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# **‘We Want Both!’: Pressuring Philadelphia Unions for Inclusion and Equity during the Long 1970s**

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## **Autobiographical sketch**

Alyssa Ribeiro is an assistant professor of History and Black Studies at Allegheny College, where she teaches courses in twentieth-century United States history. Her current research focuses on how Philadelphia’s Black and Puerto Rican communities responded to deindustrialization, austerity, and growing political conservatism in the 1970s and 1980s

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## **Abstract**

This article examines local labor insurgency in Philadelphia between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s. Drawing on alternative press sources, it traces the efforts of Black, Puerto Rican, and female workers to reshape their unions as stable employment opportunities declined. Across

industries and job sites, workers pressured both their unions and their employers through public criticism, running slates of candidates in union elections, and taking part in picketing and wildcat strikes. Existing scholarship has privileged rank-and-file activism among White men focused on wages and working conditions. Enlarging our view to include a more representative workforce at the local level while following workers' resistance forward through time recharacterizes the rank-and-file rebellion to include defiant, multiracial coalitions demanding progressive reform. That broader rebellion, in turn, challenges some long-held assumptions about US labor during the 1970s.

In July 1975, a crowd of '250 angry workers – Black, Puerto Rican and white, more than half women,' descended upon a meeting of Philadelphia's Joint Board of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. At issue was a stark choice local union leadership had presented to the rank and file: they had to decide between keeping a recent wage increase or full medical insurance. Workers rejected this difficult choice, chanting 'We Want Both,' as union officials met inside.<sup>1</sup> This diverse group of textile workers was responding to the pressures of deindustrialization not with acquiescence, but by trying to push their union further to the left.

As Philadelphia experienced an extended process of structural change, workers predictably endured a contentious relationship with employers. But at the same time, many organized workers waged fierce battles with their own union leadership during the long 1970s.<sup>2</sup> This article traces the efforts of Puerto Rican, Black, and female workers to reshape their labor unions as stable employment opportunities declined. These dynamics spanned at least twenty union locals at industrial and service employers in both the private and public sectors.

It is not surprising that in the midst of economic restructuring, many remaining union members rejected complacency and sought to seize some control through available organizational structures. Most historians have depicted this resistance as primarily concerned with restoring democracy to entrenched labor bureaucracies while pursuing better wages and working conditions (A. Brenner, Brenner, & Winslow, 2010; LaBotz, 1990; Moody, 1988, pp. 83-94). Yet rank-and-file concerns stretched much further to embrace a host of progressive values with respect to race, gender, and sexuality. I argue that at the local level, rank-and-file rebellion centered on concerns about representation, inclusion, and equity, and lasted throughout the decade and into the 1980s. Across industries and job sites, workers pressured their unions alongside their employers through public criticism, running slates of candidates in union elections, and taking part in picketing and wildcat strikes. In the process, they articulated alternative visions for more inclusive and equitable job sites.

As Lane Windham (2017) notes, our prevalent narrative of labor's decline has started too early and missed workers' ongoing efforts to organize throughout the 1970s (p. 3). When we bring more Black, Brown, and female faces into the picture, and look beyond the factory floor, the trajectory of organized labor looks different. Trends in Philadelphia are a clear indication of how social movement campaigns centered on race and gender were more closely intertwined with labor struggles than has generally been acknowledged (Isaac & Christiansen, 2002; Storch, 2013, p. 94). Deindustrialization continued to alter unions' internal dynamics even as the gains of organized labor overall slowed and reversed. Rather than demoralized workers disillusioned with civil rights progress, in many places we see defiant, multiracial coalitions demanding progressive reform.

### **Filling in the Rank and File**

A rank-and-file rebellion swept through United States unions in the late 1960s and early 1970s, coinciding with the highest level of strike activity on record (Zieger, 2007, pp. 190-191).<sup>3</sup> These conflicts centered on compensation and working conditions, aside from the political concerns of a few radicals. Then the worsening economic conditions of the 1970s and more business-friendly government policies seemingly dissolved labor militancy in short order (Brecher, 2014, pp. 221-241; La Botz, 1990, p. 28; S. Lynd & Lynd, 2000, p. 1; Rubio, 2016). Some very recent exceptions have begun to revise previous assumptions (Dyer, 2018; Windham, 2017). Yet on the whole, labor historians have constructed this widely-accepted narrative that reveals how workers' audacious actions reflected and paralleled other pressures for social reform at the time. Our current view of this movement, though, has not reflected its breadth in terms of participation, geography, chronology, or motivation. Enlarging our view to include a more representative workforce at the local level while following workers' resistance forward through time recharacterizes the rank-and-file rebellion. That broader rebellion, in turn, challenges some long-held assumptions about labor during the 1970s.

Previous rank-and-file rebellion scholarship foregrounds a White, male labor force. That focus downplays contemporary demographic shifts, which drew more female, Black and Latino workers into this wave of dissent (Morris, 1971, pp. 63-64; Windham, 2017, pp. 4, 22, 53). When workers of color or women do appear, they tend to be treated either as separate groups in ephemeral organizations or as the relatively passive constituencies of a handful of radicals or revolutionaries (S. Lynd & Lynd, 2000, pp. 201-09, 221-29; Moody, 1988, pp. 90-94; Zieger, 1986, p. 196). By the 1970s, though, Black and Latino workers had higher union membership rates than White workers (Windham, 2017, pp. 42, 53). And ongoing societal debates about racial and gender barriers permeated these workers' interactions with their unions and employers.

