"Discontented but not inevitably reactionary" : organized labor in the Nixon years.

Maria Graciela Abarca

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1

Recommended Citation
http://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1/1289

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations 1896 - February 2014 by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
"DISCONTENTED BUT NOT INEVITABLY REACTIONARY": ORGANIZED LABOR IN THE NIXON YEARS

A Dissertation Presented

by

MARIA GRACIELA ABARCA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2001

Department of History
"DISCONTENTED BUT NOT INEVITABLY REACTIONARY": ORGANIZED LABOR IN THE NIXON YEARS

A Dissertation Presented

by

MARIA GRACIELA ABARCA

Approved as to style and content by:

Kevin Boyle, Chair

Kathy Peiss, Member

Roland Santi, Member

Tom Juravich, Member

Kathy Peiss, Department Chair
Department of History
To my mother.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project in a way started about fourteen years ago in Argentina when I took my first survey course on the History of the United States. I was intrigued by American prosperity which seemed to allow all citizens, to a larger or lesser degree, to enjoy the benefits of the “American standard of living”—or did it? This question, and many others, led me to research further. As an Argentinean who grew up in a working-class family, I was fascinated to learn that Americans had debated the “Labor Question” throughout their history, and that the American labor movement had played a key role in the country’s political and economic life. I soon realized that the best way to pursue my interests was to study at an American university. I was lucky enough to be welcomed by the Department of History at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

I am indebted to Pablo Pozzi, my long-time professor, mentor and friend, who encouraged me to apply for a Fulbright grant, to obtain my Master’s degree and to continue onto a Ph.D. program. The Department of History at University of Massachusetts has been intellectually stimulating and emotionally supportive. I would like to thank each and every member of it. In Amherst, I spent the best and the worst of times with my truthful friends Jeandelize Gonzalez-Rivera, Andrea Rocha and Kevan Karbasium. In Buenos Aires, I shared my many concerns with my caring friends Melina Ginszparg and Renee Carrelo. In the final stage, I counted on Pablo Ferro’s technical expertise and on Patricio Ferro’s and Belen Vistalli’s warm collaboration at work. I give them all my heartfelt thanks for their friendship and unwavering support.
I owe the completion of this work to Kevin Boyle. He has been the best advisor I could have ever chosen to write about twentieth-century American labor history. Despite the distance that separates Amherst from Buenos Aires, he guided me through the planning of my research, improved the presentation of my arguments, and patiently polished my written English. I deeply admire him as a scholar and as a human being. It has been an honor for me to be his student.

I cannot imagine having completed this dissertation without the encouragement of my mother, who never doubted that I would obtain my doctorate in spite of the many difficulties. Finally, I am extremely grateful to my father, whose spirit has accompanied me every step of the way since he left us almost nine years ago.
The present study examines organized labor’s role in American political and economic life during the Nixon years. In the 1960s, most observers regarded American workers as economically secure and content. Events at the close of the decade, however, undermined the image of the affluent worker. Workers’ support for conservative candidates George Wallace and Richard Nixon during the 1968 presidential campaign convinced many observers that blue-collar Americans had swung to the right. In the election’s aftermath, analysts of various political persuasions tried to explain “the blue-collar blues.” According to the mainstream press, white workers had become more concerned with social issues—ghetto rioting, campus unrest, widespread anti-war protest, the breakdown of law and order—than about “traditional” economic issues.

Richard Nixon hoped to capitalize on the Social Issue to woo white workers and fashion a new Republican majority. But the relationship between the Nixon Administration, a traditionally Democratic labor leadership, a radicalized student
movement, and a volatile rank and file proved to be highly complex. Large-scale strikes against the General Electric and General Motors corporations in 1969 and 1970 showed that workers still considered economic issues to be of paramount concern. Workers and their unions did not uniformly support U.S. policy in Vietnam; indeed, during the Nixon years, unionists became more outspoken in their opposition to the war. Some unions even attempted a rapprochement with segments of the New Left. Organized labor denounced Nixon's attempts to combat the inflationary spiral the Vietnam War had triggered.

