, however, reaffirmed the authority of the IWC and dismissed the injunctions. That decision immediately put into effect a new minimum wage and mandatory overtime pay for more than eight hours worked.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> See "A New Start on State Wage-Hour Orders," *East Bay Labor Journal*, 7 February 1975 and Fran Bernstein, "Women Fight for Protective Laws: Interview with Joyce Maupin," *Common Sense*, July 1974.

<sup>281</sup> Diane Sandrowski, "Unanimous Court Gives Workers a Break," *Union W.A.G.E.*, September-October 1980.

Over the course of more than ten years of work on the protective legislation issue, WAGE's accomplishments on behalf of unorganized workers were considerable. The IWC doubled California's minimum wage between 1974 and 1981, in no small part because WAGE focused public attention on this obscure state agency and relentlessly demanded what they referred to as a "living wage." WAGE also successfully lobbied the IWC for night and weekend hearings to allow more participation from working people and recruited dozens of women and other unorganized workers to testify at the hearings, often providing them with transportation and assisting them with their testimony. WAGE activists succeeded in placing their members and supporters on the IWC industry advisory boards that helped the commissioners prepare the wage orders. Under pressure from WAGE, the IWC began including household workers under the wage orders beginning in 1974 and they equalized their protections two years later. Lastly, WAGE helped reduce the double standard for agricultural workers, whose minimum wage and work hour standards lagged behind those of workers in other sectors, and they achieved their initial goal of extending the IWC's protections to men.<sup>282</sup>

As impressive as their successes in the realm of public policy were, Union WAGE also had a deep and long-lasting impact on the local labor movement through its training and support of rising young leaders in the Bay Area's major health care and public sector unions. Few WAGE activists exemplified this group of union leaders better than Kay Eisenhower, who tapped into WAGE resources

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<sup>282</sup> See Barbara Berry, "State Industrial Welfare Commission: Minimum Wage Bill Next Major Fight," *Union W.A.G.E.*, July-August 1975.

as she helped establish SEIU Local 616, representing employees of Alameda County across the bay from San Francisco. As a high school student in Los Gatos near San Jose, Eisenhower was active in Methodist youth programs that oriented her toward liberal politics and the civil rights movement.<sup>283</sup> In 1962 she was expelled from Stanford University after becoming pregnant out of wedlock. Transferring to San Jose State College, she became involved in the civil rights and peace movements. Three years later, now married, Eisenhower moved to Berkeley with her husband as he began graduate studies while she finished her bachelor's degree. It was the fall after the Free Speech Movement and the campus was alive with a spirit of protest and possibility. Eisenhower and her husband gravitated to the students and their adult mentors in the International Socialist Clubs, which was soon to rename itself the International Socialists (IS). They joined the group and worked on the newspaper, which was produced at its Berkeley office. Following her divorce a few years later, Eisenhower managed the IS office in the afternoon and the organization provided child care for her son.

By 1971 many of Eisenhower's closest IS comrades had left the Bay Area for the Midwest to take jobs in the steel, auto, communication, and transportation industries. Eisenhower briefly considered taking a blue collar job, but she did not meet United Parcel Service's height requirement and believed that shift work would make it difficult to find quality childcare for her son. Moreover, Eisenhower was deeply immersed in the women's liberation movement and active in the

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<sup>283</sup> Eisenhower's formative experiences paralleled those of the women profiled by historian Sara Evans in her study of the impact of liberal Christianity on the political commitments of 1960s-era activists (see Sara M. Evans, *Journeys that Opened Up the World: Women, Student Christian Movements, and Social Justice, 1955-1975* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2004]).

Oakland Women's Liberation Group. Though still an IS member and strong supporter, she "found it more comfortable to be in an all-female group."<sup>284</sup> With friends from Oakland Women's Liberation, some of whom were also IS members, she began discussing the possibilities for organizing low-wage women workers in the service industries. Though these discussions took place in the midst of the IS's drive to root itself in the working class, that strategy emphasized implanting members in basic industries that were thought to be central to the U.S. economy. Eisenhower and her comrades found that their interest in organizing women in the service sector was peripheral to IS's emphasis on manufacturing and transportation. At about the same time, some IS women invited Eisenhower to join Union WAGE just as the new organization was launched. Over the next several years, WAGE provided Eisenhower with access to its broad network of labor feminists across the region as well as training on the basics of union structure, meeting facilitation, and labor organizing.

Oakland's Highland Hospital hired Eisenhower in December of 1971 as a clerical worker in the billing department. Within a few months, she was joined by two friends from her feminist study group. "We were very clear that once we got there and evaluated the situation, that what we wanted to do was to organize" women into unions, Eisenhower later said.<sup>285</sup> Three SEIU locals represented county workers, but the largest group of employees—the clerical employees—

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<sup>284</sup> Eisenhower also observed that "it was obvious that even in an organization as committed to internal democracy as the I.S. was, it was men who by and large were the leadership" (see Staughton Lynd and Alice Lynd, ed., *The New Rank and File* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000) p. 64.

<sup>285</sup> Eisenhower, Interview by author, 31 October 2003.

were represented by the Alameda County Employees Association, a weak union that favored its professional members. The three women realized that they would have to undertake a long-term campaign to nurture pro-union sentiment among the county clerks and “to make clerks see that their image of themselves was one foisted on them by management.”<sup>286</sup> They began by holding a series of dinner meetings aimed at identifying key issues around which to mobilize clerical workers and developing relationships with a group of women who would serve as the leaders of an organizing drive. Eisenhower and her associates succeeded in drawing together a diverse group from across the county and made special efforts to invite workers who were unlike themselves—college educated women with experience in the feminist and socialist movements.

In December they launched a four-page newsletter—*Clerks’ County*—the title of which suggested the potential power of the clerical workers who made up a quarter of the counties employees. *Clerks’ County* quickly became the voice for pro-union clerks, a tool around which to attract supporters, and the name of the pro-union faction within the Association. Dignity issues were an early focus of *Clerks’ County* and “Clerks were indignant about an awful lot,” Eisenhower said, recalling one department where women “had to turn in a stub to get a new pencil.”<sup>287</sup> Other articles focused on the limited promotional opportunities for older clerks, childcare, leave for sick children, and abusive and sexually aggressive bosses. In its effort to raise the consciousness of clerical workers,

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<sup>286</sup> Eisenhower, “Clerical Workers Caucus in Alameda County,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, September-October 1973.

<sup>287</sup> Eisenhower, Interview by author, 31 October 2003.

*Clerks' County* "hit hard" on the notion "that many women thought unions were ok for their husbands, but not for them" and it urged readers to support the union over the Employees Association.<sup>288</sup>

The *Clerks' County* group agitated for the better part of a year with the goal of forcing an election that would allow clerical workers to choose between the Employees Association and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Facing probable defeat, the leaders of the Employees Association cut a deal to affiliate with SEIU, thus establishing Local 616 in March of 1973. This was a setback for Eisenhower and her associates who had hoped for an election showdown with the Association and felt that SEIU had gone behind their backs and taken a shortcut to unionization. They declined an SEIU offer to make *Clerks' County* the official union newsletter, choosing instead to continue it as the voice for a rank-and-file caucus within the local. Based on their popularity among the employees, several Clerks' County activists soon became stewards and Eisenhower was appointed to the union's bargaining committee. They quickly became the most powerful political bloc in the union and within two years were in control of its affairs.

As they built Local 616 into one of the Bay Area's most powerful unions, Eisenhower and her colleagues from *Clerks' County* began appearing on local public television radio programs and they were interviewed for numerous books

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<sup>288</sup> In the pages of the WAGE newspaper, Eisenhower elaborated on the experience of building *Clerks' County*: "The major source of our strength has been our policy to make all decisions as a group, whether it's about an article, a leaflet, or committee personnel. We have learned a lot about patience, research and leadership in the last six months and we are convinced that women (and men) in other industries can succeed if they keep their organizing committees together and extend their ties to members of other locals" (see Kay Eisenhower, "Clerical Workers Caucus in Alameda County," *Union W.A.G.E.*, September-October 1973).

and articles. “There were people who studied what was going on organizing in the workforce and knew that clerical organizing was important,” Eisenhower later recalled.<sup>289</sup> Union WAGE increasingly looked to her as a resident expert on clerical and public sector organizing. In the fall and winter of 1974-75, Eisenhower organized a series of meetings for Union WAGE that brought dozens of clerical workers from three Bay Area county governments together with representatives from three competing local unions “for a sisterly exchange” of ideas for confronting the counties’ use of reclassification to trim budgets and justify low wages.<sup>290</sup> WAGE also looked to Eisenhower as its resident expert on rank-and-file publications. Writing in the WAGE newspaper, Eisenhower asserted that “the collective experience of putting out a newsletter teaches workers many of the skills they need to exercise democratic control over their union structures and to deal effectively with arbitrary management actions.”<sup>291</sup> Even as she assumed positions of leadership within Local 616 and Union WAGE and among Bay Area labor feminists, Eisenhower worked hard to retain her rank-and-file perspective. “If you allowed people to, they made me the star and the bureaucrats or the conservatives or whomever are always trying to relate just to me and I would make them relate to the whole group,” she recalled.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Eisenhower, Interview by author, 31 October 2003.

<sup>290</sup> For coverage of the meetings, see Eisenhower, “Bay Area Clericals,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, January-February 1975 and Eisenhower, “Bay Area Clericals Meet Again,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, March-April 1975.

<sup>291</sup> Eisenhower, “Building a Caucus . . . Your Own Shop Newsletter,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, March-April 1975.

<sup>292</sup> Eisenhower eventually served Local 616 in nearly every possible capacity, including president, steward, chair of the strike council during a forty-nine-day walk out in 1976, and finally as a retiree

Just as she deepened her involvement with Local 616, Eisenhower became a key player in WAGE's first organizational crisis. In the spring of 1974 she and seventeen other Bay Area WAGE members attended the founding convention of (CLUW) the Coalition for Labor Union Women in Chicago. The women left for Chicago hopeful at the prospect of forming a national working women's group, and they took satisfaction in knowing that their pioneering efforts in California had contributed to the groundswell that led to CLUW's formation.<sup>293</sup> But they returned from Chicago with mixed reviews of the conference. Eisenhower voiced strong objections to CLUW's exclusion of non-union women from its membership, suggesting that such a policy amounted to a kind of double jeopardy for unorganized and unemployed women: "The necessity for CLUW being formed comes out of this neglect of women workers by the official union structure; to mirror the failure of the union movement to organize women workers by preventing those same women from belonging to the organization that now hopes to remedy that situation seems foolish at best."<sup>294</sup> Joyce Maupin added her criticisms of the CLUW leadership's "heavy handed" use of parliamentary procedures to block a popular resolution in support of the Farmworkers' Union—

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activist. Among her first acts as president was to rewrite the by-laws to devolve much of her power to the board, an action that helped institutionalize rank-and-file control. From her experiences in the women's movement, WAGE and the *Clerks' County* caucus, Eisenhower had grown to appreciate the ways in which collective decision making, though often cumbersome, "pulled us together and improved the skill level of the whole group" (Eisenhower, Interview by author, 31 October 2003).

<sup>293</sup> The previous year, WAGE had played a pivotal role in organizing the West Coast Working Women's Conference, during which the conferees added their names to a growing chorus of women who were calling for the founding of a national labor women's group.

<sup>294</sup> Eisenhower, "Open Membership!," *Union W.A.G.E.*, May-June 1974.

a telling indication “that female bureaucrats are in every respect the equal of male bureaucrats.”<sup>295</sup>

Teachers union members Anne Lipow and Gretchen Mackler, on the other hand, were among the WAGE leaders who argued that CLUW’s potential to be a “broad-based nation wide organization of trade union and working women” outweighed its short comings. They supported the decision to exclude non-union members at least initially, arguing that the alternative “is an organization dominated by women who are ‘friends’ of working women and who do not see the central importance of the labor movement—a revived labor movement—in the struggle ahead.” This “would be a disaster for working women because they would be trapped in a sect that could have influence on neither society nor the labor movement.” Instead of “standing aside in helplessness and fury that ‘our’ movement has been stolen from us,” they argued, WAGE should disband the organization and focus on building their local CLUW chapters.<sup>296</sup>

WAGE weathered the controversy, but they lost Lipow, Mackler, and a handful of key union members just as the organization was reaching its peak of influence within the local labor movement. In March and April of 1974, more than

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<sup>295</sup> CLUW’s constitution expressly prohibited it from involving itself in jurisdictional disputes between AFL-CIO unions. CLUW officials argued that passage of the resolution would amount to taking the Farmworkers’ side in a dispute with the Teamsters. Despite overwhelming support for the Farmworkers’ resolution from the floor, the CLUW leaders decided to table the matter (see Joyce Maupin, “Rank and File Victory,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, May-June 1974).

<sup>296</sup> The CLUW supporters in WAGE also argued that its formation represented a major change in the labor movement’s fortunes and warned their sisters that “the failure to recognize these changes, and consequently the failure to take the opportunity which they offer to move onto an entirely new and far higher plane has been the tragedy of many organizations and movements.” They acknowledged that WAGE had a good program, but “an excellent 10-point program and a relatively small group of union women do not constitute a movement” (see Anne Lipow, Gretchen Mackler, LaRene Paul, Luella Hanberry, “A Giant Step Forward,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, May-June 1974).

15,000 striking clerks, janitors, hospital workers, sanitation workers, cafeteria workers, transport workers, animal keepers, and librarians in the City of San Francisco struck for higher wages in the face of spiraling inflation. This marked the city's widest disruption in public services since the General Strike of 1934.<sup>297</sup> WAGE members played a leading role in the nine-day strike, especially within the largest of the striking unions—Local 400 of the Service Employees International Union, Civil Service Association, which represented the mostly female clerical workers.<sup>298</sup> While building a strong base of support for the union among the clerks, Local 400 organizer and WAGE activist Maxine Jenkins helped frame the strike to the public as a response both to the cost of living crunch and to institutionalized gender discrimination. She explained to reporters that the city had long rationalized low pay for the mostly female clerical workers by comparing their wages to the already depressed wages of non-union clericals in the private sector. Jenkins berated the city for assuming that service workers' wages were supplemental to those of a presumably male head of household. Increasing numbers of them were heads of households, she asserted, and many qualified for food stamps. "Wouldn't we think it was unacceptable for a Teamster or a

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<sup>297</sup> On the General Strike of 1934 and the establishment of the ILWU, see David Selvin, *A Terrible Anger: the 1934 Waterfront and General Strikes in San Francisco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1996).

<sup>298</sup> Women were far more visible in the 1974 strike than they were in the 1934 strike that had been led by the longshoremen. As one observer noted: "The women are making this strike. They are everywhere visible on the lines, on the Negotiating Committee and behind the lines in thousands who won't cross union picket lines" (see Maxine Jenkins, "Women in the S.F. City Strike," *Union W.A.G.E.*, May-June 1974).

longshoreman to qualify for food stamps after working an 8-hour day?," Jenkins asked.<sup>299</sup>

City Hall and many of the schools essentially closed. Roaming bands of picketers shut down the bus lines, trolleys, and trains, and an unattended water treatment plant spewed millions of pounds of raw sewage into the Bay and the Pacific Ocean. With the city on the verge of chaos, the board of supervisors agreed to across the board raises of about \$600 a year and a pay package amounting to \$11 million—twice as much as had been offered before the strike.<sup>300</sup> WAGE members were jubilant. The strike confirmed their presumption that masses of women were ready to take action to improve their pay and working conditions. Steady organizing on the part of Jenkins and other WAGE leaders and associates had yielded influence within the union and the strike.

The conservative backlash, however, was swift. The Chamber of Commerce responded with a lawsuit against the "illegal strikers" that delayed the pay raises for nearly a year. The Chamber also drafted and championed a proposal to forestall collective bargaining by adopting a formula to set city workers' pay based on comparative wage studies. Jenkins emerged as a leading

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<sup>299</sup> Bob Levering, "City Strike: Revolt of the New Rank and File," *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, March 14-27, 1974. See also, "Sexist Wage Patterns Exposed," *San Francisco Municipal Review*, 22 November 1973, reprinted in *Union W.A.G.E.*, May-June 1974. Jenkins was born in Monroe County, Mississippi, and moved to Berkeley in 1964 where she became involved in the antiwar movement. She organized clerical workers for AFSCME on the Berkeley campus, and was later an organizer for the California Nurses Association. For more on Jenkins's career in the labor movement, see Paul Johnston, *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism in the Public Workplace* (Ithaca: ILR Press 1994).