Rank-and-file rebellion scholarship has also primarily focused on large, established unions with emphasis on the national scale. Especially prominent are the United Auto Workers, the Teamsters, the United Mine Workers, and postal workers. But they are only part of the story. Most workers experienced the nuance of labor struggles at the local or municipal level. Much of the action was closer to home at small and scattered job sites and involved occupations that were less impacted by deindustrialization, such as light manufacturing and service provision (S. Lynd & Lynd, 2000, p. 8). A 1971 handbook for restive rank-and-filers put emphasis on the ‘lower level, in the shops and local unions where the daily problems arise’ and touted the potential of ‘a militant progressive force’ within unions (Morris, pp. 144, 151).

Moreover, narratives of rank-and-file activism have generally examined private and public sector unions separately. This distinction accommodates their differing chronologies, legal circumstances, and membership bases. Labor insurgency in this era, however, reveals similar tactics and experiences among workers whether they worked for government or not. As Randi Storch (2013) notes, ‘jobs in service, retail, and light manufacturing shared a high proportion of women and minorities and a stressful work culture’ regardless of the employer (p. 96). Melvin Dubofsky and Joseph McCartin (2017) add that activism surrounding equal pay and family issues in the private sector drew directly on campaigns by female public servants (p. 357).

By most accounts the rank-and-file rebellion disappeared by the mid-1970s, when sharp economic recession eroded workers’ leverage. Scholars such as Jeremy Brecher (2014; p. 240) and Kim Moody (1988, pp. 91-94) also point toward (White) workers’ turn toward individualism and their inability to sustain reform-oriented organizations. This timeline overlaps with interpretations of the civil rights movement ending in the late 1960s or early 1970s. On the ground in places like Philadelphia, though, many workers kept pushing throughout the decade, with echoes of a restive rank and file extending well into the 1980s. So too, workers’ continued

fight against discrimination and their ability to form alliances across racial and ethnic lines did not disappear. The persistence of progressive principles with respect to race and gender belie the strength of White ‘backlash’ and antifeminist politics among organized workers.

Why have these dimensions of worker mobilization amid deindustrialization remained muted? The spontaneous and sometimes short-term nature of broader rank-and-file actions has made them less visible to historians. This is especially true of accounts driven by organizational records, oral interviews with union leaders, and national newspapers. Because coverage of internal union struggles was often absent from mainstream media, alternative press sources offer valuable pieces of evidence. Leftist, ethnic, campus, and neighborhood-oriented newspapers covered labor issues as local illustrations of broader societal changes.

As a start toward filling in the history of the rank-and-file rebellion, this article focuses on private and public-sector unions in the broad areas of transportation, manufacturing, and service provision where rank-and-file activism was most prevalent. It excludes Philadelphia’s building trades and teacher unions, whose particular struggles with racial integration and City Hall, respectively, have been detailed by other historians (Alvarez, 2003; Anderson, 2004, pp. 111-60; Golland, 2011; McKee, 2008, pp. 211-48; Shelton, 2017). Analysis of alternative press articles for patterns among local workers’ actions and ideologies reveals a narrative of widespread labor insurgency fed by left-leaning principles. Philadelphia’s rank-and-file rebellion drew its strength from multiracial groups of men and women. Bus drivers, telephone operators, butchers, and many more sought to make unions not only more responsive, but also more progressive.

### **The ‘Workshop of the World’ in Transition**

Employment opportunities in Philadelphia’s broad-based manufacturing economy attracted labor migrants throughout the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. Major

industries included metal working and heavy equipment, textiles and apparel, and a wide variety of small consumer goods. The city's network of small- to medium-sized firms turned out everything from Stetson hats to locomotives. By the mid-twentieth century, though, a decades-long trend of population and corporate outmigration set in, wreaking havoc upon local tax revenues. Industrial renewal efforts found limited success as the city's economy underwent a rough transition away from manufacturing and toward service provision. By one estimate, the city lost 75% of its manufacturing jobs between 1955 and 1975. Traditional pillars like metal and textiles declined precipitously. In their place, universities, healthcare providers, banking, and retail provided a greater share of employment (Bauman, Hummon, & Muller, 1991, p. 276; Goode, 1994, p. 206; Goode & Schneider, 1994, pp. 30-31; McKee, 2004; Simon, 2017).

The city's non-White workforce was disproportionately affected by these trends. In 1970, approximately 40% of employed Black and Puerto Rican persons were service workers or operatives, compared to just 24% of White Philadelphia workers. By 1980, these numbers had increased to 47% and 28%, respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1973, pp. 400, 456, 504; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983, pp. 279, 405, 507). Occupationally, workers of color and women concentrated in areas like textile production and food processing, which were prone to plant closure. They also had a strong presence in public sector employment, where they faced austerity resulting from a decline in the local tax base. Meanwhile, they filled many lesser-skilled positions in the healthcare sector, which underwent painful structural adjustments even as it ultimately grew. Geographically, many Black and Puerto Rican residents also lived in factory-dense North Philadelphia neighborhoods, where they felt the fullest impact of these developments (Adams et al., 1991, pp. 30-65; Bauman et al., 1991, pp. 279-280; McKee, 2008, pp. 13, 85; Simon & Alnutt, 2007, p. 404).

### **Disloyal and Discriminatory: Worker Critiques of Union Leadership**



Amid this uncertain labor market, two themes dominated workers' public critiques of union leadership: accusations of disloyalty and inequality. In the former category, rank-and-file workers viewed union leadership as co-opted by management and out of touch with actual workers' concerns. Local political divides, union leaders' decisions, working conditions, and lack of access to union benefits all fueled discontent. Moreover, that discontent took on an added edge due to drastic racial and gender disparities between union leadership and the rank and file. Most commonly, workers scorned their leaders for 'selling out' and accepting 'sweetheart' deals.