Nixon nevertheless won substantial blue-collar support during his 1972 reelection campaign. He did so not by playing the social issues but by neutralizing the Vietnam War and economic concerns. Nixon's victory proved to be short lived, however. The economic recession of 1973 took its toll on the workers and their unions. The energy crisis launched a devastating round of de-industrialization. By 1974, Nixon's blue-collar support had collapsed. For all their discontent, white workers had not become members of the new Republican majority. They were displeased with their position in American society, however, and their votes were available for courting.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. THE UNRAVELING OF THE LABOR-LIBERAL ALLIANCE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. THE BLUE-COLLAR BLUES</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. THE GE STRIKE</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. THE GM STRIKE</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ORGANIZED LABOR’S MOST DIVISIVE ISSUE: THE VIETNAM WAR</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY IN DISARRAY</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. THE COLLAPSE OF POSTWAR PROSPERITY</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPILOGUE: FROM CHICAGO TO SEATTLE</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 1971, Gary Bryner had been president of local 1112 of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) for over twenty months. Its members were employees at the General Motors (GM) assembly plant in Lordstown, Ohio. "It's the most automated, fastest line in the world," Bryner asserted. The youthful local president had been through the widely publicized 1970 strike against GM and a number of stoppages over speedups. In Bryner's view, the General Motors Assembly Division aimed at efficiency as well as cost reduction, and totally disregarded the toll that such an approach took on the workers. For that reason, rank and file had labeled the GMAD, "Gotta Make Another Dollar."

Reflecting on his role as union leader, Bryner concluded: "...I feel good around when I'm able to stand up and speak up for another guy's rights. That's how I got involved in this whole stinking mess. Fighting everyday of my life. And I enjoy it."  

Although he admitted that industrial unionism was a "stinking mess," Bryner prided himself on what he—as a union leader—could do for "the guys." In the post-WWII period, however, the idealism that tinged Bryner's words was seldom associated with organized labor. In the turbulent 1960s, the concerns of organized labor and working people rarely held center stage. The civil rights crusade, the escalating antiwar demonstrations, and the women's liberation movement occupied the forefront of social change and political controversy. "In a time of flower children burning ghettos, and open contempt for traditional American values and aspirations," historian Robert Zieger claims, "no wonder the world of the wage worker and the trade unionist seemed remote..."

---

American workers had come to be regarded as affluent and content members of consumer society. It was widely believed that, despite the dissatisfaction associated with factory work itself, high wages enabled workers to enjoy a lifestyle once reserved for the middle class. American society had presumably become a "middle-class society" in which the vast majority of the population participated as equals.

At the close of the decade, however, the picture of the prosperous, suburban, middle-class worker grew blurred. Unemployment rose appreciably and wages failed to keep pace with soaring prices. Contrary to widespread belief, the relative prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s had not turned workers into fully integrated members of the American social and political system. "In 1968," S. M. Miller states, "a new group in America was identified first with horror, increasingly with compassion." At the onset of the 1968 presidential election, George Wallace, a racist demagogue, attracted a large number of union members to his cause. Such a rightward political turn among workers shocked many Americans. Although most of the early Wallace supporters switched to Democratic Party candidate Hubert H. Humphrey before the balloting, the presidential election was crucial in bringing working-class concerns to the forefront of public controversy. The "blue-collar blues" caused a flurry of working-class studies that tried to determine the economic and social problems of workers. The debate centered on the alleged "middle-class" status, hawkishness, and political conservatism of the American worker.


Conservative, reactionary, hawkish, or authoritarian were not the worst names that the American working class was called. As Michael Harrington expressed it in 1972, "the unkindest cut of all" was "nonexistent." In 1969, however, there were 77.902 million working men and women in the non-agricultural labor force; 20.21 million were unionized and concentrated mainly in machinery, transportation equipment, contract construction, and transportation services. The strike wave of 1969-1970 increased organized labor's visibility and reminded distinguished scholars at disparate points in the political spectrum that unionized workers still shared "a common situation and common interests." Fortune anticipated that 1969 could turn out to be "a time of epic battle between management and labor" as unionists were in an "angry, aggressive and acquisitive" mood. While the mainstream press played up working-class conservatism and economic well being, some liberals were trying to fashion a new version of the New Deal Liberal coalition. New leftists, for their part, were re-evaluating the role of the working class and turning out on picket lines to support striking workers.

This study evaluates the role that labor unions played in electoral politics, the economic arena and the anti-war movement in the 1968-1974 period. To a large number of labor historians, a discussion of organized labor in the late 1960s and early 1970s may sound irrelevant. To some scholars, the American labor movement collapsed with the

---


5 Ibid., 137.

rise of the “New Deal order” which contained the revitalized worker militancy of the 1930s. To others, unions lost all political leverage in the immediate postwar period when labor leaders failed to create industrial democracy; few historians would argue that labor unions could still make a difference in America’s socio-political and economic life by the 1960s. In their evaluation of American trade unionism, labor scholars inevitably reflect their own set of assumptions about the way political systems work and about the best strategies for reform.