<sup>300</sup> See "Nine Days in March: On Strike in San Francisco," *Union W.A.G.E.*, May-June 1974, reprinted from *The Dispatcher*, 22 March 1974, Douglas E. Kneeland, "Big-City Problems Peril San Francisco's Charming Image," *New York Times*, 1 June 1974, and "Wage Deal Scored by San Franciscans," *New York Times*, 17 March 1974.

spokesperson against the “Feinstein Amendment,” so named after its pro-business sponsor—San Francisco board of supervisor’s president and mayoral hopeful, Dianne Feinstein. Jenkins appealed for support from the Bay Area’s feminist movement by recasting what was understood as a narrow public sector labor issue into an “anti-feminist proposition,” whose real targets were the thousands of low- wage clerical workers in the private sector. In a guest editorial in the *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, Jenkins argued that the Chamber of Commerce understood that collective bargaining for city clericals would eventually drive up the wages of the women who worked in the “high rise secretarial ghettos” of the Chamber’s constituent members, including Bank of America, the Bechtel Corporation, and Shell Oil. “Thousands of women clerical workers,” she wrote “for the good of Chamber member profits, must be discouraged from organizing a breakthrough in sexist determined wage scales.”<sup>301</sup>

As Jenkins carried on this public relations offensive, WAGE leaders made good use of their connections within the national women’s liberation movement. After receiving word that feminist writer and activist Gloria Steinem planned to attend a political fundraiser for Feinstein, WAGE urged Steinem to forego the event, warning her that she “would have to walk through a picket line of hundreds of women, representing many different unions and women’s groups.” Steinem replied to WAGE a few days later explaining that she had been unaware of Feinstein’s role in the matter: “I’m sure you understand, accurate information is

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<sup>301</sup> Maxine Jenkins, “Why Women Workers Fight Prop. L,” *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, 13 October 1974.

not always easy to come by from a distance; all the more so when a candidate's position on issues of interest to women—and to all powerless groups—is an apparent change from the past.” To save Steinem embarrassment, Feinstein withdrew her invitation—a turnabout reported by the popular *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen. San Francisco voters defeated the amendment by a plurality of 12,000 voters in November.<sup>302</sup>

Jenkins also faced new challenges from within her union that exposed some unresolved tensions regarding Union WAGE's relationship to labor unions. In activating the low-wage clerical members of the union during the strike and the campaign to fight the Feinstein Amendment, Jenkins and her close associate Louise Statzer had threatened the dominance of the higher paid professional members of Local 400 as well as the union officers. In March 1975, Jenkins and Statzer, were fired on flimsy charges by Local 400 and reinstated only after rank-and-file members and Union WAGE rallied to their defense. A few months later, SEIU placed the union in trusteeship and assumed control of the local's finances and administration. In response, Jenkins, Statzer, and their supporters established the independent Union of City Employees (UCE) in July of 1975. WAGE members cheered the formation of the female-led union as a victory for women and for rank-and-file democracy. They also hoped that the UCE could serve as an alternative to the stifling bureaucracy and male domination of the

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<sup>302</sup> See Joyce Maupin to Gloria Steinem, 31 August 1974 and Steinem to Maupin, 3 September 1974, both documents in Box 5, Folder 1, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University. See also Maxine Jenkins, “Labor-Feminists Win Victory at the Polls,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, November-December 1974, and Beverly Stephen, “Feinstein and the Feminists,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 September 1974.

AFL-CIO. UCE appeared to be the long awaited “breakthrough to give future impetus to organizing women workers in private industry.”<sup>303</sup>

The sense of optimism faded quickly in the following weeks when Jenkins and Statzer led their fledgling union into a short-lived affiliation with the Laborers’ International Union. Jenkins explained that the Laborers offered badly needed resources that an independent union could not provide. Moreover, the Laborers’ brought clout that would pay off in contract negotiations with City Hall. During the affiliation negotiations, however, Laborers’ officials expressed their unwillingness to work with Denise D’Anne, a transsexual clerical worker and WAGE activist, who had been groomed for leadership by Maxine Jenkins. WAGE members, who had previously fought Jenkins’s and Statzer’s dismissals from SEIU, felt betrayed and accused them of opportunism for affiliating with a union long associated with gangsterism and with no history of support for feminism. They accused the women of selling out the clerical workers, feminism, and their WAGE sister Denise D’Anne.<sup>304</sup>

In the aftermath of the “betrayal,” WAGE leaders openly acknowledged that they deserved “some criticism in regard to our supportive attitude toward Jenkins and Statzer,” who, they had believed “were taking a progressive position by building a rank-and-file caucus and fighting for the restoration of their jobs.” But in their hope that “a new democratic unionism would be born, controlled by

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<sup>303</sup> Denise D’Anne, “New Union Forms!,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, July-August 1975.

<sup>304</sup> D’Anne later alleged that her life was threatened for speaking out against affiliation with the Laborers. A WAGE editor later warned members against “participating in this vicious attack, which violates the spirit of Union WAGE” (see Denise D’Anne, “Jenkins/Statzer Betray City Clerks,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, September-October 1975).

the rank and file,” WAGE women had failed to sufficiently consider the contradictions and nuances of the labor movement: “We need to discuss questions of trusteeship, of dual unionism, of independent unions and union raiding, and how all of these are defined.”<sup>305</sup> These discussions continued in meetings and in the pages of the WAGE newspaper through the fall of 1975. Had Jenkins’s mobilization of low-wage women workers been a genuine expression of her political values or was it an opportunistic play for power from the beginning? Some WAGE women suspected the latter, and the experience fed their growing sense of mistrust and alienation from the labor movement.

Local 400 survived, but it was hurt badly. The following year, clerical workers opted out of a municipal strike over wages, and they were unable to mount a challenge to two more anti-labor ballot measures in November. Denise D’Anne reported that the clerks were divided and dispirited following the tumultuous events of the previous two years. But D’Anne also noted that uncertain economic conditions had stifled worker militancy. She observed that the clerks feared layoffs and even assumed “guilt for the current economic crisis,” echoing conservative talking points about driving up taxes. “There were murmurs about being satisfied about their present wages” and some spoke of not wanting to out earn their husbands, she reported.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> “Statement of Union WAGE Executive Board,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, September-October 1975.

<sup>306</sup> Denise D’Anne, “Clerks Abandon Strikers,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, May-June 1976. SEIU eventually combined Local 400 with Local 390 to form Local 790, which now has more than 30,000 members in Northern California.

San Francisco clerical workers were hardly alone in their retreat from labor activism. San Francisco's municipal strike and New York City's fiscal crisis later in the year put the spotlight on the growing power of municipal unions. To much of the public, strong unions represented a threat to public order. As the City of New York teetered toward bankruptcy in the fall of 1975, the *New York Times* editorialized that San Francisco's acquiescence to the strikers' demands earlier in the year had "reinforced the conviction that unions in control of vital public services can compel the community to capitulate by holding a strike gun at its head. This is not only the road to municipal bankruptcy; it is the road to anarchy. It is a death knell for democracy."<sup>307</sup> The 1973 energy crisis and the recession of 1974-1975 also fed the climate of fear and uncertainty. The adverse affect of these economic upheavals on grassroots political activity can be seen most strikingly in the failure of unions to respond to the post-1960s anti-union offensive that crippled the labor movement and a wave of plant closings and mass layoffs that nearly wiped out some industrial unions in the late 1970s. The job losses paralyzed rather than galvanized American workers and the response of labor leaders was pathetic.

On top of these external challenges, Union WAGE faced new internal challenges as it celebrated its five-year anniversary in March 1976. The deaths of founders Draper and Maddox and the defection of the handful of pro-CLUW

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<sup>307</sup> "Frisco Follies," *New York Times*, 23 August 1975. On the power of municipal workers' unions, see A.H. Raskin, "Civil Service Workers are United and Militant," *New York Times*, 24 August 1975: "A certain inexorableness underlies the rhetoric on the part of both unions and mayors—an inexorableness that leads to the picket lines, to the accelerated exodus of business and middle-class families from core cities and to the eventual decay of urban capacity to sustain either jobs or services."

women, including Mackler and Lipow, had stretched the remaining leaders thin. Maxine Jenkins had left during the controversy, and Kay Eisenhower and other women with the strongest ties to the labor movement were less available for WAGE work due to their increasing involvement in their own unions. In the WAGE internal newsletter, Jan Arnold observed that many of the group's "inactive members" turn up "as the leaders and active workers in union drives, [and] rank and file struggles." She noted that the "contradiction drains our core of WAGE, yet it gives us an incredibly rich network of resource people, news of the labor movement, and articles for our newspaper."<sup>308</sup> WAGE may have enjoyed an increasingly broad and influential political network, but with fewer new recruits joining the organization, leadership responsibilities fell disproportionately to women who were able to prioritize WAGE work or volunteer in the office. Many of them were not union members, but self-identified as allies of poor and working-class women.

Tensions within WAGE that had been negotiated successfully in the heady and hopeful days of the early 1970s became contentious and divisive as organizing became more challenging. The divisions played out most glaringly in debates over the content and direction of the newspaper. The bimonthly newspaper, *Union W.A.G.E.*, launched just weeks after the organization's founding, had been the group's public face and the vehicle through which it reached the broader labor left and the feminist movement. In addition to highlighting WAGE's ongoing programs, the newspaper served as a primer for

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<sup>308</sup> Jan Arnold, "Notes on the Problems of Union WAGE Chapters," *Inter-Chapter Newsletter*, July 1978, Box 14, Folder 4, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

labor neophytes, featuring instructions on Robert's Rules of Order, the basics of labor law, and union organizing. Labor news outlined debates within the labor movement and publicized ongoing labor struggles, especially those in the area in which women played a leading role. For example, when twenty young women working in the Earring House Imports warehouse complained of receiving low wages and few benefits they came to WAGE to help them find a suitable union. WAGE activists put them in touch with organizers from SEIU Local 250 and within a week all twenty warehouse employees were on strike. The women's charges were eventually supported by the NLRB and they were paid back wages. WAGE also publicized the union organizing drive of employees at Jung Sai (Great Chinese American Sewing Company), a subsidiary of fashion giant Esprit de Corps. The women at Jung Sai complained of low pay and unsafe working conditions and began discussions with (ILGWU) International Lady Garment Workers Union Local 101. When union supporter Frankie Ma was fired for unsatisfactory work, her coworkers went on strike for weeks. Rather than negotiate with the workers, Esprit chose to close down the plant, a violation of federal labor law. WAGE members were a consistent presence on picket lines throughout the Bay Area during the 1970s, and *Union W.A.G.E.* helped bring these labor protests to the larger U.S. left.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> On the Earring House and Jung Sai struggles, see Maupin, "Earring House Locks out Women Employees," and "Jung Sai Workers on Strike," *Union W.A.G.E.*, September-October 1974. National Labor Relations Board forced Esprit to pay 1.5 million dollars to its former workers for illegally shutting its plant down as a response to the strike (see Laurie Udesky, "Esprit: Sweatshops Behind the Labels," *The Nation*, May 16, 1994 and Richard Rapaport, "The Rise, Fall And Repositioning Of Esprit And Its Founders: Goodbye Susie," *California Business*, August 1992).

The newspaper also sought to provide working women with a usable past through profiles of labor heroines and pioneers such as Mother Jones and printer's union leader Augusta Lewis among many others. Joyce Maupin and other contributors made frequent use of oral history interviews to capture the hidden history of local women's working class activism as well. These historical offerings were more than simple celebrations of women and unions; they reflected WAGE's critical support of the labor movement, and underscored the complexity and pitfalls of women in unions. In her profile of Lewis, for example, Maupin included Lewis's observations that "it is the general opinion of female compositors that they are more justly treated by what is termed 'rat' foremen, printers and employers than they are by union men."<sup>310</sup>

Even in its most theoretical articles, *W.A.G.E.* strove for accessibility. After receiving an unsolicited review of a book by Marxist theoretician Raya Dunayevskaya, the editors returned it to its author as unsuitable, explaining that "some of our members belong to various left tendencies but many more do not, and they are not familiar with Marxist terminology or ideas. They are even less familiar with Hegel, and terms like 'dialectics' or 'negation' would be meaningless to most of the women who read WAGE." A WAGE editor acknowledged that although she had been a longtime veteran of Marxist political organizations, she knew "nothing of Hegel, Sartre or others named in your review." She emphasized

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<sup>310</sup> Maupin, "Labor Heroines," *Union W.A.G.E.*, March-April 1972. *W.A.G.E.* profiles of local labor heroines included cannery worker activist Elizabeth Nicholas and Frances Albrier of Berkeley, who had organized maids on Pullman cars before becoming a welder during World War II (see Maupin, "Elizabeth Nicholas: Rank and File Organizer," *UNION W.A.G.E.*, July-August 1978 and Maupin, "Frances Albrier: Railroad Maid, Shipyard Welder," *UNION W.A.G.E.*, May-June 1980).

that WAGE's policy did not prevent the inclusion of "material presenting political ideas . . . but we do avoid the terminology used in radical papers and keep the language simple and clear."<sup>311</sup>

The process of putting together *Union W.A.G.E.* was as important to the organization as the product. The editorial team prided itself on its commitment to collective decision making and its successful development of new writers, editors, and leaders. Women learned how to write for publication by contributing an account of a strike, a poem, or a book review. They learned the mechanics of copyediting, layout, printing, and distribution. As they stood around the ping pong table that served as their layout space, they debated and discussed the newspaper articles and through those discussions developed ideas and strategies for responding to their own struggles at work. In a sense the newspaper was WAGE's union—their model local that embodied the nurturing culture, democratic practices, and political vision that they wished to see more of in the labor movement.

Unresolved tensions within the organization came to the surface during the tenure of WAGE newspaper editor Pam Allen. In 1964 Allen had been an exchange student at Spelman College in Atlanta when she was recruited by historian Staughton Lynd to work in Mississippi as a freedom summer volunteer. After leaving the South, Allen co-founded New York Radical Women in 1967—a pioneering women's liberation organization—and moved to San Francisco the following year, where she helped launch *Sudsofloppen*, that cities first feminist

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<sup>311</sup> Editorial Board to Terry Moon, 27 October 1975, Box 5, Folder 5, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

consciousness raising group.<sup>312</sup> Two years later, Allen helped launch Breakaway, a Bay Area women's liberation school that included courses on women's history, feminist theory, and auto repair. While Allen had no direct ties to the labor movement, she had been drawn to working-class history through her research and writing on social movements.<sup>313</sup> When a friend invited her to join WAGE in 1974, she jumped at the opportunity and quickly became involved with the newspaper.

By the time she assumed the editorship of the newspaper in May 1977, Allen had more than ten years of experience as an activist in the Deep South and on both coasts. She brought to WAGE strong ideas about building and sustaining grassroots organizations and she envisioned WAGE and its newspaper as a vehicle for uniting all women, not just those in unions. *W.A.G.E.* had never strictly been a house organ, but she felt it was too narrowly focused on wage-earning women and their union battles. And that emphasis smacked of elitism given the rising unemployment rates and an economy in which having any kind of wage work seemed a privilege. Allen expanded the newspaper from twelve to sixteen pages and began devoting more space to topical articles and special issues on sexual assault, women in prison, and reproductive rights.

Readers recognized the changes immediately and their reactions were mixed. In a letter to the editor, a San Francisco woman applauded the shift in

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<sup>312</sup> The organization chose a nonsensical name to avoid being identified with a particular ideology or activity and sought to facilitate links among various political tendencies within the women's liberation movement.

<sup>313</sup> Allen had collaborated with her husband, sociologist Robert Allen on *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States* (Washington: Howard University Press 1974). She had also written an influential pamphlet on the feminist consciousness raising movement (see Pamela Allen, *Free Space: A Perspective on the Small Group in Women's Liberation* (New York: Time Change Press 1970).

*W.A.G.E.*'s direction because it provided "an overview picture of what's happening to our lives, in all their aspects, so that we can confront the many faces of our oppression with knowledge, clarity and determination not to be suckered as bad as we have been—out of ignorance and narrow isolation." She wrote that in her years as a clerical worker, taxi cab driver, waitress, child care worker and barber she had never had the privilege of joining an organizing drive, strike, job action, or independent caucus. So "a paper devoted to a narrow focus of 'organizing' tips and stories is about as useful to me as a brochure on how to invest in stocks!"<sup>314</sup> A New York reader praised the inclusion of several articles on reproductive rights, asserting that it would help "build unity among women by breaking down barriers like union/non-union, wages/welfare, wages/husband, etc. that often separate us."<sup>315</sup> A critic, on the other hand, found the articles on broader themes to be too disconnected from ongoing WAGE programs: "The prison focus was not based in experience of the organization in prison work. As a result, the issue was primarily educational, instead of having the practical and analytical content geared toward use in ongoing work."<sup>316</sup>

The newspaper debates revealed some differences of opinion about the organization's priorities that in better times could have been negotiated and may have even strengthened the group. But as their other programmatic work faltered and their connections to the unions grew more distant, the divisions within WAGE became increasingly bitter and divisive. The group's leaders attempted to build

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<sup>314</sup> Linda John, "Letter to WAGE," *Union W.A.G.E.*, March-April 1979.

<sup>315</sup> Sister in New York to Union WAGE, *Union W.A.G.E.*, July-August 1978.