Lack of input was the biggest sticking point. One G.B. Goldman Paper Company employee called their union meetings a 'farce' because leaders completely ignored the members.<sup>4</sup> Even in the usually 'militant' Hospital Workers 1199C, workers worried that the union increasingly resembled others in its preoccupation with wages, as opposed to working conditions, and was becoming an 'un-democratic bureaucracy which does not answer to its rank and file.'<sup>5</sup>

City hall's turn toward law-and-order politics drove deep divisions in some unions. When the mayor appointed former Chief Police Inspector Joseph Halferty as streets commissioner in 1970, sanitation workers balked. They staged a work slowdown to protest the extension of police influence over their livelihoods and demanded someone with relevant experience instead.<sup>6</sup> Sanitation workers were especially sensitive to the incursion because they faced the threat of layoffs to solve city budget issues. The police, meanwhile, were playing up their protective role as they pressed for wage increases. Union leader Earl Stout undertook 'bitter wrangling' with city hall, eventually obtaining Halferty's resignation.<sup>7</sup> Trash again piled up in 1976 when sanitation workers staged another slowdown during contract negotiations. The rank and file hoped for a 4.5% wage increase just like police and firefighters had gotten. When their new contract fell short of that goal, workers disparaged Stout as a traitor who 'bowed to pressure

from the Rizzo administration' and sold the membership short.<sup>8</sup> In both of these incidents, the city's prerogative to treat public safety officers (who were predominantly White) better than sanitation workers (who were predominantly Black) set up a hierarchy among city workers that further reinforced racial disparities.

Frank Rizzo, a former police commissioner elected mayor in 1971, was an especially polarizing figure due to his antagonistic relationship with residents of color. The administration's close ties with the predominantly White building trades led to generalizations about labor's support of Rizzo (Lombardo, 2018, p. 151). But on the contrary, many rank-and-file workers strongly objected to labor leaders' support for Rizzo. United Auto Workers Local 1851, which had a Black majority, rebuked their leaders' endorsement of Rizzo by a 10-to-1 margin and issued a statement denouncing Rizzo's neglect of the Black community and hostility toward labor.<sup>9</sup> And in a powerful personal rebuff of Rizzo, Black voters throughout the city who were usually dependable Democrats crossed party lines to vote for his Republican opponent (Weiler, 1974, pp. 56-57).

Throughout Philadelphia, contract negotiations brought tensions between union leadership and the rank and file to a head. Teamsters Local 156 taxi drivers accused union leaders of 'selling out,' explaining that 'When we found out what was really in the contract, we almost threw up' because officials hid changes to their health coverage.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in Philadelphia's local Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), the rank and file objected to a lack of input on a 'sweetheart' deal that union leaders had signed with manufacturers.<sup>11</sup>

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) workers repeatedly butted heads with their leadership. Transit Workers Union (TWU) Local 234 overwhelmingly voted to oust their president after he 'negotiated a sell-out contract and rammed it down the throats of

members.’ His successor met a similar fate after gaining only a 5-cent wage increase during a 44-day strike. A TWU member explained, ‘It was obvious again that the international had come in – not to fight for us and defend us – but to sell us out. All of the campaign promises went out the window and we discovered that they were really no different than the old machine.’ He continued, ‘The rank and file is fed up with sell outs and back room wheeling and dealing. We’ve been having mass meetings at the depots, and workers have shown real militancy on the picket lines . . . This shows that even when the leadership has abandoned the principles of trade union democracy, there are many rank and filers who have not.’<sup>12</sup> Critically, Black SEPTA drivers felt leadership’s concession’s the most. They lived in neighborhoods subject to service cuts and were themselves disproportionately vulnerable to layoffs.<sup>13</sup>

At other moments, worker critiques centered squarely on racial and gender disparities. In his 1971 *Rebellion in the Unions: A Handbook for Rank and File Action*, George Morris noted, ‘Most significant is the new emphasis on the struggle against racism . . . Today we witness the rise of a more advanced unity of white, black and brown for eradication of all forms of racism whether on the job, in the community or from within the union’ (pp. 7-8). Workers in Philadelphia agreed. In 1976, rank-and-file committees from two UAW locals advocated 25 points for inclusion in contract negotiations which addressed their ‘most burning issues.’ Prominent among these were ‘an end to racism and discrimination in upgrades and apprenticeships’ and ‘demands for hiring more women and company financed daycare.’<sup>14</sup>

Racial discontent occurred at a moment when unions and employers were increasingly sensitive to such criticisms. Throughout the long 1970s, incremental integration of workplaces continued through regulatory pressure and individual lawsuits alleging discrimination (Anderson, 2004; Golland, 2011; McKee, 2008). But in the meantime, workers hoped to effect additional change from within their own organizations. A national survey of public sector unions in 1973

reported that ‘Perhaps the most abrasive factionalism that has become part and parcel of the internal politics of unions is racial in nature’ (Fink & Greenberg, 1989, p. 211). Locally, a task force on minority workers’ issues noted, ‘all too often, minority workers face as much opposition from their own unions as from the bosses when they organize to change the rotten conditions at their plants.’<sup>15</sup>