My evaluation of the 1968-1974 period will also be based on a number of premises. First, American workingmen and women have used varied forms of resistance and voiced their demands through styles of organization that have best fitted their needs and work cultures at different historical moments. “Class” — in a Thompsonian sense, as both economic and cultural creation — has informed human conflict in the United States and intersected with racial, ethnic and gender issues in crucial ways. Workers have multiple identities that they combine in different ways. This, in turn, defines the type of

---


collective action that they take. Second, the state is neither an all-powerful and autonomous entity nor a mere capitalist tool. Protective legislation that facilitates unionization does not inevitably mean co-optation. Third, any assessment of the workers’ failures and achievements cannot be isolated from either structural constraints, such as the nature of the American political system, or historical developments, such as the Cold War.

In the 1960s, American blue-collar workers did not form the homogeneous and militant constituency that some student radicals still dreamed of. The blue-collar workforce was in fact a diverse occupational group—factory workers, skilled workers, transportation workers and non-farm laborers—further divided along racial, ethnic and gender lines. Consequently, the role that their unions played in the national scene of the 1968-1974 period was extremely complex. When contemporary observers dismissed labor as irrelevant, they missed this complexity. In 1971, Brendan and Patricia Cayo Sexton stated:

We think the obituaries for workers and their unions have been premature, based principally on superficial reading of available materials and distorted inferences drawn from short-term trends. ¹⁰

The purpose of this work is to revisit the period and thus go beyond “premature obituaries” and rushed conclusions about organized labor. My analysis will be further restricted to unionized workers in the auto and electrical industries; more specifically, to the United Automobile Workers (UAW), the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), and the independent United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America

Due to their large membership and involvement in the economic and political life of the country, I believe that a study of these unions will be representative of the divisions, successes, failures, aspirations and contradictions within the organized blue-collar working class. In 1968, the UAW, the largest union in the country, withdrew from the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO). This was the culmination of a long feud between UAW President Walter Reuther and AFL-CIO President George Meany, who had fundamental differences over principles, policies and programs. The IUE, for its part, was the third largest union within the AFL-CIO. It had been chartered in 1949, after the purge of the left-leaning UE. Moreover, I will explore the relationship between the AFL-CIO top echelons and the rank and file, the student movement and the Nixon Administration.

To illuminate the relationship between labor leaders' initiatives and rank and file's responses, I will examine the way in which blue-collar workers' multiple identities combined and influenced their stand on different issues throughout the period. In his book America's Working Man (1984), sociologist David Halle argues that the "image that [workers] have of their position in the class structure is based on three distinct identities." First, blue-collar workers forge an identity on the shop floor; as an occupational group they have experiences that set them apart from other sectors of society. Blue-collar workers build a second identity outside work; this identity is directly related to income level and standard of living. Workers' third identity derives from living in the United States; it stresses "a common bond between all Americans." ¹¹

As the 1960s came to a close, the U.S. was not a “post-industrial” society in which the “old” blue-collar working class was a thing of the past. Most unionized blue-collar workers were employed in manufacturing, construction, and transportation; most of them did jobs that bore little intrinsic interest or reward; many of those who worked on assembly lines in auto plants endured a dehumanizing routine. As the president of UAW local 1112 put it: “They [auto workers] don’t come home thinking, Boy. I did a great job today and I can’t wait to get back tomorrow.” Blue-collar work is physical, dangerous or/and dirty, routine and closely supervised. These elements define the blue-collar worker’s identity on the shop floor. Moreover, as Michael Harrington states: “They are not paid as individuals, but as members of a class.” Blue collars are subjected to a common discipline in the work process and build collective institutions in defense of their immediate interests. By the late 1960s, however, workers did not necessarily return to neighborhoods that were “a hundred percent” blue collar. The movement of workers to the suburbs contributed to its participation in “classless” consumer society. The material framework outside work—income level, lifestyle, consumer goods—at times blurred the differences between white-collar and blue-collar workers. In view of this, how did workers define “job satisfaction”? Did unions help blue collars to achieve such satisfaction? These were thoroughly debated issues in the early 1970s.