<sup>316</sup> Sally Floyd, "News for Working Women," *Union W.A.G.E.*, January-February 1979.

consensus regarding the organization's future in their internal publications as well as in the pages of the newspaper. In WAGE's December 1978 internal newsletter, Allen defended her efforts to make the newspaper more broadly appealing and urged WAGE sisters to be more open and honest about their contradictory attitudes toward unions: "WAGE should be looking clearly and ruthlessly at the truth: that rank and file people get corrupted or coopted when they are elected to office, that people who can't be neutralized any other way are beaten up and even killed, and that rank and file groups tend to splinter from their own internal contradictions, assuming they can even get off the ground." Allen concluded that she would continue to argue that "members should try to work to change their unions because we can learn from those struggles, not because I think the unions can be changed."<sup>317</sup>

Joyce Maupin, among other WAGE leaders, attacked Allen's position as defeatist and warned against the danger of encouraging women to participate in union struggles in "which you don't believe they can win" because that "creates demoralization" and breeds cynicism. "Workers don't get into a union struggle for the experience," she reminded Allen, "but to win something. If you do not think this is possible, if you do not think unions are a viable form of struggle, its is better to say so and not mess with them at all." She noted that in times of crisis unions can change significantly as they respond to pressures from the rank and file. "It is comparatively easy to change a union in a crisis period," Maupin wrote,

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<sup>317</sup> Pam Allen, "Excerpt from an Answer," Inter-chapter Newsletter, December 1978, Box 14, Folder 4, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University. A slightly modified version was later published the WAGE newspaper (see Allen, "For a Broader Vision," *Union W.A.G.E.*, January-February 1979).

drawing on her experience during the Boeing strike thirty years earlier. “When we were dissatisfied with our union leadership, we burst into song at union meetings, a song addressed to our president, name of Gibson: ‘Gibson is our leader, he can be removed. Just like garbage floating on the water—he can be removed.’” Maupin concluded by reminding WAGE supporters that from the start the organization had “committed to a primary goal of organizing women into unions.” If the majority of members were no longer committed to that goal, she admitted “we certainly are in a state of confusion.”<sup>318</sup>

In February 1979, WAGE leaders emerged from a difficult two-day meeting in San Francisco believing that “after months of increasing tension, rumors, pre-convention meetings,” and “an unbelievably difficult time planning” their upcoming convention, they had resolved their differences. The session ended and the women applauded as “it began to dawn on us that we were going to make it.” They adopted a modified version of a proposal by Pam Allen to produce four focus issues of the newspaper that, where appropriate, would focus on ongoing WAGE programs.<sup>319</sup>

The sense of relief was short-lived. The divisions were never really resolved. During two meetings in June, the executive board agreed not to reappoint Allen editor. The final dispute involved a disagreement over who would control the contents of a special focus issue on “Third World Women.” Allen had

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<sup>318</sup> Maupin, “Comment on Changing the Unions,” Inter-chapter Newsletter, December 1978, Box 14, Folder 4, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University. An edited version of Maupin’s response appeared as “Everything Can Change,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, January-February 1979.

<sup>319</sup> Jan Arnold, “Putting Humpty Dumpty Back Together Again,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, March-April 1979.

recruited African American women and Latinas to serve as guest contributors to the special issue, but WAGE board members demanded that they retain editorial control. In an editorial printed shortly before her departure, Allen charged the executive board with “challenging the right of Third World, unemployed and poor women to share their concerns and their struggles because these do not fit into a trade union context nor always address issues at the workplace.”<sup>320</sup> A group of Allen’s supporters pledged to continue as a caucus within WAGE, but their efforts were short-lived and they soon left the organization.<sup>321</sup> Other members dropped out because of battle fatigue, while women at the periphery of WAGE who might have become more active were put off by the infighting.<sup>322</sup>

The remaining Union WAGE activists limped into the 1980s. They continued to provide strike support, most notably during a protracted dispute between hotel workers and their employers in downtown San Francisco and they continued to lobby the Industrial Welfare Commission. Despite the commission’s increasingly cooperative stance, every small advance was a struggle in the face of strong opposition from employers groups. In February 1980 as she testified before a legislative committee that was considering the future of the commission,

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<sup>320</sup> Allen, “From the Editor,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, July-August 1979. See also Arnold, “From the President,” in same issue.

<sup>321</sup> Several of Allen’s strongest supporters were women with whom she had worked closely on the newspaper. In response to a WAGE fundraising letter, Allen supporter Judy Syfers blasted the organization’s leaders for firing “an editor who even you admit did her job well and who certainly was the only sister in WAGE who inspired me (as she has inspired many others) to do any real work for the organization.” Syfers wrote that it was saddening to witness “the strangulation of an organization with a distinguished past and a once rich potential” (Judy Syfers to Janet Arnold and Debbie Farson, 28 August 1979, Box 7, Folder 7, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University).

<sup>322</sup> On the adverse impact of Allen’s departure, see Union WAGE, Minutes, Executive board meeting, 29 July 1981, Box 2, Folder 2, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

Joyce Maupin reflected on the conservative counteroffensive that threatened to undo much of the progress that had been made since the 1960s. “I see the employer attack on working standards in California as part of a general right-wing drive in this country to take away any of the benefits and working conditions we have had in the past.” She noted that the June 1978 passage of Proposition 13—a California ballot initiative to cap property taxes—was sold to the public as an effort to “eliminate luxuries in government.” However, those “luxuries turned out to be medical care, child care, libraries and schools” and she observed that “efforts to repeal abortion laws, and taking Medicaid abortions away from poor women, are a part of this reactionary thrust” as well.<sup>323</sup>

In the early 1970s WAGE women were animated by a sense that they were on the verge of an era of mass organizing drives that would lead to the establishment of militant and democratic unions. By the beginning of the 1980s, they were far more sober, if not dispirited. Attendance at WAGE board meetings and other functions declined considerably and most of the organization’s chapters folded. Group discussions shifted from ongoing programs to the organization’s future. In a letter to supporters, WAGE leaders acknowledged that “many of our potential activists are too preoccupied with keeping body and soul together to participate in politics. Others have only a little time to spare, and they are using it to participate in their own union or workplace activity.” Nevertheless,

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<sup>323</sup> Joyce Maupin, “Employers Attack Labor Standards,” *Union W.A.G.E.*, March-April 1980. The passage of Proposition 13 signaled the start of the nationwide “taxpayer’s revolt,” which gave expression to the public’s deep hostility to government and paved the way for the ascendance of Ronald Reagan and movement conservatism.

they vowed to persevere so that they might “feel less like victims and more like the proud troublemakers that we are.”<sup>324</sup>

Finally, in the fall of 1982 the remaining WAGE leaders issued a farewell letter to their readers and supporters, explaining that they were experiencing “the larger difficulties facing women attempting to unionize.” In the early 1970s, they wrote, women had phoned WAGE and wrote regularly requesting advice and assistance in organizing unions. But the dismal economy marked by “high unemployment” and “worsened by government cutbacks and plant closures, makes rocking the boat and risking your job dangerous business.” The AFL-CIO had “not been daring or spirited in action” and deserved its share of the blame. Despite its recent vows to “renew its ties with community groups and popular movements” its “community relations are poor.” The WAGE stalwarts concluded wistfully: “The time for organizing working women must come some day. We hope that we have made a significant contribution to this struggle and we urge others to keep fighting. What matters is not the name of the organization, but that the fight goes on. Speaking for ourselves, we have seen ceaseless injustice perpetrated on working women, and we will never forget it.”<sup>325</sup>

In their more recent retrospections, veterans of Union WAGE have expressed ambivalence regarding their experiences and the organization’s legacies. They cherish the close relationships they built and retain proud memories of picket lines and Industrial Welfare Commission protests. They

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<sup>324</sup> Joyce Maupin and Karen Guma to Members and friends, August 1981, Box 3, Folder 3, Union WAGE Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

<sup>325</sup> “WAGE Punches Out,” *Union WAGE*, 1982.

treasure the skills they gained working on the newspaper and organizing workshops that trained hundreds of women to become labor movement activists. They also rightfully acknowledge that in the Bay Area, they had a positive impact on the gender politics and the organizational culture of some of the largest unions in the country, including locals of the SEIU, OPEIU, AFSCME, and the AFT. Within those unions, Kay Eisenhower, Maxine Jenkins and many other WAGE activists took the lead in fighting for rank and file democracy and a host of reforms that benefited women workers, including pay equity, childcare, fairness in promotions, rigorous enforcement of health and safety rules, and protections from sexual harassment. The successful organization of city workers on both sides of the Bay were significant steps forward for women and for the labor movement, and at times the Industrial Welfare Commission showed promise of serving as a vehicle through which WAGE might fight for improved wages and working conditions for all California workers. But the long anticipated breakthrough never materialized. WAGE's misadventure with the independent union of San Francisco city workers was a major disappointment. The State of California also proved itself sufficiently malleable to accommodate some of WAGE's demands, while preventing the Industrial Welfare Commission from becoming a strong voice and watchdog for the interests of the state's workers. The employers' groups were too effective and powerful. Because of these setbacks, the heated debates over CLUW and the fight over the direction of the newspaper continue to cloud WAGE veterans' memories, many of whom express deep bitterness over the group's demise.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> On a more hopeful note, in October 2003 about thirty WAGE veterans gathered for the

Even if WAGE had reached a working synthesis among its various factions, it is unlikely to have found much fertile ground for organizing in the 1980s. The level of worker militancy had subsided and the political and economic climate grew increasingly hostile to all forms of progressive organizing. The young feminists who had turned to working class organizing in the early 1970s, who had looked to WAGE for guidance and had provided it with much of its earliest leadership had by immersed themselves in their own unions by the mid-1970s. They had less need of WAGE's assistance and less time to contribute to it. Moreover, the thousands of women who continued to pour into the growing service producing sector in Northern California in the 1980s found their employers and their unions generally more responsive to their needs. And when they were not, they looked to the state to guarantee fairness. In the Bay Area, that change was due in no small part to the work of Union WAGE.

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organization's first "reunion"—a reception for an exhibit of Cathy Cade's WAGE photographs. Women from all of WAGE's eras and all of its competing tendencies met at the Institute of Industrial Relations at UC Berkeley.

## Chapter 5: Laborers in a Smaller Vineyard

Returning from the salmon canneries at the close of the summer of 1953, the “Alaskeros” gathered in Seattle to rededicate their newly refurbished ILWU Local 37 union hall. Noting that the facility had been redesigned with an eye toward expanding cultural and recreational programs for young people, business agent Ernesto Mangaoang declared that “the answer of Local 37 to the problem of protecting its future is to identify itself with its community and to seek out new allies and win the youth of this community.” He urged his union brothers to “familiarize the younger generation with the necessity of perpetuating our union” because “the time will come when we will no longer be here” and “they will one day take our places.”<sup>327</sup>

Mangaoang’s remarks took on a special urgency as fall approached. The union of almost 1,500 mostly Filipino workers faced the toughest challenges of its twenty-year existence.<sup>328</sup> A few years earlier, the CIO had expelled the cannery

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<sup>327</sup> Mangaoang, “Youth’s Challenge to Labor,” Typescript of remarks at Local 37 dedication, 20 August 1953, Box 30, Folder 63, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>328</sup> The union’s membership fluctuated from year to year depending on the season’s catch. For most of the 1970s the membership ranged between 500 and 1000. On the history of the Alaskan canneries, Asian workers, and their struggles for union representation, see Chris Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor: The Pacific Coast Canned-Salmon Industry, 1870-1942* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). See also Micah Ellison, “The Local 7/ Local 37 Story: Filipino American Cannery Unionism in Seattle 1940-1959,” Fall 2004, and Crystal Fresco, “Cannery Workers’ and Farm Laborer’s Union: Their Strength in Unity,” Spring 1999, Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project website: <http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/Asian%20Americans.htm#research>.

workers' national union for its alleged affiliation with the Communist Party.<sup>329</sup>

Raids by rival unions, at times instigated by affiliates of the American Federation of Labor and other times by the cannery owners added to the union's worries. For four years several Local 37 leaders had also labored under the shadow of charges by the Immigration and Naturalization Services that they were Communists and aliens. They expected a U.S. Supreme Court ruling on their pending deportations to the Philippines any day.

By the early 1960s, most of Mangaoang's left-wing comrades had either left or been driven out of Local 37 and their conservative rivals assumed control of the union as it slipped into a long period of complacency and corruption.<sup>330</sup> A few old progressives, however, lived long enough to work with a new generation of Local 37 radicals, to share in their victories and mourn their bitterest loss. Beginning in the early 1970s this new generation, who had been shaped profoundly by their participation in the New Left and civil rights movements, organized one of the turn to the working class's most sustained and successful efforts to shape the politics and culture of a union local in the United States. Led

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<sup>329</sup> The CIO expelled the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union of America (FTA) and ten other national unions in 1949-1950 after concluding that they were communist dominated. FTA officials, had been reluctant to sign federally-mandated affidavits declaring that they were not members of the Communist Party and did not support its goals. The affidavits, a provision of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act were required for protection of the National Labor Relations Board. As the FTA subsequently unraveled, the cannery workers affiliated with the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) in March 1950, becoming Local 7-C and then Local 37. FTA locals in the South faced similar challenges during this time. See Karl Korstad in Steve Rosswurm ed., *The CIO's left-led unions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1992) and Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2003).

<sup>330</sup> For an extensive discussion of the Cold War infighting within Local 37, see Micah Ellison, "The Local 7/ Local 37 Story: Filipino American Cannery Unionism in Seattle 1940-1959," Fall 2004, Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project website: <http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/Asian%20Americans.htm#research>.

by Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes, this group of young activists within Local 37 implemented democratic measures that broke the grip of local gangsters who had run the union by controlling its dispatch system. They also mobilized the union to fight discrimination and hazardous work conditions in the Alaska canneries through an intensive long haul grassroots struggle. Moreover, in line with the labor movement's best tradition of international solidarity, they established a power base within the ILWU and the west coast Filipino community from which they organized opposition to U.S. foreign policy and the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines.

Since they were teenagers, Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes had spent their summers working in the Alaskan salmon canneries, as had their fathers and their uncles before them. They knew well the hazardous conditions in the canneries, where slippery floors, outmoded equipment, and dull knives led to countless injuries and occasional fatalities. Into the 1970s the salmon canning process remained mostly unchanged since the turn of the century introduction of the "Iron Chink," a fish gutting machine so named on its United States patent application because of the thousands of Chinese workers it displaced. During the six to twelve weeks of the season, white fishermen represented by the Alaska Fisherman's Union (AFU) docked their fishing vessels or tenders at the canneries, where the "beach gang," who were mainly white AFU members, unloaded salmon by hand or water propulsion on to elevators that carried the fish into the fish house—the domain of the Filipino and Native American workers

represented by Local 37. Until the 1970s when the industry began hiring large numbers of white and Asian female college students—who were believed to possess the necessary dexterity to remove the roe for which there was a strong market in Japan—few white workers other than machinists and supervisors ventured in to the fish house. Experienced Filipino workers hand-sorted the five types of salmon: king, red/sockeye, silver/coho, dog/chum, and humpy/pink. The sorters then put the salmon in bins capable of holding up to twenty thousand at a time. Through elevators and troughs, the fish passed through the Iron Chink butchering machines where a series of rotating blades and brushes removed fins, scales, and guts. Though the Iron Chink processed as many as five thousand fish an hour, it was inexact and left plenty of work for “slimers” who, equipped with a knife, cutting board and cold running faucet, removed remaining unwanted parts by hand. After the salmon was gutted and cleaned, workers pushed them into feeders that cut the fish and filled empty aluminum cans. Each can was then weighed and inspected, lids attached and sealed, then loaded on racks or can catchers. Pressure cookers, or “retorts” cooked the salmon cans before they were cased and readied for shipment.<sup>331</sup>

Domingo and Viernes had friends and relatives who had been maimed in the canneries either through trauma or repetitive motion injuries. Drawn by the lure of overtime pay, fish house workers sometimes labored around the clock in pools of cold water and fish parts. They suffered high rates of arthritis from

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<sup>331</sup> On salmon processing see Craig Claiborne, “The Salmon is King to Cannery (and Cooks) in the Alaskan Wilderness,” *New York Times*, 19 August 1965; and Michael Woo and Silme Domingo, Report on Alaska cannery trip, 10 September 1973, Box 13, Folder “ACWA 1974,” Tyree Scott Papers, University of Washington, Seattle.

handling fish that had been frozen or brined—kept in chilled sea water—on the boats. Every worker had heard stories of major accidents involving heavy machinery and other catastrophes such as the 1968 bunk house fire in which a stove exploded, trapping the sleeping men on the second and third floors, killing five, and seriously injuring 25 others. Survivors who jumped from the flaming building sustained “broken legs; back; ribs; slight burns of faces; ears; arms; and hairs.”<sup>332</sup>

Domingo and Viernes also experienced first hand the discriminatory practices of the cannery owners. Well into the 1970s Filipino and Native Alaskan cannery workers spent their non-work hours in dormitories that were separate from and inferior to those of white workers and they ate inferior food in separate cafeterias. The cannery managers filled openings for machinists, carpenters, and administrators almost exclusively with white workers and a vague hiring and promotion process kept Filipinos from moving above unskilled work.<sup>333</sup> Each salmon season workers barraged their union leaders in Seattle with an inventory of complaints about the deplorable conditions and racist employment practices in the canneries, but Local 37 officials rarely pressed management for improvements for fear of jeopardizing their comfortable relationships with the

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<sup>332</sup> Upon his return to Seattle from the Ketchikan General Hospital where he had visited survivors, Local 37 president wrote to the union members and recommended “that all windows” at cannery bunk houses “should be furnished with knotted ropes for an emergency fire escape.” This, he believed, would help avoid a repeat of the fire tragedy (see Gene Navarro to Members of Local 37, [July 1968], Box 26, Folder 27, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle).