Some employers were in no hurry to unify their workforce despite this pressure. In the textile industry, it seemed that companies actively tried to divide workers by race, gender, and native language.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, some unions still bore sharp racial divides in the 1970s. Temple University employees decried a situation where Black and White workers were segregated between two different locals of the same union.<sup>17</sup> Penn Central Railroad workers, meanwhile, claimed that two Black union locals had not been invited to a critical meeting with international union leadership and suffered layoffs as a result.<sup>18</sup> The leadership of International Longshoremen’s Association Local 1291 could ‘remain in office only because the membership is divided racially and unable to put forward a united slate against them.’<sup>19</sup> Frederick Lewis, head of Local 403 Highway Workers, blasted racial paternalism, claiming their contract was ‘approved in a “smoke filled room by a lot of white people who think they know what is best for Negroes.”’<sup>20</sup>

Bell Telephone Company still steered employees by race, which meant that Black and Puerto Rican women nearly always ended up in lower-level jobs like operator. One worker voiced her solution: ‘People of color and the more conscious white workers must unite and either abolish this racism within the company or abolish the company.’<sup>21</sup> Bell workers also pushed for women’s equality. While on strike in 1971, they protested the wage gap between males and females and demanded that female employees’ pensions be made available to the family in the event of her death.<sup>22</sup>

Workers in other unions believed that racial divides compromised the very function of their organizations. References to the ‘labor bureaucracy’ signaled not only entrenched or coopted leadership, but also union officials who did not reflect the demographics of workers. ACWA members, for instance, bemoaned the union leadership’s inability to relate to the majority of workers who were Black and Latino.<sup>23</sup> Meat Cutters Local 196 members were unhappy with lax health and safety standards and difficulty obtaining the union benefits to which they were entitled. Shop steward Ron Ardron argued that these deprivations amounted to racial discrimination because 90% of the plant’s workers were Black and Puerto Rican.<sup>24</sup>

While some unions remained bastions of racial privilege, other labor organizations began to tout their racial inclusivity as an asset. In a 1974 advertisement, Laborers Local 57 told *Philadelphia Tribune* readers, ‘[our] membership consists of men and women of all descent: Polish, Italian, Irish, German, Puerto Rican, Negro, Asian, Jewish, African and just about any or every other Nationality that represents America.’<sup>25</sup> Hospital Workers Local 1199C similarly boasted of a leadership dominated by female and Black officers.<sup>26</sup> Impressively, 1199C even won contract clauses protecting employees from discrimination relating to sexual preference as early as 1980.<sup>27</sup>

General frustration with union leadership that seemed out of touch with its members and specific critiques regarding racial and gender were mutually reinforcing dynamics. Overall, Morris’s (1971) handbook advised that demands for dedicated measures to address discrimination were growing more common nationally. Though these efforts were sometimes denounced as separatist, in reality they almost always depended on interracial support to succeed due to the mixed demographics of most unions (p. 67). As Kim Moody (1988) notes, contemporary mainstream media coverage privileged young White workers like those at General

Motors's Lordstown plant. Such one-dimensional portrayals belied the 'multiracial nature' of rank-and-file struggles in many places (p. 91).

### **Acting on Worker Discontent**

Wielding critiques about disloyalty and discrimination, workers acted in several ways. Some employees posed legal challenges against union leadership. At numerous employers, workers participated in picketing and wildcat strikes and sought to replace unresponsive leaders through union elections. Publicity efforts and coalitions with other organized workers provided sustenance, even as many employers sought to exploit the visible divisions among their workers.

Workers repeatedly used their physical presence, or the lack thereof, to make a statement. In June 1971, the local ACWA shut down 60 clothing factories for 10~~ten~~ days in a wildcat strike.<sup>28</sup> A few years later, the belief that union leadership was not doing enough to preserve their jobs led workers to simultaneously picket both retailers and their own union hall.<sup>29</sup> As described previously, angry workers also descended on a Joint Board meeting when asked to choose between a raise or health coverage.<sup>30</sup> Meat Cutters Local 196 members similarly aired their discontent by demonstrating at union headquarters, with 'about 70 picketers representing the 200 Black, Puerto Rican, and white workers employed at Blue Bird [Food Products].'<sup>31</sup> When popular shop steward Ron Ardron was fired, workers again demonstrated in extreme cold.<sup>32</sup>

Disrupting or delaying services also called attention to workers' grievances. For instance, over two thousand workers at eight hospitals staged a sick-out during contract negotiations, without their union's blessing. The action was so effective at Saint Luke's that over 90% of hospital workers stayed home for a day.<sup>33</sup> Trash piled up on the streets for weeks due to a slowdown by sanitation workers in 1976, drawing 'angry residents' into the middle of the labor conflict.<sup>34</sup>

At several employers, union elections served as opportunities to unseat existing

leadership and align union policy more closely with non-White and female workers' interests. *The Organizer* advised workers to target influential positions such as shop steward, grievance coordinator, and business agent.<sup>35</sup> Most rank-and-file slates were consciously representative of workplace diversity, including Puerto Rican, Black, and female candidates. Slates marketed themselves with catchy names, such as the 'Blue Ribbon Group,' 'Unity Slate,' and 'Driving Force.'<sup>36</sup> 'Token representation of blacks' in their union frustrated taxi drivers. Still, a Black-dominated candidate slate felt the need to assure others they 'were not trying to take over,' but simply sought "much needed improvements."<sup>37</sup> Among transit workers, meanwhile, two of three candidate slates hoped to take the union in a "more militant and democratic direction."<sup>38</sup> The Rank and File Committee of Meat Cutters Local 196 put forth a slate that consciously included "four Black candidates, three women, both full and part-timers, plant and retail workers, cashiers, a grocery clerk, and a meat cutter."<sup>39</sup>