Blue-collar workers, as Halle says, also develop an identity as Americans, i.e. as those born in the territory of the nation-state or admitted to citizenship by the federal government. Nationalism revolves around a number of symbols and terms—such as the

12 Terkel, 193.

13 Harrington, 138.
flag, the national anthem, the “people”- that can conjure up different meanings at different times. In the Vietnam War years, political commentators often conflated working-class hostility to radical students’ tactics such as flag-burning with working-class feelings about the war itself, and thus portrayed American labor as out-and-out hawkish. Among blue-collar workers terms such as “the American people” and “the American public” have also been used in a populist sense. In labor publications, it is not uncommon to find articles that presented the plight of the worker as a conflict between the power structure of America—big business, politicians- and the rest of the population. In 1969 and 1970, for instance, electrical workers and autoworkers rallied support for their strikes against General Electric (GE) and GM, respectively, by focusing on these companies’ “profiteering at the expense of their employees and the public.” Thus, unionists tried to show that labor militancy had the “general benefit” of Americans at heart. The blue-collar worker, however, was then more often viewed as the symbol of the new reactionary politics, rather than the symbol of the old radicalism.

Historically, the American working class has been deeply divided along racial, ethnic and gender lines. The self-conception of the worker, however, changes over time. In other words, self-definition is not static; it varies. The crucial question is how these various outlooks coexist in the workers’ minds at various times in history. By 1968, the Vietnam War as well as the impending economic crisis eclipsed race as a national dominant issue. By discussing the blue-collar blues, workers were described as members of a “class” that suffered specific problems due to their position in the American socio-economic structure. For those of us who have believed in the “creative potential of the workers” for social change, there is nothing more challenging than examining organized
labor in the United States, “the nation where labor seems most integrated into the prevailing order and utterly lacking in any kind of revolutionary consciousness.” This is precisely the task I have undertaken: unravel labor’s participation at a time when the nation was experiencing a social, political and economic crisis, a period in which liberals, trade unionists, insurgent students and aroused minority groups found it increasingly difficult to consolidate a major political coalition.

I start in chapter one by discussing union mobilization for Hubert H. Humphrey, the 1968 presidential election outcome and its aftermath. The weakening of the labor-liberal alliance and the subsequent defeat of the Democratic Party contributed to the rediscovery of the American worker. In many cases, fear led liberal politicians to take blue-collar workers’ grievances seriously. Following my analysis of the 1968 campaign, I examine a selection of politically diverse literature that reveals a clear concern with the role that “the middle American” could play in American politics. Mainstream magazines reinforced the view of the U.S. as a “middle-class society,” while politicians coined catchy phrases such as “the troubled American,” “the forgotten American,” “the little man,” or “the silent majority.”

By using the term “Middle America,” commentators lumped blue-collar workers together with the middle class. Black Power and the counterculture were presented as paramount concerns among workers, totally effacing “the class issue.” Political analysts Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg started a debate with the publication of The Real Majority in 1970. Scammon and Wattenberg argued that, to the majority of

---

American voters, the Social Issue—i.e. concerns about law and order, youth violence and black power—superseded “old” economic issues, such as unemployment, labor union prerogatives or broad-based welfare proposals such as Social Security.\[^{15}\]

Andrew Levison took issue with Scammon and Wattenberg. *The Working Class Majority* is his attempt to prove that the U.S. was not a middle-class society. In 1970, the “typical” American worker earned $9,500. This figure actually placed blue collar workers closer to the working poor than to the affluent middle class.\[^{16}\] After debunking the myth of working-class economic well being, Levison turned to workers’ alleged apathy and acquiescence. Throughout the 1960s, he pointed out, a rising discontent with working and living conditions was evident in the growth of rank-and-file militancy. The increasing number of strikes, Levison concluded, was an indication that the Social Issue had not yet superseded the Economic Issue. Rank and file were particularly restless in the 1969-1970 period. Beginning with electrical manufacturers in October 1969, and followed by trucking, meatpacking, rubber and automobiles, five great industries had to reach new three-year contracts.

The strike wave of the 1969-1970 period provides the context to assess unionized blue-collar workers’ affluence and acquiescence. Although industrial workers staged several large-scale walkouts, two captured national attention: the 102-day strike against GE in the winter of 1969-1970 and the 400,000 autoworkers’ walkout against GM in 1970. In chapters three and four, I probe these two strikes in order to assess blue-collar


workers’ demands as well as labor unions’ role in working-class life. The GE strike reflected not only rank-and-file dissatisfaction over “the old fashioned” economic issues but also the workers’ determination to reject unnegotiated contracts and to strike for longer periods of time. This labor campaign was also a valuable opportunity for radical students to build an alliance with workers. I assess the student-worker collaboration during the campaign as well as the achievements of the thirteen-union coalition—led by IUE and UE—that staged the strike.