<sup>333</sup> For workers’ reports of racial and gender discrimination in the canneries, see John B. Hatten to the President and the Attorney, ILWU Local 37, 27 July 1977, Box 27, Folder 9; Rene Laigo to Tony Baruso, [summer 1978], Box 26, Folder 37; and Affidavit of Richard Gurtiza, United States District Court Western District of Washington. Frank Atonio, et al., v. Wards Cove Packing Company, INC., et al. No. C74-145M, 1 April 1982, Box 30, Folder 14, all documents located in Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

cannery owners. At the New England Fish Company cannery in Uganik Bay, for instance, a union delegate urged the Local 37 president to address the deplorable sleeping arrangements in the Filipino bunk house where seven workers sometimes shared a room in which “many beds were double decked” in violation of health and fire codes. The delegate contrasted the Filipino dorms with the quarters for white machinists and beach gang workers: “They have the rooms over the store. Well constructed, modern furniture, steam heat, fully carpeted, spreads and drapes to match, connected bathroom with each 2 rooms.” These conditions and many others were inconvenient and insulting to the Filipino workers, others were dangerous and deadly, such as the oil barrel just outside one bunkhouse that “leaked oil constantly under the porch floor and really created a fire hazard.” Workers asked managers to install a fire hose nearby, but that request was ignored, while “people kept getting ill from the oil fumes from stoves in the rooms.”<sup>334</sup>

Union elections, when they occurred, were marred by fraud, despite prodding from ILWU international officers in San Francisco and directives from

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<sup>334</sup> Other complaints from the same report included inadequate clothes washing facilities, unsanitary toilets, overcrowding, a lack of privacy, discriminatory curfews and dorm rules, and racist treatment by cannery medical staff (see Hazel Diaz, Delegate’s report, [1976]), Box 26, Folder 34). The following year, forty-two workers from the same cannery signed a letter reiterating many of the same concerns and petitioned the Local 37 executive board to take action: “44 workers are forced to use just three wringer-type washers with only one dryer. But even worse, over 40 women must somehow use only one washer and one dryer. Workers are faced with the dilemma during the peak season of trying to wash and dry clothes with inadequate facilities.” Change will occur only if “the Union is willing to take a position on behalf of the membership and take up the issue directly with NEFCO officials” (see Local 37 ILWU Crew members Employed at NEFCO’s Uganik Processing Plant to ILWU Local 37 Executive Board, 21 August 1977, Box 26, Folder 34). For additional grievances, see Phillip Narte to Tony Baruso, 28 November 1976, Box 26, Folder 29, and Chignik workers to Gene Navarro, 1976, Box 27, Folder 9, all documents located in Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

the U.S. Department of Labor. In its investigation of the 1972 elections, the Department of Labor substantiated claims that incumbent candidates had campaigned on union time and that the union failed to give proper notice of nominations and elections. The Department also found that dozens of members living outside of Seattle and those working in Alaska at the time of the election had not received ballots. The ballot shortage, however, did not prevent the union voting machines from tallying more votes than the number of registered voters. By the time the Department of Labor forced Local 37 to adopt various procedural reforms, those union leaders who had engaged in fraud were in the final days of their terms.<sup>335</sup>

It might be argued without too much exaggeration that the union in the 1970s functioned most effectively as a cover for a massive gambling operation that was controlled by the Tulisan, a Seattle-based gang. Heavy handed foremen associated with the Tulisan extorted bribes from workers in exchange for a dispatch from the Seattle union hall. Once in Alaska, these same foremen bullied members into high stakes card games that sometimes left workers deeper in debt than when they had left the lower forty-eight. Immigrant Filipino workers, who had done the bulk of canning since the 1920s when immigration laws reduced Japanese migration to a trickle, proved especially vulnerable to the

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<sup>335</sup> The Department of Labor also observed that “two of four keys to each of the voting machines were kept in the desk of the incumbent Secretary-Treasurer, who was a successful candidate for reelection” (see J. Vernon Ballard to Gene Navarro, 5 December 1974, and J. Vernon Ballard, U.S. Department of Labor Determination, 3 December 1974, both documents in Box 29, Folder 41, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle).

predations of the foremen.<sup>336</sup> For years, these practices remained an open secret among Seattle Filipinos, the ILWU, and cannery industry managers all of whom looked the other way in exchange for labor peace.

Until the late 1950s, Local 37 had also supported left-wing liberation movements and independent trade unions in the Philippines, but in recent years it had become a source of support for the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship based on a shared ethnic identity with the many Seattle Filipinos who had ties to his home province of Ilocos Norte, as well as on Marcos's ability to cultivate relationships with powerful Filipinos abroad.<sup>337</sup> Marcos had been elected to the presidency in 1965 after having served in the Philippine House of Representatives and the Senate for many years. In September 1972, he declared martial law, suspending many civil liberties and giving himself dictatorial powers over the military and the press. There was some popular support for martial law among Filipinos, who believed that it was the only way to restore order in the midst of economic and social upheaval. But domestic and international opposition to Marcos grew amidst reports of massive corruption,

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<sup>336</sup> The congressional immigration restrictions of 1882 and 1924 greatly reduced the flow of Chinese and Japanese immigrants who had done the bulk of salmon canning in the industry's first fifty years; the WWII Japanese internment policies left the industry almost wholly dependent on Filipino labor.

<sup>337</sup> The Local 37 1952 "Yearbook," which was edited by the well-known Filipino writer Carlos Bulosan, provides ample illustration of the union's ties to the Philippine left. Bulosan, who was also a Local 37 member, included in the Yearbook a report on the suppression of the Filipino labor movement, an editorial by Amado V. Hernandez, the jailed leader of the outlawed Philippine Congress of Labor Organizations (CLO), and a message from William Pomeroy, an American who was jailed for working with the Huk movement, a group of communist guerillas who had led the popular resistance to Japanese occupation during the war (see "Terrorism Rides The Philippines," Hernandez, "Wall St. Chains the Philippines," and Pomeroy, "Heritage of Truth," in "Cannery Workers Local 37 ILWU, 1952 Yearbook," Box 26, Folder 17, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle).

political repression, and human rights violations. Philippine authorities stationed at the consulate in Seattle attempted to counter the opposition and bolster Marcos's position by forging close ties to the conservative leaders of the city's Filipino community and within the union.<sup>338</sup> The consular officials understood that a hostile ILWU, with its ability to disrupt global trade, posed a significant threat to the Filipino economy and they realized that Local 37 and the even larger ILWU Local 142 in Hawaii were among the most important Filipino-American political institutions in the United States and could influence public opinion and help sway U.S. foreign policy against Marcos.

Both of the union's presidents during the 1970s were strong Marcos supporters. President Gene Navarro traveled to the Philippines as part of the *Balikbayan* (homecoming)—a government program that aimed to polish Marcos's reputation through subsidized visits for Filipinos living abroad. Navarro returned to Seattle and reported to Local 37 that he “appreciated the way the government is being administered under martial law.”<sup>339</sup> His successor, Tony Baruso, boasted of his close relationship with Marcos and decorated his union hall office with a photograph of himself shaking hands with the dictator. Baruso was also close to consular officials, and was a strong supporter of their efforts to deport three Filipina maids who had allegedly stolen from the consulate. The incident divided

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<sup>338</sup> Consular authorities attended banquets and festivals as guests of honor of the Filipino community's social and fraternal organizations. Note, for instance, the presence of ambassador Julia Palarca at the December 1973 commemoration of the martyrdom of Jose Rizal, the national hero of the Philippines (see Filipino Community of Seattle, Inc, Program, Rizal Day Commemoration, 29 December 1973, Box 29, Folder 42, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle).

<sup>339</sup> ILWU Local 37, Executive Council Minutes, 19 February 1975, Box 5, Folder 5, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

Seattle's Filipino community after the maids filed for political asylum on the grounds that they would be persecuted upon their return to the Philippines. Marcos supporters demanded their deportation, while the growing opposition to Marcos supported their petitions for asylum.<sup>340</sup>

By the late 1960s, the local was a shell of the militant left-wing union that had been organized in the 1930s as Cannery Workers' and Farm Laborers' Union Local 7 of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The roots of the union's descent can be traced to the years after World War II, during which it fended off attacks from the cannery owners, rival unions, organized crime elements, and the federal government. In 1950 government agents arrested some thirty Local 37 members, including the local president and business agent, and charged them with failing to register with the attorney general as communists under the recently passed McCarran Internal Security Act. Paralleling the government's campaign against the Australian-born ILWU president Harry Bridges, the arrests and threatened deportation of Local 37 members continued for several years until union lawyers won a U.S. Appeals Court ruling, subsequently confirmed by the Supreme Court, that prevented the deportation of Filipinos who had migrated before 1934 when the Philippines was still a U.S. territory.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> One Local 37 member later charged that Baruso had expelled him from the union for having married one of the maids, thus allowing her to stay in the United States (see "NLRB Nineteenth Region, ILWU Local 37 [respondent] and Laurencio R. Razote [an individual]," Case No. 19CB-3609, Box 30, Folders 20-21, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle).

<sup>341</sup> 205 F.2d 553 John Boyd, District Director of Immigration and Naturalization Service, and Robert D. Cummings, petitioners, v. Ernesto Arcebal Mangaoang No. 325 Supreme Court of the United States November 9, 1953 and Mangaoang v. Boyd, District Director, Immigration and

Longtime Local 37 member Terri Mast believes that Cold War anti-Communism crippled the union's effectiveness: "The officers spent a lot of time defending themselves and got away from running the union." As a result, she believes that the union never transitioned from the tumultuous campaign to establish and defend itself against government attacks to the more mundane, but critical project of sustaining a union that would protect workers on the job and negotiate favorable contracts. In getting to know the early leaders of the union, Mast also saw up close how the years of repression wrought havoc on their families and personal relationships as several of the union's pioneers succumbed to alcoholism. Though Local 37 had once been preeminent in Filipino political and civic affairs, it lost some respect within the Filipino community in the 1960s due to its Communist taint and the personal failings of some union leaders.<sup>342</sup>

Viernes, Domingo, and other U.S.-born cannery workers of their generation were unwilling to tolerate the exploitation of the canners and the complicity and corruption of their union officials. Their politics were shaped by a growing spirit of dissent in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as their participation in Seattle protest movements. Silme Domingo was born in 1952, raised in the predominantly white Seattle neighborhood of Ballard, and graduated with honors from the University of Washington, where he participated in Seattle's

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Naturalization Service et al. No. 13537 United States Court of Appeals Ninth Circuit 205 F.2d 553; 1953 U.S. App. LEXIS 2629 June 17, 1953.

<sup>342</sup> Terri Mast, Interview by author, 17 December 2003. Mast's observations underscore the arguments of some historians who have found that the anti-Communist crusade undermined the labor movement's vitality, as well as its commitments to union democracy, civil rights, and gender equality, and led to a loss of militancy. See, for example, the essays of Ellen Schrecker and Michael K. Honey in Robert W. Cherny, William Issel, and Kieran Walsh Taylor, eds. *American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots Politics and Postwar Political Culture* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press 2004), pp. 7-24, and 216-244.

Asian movement—a largely youth-based effort to fight discrimination and promote Asian cultures and identities. Through his father’s connections Silme worked summers at the New England Fish Company Uganik Bay cannery.<sup>343</sup> His older brother, Nemesio was also a cannery worker, and had been a member of SDS, the Washington Peace and Freedom Party, and the Venceremos Brigade, which brought radical students to work in Cuba to learn about the revolution’s achievements. Nemesio Domingo later recalled that during off hours the younger workers gathered to discuss grievances and plan strategies for making work fair and tolerable. He and Silme quickly emerged as leaders, he remembered, because “we were always speaking our piece.”<sup>344</sup>

Others who became involved in the cannery workers movement had similar histories of activism. David Della became an activist while still a student at Cleveland High School—where he came in to contact with slightly older Asian radicals, including teaching assistant Nemesio Domingo Jr. As a college student at the University of Washington, Della fought for low-income housing in the International District and the expansion of bilingual social services.<sup>345</sup> Before she was swept up in the Filipino movement though her friendships with several of its key leaders, Terri Mast participated in antiwar demonstrations and women’s liberation. Mast, who grew up in a white working-class family in Seattle, spent

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<sup>343</sup> Dick Clever, “Violent Path Toward Reform,” *Seattle Times*, 7 June 1981.

<sup>344</sup> Stamets, “Cannery Murders,” 10 August 1982, *Seattle Weekly Sun*. See also Dick Clever, “Violent Path Toward Reform,” *Seattle Times*, 7 June 1981 and Domingo Jr. to Cannery Workers’ Union ILWU Local 37, 15 November 1968, Box 28, Folder 5, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>345</sup> David Della, Interview by author, 20 December 2003.

much of her young adulthood in the University District, which was a hotbed of leftist politics in the late 1960s and 1970s. It was there that Mast, recalls Black Panthers lecturing the counterculture youth about the need to take politics more seriously.<sup>346</sup> Bruce Occena, who played a key leadership role in the later years of the cannery worker reform movement, helped supply the Native Americans who seized Alcatraz Island in 1969 and was among the early leaders of the battle to save San Francisco's International Hotel from the demolition that led to the displacement of hundreds of low-income residents. As a student at Berkeley in the late 1960s, Occena participated in communist study groups led by Chinese graduate students, and like Nemesio Domingo, he had traveled to Cuba on a trip sponsored by the Venceremos Brigade.<sup>347</sup>

At the end of 1971, Silme Domingo and ten of his coworkers were dismissed for "agitating the crew." When Local 37 declined to intervene on their behalf, they drew upon their extensive contacts among Seattle progressives to launch the first of several discrimination lawsuits with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Civil rights and labor activist Tyree Scott of the United Construction Workers Association (UCWA), encouraged the cannery dissidents to form an organization that could publicize the suits, gather information to build strong cases, and recruit additional plaintiffs from among the workers. Scott's organization, which used direct action and legal strategies to secure jobs for African Americans in the construction industry, provided a small

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<sup>346</sup> Terri Mast, Interview by author, 17 December 2003.

<sup>347</sup> Bruce Occena, Interview by author, 18 January 2004.

grant to launch the Alaskan Cannery Workers Association (ACWA) in the summer of 1973.<sup>348</sup>

A few weeks later, posing as University of Washington business students conducting industry research, Domingo and his associate Michael Woo traveled to Alaska to gather evidence for the lawsuits. But the word spread among the cannery operators about the two suspicious “students,” and Woo and Domingo found themselves shut out of the fish camps. They were forced to end their trip after a few days, but before leaving Alaska they interviewed a few workers who shared their anger at the deplorable conditions in the canneries and their frustrations with the union. Among those workers was Gene Viernes, a slimer at Ward’s Cove in Ketchikan Bay. He became one of their best informants and most reliable allies.<sup>349</sup>

Viernes grew up in Wapato in the Yakima Valley east of Seattle, and spent his first summer in the canneries in 1966 at Ward’s Cove. Like Domingo, Viernes secured a position with his father’s bribe to a foreman. Though Viernes was not an activist during his first several summers in Alaska, he and a group of young cannery workers began speaking out against the miserable conditions in the summer of 1971. His childhood friend and coworker Andy Pascua later remembered that the cannery workers reached their breaking point over the mistreatment of their uncles and fathers. “We first got upset over the treatment of

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<sup>348</sup> The UCWA board allocated \$3,000 “to begin investigations in Alaska salmon industry,” ACWA, Chronology of events [May 1974], Box 13, Folder “ACWA 1974,” Tyree Scott Papers, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>349</sup> Michael Woo and Silme Domingo, Report on Alaska cannery trip, 10 September 1973, Box 13, Folder “ACWA 1974,” Tyree Scott Papers, University of Washington, Seattle.

the old men there, the way [*management*] treated our fathers. The old men couldn't even talk back to the foremen. We weren't used to that. We were used to farm life where everyone works together, not this very structured work with all the power in the foreman. It really hurt us to see the old men treated this way. We had grown up with them. That was the catalyst for action."<sup>350</sup> Another sore spot for Viernes and other non-white workers was that they were served lower quality food than their white counterparts. Knowing that the union would not file appropriate grievances, Viernes organized a series of disruptive hunger strikes that led to improvements in the cafeteria offerings. By the fall of 1973, shortly after meeting Silme Domingo, Viernes too was fired and both men found themselves blacklisted from the canneries and the union.