Existing union leadership resisted these efforts and clung to power by determining election parameters. Some leaders refused to allow secret ballots; others insisted on mail ballots that many workers thought were susceptible to fraud. Ballots were often printed only in English even when significant numbers of Spanish-speaking employees belonged to the union. Other unions held elections within short hours that prevented some shift workers from voting. In the ACWA, rank and filers unsuccessfully pressed for a secret ballot in order to overcome intimidation.<sup>40</sup> Most rank-and-file slates found limited success in union elections, but the caucuses persisted and continued to push for reform.<sup>41</sup>

Strike and contract votes also revealed deep division within unions, even as they faced employers across the bargaining table. When Hospital Workers 1199C voted to strike over inadequate payment for Medicaid services, David Fair explained, 'This is an action which comes from the rank and file union members, not the leadership, and we must carry it through.'<sup>42</sup> At

Rois Manufacturing Company, Black and Latino members of United Electrical Workers Local 168 went to the brink of striking in 1986. Workers felt that the defense contractor, which manufactured mines and radio equipment, could easily afford higher wages and fairer treatment. After a long and contentious meeting, the contract vote was 59 in favor and 48 opposed. Younger Rois workers were strike averse and more willing to compromise, while older and more skilled workers balked. But should the contract vote have failed, even union organizers admitted that the local lacked the unity necessary to carry out a successful strike.<sup>43</sup>

During these campaigns, workers spread the word among themselves not only through meetings and face-to-face conversations, but also through printed materials (S. Lynd & Lynd, 2000, pp. 91, 106, 207). *The Organizer*, a communist publication circulated in Philadelphia, offered readers tips to produce effective leaflets, which were a crucial tool for reaching a broader audience.<sup>44</sup> When the UAW tried to introduce 3-year terms for local leadership, workers circulated leaflets that cast existing union officials as ‘kings and princes’ seeking ‘lifetime’ rule.<sup>45</sup> The appeal was effective, and the measure failed. ACWA workers used a leaflet to share how one union official ‘sneered at and mocked a Spanish speaking member of our local,’ clearly appealing to Puerto Rican workers.<sup>46</sup>

Small-run newsletters likewise kept membership apprised of developments during contract negotiations or internal controversies. These newsletters could be especially helpful when circulated among workers who were geographically divided. For instance, during contract talks in 1976, caucuses from two different UAW locals collaborated to distribute the *Rank and File News*.<sup>47</sup> The rank-and-file committee of Meat Cutters Local 196 similarly kept in touch with workers across multiple job sites through a newspaper called *Writing the Wrongs*.<sup>48</sup> Beginning in 1979, the publication of *Labor Notes* built upon local precedents to circulate news among rank and filers nationally (Moody, 2016). Contemporary studies found that union members placed



more trust in the labor press than other news sources; this trust may have stretched toward other worker publications as well (Blume, 1970; Lyons, 1969). Even though employers tried to limit the circulation of printed materials and some workers remained reluctant to take them for fear of retaliation, leaflets and newsletters played a central role in gathering support for rank-and-file reform efforts.

### **Between and Beyond Unions: The Struggle for Community Support**

Frustrated workers sought outside help when their unions fell short, both from the surrounding community and other labor organizations. Reaching out to the alternative press as well as mainstream media brought more attention to their plight. If mobilized, public opinion could help rebellious rank and filers apply pressure to their unions and employers.

Sensational moments alerted the general public to deep-seated tensions within local labor organizations. Union disputes easily grabbed headlines on the rarer occasions when they became violent. William Dennis, a candidate for office in the taxi drivers union, requested police protection after his car was vandalized.<sup>49</sup> Leroy Parson, who worked to address racial discrimination in Local 542 of the Operating Engineers Union, was repaid with a savage beating from a motorcycle gang.<sup>50</sup> More seriously, Laborers Local 57 organizer Charles Williams was shot while sitting in his car, in what the press called a ‘gangland style assassination attempt.’<sup>51</sup> And Hospital Workers Union 1199C organizer Norman Rayford was shot and killed by a security guard in the midst of a strike.<sup>52</sup>

Community support was especially crucial for unions that provided basic public services. The United Parents of Ludlow, for instance, called for children to stay home in solidarity with a strike by the school system’s custodial, transportation, and food workers. The organization explained that children’s safety and comfort was directly connected to school employees’ working conditions.<sup>53</sup> And when sanitation workers staged a work slowdown to protest a

leadership appointment, the *Philadelphia Tribune* noted that ‘Blacks across the city showed rare unanimity’ in their support.<sup>54</sup>

Public transit workers hoped to gain similar support through labor actions that disrupted daily transportation. Overall, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, five thousand SEPTA employees went on strike three times in six years, with the longest standoff lasting 44 days. Community organizations generally viewed SEPTA workers as allies, and groups including the NAACP, the Consumers Education and Protective Association, and the Coalition for Better Transit backed strike demonstrations.<sup>55</sup> TWU leadership, however, did not leverage these relationships. During a 1977 SEPTA strike, TWU president Ned LeDonne dismissed the likelihood of community support. A frustrated rank-and-file member disagreed, claiming ‘The support was there. All he had to do was pick up the phone. We (the Committee) contacted a group of ministers in the Black community and the leaders of many community organizations. They told us that they were with us and would give us public support if LeDonne would just ask for it.’<sup>56</sup> Mindful of being caught in the middle, rank-and-file transit workers provided ‘covert support’ for riders to protest fare increases by paying with pennies.<sup>57</sup>