The 1970 walkout against GM also brought the issue of labor militancy and industrial unionism to the forefront of political debate. To some observers, the GM strike had been an expensive triumph. The conflict had cost the UAW about $160 million and almost bankrupted the union. The powerful multinational corporation also lost millions of dollars in its attempt to resist the unions’ demands. To more cynical analysts, however, the company had allowed itself to be struck in order to protect union leaders, who in turn had sold the members a cheap settlement. Were strikes and unions still necessary to humanize the shopfloor and improve the workers’ living standards? Or were walkouts little more than “a blue-collar catharsis”? My analysis aims at determining whether companies and unions had become “sweethearts,” as critics implied, or whether they remained adversaries.

--


18 In The Company and the Union (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1973), William Serrin presents a scornful view of the “civilized relationship” between the auto companies and the UAW leaders.

In chapter five, I explore the most divisive issue within the ranks of organized labor: the Vietnam War. Labor unions' support for U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia fed into the view of the American worker as politically conservative or even reactionary. The AFL-CIO's unconditional backing of the Vietnam War gave substance to the charges of labor's "hawkishness." The hard-hat demonstrations of May 1970 apparently confirmed the view of the white blue-collar worker as reactionary. The media transformed the hard-hats into symbols of authoritarianism and patriotism. The "hard-hat phenomenon," however, was not representative of working class sentiment towards the conflict. The number of dissenting unions and rank and file members had been increasing considerably since 1968.

As historian Christian Appy has thoroughly documented, the Vietnam War was a working-class war, a fact that was not acknowledged at the time. About 80 percent of those who fought in Southeast Asia came from working class and poor backgrounds. Consequently, the feelings that the soldiers and their families had about the American military intervention in Indochina and the largely middle-class anti-war movement were very complex. Workers might oppose an escalation of the war and the student radicals' "anti-American" demonstrations. In a 1973 essay on patriotism, John H. Shaar asserted, "The radicals of the 1960s did not persuade their fellow-Americans, high or low, that they genuinely cared for and shared a country with them. And no one who has contempt for others can hope to teach those others."²⁰

In the Vietnam years, the issue of nationalism became a dilemma to the American public. Was opposition to the conflict in Indochina un-American? Were American boys

being lost to a right cause? Organized labor sharply divided over the war issue. On the one hand, the AFL-CIO Executive Council provided its unwavering support for American intervention in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, a rising number of unions and rank and file labor mobilized against the war. I trace labor’s statements for and against the war in the 1968-1974 period, in an attempt to unravel the complex relationship between the workers’ “patriotism” and their allegiance to the government’s foreign policy.

The 1972 presidential election took place in the midst of rising opposition to the conflict in Indochina and discontent about the faltering economy. The Democratic Party, however, blew the election as it had in 1968. Despite the AFL-CIO’s declaration of neutrality during the 1972 presidential election campaign, considerable labor support went to the Democratic candidate, George McGovern. The National Labor Committee for the Election of McGovern-Shriver became a clearinghouse for over twenty-six unions that opposed Nixon’s reelection. In its pamphlets, the committee not only tried to rally support for the Democrats but also attempted to debunk the myth of the hard-hat’s unconditional support for the administration. In chapter six, I explore the reasons why, despite some unions’ efforts, it was impossible to re-establish the New Deal labor-liberal coalition in 1972.

In 1973, the AFL-CIO abandoned the “silent” position adopted during the 1972 presidential election. Its Tenth Constitutional Convention called upon President Nixon to resign: “We believe,” the Executive Council said, “that the American people have had
enough. More than enough." The Watergate scandal along with the economic recession of 1973-74 heightened the national feeling of exhaustion that had been prevalent since the late 1960s. The events of the early 1970s seriously shook citizens' confidence in American institutions. In the last chapter, I assess Nixon's political and economic collapse as well as its impact on labor-capital relations in the years to come, the years of the conservative ascendancy.

In October 1996, leading American intellectuals and labor movement activists held a “Teach-in with the Labor Movement” at Columbia University. They addressed the same issues that some liberals, new leftists and trade unionists were discussing almost twenty years earlier: how could a revitalized labor movement challenge the disproportionate power of corporations in American society and fight for social justice and economic security? The answers are as difficult today as they were thirty years ago.22

It was hard to predict in 1996 that less than four years later, a new coalition of unions, human rights groups and environmentalists would voice their concerns about global economic injustice in demonstrations that made the headlines all over the world. November 30, 1999, was the day that the World Trade Organization was battled head-on in Seattle. The mass media soon drew parallels between the 1968 Battle of Chicago and the 1999 Battle of Seattle. The confrontations with the police and the “street theater” may have looked similar. There were, however, many differences. In Chicago, labor

---

21 AFL-CIO Executive Council on President Nixon to the Tenth Constitutional Convention, October 1973, 2.

leaders and student demonstrators were on different sides of the barricades. In Seattle, the students and the workers were unequivocally on the same side. During a Pier 62 rally in Seattle, Steelworkers’ President George Becker referred to this newly forged alliance:

“I want to say a word to the young people. I want to welcome you. This is where you belong, with the labor movement.”