With its core group consisting mostly of blacklisted workers, the Alaskan Cannery Workers Association focused on recruiting support from working union members and inviting them to join as plaintiffs in the lawsuits. They appealed to some frustrated young workers who felt alienated from the union's aging leaders, many of whom had not worked in the canneries for years. Many other workers viewed the Association with suspicion and sympathized with the leaders of Local 37 who accused the young radicals of being communists and of creating a dual union. When they got wind of the upstart organization's formation, Local 37 board members had been outraged. Union vice president Tony Baruso urged members to "open our eyes and always be aware in protecting the interests of our members from outside interference." Other board members vowed to "counteract

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<sup>350</sup> John Stamets, "The Cannery Murders," *Seattle Sun*, 10 August 1982.

their move and destroy their growth.”<sup>351</sup> Association leaders responded to the charges of outside interference by emphasizing that each of their staff and board members “is or has been employed in the industry.” Nevertheless, early on in their efforts they struggled to overcome the cannery workers’ deep feelings of resignation and understandable fear of being blacklisted for challenging the union.<sup>352</sup>

After two years outside of the official union structure, however, ACWA members began to question their over-reliance on a legal strategy rather than a grassroots organizing approach that would challenge Local 37’s entrenched leadership. Their attitude towards Local 37 had been partly a reflection of their New Left sensibilities. Many in the student movement, especially, had dismissed unions as hopelessly reactionary and had written off union leaders as labor bureaucrats.<sup>353</sup> But as long as the Local 37’s “leadership was corrupt or allowed to be lazy,” Association leaders eventually concluded, their effort “would have no real tools to fight . . . against the company for better wages, better health and

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<sup>351</sup> At a special executive council meeting in the fall of 1973, president Navarro described ACWA as “evidently a rival of this Union,” because “among the activist member if not the founder of such rival union, is one of the complainant of the case now pending before the N.L.R.B. against our Union.” Navarro then scoffed at a letter he had received from Nemesio Domingo Jr. inviting him to a meeting to “elect officers and adopt” a constitution for the new group. Navarro announced that he would not attend “because if it is a meeting of cannery workers, it should take place in Local #37 I.L.W.U. Hall, and that he (Mr. Navarro) is the only one who can call a meeting of the Cannery Workers who are members of Local #37,” Minutes, Special Executive Board ILWU Local 37, 14 November 1973, Box 5, Folder 4. For the ACWA’s efforts to solicit the cooperation of Local 37, see Nemesio Domingo Jr. to Navarro, 10 December 1973 and Michael J. Fox to Navarro, 19 December 1973, Box 30, Folder 17, all documents in Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>352</sup> Michael Woo to Robert Torres, Junior Condes, Jose Bartolo and Foster Macebo, 3 July 1974, Box 37, Folder 6, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>353</sup> On this tendency within the New Left, see Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois 1994) pp. 108-127.

safety, and improved living conditions.”<sup>354</sup> Moreover, some Association activists feared that they were growing disconnected from the realities of cannery work. Association leaders understood that the lawsuits and the formation of an organization independent of Local 37 were useful and probably necessary initial strategies given that members had been blacklisted from the industry and the union, but the legal strategy had been pursued to the exclusion of the more rooted issue of union reform. Once they decided to return to the canneries, Bruce Occena later recalled, “we had the very difficult task of reversing and going back into the union.”<sup>355</sup>

Shifting gears in 1975, ACWA began encouraging supporters to re-enter the union and refocus their efforts on union reform even as their lawsuits worked their ways through the courts. To bypass the tremendous suspicion and hostility of the union’s officers, ACWA members used family ties and other personal connections to once again secure dispatches to the canneries. Silme’s father Nemesio Sr., who had worked in the canneries from 1927 to 1942, drew upon his extensive networks in the canneries and persuaded a corrupt foreman to dispatch his sons to Alaska. Tony Baruso, who had become president in the wake of Navarro’s death in the spring of 1976, objected, but an ILWU lawyer informed him there were no grounds for excluding the Domingos from the

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<sup>354</sup> ACWA, Minutes, Board of Directors, 8 August 1975, Box 37, Folder 7 and “Our View on the ’78 Election,” *Alaskero News*, March 1979, Box 33, Folder 43, both documents located in Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>355</sup> Bruce Occena, Interview by author, 18 January 2004. Occena’s comments are echoed in a retrospective analysis of ACWA’s work that suggests that their early efforts verged on dual unionism and reflected an “ultra-left” dismissal of trade unions as hopelessly bureaucratic (Line of March document copy in author’s possession).

union.<sup>356</sup> By the salmon season of the following year, the Domingo brothers, Viernes, and several of their ACWA supporters were back at work in Alaska and had formed a union reform caucus, the Rank and File Committee of Local 37.

In adopting the name Rank and File Committee (RFC), they drew strategically on an enduring bit of Local 37 laborlore. As the story goes, twelve hundred cannery workers were crowded onboard the Alaska-bound SS Santa Cruz on a hot summer's evening in 1946. The men were angry at the canners for herding them on to a filthy ship with inadequate provisions, and incensed at their union for allowing it to happen. They gathered below deck, vowed to take over their corrupt union, and elected a committee to lead the fight. Their anger boiled over into rage after the ship ran aground, leaving them exposed to brutal cold and dire hunger for three days and nights. Upon their return to Seattle at the end of the summer and true to their pledge, they reconvened and named their movement the Rank and File Committee. This first Rank and File Committee soon became the driving force within the union; committee leaders led Local 37 through the years of the Red Scare. The Local 37 creation narrative was well-known among old timers, as well as the young radicals of the 1970s and any cannery worker who was interested in the union's history. The reconstituted Rank and File Committee took every opportunity to retell the story, incorporating it into

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<sup>356</sup> In June of 1976 Baruso contacted ILWU Vice President William Chester and inquired as to whether he was required to allow the dissidents back in to the union. After consulting with union lawyers, Chester advised Baruso to readmit them (see Benjamin O. Anderson to William H. Chester, 22 June 1976, and Chester to Baruso, 23 June 1976, ILWU Local 37 Correspondence through 1977 [general] 18G, ILWU Archive in the Ann Rand Research Library, San Francisco, Series: local collections, Marine Div./IBU/Region 37, Local 37 Historical Materials, Officers Correspondence, 1934-present).

their public presentations and publishing versions in their newsletter and the *International Examiner*, a local newspaper they published.<sup>357</sup>

Even before they had been readmitted to Local 37, 1970s version of the Rank and File Committee adopted a blueprint for transforming the union. Once reestablished within the union they planned to form a caucus that would identify key individuals to back for union elections. They would couple these electoral efforts with “administrative and legal actions . . . to force union resignations” and provoke ILWU International intervention. They also committed themselves to joining key union committees and immersing themselves in the details of labor law and health and safety standards.<sup>358</sup>

Over the next several years, the Rank and File Committee put those plans into action. They used a combination of parliamentary rules, recall campaigns, union elections, and member education and training to build a movement to challenge the union’s old guard. Gene Viernes initiated a program to train shop stewards, and he and other Rank and File Committee supporters sought election as union delegates so that they might aggressively pursue grievances.<sup>359</sup> Silme Domingo joined the negotiations committee and successfully pushed the union to adopt a policy whereby no workers would be dispatched without a contract

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<sup>357</sup> Glenn Suson, “Where is our Union?,” *Alaskero News*, March 1980, Box 33, Folder 45, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle. See also Viernes, “Cannery Workers’ Union Emerges from War Years and McCarthy Era,” *International Examiner*, July 1977. Note that Viernes identifies the ship as the SS Young America.

<sup>358</sup> ACWA, Minutes of Special Meeting, 25 August 1975, Box 37, Folder 7, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>359</sup> Delegate training program committee to Local 37 members, 16 April 1980, Box 33, Folder 5, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

ratified by the membership.<sup>360</sup> He also helped reinvigorate the union's organizing efforts by spearheading an ambitious drive to organize non-union canneries under the auspices of the ILWU's All-Alaska Council. Still other reformers waged a kind of low-intensity warfare to keep union president Tony Baruso and his allies off balance by holding them narrowly to the union's policies and procedures. They contested, documented, and reported slight infractions such as cancelled meetings and poor accounting practices as they built their case that the union's leaders were corrupt and incompetent.<sup>361</sup>

Women played key roles in the reform effort. In the early 1970s the canneries began hiring increasing numbers of women, especially college-age white women from the West Coast. The cannery owners did so in response to the growing Japanese demand for salmon roe, the harvesting of which was considered women's work. The inclusion of these new workers gave the cannery owners an opportunity to undermine the union's base among Filipino men. However, the newly hired women often demonstrated a similar willingness to exercise their rights at work not unlike the San Francisco Bay Area women who were transforming the political culture of the region's public and service sector unions in the 1970s. Once informed of the Rank and File Committee's efforts to fight discrimination and union corruption, they often proved to be sympathetic.

Committee members Emily Van Bronkhorst, Terri Mast, and Silme's sister Lynn

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<sup>360</sup> ILWU Local 37, Press release, "Cannery workers contract negotiations," 24 April 1980, Box 31, Folder 25, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>361</sup> See, for example, John B. Hatten to Baruso and Ponce Torres, 3 November 1978, Box 27, Folder 16, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

Domingo recruited dozens of women into the reform movement who might not have responded to similar appeals from Asian men.

Bruce Occena, a key Rank and File Committee strategist observed that the female leaders also provided a buffer in the male-dominated and gangster-dominated world of the canneries: “We were fighting a culture battle where the guys who were the stewards were the same guys who ran the gambling, and their lieutenants were these Tulisan, this gangster element. . . . We basically were trying to create another culture.” Women “could actually get away with saying things . . . that the males could not because the males would be more easy targets. So we tried to use whatever bogus chivalry existed, but what it meant is putting incredibly scary and big responsibilities on the shoulders of the women organizers.”<sup>362</sup>

Along with their campaign for union democracy, the reformers carried out an ambitious program of agitation and education regarding the situation in the Philippines. In 1974 Domingo and Viernes and several other Filipino cannery workers joined the Union of Democratic Filipinos (Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino/KDP), a newly formed organization to fight for democracy in the Philippines and democratic rights for Filipino Americans. Among the KDP’s founders were radical Filipino-Americans, such as Occena, as well as movement veterans from the Philippines. In the spring of 1970 a series of mass protests in Manila, known as the First Quarter Storm, threatened to topple Marcos. The movement was brutally suppressed by the military, and the worried parents of

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<sup>362</sup> Bruce Occena, Interview by author, 18 January 2004.

middle-class students sent their activist children to the United States for safety. Many of these young expatriates continued with their political work, providing the KDP ties to the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its military wing the New People's Army.

The KDP also developed close ties to the New Communist Movement in the U.S. Contrary to the practice of many New Communists who were hostile to the CPUSA and unwilling to work with the "revisionists" who they alleged had abandoned Marxism-Leninism, the Seattle KDP members sought support from local CP members and former members, some of whom had worked in the canneries decades earlier. Terri Mast recalled that she and Silme Domingo learned much of what they knew about the union's history and politics by spending time with Chris Mensalvas, a retiree who had been both a Communist Party veteran and the former union president. "[We] were able to build on things that had been created before," Mast recalled. "And a lot of that really was the CP and I think a lot of people don't give credit to the early years and the work they did."<sup>363</sup> Other union pioneers provided strategic advice, as well as a level of legitimacy and seriousness that appealed to older and moderate union members and the larger Filipino community. For instance, the Rank and File Committee recruited to their ranks Leo Lorenzo, who had first worked in Alaska in the late 1920s and was a cofounder of the first Rank and File Committee. They later

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<sup>363</sup> Mast added: "I really got politicized by being around Chris. He and his friends. How incredible it was to go hang out with them on a weekend and they'd be drinking wine and telling stories . . . and talking politics, talking about the daily events and things that were going on" (Terri Mast, Interview by author, 17 December 2003).

tapped Lorenzo to serve as union vice president, a position he had first held in 1946.<sup>364</sup>

For the rest of the 1970s and the early 1980s, the KDP provided the Seattle union reformers with organizers, strategic assistance, and access to its international network of activists. From the beginning the KDP leaders within the Rank and File Committee were careful to separate the issues of union democracy and the overthrow of Marcos. Bruce Occena recalls that they “were clear pretty much from the beginning that you could work with someone who was ambivalent about Marcos or supported him” because “the issues of the trade union reform . . . gave you lots to talk to that person” about. Their interest in reform indicated that even pro-Marcos workers held a “basic democratic impulse,” and that was enough to build upon.<sup>365</sup>

Rank and File Committee success was rooted in its ability to build a dynamic and supportive movement culture that drew upon its members’ experiences in Seattle’s civil rights and student movements, the traditions of the Filipino-American community, the union culture of Local 37, and the intellectual rigor and organizational discipline of the KDP.<sup>366</sup> This movement culture allowed

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<sup>364</sup> An Rank and File Committee leader later remembered Lorenzo as a “mentor” who “provided continuity with the union’s militant past and was a symbol of the ideals we were trying to resurrect. He told us how they first organized, how they dealt with obstacles and how they negotiated with the companies and got contracts. We learned a lot from him” (Ron Chew, “District News,” *International Examiner*, 3 August 1988).

<sup>365</sup> Bruce Occena, Interview by author, 18 January 2004. For more on the KDP, see Helen C. Toribio, “Dare to Struggle: the KDP and Filipino American Politics,” in Fred Ho ed., *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America* (San Francisco, AK Press 2000) pp. 31-45.

<sup>366</sup> The Domingo family had been deeply involved in Filipino social and political groups for decades. Ade and Nemesio Sr. had been active in the Caballeros de Dimas-Alang, the Filipino Community of Seattle, as well as veterans groups. Their children were exposed to organizational

reformers to undertake long hours of organizing and study and to participate in a host of community initiatives and program, while providing social networks and ample opportunities for friendships and romantic relationships. Committee leaders attended study groups to read Marx and Lenin and documents from the struggle in the Philippines. They enrolled in labor studies classes and held retreats intended to clarify strategy and solidify relationships. Street dances provided an opportunity to distribute literature and deliver speeches explaining the organization's purpose.<sup>367</sup> Staff members survived on small grants from religious and progressive foundations, as well as private donations and some additional cash from a parking lot that was maintained by the organization.<sup>368</sup> They also controlled costs by living in collective housing such as the KDP headquarters on Beacon Hill, where they shared cooking, cleaning, and child care responsibilities. The members of these collectives constantly changed as

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culture through their parents community activism. Three of Silme's siblings Nemesio Jr., Lynn, and Cindy assumed leadership roles in the cannery workers struggles, and each of them is still active in social justice work in the Seattle area.

<sup>367</sup> At the 2 July 1975 board meeting, Silme Domingo outlined four purposes for an upcoming street dance: "1) to prove that we (ACWA) is capable of doing something, 2) to get members down to that office that would not come to other functions, 3) to further promote ACWA's identity, and 4) to make money" (ACWA, Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, 2 July 1975, Box 37, Folder 7, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle).

<sup>368</sup> Grantors to ACWA included: the Commission on Race and Religion of the United Methodist Church; Campaign for Human Development of the United States Catholic Conference; Presbyterian Emergency Legal Defense Fund; and the Japanese American Citizens League (see ACWA, Minutes, Board of Directors, 21 May 1975, Box 37, Folder 7; Nemesio Domingo Jr., Lester Kuramoto and Clark Kido to David Ushio, 7 May 1974, Box 37 folder 5, both documents in Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle; and Lawrence J. McNamara to Michael Woo, 16 September 1974 and Chronology of Events, ACWA, [May 1974], both documents in Tyree Scott Papers, Box 13, "ACWA 1974 folder," University of Washington, Seattle.)

activists visited from out of town and workers left for the canning season or perhaps returned to school.<sup>369</sup>

Reform movement leaders traveled to Alaska, the Yakima Valley, the San Francisco Bay Area, and the San Joaquin Valley in order to meet with Local 37 members; through the KDP their activist networks extended across the country and even to the Philippines. But the center of their world was Seattle's International District, home of their rented storefront office at 416 Eighth Avenue South, less than two miles from the union hall and the KDP house, and conveniently located across from the Four Seas, a landmark Chinese restaurant and bar. Nestled next door to the Wing Luke Asian Museum, at the time a fledgling art and history museum, the Rank and File Committee headquarters served as both a strategy center and editorial production office for the group's publications, including the *International Examiner*, a community newspaper they purchased in 1975 for a dollar.<sup>370</sup>

Ron Chew, the longtime editor of the *Examiner*, later recalled the building's "high ceilings that dripped all the time from overflowed toilets in the apartments up above" and trash cans "strategically positioned in about a half dozen spots on the floor to catch the water before it had a chance to soak its way into the carpet." In the front room "people worked at desks and chatted with drop-in visitors or sometimes held organizing meetings for street demonstrations." A

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<sup>369</sup> Responsibilities for watching children rotated among those members who had children (see ACWA, Minutes, Executive Committee Meeting, 12 December 1975, Box 33, Folder 20, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle).