Recognizing the need for overarching community support, the activist Puerto Rican Alliance formed a Workers Rights Committee in the early 1980s. Such organizations offered workers an alternative route to improve their position that existed outside of the union hierarchy. Participants consciously evoked the preceding decade of Puerto Rican community pressure, explaining, ‘We need to do what was done all those years by Concilio, Puerto Rican Fraternity, PR Alliance and other organizations – make our voice heard.’<sup>58</sup> The Committee responded to requests for support from workers at Moritz Embroidery Works, Simkins Paper Company, Mrs. Paul’s, Arrowhead Sportswear, and Progress Lighting.<sup>59</sup> Tragedies like the death of Hermino Torres, who was killed by a detached piece of an industrial polisher at Progress Lighting, added

urgency to the Alliance's efforts.<sup>60</sup> At Moritz, though, disagreements between the Alliance and the union about 'how to respond to court injunctions, police harassment, and strike breakers' hindered strike coordinators' efforts.<sup>61</sup>

Alliance members touted the trend of increasing Latino labor activism, explaining 'Puerto Rican workers long oppressed, long silent, are raising their voices, demanding respect, demanding their contracts in Spanish, electing shop stewards that will defend them, uniting with black and white workers determined to fight for better working conditions.' Strikes at several employers lasted multiple weeks, and union drives at places like Annex Metals succeeded.<sup>62</sup>

As global economic pressures increased, public solidarity became even more important. United Electrical Workers organizer Phil Mamber explained that amid companies' efforts to 'turn the inner cities into the Third World,' it became essential 'to organize the community to support [a] shop.' Accordingly, Rois Manufacturing workers held a lunchtime rally with appearances from prominent local politicians and community activists.<sup>63</sup>

Local coalition organizations like the Philadelphia Council for Trade Union Action and Democracy united workers across employment sectors to stake out progressive political positions. For instance, the Council's Rank-and-File Committee released a 1970 statement expressing concern about the 'growing danger of a Police State coupled with the Military-Industrial complex in our country.'<sup>64</sup> In 1972, the Council supported universal basic income, higher taxes on the wealthy, and a low-cost housing program. It also sought to make discrimination a federal crime.<sup>65</sup> Ad-hoc coalitions also unified local labor groups around the Vietnam War, the George McGovern campaign, and unemployment (Haines, 1979, p. 107).

In addition to local collaboration, Philadelphia workers participated in coalition efforts at the national level. The National Rank and File Action Conference held in Chicago in June 1970 drew a crowd that was 'largely black' but also included 'large groups of Puerto Ricans, Mexican-

Americans, and urban whites.’ Representatives of at least ~~11~~eleven Philadelphia unions attended, where they helped draft a platform that prioritized racial and gender equity.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the founding conference for Coalition of Back Trade Unionists drew 1200 attendees to Chicago in September 1972; Philadelphia had its own local chapter by March 1974 (Walker-McWilliams, 2016, pp. 130-38).<sup>67</sup>

### **Appraising Union Insurgency in Philadelphia**

Actions in Philadelphia bear strong resemblance to contemporary union insurgency in other cities. Bus drivers in Chicago, electrical workers in upstate New York, and countless others pressed to hold leadership accountable and make unions more democratic and inclusive (Gellman, 2014, p. 49; Kashner, 1978). Workers in Pittsburgh even fundamentally challenged private property rights in an attempt to salvage industrial production (Rosenberg, 2001).

Even with incremental successes, though, unions were not a panacea. Most workers were not organized and the bureaucratic tendencies of some existing unions put them in conflict with their members. Many workers remained apathetic about conditions, partly because they needed the income from their job, and partly because they felt powerless. High employee turnover in low-skilled jobs also reduced workers’ resolve to press issues at any particular employer. One worker at Devon Apparel found the union ‘useless,’ since the company still fired workers at will.<sup>68</sup>

Workers’ gains in this era were often relatively short lived. Blue Bird Food Products, a site of conflict within Meat Cutters Local 196 in the late 1970s, closed its Philadelphia plant by 1982. Even more immediate, Arrowhead Sportswear gave Local 170 members less than two weeks’ notice of its factory closure. The rank and file were particularly upset that union leadership had failed to negotiate severance conditions, as had been done in other places.<sup>69</sup>

Beyond waging struggles with their unions and employers, Philadelphia workers faced ambivalent public attitudes in the 1970s and 1980s. They could often count on support from working-class people of color and progressive community organizations. But many Philadelphia residents grew weary of labor conflict, all the more so because White working-class residents had more difficulty establishing empathy with workers of color. And against a backdrop of sustained public protests about a plethora of social justice issues, pickets and strikes only added to the commotion. Frequent and disruptive strikes by transit workers and teachers, alongside work slowdowns by sanitation workers, inconvenienced Philadelphians enough to help erode public support for organized labor (Countryman, 2008, pp. 245, 310; Shelton, 2017; Wolfinger, 2016).<sup>70</sup> Lack of coverage by major news outlets also hurt workers' efforts to win broader sympathy (Issac & Christiansen, 2002).<sup>71</sup>

Though many rank-and-file efforts ultimately foundered, such persistent and dramatic struggles demonstrate how workers contested protracted deindustrialization at the local level, one workplace at a time. Rank-and-file groups pushed for more inclusive and equitable unions and workplaces even under the pressures of workplace closure and fiscal austerity. Tellingly, the local ACWA newspaper decreed in 1975, 'Let's be thankful that the union movement is STRONG. [It] is the most liberal, progressive force in the nation' (Haines, 1979, p. 108). Such confidence, expressed mid-way through the long 1970s, offers evidence of the longevity of local labor resistance. While the majority of workers remained unorganized, those that were tried to make it count.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> “Stop the ripoff! Philly clothing workers vote no to protect raise,” *The Organizer: Newspaper of the Philadelphia Workers’ Organizing Committee* (hereafter *Organizer*), May-July 1975, Wisconsin Historical Society Microforms (all *Organizer* articles from Wisconsin Historical Society).