It remains to be seen whether the Battle of Seattle was an isolated moment of militancy or a real turning point in the history of the American labor movement.

---

CHAPTER 1
THE UNRAVELING OF THE LABOR-LIBERAL ALLIANCE

In 1969, British journalists Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson, and Bruce Page produced a thoroughly researched account of the 1968 presidential campaign in the United States. They entitled it, *An American Melodrama*. By definition, "melodrama" is "a dramatic piece characterized by sensational incident and violent appeals to the emotions, but with a happy ending." The events that took place in 1968 were unprecedented: an ambitious president’s withdrawal from the presidential race; the assassination of his most bitter rival; the murder of the most famous African-American of the time; the successes of an overtly racist third party candidate; the split of the Democratic Party over the Vietnam War; the rupture of the American labor movement.

Did 1968 then come to a "happy ending," as melodramas do? Or is it more appropriate to simply call it "the year of the barricades"? The events of 1968 were not just sensational. The year’s developments signaled a turning point in the history of the United States: they shook the foundations of the labor-liberal alliance that had sustained the New Deal order for over thirty years.

The New Deal managed to accommodate in its coalition such varied constituents as southerners, ethnic Catholics in the northeast and midwest, African-Americans, lower

---


2 In *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), David Caute describes 1968 as “the most turbulent since the end of WWII.” Yet, he concludes that the legacy of the New Left has been entirely “cultural” as its challenges to the state, the political system and corporate capitalism were defeated.
middle-class Jews, union members and blue-collar workers. Since the mid-1930s, the alliance of liberal Democrats and progressive labor leaders had provided American workers with higher real incomes, greater economic security, increased protection against sickness and accident, and broadened educational opportunities. In a 1968 message to the United Automobile Workers, union president Walter Reuther summed up the crucial intersection between politics and trade unionism in the following way:

Over the years we have learned through the hard lessons of history that collective bargaining does not take place in a vacuum and there is, in fact, a direct relationship between the bread box and the ballot box. 3

The 1968 presidential election campaign posed a serious challenge to organized labor. The war in Southeast Asia created deep rifts among both labor leaders and rank-and-file workers. The debacle at the Democratic Party convention in Chicago galvanized the differences between the anti-war protesters and the president of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) George Meany, who assailed them as “dirty-necked, dirty-mouthed demonstrators.” 4 Moreover, George Wallace, the racist former Alabama governor, and Richard Nixon, the conservative Republican candidate, were trying to capture the blue-collar vote and apparently succeeding. Both politicians made “law and order” the focal point of their campaigns. The phrase had come to mean many things from opposing crime in the streets and ghetto rioting to unrest over unfulfilled promises, slums, school desegregation and the war on poverty. American workers, some observers contended, were drawn to Wallace’s and Nixon’s law and order appeals because they were more concerned about social issues than about economic ones.


To stop a possible conservative ascendancy, union leaders worked vigorously to promote the election of vice-president Hubert H. Humphrey and thus to preserve the alliance that had substantially increased organized labor’s economic and political power for over three decades.

The alignment of the labor movement with the Democratic Party both empowered and limited its room to maneuver. In the early 1930s, the New Deal protective legislation allowed the newly-formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)—which rivaled the long-standing American Federation of Labor (AFL) to channel working-class activism into permanent labor unions in mass-production industries. American employers lost the enormous power advantages that they had enjoyed in the struggle over collective bargaining, but in exchange the labor movement conceded its independence from the state. Under the landmark National Labor Relations Act, collective bargaining remained free—the state did not mandate the terms of the capital-labor agreements—but the framework of the negotiations came under the aegis of state regulation. Industrial unionism also forged institutional ties of representation, influence and negotiation with the state, which considerably increased its political leverage.