<sup>370</sup> Gary Iwamoto, "Where are They Now? Lawrence Imamura and Office Emporium, the First Publisher and Founder of the *International Examiner*," *International Examiner*, 7-20 January 2004.

loft provided space for “smaller, more private conversations” and a back office served as storage for “left-over newspapers and picket signs and old leaflets,” while a “cheap offset printing press, used to print fliers for demonstrations, sometimes rumbled on for hours.” Nemesio Domingo Jr. acted as publisher, “watching over the paper’s meager finances and doling out, during good months, token checks of \$10 to individuals for contributed stories and articles. During bad months, everyone was just a volunteer,” according to Chew. Poor heating drove most of the staff home early in the winter, except for the “diehards—Gene, Nemesio, Terri Mast and Julia Laranang,” who “stayed in the front area” and worked in their coats.”<sup>371</sup>

Under the leadership of the cannery worker reformers, the *Examiner* gave voice to the concerns of young Asian Americans. It covered stories that were often overlooked by the Seattle daily newspapers, including the fight for low-income housing in the International District, the campaign for bilingual social services, and historic preservation efforts. Early in his tenure with the *Examiner*, Chew helped produce a seven-part series on the history of Asians in the canneries researched and written by Gene Viernes. The series made the larger community aware of the history of the cannery workers, while giving the

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<sup>371</sup> See Ron Chew, “Memorable Years at the International Examiner; the Examiner Takes a Final Look Back at 30 years of History,” *International Examiner*, December 1-14, 2004. Lorraine Pai, a landscape architect, who began volunteering at the *Examiner* in 1977, later recalled her first impressions of Gene Viernes, whom she met after a newspaper staff meeting: “I was waiting for the bus on Eighth and Jackson. A young guy sat on the sidewalk, and we started talking. Although I had never met him, I knew it was Gene Viernes. He spoke with a sense of urgency in describing cannery workers’ issues and showed me things he had written. I was impressed by his strengths as an activist and journalist. It made me realize that there were many ways to contribute to the community and how much further the community stretched past Jackson” (see Chew, “Memorable years at the International Examiner,” *International Examiner*, 15-31 December 2004).

dissidents a usable past that put their efforts in the context of nearly a century of political struggle. Among the stories Viernes included in the series was that of the cannery union martyrs, Virgil Duyungan and Aurelio Simon who were assassinated in December 1936, as they attempted to wrest control over the hiring process from crooked labor contractors. After being shot over dinner at Seattle's Gyoken Restaurant, Duyungan returned fire and killed his attacker who turned out to be a contractor's relative. Thousands of maritime workers attended the men's funeral march, and the murders stiffened the cannery workers resolve to establish a union.<sup>372</sup>

In short, the Rank and File Committee became a way of life for its leaders. For those like Domingo and Viernes who also immersed themselves in KDP, the work was all the more intense. San Francisco-based activist Estella Habal later described her involvement with the KDP as a "most concentrated political, social, and ideological transforming experience." She recalled gaining a sense of "empowerment, optimism and destiny" and feeling as if her "individual energy and power were doubled, quadrupled" by her involvement in the movement. Habal's reflection's capture the sense of exhilaration that the KDP organizers experienced, but the frenetic pace of activity and the demands of party discipline also took their toll. Habal was among many who eventually faced burnout. Few

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<sup>372</sup> Much of what has been subsequently written about the early years of Local 37 and its predecessor unions, was documented and preserved by Gene Viernes. The *Examiner* articles in the Viernes cannery series include: "It's the Alaskeros Waiting for Dispatch to the Canneries," February 1977; "Here's How They Created the Salmon Canning Industry," February 1977; "Sliming and Butchering Fish in the Alaska Canneries," March 1977; "The Contract Labor System in the Canneries," April 1977; "A Militant Union Copes with Disruptive Tactics," May/June 1977; "Cannery Workers' Union Emerges From War Years and McCarthy Era," July 1977; and "Who Will be the Alaska Cannery Workers of the Future?," August 1977.

young radicals could sustain such a high level of activity for too long and the pressures only grew stronger and the stakes higher as the reform movement gathered steam.<sup>373</sup>

By the fall of 1978 the Rank and File Committee had built enough of a presence within Local 37 to run a slate of candidates that included Domingo for Dispatcher and Viernes for Secretary-Treasurer—the two positions they identified as the keys to ridding the union of corruption and incompetence. Both finished third, although several other reformers on their slate were elected to the union's board of trustees. Nevertheless, the reformers considered the campaign a defeat and, setting their sights on the 1980 elections, vowed to more aggressively organize workers in Alaska, especially the growing minority of white college-age women.<sup>374</sup> But months before the election, agitation on another front paid off when the committee led the successful recall of secretary-treasurer Ponce Torres for incompetence during the spring and summer of 1979. Rank and File Committee members had identified Torres as being weaker than union president Tony Baruso, and they drove a wedge between the two men. The recall chipped away at Baruso's power, put him on notice, and most importantly created a vacancy for the secretary-treasurer position. After Baruso's choice for a

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<sup>373</sup> Habal also recalled that “during that period KDP members worked tirelessly to accomplish concrete tasks which yielded tangible results, while at the same time having a broad vision that encompassed not only our ‘Filipino struggles,’ but the whole world!” See Estella Habal, “How I Became a Revolutionary,” in Fred Ho, ed. *Legacy to Liberation, Politics and culture of revolutionary Asian pacific America* (Brooklyn and San Francisco: AK Press and Big Red Media 2000) pp. 208, 209.

<sup>374</sup> Official General Election 1978, ILWU Local 37 Total, 29 September 1978, Box 29, Folder 43 and “Our View on the '78 Election,” *Alaskero News*, March 1979, Box 33, Folder 43, both documents in Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

replacement died after just six months on the job, Silme Domingo assumed the role in March 1980 backed by a growing base of supporters who appreciated his candor, charisma, and intelligence.<sup>375</sup>

With their revised electoral strategy for the 1980 elections, the Rank and File Committee set its sights on the dispatcher's position, nominating Gene Viernes for the job. Just weeks before the election, Viernes discussed his goals in the caucus newsletter. He observed that coworkers had asked him to remember them after the election and that some had jokingly demanded that he buy their vote. Others promised him their votes because they came from his father's home province. Viernes rejected "such joking remarks" because they "reveal[ed] the deep-rooted backward practices our union has developed over the years." He explained that "vote buying and reliance on the 'compadre' and 'Kababayan' system" had corrupted Local 37's elections over the course of the years. "For those who honor me by calling me a compadre (one who is a friend who will remember them) or a Kababayan (one who is of the same blood or town), I respect them for carrying on such a tradition. Without these cultural traditions many of our fathers who came to America during the depression would have starved to death." But for a union election, he and the Rank and File Committee agreed "there is no place for such practices." The very traditions that had promoted survival and solidarity among the Filipino cannery workers had been co-opted and perverted by management and their gangster allies among

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<sup>375</sup> For details on the recall, see "Commentary: Torres Recall Closes the Decade," *Alaskero News*, February 1980, Box 33, Folder 45, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

the union's leadership. Favors and bribes had trumped fairness and seniority, according to Viernes.<sup>376</sup>

The Rank and File Committee won eleven of seventeen positions on the executive board in the October 1980 election; Silme Domingo was reelected secretary treasurer and Gene Viernes became dispatcher.<sup>377</sup> Though the committee had decided against challenging Baruso for the presidency, it now controlled the union. Their reform efforts, especially changing dispatch practices to respect seniority rights, moved ahead at full speed. They also revisited their role as a dissident caucus. In a meeting shortly after the election, Silme Domingo explained that their first goal, "holding the Union officers accountable for dealing with the basic fighting capacity of the Union" had been achieved. It was now up to them to "build the Union strong from the inside . . . and educate and organize the membership." Domingo argued that the committee should encourage union members to take progressive stands on broader issues such as discrimination on the job and racism in Seattle. He also recommended that the committee consider using the ILWU International's resolutions process as a means for conducting

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<sup>376</sup> Gene Viernes, "Dispatcher Candidate Speaks Out," *Alaskero News*, August 1980, Box 33, Folder 45, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>377</sup> The Rank and File Committee had earlier succeeded in having David Della appointed to chair the election board, thus ensuring the integrity of the 1978 and 1980 elections. This is but one example of the movement's ability to achieve significant reforms built on smaller successes. For a report on the improved elections procedures, see 1980 Election Board, Final Report of 1980 Elections, [September/October 1980], Box 29, Folder 45, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

popular education on international human rights issues “such as the embargo of military shipments to the El Salvadorean junta.”<sup>378</sup>

With the support of the KDP, Viernes spent five weeks in the Philippines beginning in March 1981. This marked Viernes’s first trip to the Philippines and he seized the opportunity to meet his deceased father’s extended family. But there was work to do as well and much of it was quite dangerous. The KDP organized this trip around the goal of assessing the level of repression against trade unions and reporting back to the U.S. labor movement.<sup>379</sup> Viernes attended a May Day planning convention where he met Ernesto Arellano, the General Secretary of the KMU (May First Movement), a new free trade union movement. Arellano had recently been released from prison for organizing a demonstration for the right to strike. Viernes also met Bert Olalia, a labor movement pioneer who began organizing in the 1920s and was once the head of the Philippine Congress of Labor Organizations. The year after Viernes’s meeting with Olalia, Marcos imprisoned him during a crackdown on labor activists; he died a few months later at the age of 80. As later events would reveal, the Philippine authorities closely tracked Viernes’s movements, including his visit to the countryside to meet guerilla leaders of the New People’s Army.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Rank and File Committee, Minutes, 29 January 1981, Box 33, Folder 27, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle. After the Rank and File Committee’s victory, the union took an increasing interest in international human rights issues in Latin America and South Africa, as well as the Philippines.

<sup>379</sup> Bruce Occena, Interview by author, 18 January 2004.

<sup>380</sup> “Felixberto Olalia, 80, is Dead; Led a Philippine Labor Group,” *New York Times*, 5 December 1983.

Viernes flew directly from the Philippines to Honolulu for the annual ILWU convention at the end of April. In Hawaii, he and Domingo crafted a carefully worded resolution condemning the repressive labor policies in the Philippines and recommending that the ILWU send an investigative team there to gather information regarding “trade unions, working conditions, and civil liberties.” Also attending the convention, Tony Baruso attempted to play both sides of the issue. Realizing that it would pass, he stood before the delegates and attempted to soft pedal the resolution. He explained that it “has and never will in any way attempt to condemn the Marcos regime as martial law. To the contrary, [*it respects*] the wishes of the majority of the 42 million people in the country for accepting martial law, which the majority is enjoying now.” Appealing to a long tradition of U.S. labor movement paternalism where international affairs are concerned, Baruso asserted that the measure would merely enable the union to “have a look-see, and maybe we could help with our expertise of this Union, the suffering brothers and sisters back home.”<sup>381</sup> Gene Viernes took the podium and reminded the delegates of the ILWU’s historic links to the liberation movements and progressive trade unionists of the Philippines. He discussed his recent meetings with KMU leaders, and explained that the Filipino activists had “expressed the need for international support” and had provided him with a letter “conveying a

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<sup>381</sup> On labor internationalism, see Dana Frank, “Where is the History of U.S. Labor and International Solidarity,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Spring 2004, pp. 95-119.

call to solidarity.” After some back and forth regarding the resolution’s meaning, it passed overwhelmingly.<sup>382</sup>

A few weeks after the ILWU convention, Viernes and Silme Domingo were back in Seattle to prepare for the season’s dispatch, which would be the first under the reformed procedures. Tensions mounted at the union hall in the last week of May as the industry floated rumors of a slow season and cannery workers jockeyed for the available jobs. The foremen used all of their connections and powers of persuasion to retain the privilege of selecting their crews, but their lobbying efforts fell upon deaf ears as the new dispatcher Viernes and other Rank and File Committee leaders explained that the dispatch would respect seniority. One gang leader Tony Dictado confronted Viernes in his office, demanding that his favored Tulisan gang members be dispatched. A heated argument erupted before Dictado turned away shouting a threat in Ilocan, a Filipino dialect that Viernes did not understand.<sup>383</sup>

A few days later at about 4:30pm on Monday June 1, two Tulisan members shot Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo as they worked alone in the union hall. Viernes died instantly—an unfinished letter remained in his typewriter. Domingo survived long enough to crawl to the street for help and to name the assailants. A bystander told reporters that he had been standing on the sidewalk near the union hall and “looked over and the guy looked like a drunk. But then I

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<sup>382</sup> ILWU, Proceedings of the Twenty-Fourth Biennial Convention, Honolulu, Hawaii, 27 April 1981, Ann Rand Library of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, San Francisco, CA. See also, Nemesio Domingo and Alonzo Suson to Titled officers and members, 8 March 1982, Box 27, Folder 16, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>383</sup> Jack Hopkins, “Witness Says Dictado Talked of Killing Cannery Union Dispatcher,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 7 May 1982.

saw all the blood on his stomach. He was waving his arms and saying: 'Can't you see me? Help me.'"<sup>384</sup> Viernes, twenty-nine, was single; Domingo, also twenty-nine, left his wife, Terri Mast, and two young daughters.

Over the following weeks, the Rank and File Committee's struggle developed along two fronts—they moved to solidify their union reform effort and they initiated a campaign to bring the murderers to justice through the establishment of a Committee for Justice for Domingo and Viernes (CJDV). On both fronts, this work was bolstered by an influx into Seattle of KDP activists and supporters from the Line of March (LOM), a network of Marxist-Leninist groups with which KDP was affiliated.<sup>385</sup> Two days after the killings, three hundred people marched through the International District to the union hall in Pioneer Square for a memorial service for Gene Viernes. "The reason they had to shoot Gene was because they couldn't change him," said Andy Pascua, a friend and coworker from his hometown. "He was totally dedicated, totally uncorruptible." David Della called for the "tragic murder to release a floodgate of outrage," while union president Tony Baruso, who had often derided Domingo and Viernes as communists, pledged to continue the reform movement, for which he gallingly took credit. "Maybe somebody is going to shoot me in the head, too," he declared. "But we will not be stifled or changed. We are not going to give up our values."<sup>386</sup> A few days later, five hundred friends and comrades gathered at the

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<sup>384</sup> Tomas Guillen, "2 Union Officials Shot, 1 Fatally," *Seattle Times*, 2 June 1981.

<sup>385</sup> Line of March was an outgrowth of the KDP, *The Guardian* newspaper and several other radical organizations.

<sup>386</sup> Wayne Jacobi, "Tears and Vows at Funeral for Murdered Union Officers," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 4 June 1981. Baruso also decried the attacks as "an attempt to intimidate this union

Filipino Community Center to say the Rosary for Domingo, and an honor guard from the Caballeros de Dimas Alang, a Filipino fraternal organization that he had joined two years earlier, read the official burial ceremony. Other friends and supporters held services in San Francisco and Honolulu in the following days as well.<sup>387</sup>

Within six months the two gunmen Domingo had named as his assailants were rounded up, arrested, tried, and sentenced to life in prison and Tulisan gang leader Tony Dictado was convicted a few months later for having directed the murders. Just weeks after the murders, union president Tony Baruso was also arrested at his home after it was discovered that he was the owner of the murder weapon—a revolver that had turned up in a West Seattle trash can.<sup>388</sup> In his absence the union’s executive council held an emergency meeting during which Silme’s widow, Terri Mast charged Baruso and another union official with conducting a fraudulent election for ILWU international officers. The council agreed to form a trial committee to consider the allegations that Baruso had

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and its leadership” and explained to reporters that he had also received death threats. Though he had often found himself in opposition to the reformers, Baruso described his nemeses Viernes and Domingo as “hard working, honest and progressive trade-union officers” and asserted that they had been “carrying out the union’s policy and my policy in instituting dispatch procedures for work at the Alaska canneries” (see William Gough, “Job Dispatching Hinted as Motive in Union Slayings,” 3 June 1981, *The Seattle Times*).

<sup>387</sup> See Dick Clever, “500 at Rosary for Murdered Union Official,” *Seattle Times*, 6 June 1981 and “Hundreds Mourn Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes, Slain in June 1 Attack on Local 37 headquarters,” *The Dispatcher*, 10 July 1981.