<sup>2</sup> Following many other historians’ use of this periodization, in this article I understand the long 1970s as stretching from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s.

<sup>3</sup> According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, cumulative sums of idle days in the past decade peak at 290,741 in 1976. This is a very conservative estimate, as the data does not capture work stoppages involving fewer than one thousand workers. Figures from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Table 1. Work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers, 1947-2017,” accessed January 9, 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkstp.t01.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> “Ever work at G. B. Goldman Paper Co.?,” *Kensington Peoples Press*, December 1971, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries (hereafter SCRC).

<sup>5</sup> “Militant tradition tarnished: 1199 leaders sell rank & file short,” *Organizer*, August-September 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Pamala Haynes, “Two sanitation unions set to cast strike or work vote on Saturday,” *Philadelphia Tribune* (hereafter *Tribune*), February 14, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers (all *Tribune* articles from ProQuest).

<sup>7</sup> “City workers threatening to strike next Tuesday if Tate lays off over 3,500,” *Tribune*, December 12, 1970.

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<sup>8</sup> Lorraine Branham, “Union head blamed as vote is taken on new contract,” *Tribune*, August 10, 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Local 1851 had about 900 members, the majority of whom were Black. Len Lear, “Black union rank & file oppose leaders on Rizzo endorsement,” *Tribune*, April 22, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> Al Richardson, quoted in Len Lear, “Yellow Cab shop stewards charge ‘sellout;’ union official answers, calls them ‘liars,’” *Tribune*, July 27, 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Philadelphia’s local was the second largest chapter of ACWA in the nation. “Clothing workers rebel against sweetheart contract,” *Philadelphia Free Press*, July 5, 1971, SCRC.

<sup>12</sup> “SEPTA workers say: Put the pork on the fork,” *Organizer*, March-April 1975, (quotes); Larry Pieper, “Three way race in Local 234,” *Organizer*, August 1980.

<sup>13</sup> “SEPTA puts it on the workers,” *Organizer*, December-January 1977.

<sup>14</sup> “Budd rank and file preparing for contract battle,” *Organizer*, October-November 1976.

<sup>15</sup> “Minority workers task force holds forum,” *Organizer*, July 1980.

<sup>16</sup> “Crisis shakes clothing industry . . . and workers get the shakedown,” *Organizer*, May-July 1975.

<sup>17</sup> “Manifesto of the Black workers at Temple U,” *Philadelphia Free Press*, February 2, 1970, SCRC.

<sup>18</sup> Len Lear, “Idle Penn Central employees picket union dinner meet,” *Tribune*, December 18, 1971.

<sup>19</sup> “Longshoremen pay for do-nothing leadership,” *Organizer*, August 1975.

<sup>20</sup> “Tan city workers not asked about contract, Lewis says,” *Tribune*, January 10, 1967.

<sup>21</sup> A Telephone Worker, “Working at Bell Telephone,” *Philadelphia Free Press*, January 15, 1973, SCRC.

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- <sup>22</sup> “Workers strike back at Ma Bell,” *Philadelphia Free Press*, July 19, 1971, SCRC.
- <sup>23</sup> A Fed-up Member of Amalgamated Clothing Workers, “Clothing workers demand strong contract, fight sell-out leadership,” *Philadelphia Free Press*, May 1974, SCRC; “Garment workers strike; union heavily Black,” *Tribune*, June 4, 1974.
- <sup>24</sup> “Blue bird workers fight for their rights,” *Organizer*, January-March 1976; “Local 196 members speak out on health and safety,” *Organizer*, June-July 1976.
- <sup>25</sup> “Local 57,” *Tribune*, February 12, 1974.
- <sup>26</sup> Margo Downing, “Hospital workers union is unique; has Blacks in leadership positions,” *Tribune*, January 11, 1975.
- <sup>27</sup> “Union wins gay rights clause,” *Gay Community News*, June 14, 1980.
- <sup>28</sup> “Clothing workers rebel.”
- <sup>29</sup> “Anti-import drive: ACWA fights for crumbs, but rank & file wants whole loaf!,” *Organizer*, January-February 1975.
- <sup>30</sup> “Stop the ripoff!”
- <sup>31</sup> “Blue Bird workers” (quote); “Local 196 members.”
- <sup>32</sup> “Local 196 R&F protest firing of active steward,” *Organizer*, February-March 1977; “Rank and file steward loses arbitration,” *Organizer*, October 1977.
- <sup>33</sup> “Labor round-up,” *Organizer*, May-July 1975.
- <sup>34</sup> Branham, “Union head blamed.”
- <sup>35</sup> “How to clean house,” *Organizer*, March-April 1975.
- <sup>36</sup> Pieper, “Three way race”; “UAW Local 92 elections: Rank & file down but not out,” *Organizer*, November-December 1975; “United slate defeats incumbent union leadership in Philadelphia,” *Tribune*, February 13, 1979.

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<sup>37</sup> William Davis, quoted in Pamala Haynes, “Black taxi drivers pick men to run for union officer posts,” *Tribune*, November 21, 1970; Clay Dillon, “Veteran driver seeking post in Teamsters 107 election,” *Tribune*, February 8, 1969.

<sup>38</sup> Pieper, “Three way race.”

<sup>39</sup> “Food workers 196 election aftermath . . . ‘down but not out,’” *Organizer*, December-January 1977.

<sup>40</sup> “ACWA rank & filers run for Joint Board,” *Organizer*, November-December 1975.