In the early 1940s, as the country prepared for war, the federal government devised a system of labor-management relations. Public officials, labor leaders and corporate executives worked side by side in agencies such as the National War Labor Board, the Office of Production Management, and the War Production Board. In 1945-46, some observers believed trade unions could build on their wartime experience to fashion industrial democracy. The CIO’s leadership aimed at tripartite governance of industry, which would give organized labor decision-making powers in corporations’
production, investment and employment. The CIO's project, however, never materialized. Corporate leaders who presided over key manufacturing industries emerged from the war with renewed self-confidence. ^5 The rising tide of conservatism resulted in the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, which curbed solidarity among unions. Policy-makers' revived faith in capitalism led to the triumph of the "Keynesian" or fiscal state over the "regulatory" state. The state would stimulate the economy through its fiscal and monetary powers rather than tighten its control over capitalist institutions. ^6 Economic growth, most policy-makers came to believe in the war's aftermath, was the surest path towards a more egalitarian society. By the end of World War II, liberals rejected the class analysis that permeated the political rhetoric of the 1930s and promoted the notion of a pluralist society made up of special-interest groups.

The coalition that labor unions forged with the Democratic Party also led to unconditional support of the party's foreign policy. At the onset of the Cold War, the labor movement was gripped by an internal crisis over Communist participation. In 1949, Communist-dominated unions were expelled from the CIO. Six years later, the AFL and the CIO settled their major differences and merged into a single organization under the leadership of George Meany. Postwar labor leaders, as well as organized workers, shared in the fruits of a political economy of growth and accommodated easily


to the New Deal formula. Labor unions negotiated the best possible contracts for their members and rallied support for Democratic candidates. The combination of consensus politics at home and containment of communism abroad thus seriously compromised organized labor's attempts to fundamentally alter power relations in American society.

Despite the political and structural limitations, the more progressive unions such as Reuther's UAW continued to promote a larger agenda which included the repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act, the passage of civil rights legislation and the expansion of the welfare state. When President Lyndon B. Johnson launched his administration's attack on poverty in 1964, the UAW leadership became fully involved in the Great Society programs. The federal government thus committed itself to providing "better schools and better health and better homes and better training...to help more Americans...escape from squalor and misery and unemployment..." The War on Poverty, however, was flawed from the beginning. The Great Society's programs were largely aimed at urban African-Americans and thus linked race and poverty. The expansion of the Great Society into the ghettos in 1965 and 1966 led to a clash between the UAW and black grassroots organizations. The growing African-American militancy, coupled with the rising cost of federal social programs, weakened the reform coalition that had gathered around the Great Society. The UAW leadership, though initially pleased by the LBJ Administration's programs, grew frustrated as it became clear that they were too narrowly defined.


8 Ibid., 217-238.
As Kevin Boyle states, "The Johnson Administration never moved beyond its concern for the underclass to confront the problems of the working class as a whole."  

By the late 1960s, a faltering economy was revealing the shaky foundations of the economic security blue collars had won the in postwar era. An increasing number of white workers thought that the Great Society programs were costing them money, but not benefiting them. Many felt that liberals were unconcerned with their needs and interests. Political debate seemed to center either on racial issues or on the demands of middle-class led movements, such as women's rights, gay rights, and environmental protection. Dissatisfied blue collars appeared to be turning their backs on LBJ and his social programs and thus seriously weakening the New Deal coalition. Nixon and Wallace would base their campaigns for the presidency in 1968 on the conviction that the American electorate had shifted to the right. Workers, however, had not undergone an ideological conversion. But because the New Deal formula did not seem to be working for them, their vote was in 1968 available for courting.

The escalation of the Vietnam War further fractured the labor-liberal alliance. In particular, it highlighted the deep strains within the AFL-CIO. Since the merger of the AFL-CIO in 1955, Meany and Reuther, the last CIO’s president, had worked together to shape the labor movement’s relationship with the Democratic Party. The two men were dramatically different. In the 1940s and 1950s, Meany had moved up the AFL’s bureaucratic ladder, becoming the president of the merged AFL-CIO in 1955. Meany was the quintessential labor bureaucrat who could act as a negotiator at a bargaining table, an administrator of the organization, and a labor lobbyist in Congress. The AFL-

---

CIO president was proud to have never walked a picket line, organized a local or led a strike. Meany believed that organized labor could advance its interests through collective bargaining as well as political and legislative action. In foreign policy issues, Meany was fully committed to the Cold War. He was a staunch anti-communist who regarded any attempt at détente with the Soviet Union as a sign of appeasement.