<sup>388</sup> The day after the murders, police arrested Ben Guloy and Jimmy Ramil, the assailants named by Domingo (see Evelyn Iritani, “Union Case Killers Jailed for Life,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 19 November 1981 and Jack Hopkins, “Dictado Gets Life Without Parole for Murders of 2 Union Officials,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 20 August 1982).

falsified ballots and mailed them to the International union without informing the membership of the election.<sup>389</sup>

A few days later, Baruso was released from jail when prosecutors decided there was insufficient evidence to connect him to the murders. The Rank and File Committee members, however, began demanding his resignation as evidence mounted over the next several weeks that the cannery owners were taking advantage of the murders and the arrest to flaunt their contracts and thwart new organizing. One ILWU official reported to local members that the union had lost elections in Cordova and Dutch Harbor because “rumors have spread that Local 37 was gangsterous.” He strongly urged them to “clean these rumors up.”<sup>390</sup>

Local 37, wanting nothing more than to clean the union up, looked to the ILWU office in San Francisco for assistance, requesting that the international supply an armed guard for meetings and provide them access to union lawyers. When these requests were denied, Terri Mast and other reformers blasted the International executive board members for their lack of support and accused them of falling victim to a new wave of anti-Communism. “To the extent our broader views are a factor in your vacillation, it would be far better to open up

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<sup>389</sup> ILWU Local 37, Minutes, Emergency executive council meeting, 15 July 1981, and Resolution of the Executive Council, 15 July 1981, Box 5, Folder 9. Lynn Domingo was chosen to fill his position and a four-member dispatch team assumed Viernes’s duties both because of the amount and the urgency of the work involved, as well as for the reformers’ safety. Regarding the challenges faced by the dispatch team, see John Foz to Local 37 Executive Council, 5 August 1981, Box 26, Folder 51, all documents in Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>390</sup> ILWU Local 37, Minutes, Executive Council meeting, 5 August 1981, Box 5, Folder 9. Larry Cotter of the Alaska Council (ILWU) reported to the membership that the organizing drives had failed, in part, because workers feared joining Local 37 (see Minutes, membership meeting, 21 October 1981, Box 6, Folder 4, both documents in Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle).

frank discussions on this point,” they wrote. “However, we should be judged on the basis of our work and track record in the union. Baruso is certainly giving every indication that he will use the ‘red scare’ to hold the presidency. The International is well advised to not jump on that bandwagon.”<sup>391</sup>

The Communist Party USA had historically wielded influence within the ILWU, and CP members among the union’s leaders were likely suspicious of the Seattle radicals’ association with the New Communist Movement, much of which was hostile to the CP and the Soviet Union. But not all of the international’s seeming indifference was politically motivated. Local 37 had long complained of the lack of attention from the International, attributing it to the seasonal nature of cannery work and high levels of workforce turnover in the industry. Longstanding disputes over requirements that members pay half-year union dues, though the season was only two months long, predated affiliation with the ILWU in 1950.<sup>392</sup> Moreover, the international was guided in its response by the ILWU’s commitment to local autonomy and did not “really have a lot of powers at the

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<sup>391</sup> The Rank and File Committee also accused the ILWU of having ignored the local “ever since the McCarthy period,” and now “our bloodshed and your embarrassment is the price for the years of your neglect” (see Terri Mast, David Della and John Foz to James Herman, George Martin, Rudy Rubio and Curtis McClain, 4 August 1981, International Officers’ Correspondence Box, IBU/Local 37, 1977-1993, Box 45, ILWU Archive in the Ann Rand Research Library, San Francisco). See also Lynn Domingo and Tony Baruso to George Martin, 25 June 1981 and Martin to Baruso and Domingo 23 July 1981, Box 26, Folder 62, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>392</sup> The ILWU granted some relief to the seasonal workers of Local 37, assessing them at five months and then at three months beginning in 1975 before returning to the five month assessment in 1980 after the membership grew because of better salmon seasons and aggressive organizing (see George Ginnis to International Officers, 20 June 1975; Constantine “Tony” Baruso to Curtis McClain, 21 November 1979; and Johnny Parks to Curtis McClain, 20 November 1979; and Curtis McClain to Constantine Baruso, 4 December 1979, all located in Box 27, Folder 4, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle).

International level to go barging in and taking over locals,” as one official who worked closely with Local 37 later explained.<sup>393</sup>

These tensions eventually subsided after ILWU president James Herman directed two regional officials to investigate Mast’s allegations of election fraud against Baruso.<sup>394</sup> The international officers and the Local 37 trial committee substantiated Mast’s charges, though the membership rejected the committee’s recommendation that Baruso be fined, an indication that he continued to enjoy significant support within the union.<sup>395</sup> That fall the Rank and File Committee launched a recall campaign patterned after their successful effort against Ponce Torres. Activists in each of the canneries carried lists of union members upon which they graded workers’ attitudes toward the recall and recorded whether or not the individual had already voted. Another forty Seattle-based Committee

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<sup>393</sup> These were the comments of vice president Randy Vekich, who had worked closely with Local 37 in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a representative of the ILWU’s International Executive Board (see ILWU, Proceedings of the Twenty-Eighth Convention, Seattle, Washington, 3-7 June 1991, p. 231, ILWU Archive in the Ann Rand Research Library, San Francisco).

<sup>394</sup> Herman to Russell Alexander and Randy Vekich, 7 August 1981, Box 30, Folder 16, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>395</sup> See Herman to Baruso and Lynn Domingo, 15 September 1981, Box 30, Folder 16, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle, and Local 37, Minutes, membership meeting, 21 October 1981 and Trial Committee Report, 21 October 1981, both in Box 6 folder 4, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle. In a 30 September 1981 letter to James Herman, Baruso claimed to have been in jail during the election and was unaware that the union did not follow procedure. He blamed Abe Cruz and Domingo and Viernes for the miscue (Baruso to Herman, 30 September 1981, Box 45, Officers’ Correspondence, IBU/Local 37, 1977-1993. For the ILWU report, see Vekich and Alexander, Investigation of International Election, 28 August 1981, Box 45, Officers’ Correspondence, IBU/Local 37 1977-1993, both documents in ILWU Archive in the Ann Rand Research Library, San Francisco).

members worked a phone tree to urge members to support the recall and followed up with one-one-one conversations.<sup>396</sup>

On December 4 a Local 37 committee and an ILWU international representative certified that Baruso had been recalled by the membership by a vote of 323 to 170. Upon Baruso's return from Acapulco, where he had been vacationing, the executive council informed him of the tally. He protested, but handed the gavel to Silme's father, Nemesio Domingo Sr. In a special issue of *Alaskero News* trumpeting the results, Dave Della proclaimed that "this blow was landed not by a small group of 'dissidents' but by a conscious and organized movement of the rank and file. This movement, moreover, didn't appear overnight. Rather, it was a result of the long reform campaign begun by Silme, Gene and the Rank and File Committee five years ago. During the referendum, a broad network of union membership up and down the coast participated in a 'get-out-the-vote' effort that reached hundreds of union members."<sup>397</sup> Committee gains were solidified during elections the following year when Terri Mast was voted president and reformers swept all of the remaining executive board slots. Mast became the first woman to serve as Local 37 president and the members elected the youngest executive council in the union's history—many of them being in their 20s.

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<sup>396</sup> Rank and File Committee, Recall voter sheet and Phone tree outreach, [Fall 1981], both documents in Box 33, Folder 35, Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

<sup>397</sup> See ILWU, Minutes, Executive council, 15 December 1981, Box 5, Folder 9; David Della, "Membership Votes Yes: Baruso Recalled!," *Alaskero News*, Special issue [December 1981], Box 33, Folder 45; and Lynn Domingo to ILWU Local 37 members, 4 January 1982, Box 26, Folder 28, all located in Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, Local 7 Records, University of Washington, Seattle.

Though Tony Baruso had been implicated by witness testimony and his ownership of the murder weapon, no criminal charges against him in connection to the murders appeared to be forthcoming. With the cooperation of the Rank and File Committee, however, federal authorities had been building a corruption case against him that culminated in February 1984 with a conviction and three-year sentence for embezzling union funds and mail fraud. While serving as president Baruso had bilked the union out of more than \$5,000 by reimbursing himself for travel expenses already paid by other organizations. He had also filed fraudulent medical claims that netted him another \$16,000.<sup>398</sup>

Though many law enforcement officials and other observers considered the murders to be an internal union dispute turned violent, Committee for Justice activists consistently voiced their suspicions that a much larger conspiracy had taken place—a murder plot involving issues and individuals extending far beyond the International District. With the discovery of Baruso’s gun, Committee for Justice attorney Michael Withey later explained to a reporter “the dispatch theory goes out the window, because why would Baruso kill somebody just because Dictado wanted to get his boys dispatched?”<sup>399</sup> While the Committee, led by Silme Domingo’s sister Cindy, was very careful to make sure that their theory of a deeper conspiracy did not undermine the ongoing criminal investigations, for which there was broad popular support, they began making bolder assertions regarding the political forces beyond Seattle who benefited from the murders.

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<sup>398</sup> Darrell Glover, “Ousted Cannery Union Chief Sentenced to 3 Years in Jail,” *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, 11 February 1984.

<sup>399</sup> Tony Harrah, “Marcos Found Guilty in Murders of Seattle Union Leaders,” *The Guardian*, 10 January 1990.

Just over a year after the murders, the Committee for Justice filed a lawsuit in federal court accusing Ferdinand Marcos and U.S. government officials of complicity in the murders.<sup>400</sup> Central to their case was a series of 1979 articles written by columnist Jack Anderson that exposed the “Filipino infiltration plan,” an effort by the Philippine government and U.S. spy agencies to penetrate and neutralize Marcos’s American opposition.<sup>401</sup> These allegations were immediately dismissed as paranoid and conspiratorial and a district court judge quickly excluded the governments of the Philippines and the United States as defendants, citing national security concerns and the suit’s lack of specific evidence. These were very difficult years for the justice campaign as Marcos and U.S. President Ronald Reagan cemented their relationship in the early years of the Reagan administration.

But change came in 1986. As Reagan was being forced to account for the events related to what would come to be known as the Iran-Contra scandal, the Marcoses fled the Philippines for Hawaii under intense political pressure. Cindy Domingo and Mike Withey traveled to Honolulu to depose the exiled dictator. Marcos took the fifth amendment in response to their most direct questions, but he acknowledged that he was concerned by links between the two countries’ labor movements and recognized that the ILWU had the capacity to impede trade to the United States. He also admitted to monitoring Viernes’s trip to the

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<sup>400</sup> Secretary of State George Schultz and FBI director William Webster were named as co-conspirators. See Ben Bedell, “Did Marcos Order U.S. Murders?,” *The Guardian*, 22 September 1982.

<sup>401</sup> Jack Anderson, “Filipino Agents Hunt Foes in U.S.,” *Washington Post*, 11 August 1979 and Anderson, “FBI No Shield for Political Refugees,” *Washington Post*, 1 August 1979.

Philippines, but scoffed at the notion that he would order the murders, dismissing Viernes and Domingo as “laborers in a smaller vineyard.”<sup>402</sup>

Using the Freedom of Information Act, the Committee for Justice began acquiring documents to build their case. They discovered that shortly before Viernes’s trip, U.S. intelligence agents had monitored his movements and warned Philippine authorities that he was carrying nearly \$300,000 with him to distribute to the opposition. KDP, which raised money openly for the New People’s Army, acknowledged that Viernes had withdrawn about \$3,000 from an organizational bank account shortly before leaving. But they explained that the purpose of his trip was not to raise money for the rebels and asserted that the documents proved a link between the governments. Even more damaging to Marcos was the discovery of papers that documented his payments to a shadowy corporation in San Francisco he had used to fund his U.S. spy and intimidation network. The documents revealed that through intermediaries Marcos had paid \$15,000 for a “special intelligence project” to Local 37 president Tony Baruso. With this new evidence, a federal judge reinstated the Marcoses as defendants.<sup>403</sup>

This civil court case went to trial in the fall of 1989 just weeks after Ferdinand Marcos’s death. The attorney for the Marcos estate argued that the murders were the result of an internal labor dispute and cast doubt on the notion

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<sup>402</sup> “Intelligence Agents Monitored Viernes’s Trip to Philippines,” *International Examiner*, 2 November 1983 and “Marcos Takes Fifth During Questioning in Cannery-Death Suits,” *Seattle Times*, 5 March 1987.

<sup>403</sup> “Intelligence Agents Monitored Viernes’s Trip to Philippines,” *International Examiner*, 2 November 1983.

that the late dictator would be concerned with the leaders of an obscure cannery union in Seattle. The jury disagreed. On 15 December 1989, they delivered a unanimous verdict finding Marcos guilty of conspiring to kill Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo. The victims' families and their supporters burst into tears as they learned that the jury had awarded them \$15 million, though that amount was reduced substantially after the families reached an agreement with Marcos's widow, Imelda.<sup>404</sup> With the momentum from the civil trial, prosecutors in Seattle rearrested Tony Baruso in 1990. This time he was tried, convicted, and sentenced to life without parole.<sup>405</sup>

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Much of what Local 37 reformers fought for and won has been under attack since the 1980s; new political and economic developments have threatened or eliminated the cannery workers' successes and obscured their legacies. Two of the three Alaskan Cannery Workers Association discrimination lawsuits ended in settlements for the Filipino and Native Alaskan cannery workers, but in 1989 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 against the plaintiffs in the last of the suits, *Wards Cove Packing Company v. Antonio*. While remanding

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<sup>404</sup> After awarding the Viernes and Domingo families \$15 million from Ferdinand Marcos's estate, juror Bob Bible told reporters about his initial doubts about the plaintiff's outlandish conspiracy theory. He was impressed, however, by their attorneys' "well-researched" case and he revealed that he and his fellow jurors were impressed by the ILWU resolution and convinced that it had threatened the Marcos regime. When he was asked what he thought of Marcos's suggestion that Domingo and Viernes were mere "laborers in a smaller vineyard," Bible replied "on the contrary, we think they had a big influence in their community." Marcos's conduit in the US, Lionel Malabed, Baruso, and the already convicted killers were also found liable in a separate bench ruling by Judge Rothstein (see Tony Harrah, "Marcos Found Guilty in Murders of Seattle Union Leaders," *The Guardian*, 10 January 1990).

<sup>405</sup> Louis Shagun, "Ex-Union Chief Guilty in Murder," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 March 1991.

a few peripheral issues to the lower courts, the high court shifted the burden of proof in Title VII civil rights cases from the employer to the employee, and it barred the use of company workforce comparisons to establish disparate impact. In his dissenting opinion, Justice Harry Blackmun denounced the majority for raising the burden of proof so high as to make it seldom attainable. In considering the facts of the case, Blackmun said he was reminded of “a kind of overt and institutionalized discrimination we have not dealt with in years: a total residential and work environment organized on principles of racial stratification and segregation, which, as Justice Stevens points out, resembles a plantation economy.” He branded the cannery’s policies as “discrimination of the old-fashioned sort” and blasted his brethren for a ruling that would “essentially immunize these practices” from legal challenges. Blackmun glumly concluded that his colleague’s decision “comes as no surprise,” and he wondered “whether the majority still believes that race discrimination—or, more accurately, race discrimination against nonwhites—is a problem in our society, or even remembers that it ever was.”<sup>406</sup>

Thirteen years later, the 9<sup>th</sup> U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed the remaining issues that had been remanded from the Supreme Court. “For 27 years, cannery workers fight a battle from another era,” announced the *Seattle*

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<sup>406</sup> *Wards Cove Packing Company v. Atonio* 490 U.S. 642. The U.S. Congress attempted to rectify this imbalance in the 1991 Civil Rights Act, though Alaska Senator Frank Murkowski threatened to hold up the bill until an amendment was added exempting Wards Cove from coverage. Veterans of the cannery worker battles organized a “Justice for Wards Cove Workers” campaign that became the focus of a good deal of union, civil rights, Asian American rights organizing in the 1990s. Despite support from President Clinton, Wards Cove retained its special protection.

*Times* headline after the December 2001 decision was handed down.<sup>407</sup>

Nemesio Domingo Jr. suggested that civil rights activists might do better to take future struggles to the streets, and he noted that federal courts had allowed the civil rights gains of Reconstruction to erode before 1900, just as today's judiciary has done to the gains of the 1960s and 1970s. "We are going to have to mount a third reconstruction of civil rights," he told a reporter.<sup>408</sup>

The availability of cheaper Chilean, Norwegian, and farm-raised fish ravaged the Alaskan seafood industry during the 1980s and 1990s. Thousands of salmon industry jobs were lost. Many additional jobs disappeared as canneries shifted from canning to the less labor intensive production of frozen fish. In the mid-1980s, Local 37, like much of the American labor movement, was forced by employers into concessionary bargaining. Facing declining membership and escalating operating costs, Local 37 affiliated with the Inland Boatmen's Union (ILWU) in 1987.

These historical dislocations have been reinforced by drastic changes that have befallen the movement's physical environment, making it more difficult to even remember the cannery workers' struggles of the 1970s. Dozens of canneries where Alaskeros chopped fish for seventy-five years sit idle; their rotting dormitories and fish houses dot the Southern Alaska coast. Some of the old Filipino bunkhouses are getting long-overdue renovations as private developers convert shuttered canneries into fishing resorts. The Waterfall

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<sup>407</sup> Jerry Large, *Seattle Times*, 6 January 2002.

<sup>408</sup> See Eric Pryne, "Cannery Bias Case Ending: After 27 Years, Plaintiffs have Taken it 'As Far as We Could,'" *Seattle Times*, 28 December 2001.