<sup>41</sup> “La campaña contra las importaciones: ACWA pide poco. Pero los obreros de ropa se demandan más,” *Organizer*, January-February 1975; “ACWA rank & filers run for Joint Board”; “Food Workers 196 election”; “UAW Local 92 elections.”

<sup>42</sup> Peter Bessen, “Episcopal Hospital workers vote to strike,” *Community Focus*, July 14, 1982, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP).

<sup>43</sup> The labor force at Rois was roughly half Latino and half Black. Jimmy Seale Collazo, “Obreros aprueban contrato Rois,” *Community Focus*, November 5, 1986, HSP; Jimmy Seale Collazo, “Workers strike Fishtown plant,” *Community Focus*, October 29, 1986, HSP.

<sup>44</sup> “Helpful hints on producing a leaflet,” *Organizer*, July 1976; John Malachi, “Jim Crow: Alive and well in the building trades,” *Organizer*, January 1977.

<sup>45</sup> “Red Lion plant: Budd workers defeat 3 yr. term,” *Organizer*, January-February 1975.

<sup>46</sup> “ACWA rank & filers.”

<sup>47</sup> The newsletter was put out by the Blue Ribbon Group of Local 92 at Red Lion and Concerned Members of Local 813 at Budd. “Budd Rank and File Preparing for Contract Battle,” *Organizer*, October-November 1976.

<sup>48</sup> “Righting the wrongs in Meat Cutters Local 196,” *Organizer*, November-December 1975.

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- <sup>49</sup> “Taxi union post seeker asks police protection,” *Tribune*, November 24, 1970.
- <sup>50</sup> Len Lear, “Violence, union ties being probed,” *Tribune*, April 20, 1974.
- <sup>51</sup> Ed Stenson, “Shot in ambush, Local 57 leader fights for life,” *Tribune*, December 23, 1972.
- <sup>52</sup> “Guard slays union organizer,” *Guardian*, September 13, 1972.
- <sup>53</sup> United Parents from Ludlow Community, “Atencion madres y padres de comunidad de Ludlow,” September 1977, Box 8 Folder 10, Aspira Papers, HSP.
- <sup>54</sup> “City workers threatening.”
- <sup>55</sup> “Community & workers unite to fight SEPTA cutbacks,” *Organizer*, October-November 1976; Len Lear, “Black drivers support July fourth shut-down of SEPTA,” *Tribune*, June 19, 1976; Sara Murphy, “SEPTA strike drags on...can transit workers beat the system?,” *Organizer*, April 1977; “Concern rises in Philadelphia over transit strike,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1981; William Robbins, “Philadelphia commuters cope with transit strike,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1981.
- <sup>56</sup> Anonymous worker speaking on behalf of Committee for a Decent Contract, quoted in Joe Lewandowski, “TWU leadership took SEPTA workers for a ride,” *Organizer*, June 1977.
- <sup>57</sup> “Public urged to use pennies in SEPTA boycott,” *Tribune*, June 4, 1977.
- <sup>58</sup> Original in Spanish reads “hacer dejar sentir nuestra voz.” Jorge Santiago, “Problemas de la promoción en masa,” *Community Focus*, May 23, 1984, HSP.
- <sup>59</sup> Benjamin Ramos, “La historia como testigo,” *Community Focus*, October 19, 1983, HSP; Juan Gonzalez, “Conferencia obrera en lighthouse,” *Community Focus*, February 24, 1982, HSP.
- <sup>60</sup> Gonzalez, “Conferencia obrera en lighthouse.”
- <sup>61</sup> Workers’ Rights Committee of the Puerto Rican Alliance, “Moritz strike coverage,” *Organizer*, March 1981.

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<sup>62</sup> These included a 6-week strike at Fogel Refrigerating, a 5-week strike at Pennsauken Paper, and a 3-week strike at DeFab Co. Other employers with increasingly rebellious workforces included Halpern Interstate, Bill Penn Co., Fischer Porter, Simkins Paper, and Glencoe Refrigerating. Workers' Rights Committee, "Moritz strike coverage."

<sup>63</sup> Those appearing included City Council members Angel Ortiz and Lucien Blackwell as well as State Representative Ralph Acosta. Collazo, "Workers strike Fishtown plant."

<sup>64</sup> "Fascist state near, Black unionists warn," *Tribune*, October 3, 1970.

<sup>65</sup> "Philadelphia rank-and-file union members urge jobs for all, end to war," *Tribune*, June 13, 1972.

<sup>66</sup> Len Lear, "Declaration of labor rights issued by unions: No taxes for those under \$10,000, Black unionists demand," *Tribune*, July 14, 1970.

<sup>67</sup> Libby Clark, "Trade union solidarity borne from conference," *Tribune*, February 14, 1989; "History of CBTU - The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists," accessed July 2, 2018, <http://www.cbtuphila.org/history-of-cbtu/>.

<sup>68</sup> "Ever work at Devon Apparel?," *Kensington Peoples Press*, February 1972, SCRC.

<sup>69</sup> Juan Gonzalez, "350 workers from closed Arrowhead Sportswear organize to demand severance pay," *Community Focus*, March 17, 1982, HSP; Juan Gonzalez, "Obreros de fabrica cerrada buscan por la justicia," *Community Focus*, March 24, 1982, HSP.

<sup>70</sup> In addition to the actions by sanitation and transit workers described herein, teachers threatened to strike in 1968 and actually did strike in 1970, 1972, 1973, 1980, and 1981, or five times in eleven years. Dianne C. Gordon, "Parents, preachers, kids demand Mayor Green end teacher strike," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, September 17, 1980, Kensington Joint Action Council, Bulletin clippings, SCRC.

<sup>71</sup> Santiago, "Problemas de la promoción en masa."