Cannery, site of the 1968 fire that killed five workers, is among those that have been made “comfortable for tourists without sacrificing the rough-hewn character of the cannery.”<sup>409</sup> Different changes have transformed the reformers’ Seattle organizing turf—the International District and Pioneer Square. Residents and workers in the ID have long struggled to retain its affordability and character in the face of urban renewal schemes and stadium and highway construction projects. A new wave of redevelopment proposals threatens to raise rents and drive out longtime residents, many of whom are elderly and poor. The empty union hall on Main Street in Pioneer Square faces the wrecking ball; the union vacated in 1986 because the crumbling building was unsound and too expensive to renovate.

Despite these dramatic rollbacks, some of the reform movement’s legacies have survived, just as they survived the Cold War. Those canneries still in operation were forced to eliminate their segregated dormitories and cafeterias. They have opened up supervisory, skilled, and technical jobs to women and nonwhites. IBU Region 37 continues as a model of union democracy and workers are dispatched through a system that respects seniority. The union has taken a leadership position in current battles regarding immigrant rights and was among the most active local unions involved in the massive protests against the policies of the World Trade Organization in 1999.

Terri Mast and former Rank and File Committee member Richard Gurtiza continue among the union’s leaders. Three of Silme Domingo’s siblings have

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<sup>409</sup> See Wesley Loy, “Cannery Culture: Developers Hope to Cash in on a Piece of Alaska’s Past,” *Anchorage Daily News*, 19 September 2004.

remained active in LELO (Legacy of Equality, Leadership, and Organizing), a grassroots labor and civil rights advocacy group that was an outgrowth of the cannery and construction workers' struggles.<sup>410</sup> David Della worked for the union in the 1980s and currently serves on the Seattle City Council with the support of many of the city's progressive forces. Other former cannery worker activists continue as labor organizers and staff members in Seattle and the San Francisco Bay Area.

While popular images of the labor movement during the 1970s revolve around the curmudgeonly television longshoreman Archie Bunker or perhaps the hard hat construction workers in Manhattan who beat up antiwar demonstrators, the story of Domingo, Viernes, and their comrades reminds us of a parallel tradition. In carrying out their struggle for ten years (many more when the legal cases are included), they rediscovered and revived the labor movement's commitments to new worker organizing, union democracy, labor feminism, and international working-class solidarity. Their work represented what Dana Frank has referred to as the "moveable feast" of labor's global politics—the flow of ideas and strategies, energy and personnel, back and forth across national boundaries.<sup>411</sup> Inspired by the social movements of the 1960s, the cannery worker reformers committed to a grassroots organizing project that had a tremendous impact on the vitality and culture of a union local and an industry,

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<sup>410</sup> It was originally known as the Northwest Labor and Employment Law Office.

<sup>411</sup> Dana Frank, "Where is the History of U.S. Labor and International Solidarity," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Spring 2004, pp. 95-119.

while making significant contributions to the campaign to bring down the Marcos dictatorship and advance democracy and human rights in the Philippines.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> For a scathing critique of the AFL-CIO's foreign policy see Daniel Cantor and Juliet Schor, *Tunnel Vision: Labor the World Economy and Central America* (Boston: South End Press 1987).

## Conclusion

Two months after the murders of Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes in Seattle, 400 New York-area workers, including firefighters, longshoremen, autoworkers, and garment workers paraded around a control tower at Kennedy International Airport to protest President Reagan's dismissal of more than 11,000 members of the (PATCO) Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization for having taken part in an illegal strike.<sup>413</sup> "Any self-respecting trade unionist should be here supporting PATCO because the Administration's attack on PATCO is a threat to all unions," one New York transit worker explained to a reporter. "We may all have to fight for our existence, and if we don't support them we can't expect them to support us."<sup>414</sup>

Labor historians debate whether Reagan's decision to fire the air traffic controllers and hire replacement workers marked the start of a stepped-up employer offensive or the culmination of longer-term anti-union trends aimed at

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<sup>413</sup> After several months of negotiations, the PATCO workers went on strike on 3 August 1981, in violation of rules prohibiting strikes by government workers. Reagan responded quickly: "Let me make one thing plain: I respect the right of workers in the private sector to strike. Indeed as president of my own union I led the first strike ever called by that union. I guess I'm the first one to ever hold this office who is a lifetime member of an A.F.L.-C.I.O. union" (see "Text of Reagan Talk on Strike," *New York Times*, 4 August 1981).

<sup>414</sup> Dorothy J. Gaiter, "400 Join in a Rally at Kennedy for Controllers," *New York Times*, 16 August 1981.

rolling back labor's gains since WWII.<sup>415</sup> There is no question, however, that the PATCO defeat has come to symbolize the labor movement's dramatic decline over the past thirty-five years. The litany is familiar. The percentage of private sector workers who are union members has dropped to 7.4—a lower level than at any time since the Great Depression.<sup>416</sup> The number of union members in the United States is equal to that of 1952 when the workforce was half its present size. Over the past five years, the United States has averaged 18 major strikes a year compared to 424 in 1974 and an average of 289 throughout the 1970s. Unions have routinely accepted contract concessions, including drastic pay and benefit cuts and union-busting two-tier wage schemes that provide lower wages to newly hired workers; many unionists have watched as their jobs are outsourced to non-union operations in the other parts of the U.S. and abroad, and millions of American workers have been forced to adjust their retirement plans as negotiated pensions were unilaterally reduced or even eliminated. The lifeblood of the labor movement—the workers' ability to organize unions—has been undermined by the steady erosion of the National Labor Relations Act and the increasingly aggressive attempts by employers to remain union free. Workers attempting to organize unions are consistently subjected to harassment and

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<sup>415</sup> Joseph A. McCartin argues that the use of striker replacements during several public employee strikes in the 1970s as well as the PATCO strike "paved the way for its expanded use in the private sector" (see McCartin, "Fire the Hell out of Them': Sanitation Workers' Struggles and the Normalization of the Striker Replacement Strategy in the 1970s," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class Histories of the Americas*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Fall 2005, 67-92).

<sup>416</sup> With government workers included that number climbs to twelve percent.

discipline for exercising their rights. A recent study found that thirty percent of all employers facing organizing campaigns fire pro-union workers.<sup>417</sup>

None of the young radicals and intellectuals who made the turn to the working class in the 1970s could have predicted the depths to which the labor movement has plummeted. They watched appalled at the combination of economic and political developments that began emerging in the mid-1970s—deindustrialization and the relative quiescence of American workers and their unions; white working-class support for Reagan; the growing anti-union climate; and the dismantling of the welfare state with strong popular support. These trends forced radical activists to reevaluate how best to organize workers. Those who had looked at the late 1960s and early 1970s wildcat strikes—including those of black workers in Detroit and Atlanta—as harbingers of the kind of mass upsurge and labor militancy that had pushed the Democratic Party to the left in the 1930s were forced to decide whether remaining in the labor movement made sense politically when the broader protests failed to materialize. Those who continued on the job and in the unions found promise and meaning in the democratic struggles for inclusion such as fights over gender and racial equity in older exclusive trades as well as jobs in the growing sectors of the economy. Still others viewed union democracy as the necessary first step to building a mass movement of the rank and file. Those efforts bore fruit in the Seattle cannery union and in some of the San Francisco Bay area service unions. Battles for

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<sup>417</sup> The study also found that 49 percent of employers threatened to close or relocate parts of the business if workers voted for the union, and that 82 percent hired anti-union consultants (see Center for Urban Economic Development, University of Illinois at Chicago, “Undermining the Right to Organize: Employer Behavior During Union Representation Campaigns,” December 2005).

union democracy also helped re-shape the cultures of many of the nation's largest national unions, including the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The more than twenty-year fight for Teamster reform contributed directly to the successful United Parcel Service strike in 1997—a campaign that marked a major victory for labor's battle with employers' over their use of contingent workers to undermine union strength. The Teamsters forced UPS to bundle existing part-time jobs to create ten thousand new full-time positions.<sup>418</sup>

Countless other labor radicals never had the choice of retooling their organizing strategies. They lost their jobs in mass layoffs and plant closings and failed to find new working-class jobs in the 1980s. Some returned to school for advanced degrees or resumed professional careers. For Ann Arbor student radical turned autoworker-activist Rich Feldman, the plant closings in the 1980s and the failure of the radical groups with which he was associated to gain traction among his coworkers prompted second thoughts regarding his commitment to organizing workers as a means of establishing a new socialist party. After “romanticizing the working class, after thinking I had the answers with Marxism-Leninism, I came to the point that I didn't have enough answers,” Feldman recalled. In the mid-1980s, he began conducting oral history interviews with his coworkers at Ford's Michigan Truck Plant outside of Detroit. Those interviews provided the basis for the book *End of the Line*, in which workers reflect upon

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<sup>418</sup> Jim West, “Big Win at UPS! Strike Puts Part-Timers on National Agenda,” *Labor Notes*, September 1997.

their jobs and families and the impact of plant closings and mass layoffs.<sup>419</sup> “I wrote the book as a way to say maybe if you just dialogue through this discussion with people, a new birth of ideas will emerge,” said Feldman. With its moving portraits of coworkers with whom he had worked for seventeen years, Feldman came to view the book as “a going away present, a way to sum up a certain part of my life.” After a promotional tour for the book during which he had the opportunity to talk to workers across the country, he decided to stay at Ford where he was elected plant chairman before working on the UAW staff.<sup>420</sup>

General Baker and Marian Kramer find themselves in the kinds of struggles for survival that had first motivated them to become activists in the early 1960s. During their years in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, they had believed that young black workers in Detroit would be key agents for bringing about a radical reordering of the social and economic structure. They maintained that faith long after Baker’s dismissal from Chrysler during the 1968 wildcats, and as Kramer immersed herself in work with welfare recipients in the National Welfare Rights Union.<sup>421</sup> But today they find themselves fighting to provide water to many of those workers and their children and grandchildren. After a neighbor sheepishly asked to borrow her water hose a few years ago, Kramer learned that the water departments in Detroit and Highland Park—an industrial suburb within Detroit’s city limits—had shut off services for tens of

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<sup>419</sup> Feldman, and Mike Betzold, eds., *End of the Line: Autoworkers and the American Dream* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press 1990).

<sup>420</sup> Feldman, Interview by author 19 May 2004.

<sup>421</sup> Baker eventually found work at Ford’s River Rouge plant, where he was active in the UAW, even serving as local president.

thousands of customers who could not pay their bills. The city of Highland Park mulled plans to privatize its water services, contracting with a company that would generate revenue by selling bottled water. Kramer and Baker sprang into action. They pulled together a broad-based coalition—including victims of the water shut-offs—and forced the cities to implement water affordability plans for those who had fallen behind in their bills. Kramer argued that the potential for a public health crisis outweighed the right of the water departments to shut off water. Denying water to people who lived adjacent to the largest supply of fresh water in the world was “just plain wrong!”<sup>422</sup> The incident served as another reminder for Kramer that “the fight in Highland Park is the fight in Benton Harbor, in Flint, in Johannesburg, South Africa, in China and all the places when it comes to a question of water. It becomes a global problem.”<sup>423</sup>

The 1995 election of John Sweeney as president of the AFL-CIO over incumbent Lane Kirkland provided a sliver of hope for a new direction for the labor movement. Sweeney, who had been president of SEIU, promised to organize new workers, reestablish labor power within the Democratic Party, and oppose the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Scholarly and popular observers noted some signs of revitalization within the U.S. labor movement in the years that followed his election. The Federation and many of its

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<sup>422</sup> Cassandra Spratling, “Water Warrior: Highland Park woman gets national recognition for fighting water cutoffs for poor people,” *Detroit Free Press*, 1 July 2007.

<sup>423</sup> Curt Guyette, “Waterfight: Film Makes Highland Park Symbol of Worldwide Issue,” *Metro Times* (Detroit), 23 May 2007.

constituent unions committed substantial resources to organizing new workers.<sup>424</sup> Steelworkers and chemical plant workers formed fragile alliances with environmentalists in efforts to protect jobs and promote healthy communities, while unionized government employees joined community-based campaigns to secure a “living wage” for all of those working under municipal contracts.

More skeptical observers suggested that these developments probably arrived years too late. A handful of organizing successes, though remarkable given the barriers to forming unions, cannot make up for the loss of thousands of members through plant closings, layoffs, downsizing due to mechanization, and decertification drives.<sup>425</sup> In September 2005, Sweeney’s successor at SEIU, Andy Stern, led that union and several others out of the AFL-CIO and into a new umbrella group, the Change to Win Federation.<sup>426</sup> The seven unions in the Change to Win Federation accused the AFL-CIO of failing to commit the resources necessary to organize new workers. They also argued for the consolidation of smaller unions into larger unions that would presumably have more bargaining power.

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<sup>424</sup> Recent organizing victories include the Service Employees’ International Union’s (SEIU) successful campaigns to organize home health care workers in Southern California and childcare workers in Illinois, adding more than 100,000 members to the ranks. The Communication Workers of America have made consistent gains in organizing new telephone and wireless communications companies, and 2,500 members of the Florida-based Coalition of Immokalee Workers won a historic labor agreement with Taco Bell in 2005.

<sup>425</sup> For a full discussion of the changes within the AFL-CIO and the limitations of those changes, see Bruce Nissen ed., *Which Direction for Organized Labor?: Essays on Organizing, Outreach, and Internal Transformations* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1999).

<sup>426</sup> Steven Greenhouse, “Breakaway Unions Start New Federation,” *New York Times*, 28 September 2005. In addition to SEIU, the federation includes UNITE HERE, the United Farm Workers, the Teamsters, the Carpenters, the United Food and Commercial Workers, and the Laborers’ International Union of North America. Those unions represented more than a third of the AFL-CIO’s membership.

Despite the internal divisions, the energy emanating from the labor movement since 1995 captured the imagination of a new generation of young activists. Students at dozens of colleges and universities drew attention to the exploitation of sweatshop workers by U.S. corporations and supported campus workers struggling for higher pay, better working conditions, and union recognition. The more committed among them served as AFL-CIO Union Summer interns or enrolled in the Organizing Institute, a Federation-sponsored organizer training school that places its graduates with unions in the midst of organizing campaigns.

Kay Eisenhower, a Union WAGE activist and longtime leader of SEIU Local 616 in the Bay Area, has been encouraged by the vitality and interest of young people, but she worries that it may not be enough: “We don’t have anything that has the iconic status of the civil rights movement for example, and I worry about that just because I think it made such a big difference to so many of us.” The civil rights movement, she argues, gave activists of her generation “a sense of perspective and purpose. . . . Whereas a lot of these newer smaller movements are more narrow in scope. They don’t have the same broad picture scope.” She has also observed that many of the young labor activists take jobs as paid staff members and is disappointed that few consider the possibility of organizing as rank-and-file members. “If your group believes in socialism from below and union power from below and transforming the labor movement from below, you don’t go about that by becoming a union staffer,” she said. “I think to know what it’s like from the ground floor is really important. Otherwise I think

people, particularly leftists who are often better educated than some of the people they are working with, are going end up just substituting themselves” for the working class.<sup>427</sup>

The belated retooling of the AFL-CIO’s Cold War foreign policy, which had once bolstered right-wing anti-labor regimes and organizations abroad has been another positive sign. A handful of unions have been at the forefront of forging the kind of international linkages that will be necessary for confronting the new realities of economic globalization. The latest development has been especially satisfying for Terri Mast, who, after Silme Domingo’s murder, struggled with being a thirty-one-year-old widow with two children while keeping ILWU Local 37 together through the decline of the Alaska salmon canning industry. In November 1999, as Seattle moved to the forefront of a new movement for global economic justice, Mast practiced the same brand of labor internationalism that had animated her and her associates in their efforts to secure justice in the Philippines. She initiated a labor coalition to take part in the historic protests during the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle. “Transnational corporations are attempting to create a global nightmare for workers to live under,” Mast said upon announcing the formation of a labor-WTO mobilization committee. “But we in the labor movement reject that nightmare. Right now we have a unique, historic opportunity—a chance that may never come again—to

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<sup>427</sup> Eisenhower, Interview by author, 31 October 2003.

confront anti-worker trade policies and fight for our vision of a different kind of future.”<sup>428</sup>

Nineteen sixty eight did not mark the end of an era of protest for Marian Kramer, General Baker, Kay Eisenhower or any of the other radical activists and intellectuals who made the turn to the working class. The challenges they faced at the end of the 1960s were often disheartening, but they also opened up new possibilities for organizing in the 1970s. Those new possibilities led them to engage workers across the country to build a broad-based movement for social change. Their efforts were complicated and contradictory, and they ultimately failed to achieve their most ambitious goals. Nevertheless, those labor radicals who remained active over the long haul helped the American labor movement rediscover and put into practice its best traditions of union democracy, global internationalism, civil rights unionism, feminism, and a commitment to organizing new workers. As the labor movement grapples with the impact of economic globalization, those traditions will be essential building blocks in the ongoing struggle for democracy and economic justice.

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<sup>428</sup> Brian Wiles, “Protest of the Century: Labor Says ‘No’ to the WTO!,” *Puget Sound IBU Newsletter*, October-November 1999.

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