Reuther, for his part, had organized thousands of automobile workers in the mid-1930s and led the UAW in a number of postwar strikes. As an advocate of social unionism, the UAW leader expected the AFL-CIO merger to spark a massive organizing drive, an interest that Meany did not share. A former Socialist Party member, Reuther voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 and 1944. Other militant UAW leaders such as Emil Mazey and Victor Reuther preferred organized labor to remain independent from the Democratic Party and were committed to the creation of a labor party. By the time of the 1948 presidential election, Reuther had abandoned any such hopes and embraced the Democratic Party as a vehicle for labor and liberal causes. In that year, the UAW leader repudiated the Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace and supported the Democratic Party ticket. Although Reuther did not share Meany’s virulent anticommunism, the UAW leader accepted the emerging Cold War foreign policy consensus. This did not

---


12 Ibid., 296.

13 The impact of the Cold War on the labor movement is further discussed in Chapter 5.
prevent Reuther from becoming, in Nelson Lichtenstein's words, "one of the founders of mid-twentieth century liberalism and an architect of the American welfare state."¹⁴ In the mid-1960s, Reuther not only set the parameters of collective bargaining but also defined the most liberal wing of organized labor's political agenda.

The relationship between Meany and Reuther was never amicable: the two leaders started feuding as soon as the AFL-CIO merger was completed in 1955. By 1962, Reuther had become increasingly frustrated with the state of the labor movement. In his view, the AFL-CIO was neither organizing the unorganized nor vigorously fighting corruption or racial discrimination among affiliates. Reuther grew more outspoken in his criticism of Meany's conservatism and even blamed the AFL-CIO president for the movement's stagnation. In 1962, Meany and Reuther clashed over the nomination of Ralph Helstein as a member of the federation's Executive Board. Helstein was the president of the Packinghouse Workers and a widely recognized liberal leader. Meany regarded the nomination as an act of defiance on the part of Reuther, and consequently rejected it. Reuther then considered pulling the UAW out of the AFL-CIO, but President John F. Kennedy persuaded him to remain in the federation until after the 1964 election.

Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam War exacerbated tensions between the AFL-CIO and the UAW. Throughout 1966 and 1967, American military and political leaders had been extolling U.S. progress in the war: the National Liberation Front (NLF) and its

¹⁴ Lichtenstein, 280.

North Vietnamese allies, they claimed, were on the verge of collapse. Despite the optimistic government reports, organized protest against the Vietnam War had grown dramatically, in the process straining the Democratic Party. Doves pictured LBJ as too quick to resort to force, denounced the destructiveness of his military actions, and insisted that the president greatly exaggerated Chinese influence in Vietnam and North Vietnamese and Communist control of the National Liberation Front (NLF). Some doves called for a reduction of or end to the fighting; others called for peace talks, including negotiations with the NLF. Although the president insisted that the country could afford both the war in Southeast Asia and the Great Society programs, his critics argued that the country could not pay for both “guns” and “butter.” One indication of growing dissent within the Democratic Party was Eugene McCarthy’s decision to leave Congress and enter the presidential campaign as an antiwar candidate. The Minnesota Senator sought the 1968 Democratic Presidential nomination only after popular antiwar politicians, such as Robert F. Kennedy, had declined to run. On November 30, 1967, McCarthy announced that he would enter the race as the voice of the movement for a negotiated settlement to the war in Vietnam. His announcement kindled the hopes of anti-war college students who would campaign for McCarthy by the thousands.16

Profound changes had been taking place in liberal and labor circles as the war in Vietnam and the anti-war movement grew. In November 1967, the National Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace convened in Chicago to express unionists’ uneasiness over the Vietnamese conflict. The Assembly put Walter Reuther in an awkward position.

Though he was uncomfortable with the escalation, he continued to support Johnson's Vietnam policy. However, Emil Mazey, the UAW's Secretary Treasurer, and Victor Reuther, Walter's brother and the Director of the UAW International Affairs Department, spoke at the Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace in Chicago. Reuther and Mazey—along with UAW officials Milfred Jeffrey, Nat Weinberg, Martin Gerber and Paul Schrade—were members of the union's old socialist wing. They had first voiced their opposition to the Vietnam War in 1965, when Johnson escalated American involvement in Southeast Asia. During the 1967 assembly, the UAW leaders shared the dais with leading anti-war figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., economist John Kenneth Galbraith and Senator Eugene McCarthy (D-MN).^17

After two days of meetings, 523 union leaders from fifty international unions unanimously adopted a policy statement condemning the war as immoral. "We believe," the unionists said, "there can be no justification for expending the precious lives of our American youth and destroying ever larger numbers of Vietnamese men, women and children." The Chicago Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace sought "to express the underlying and deeply felt peace sentiment of American workers" and exhorted labor to play its part in bringing the war to "swift and just conclusion." The statement flew in the face of the pronouncements made by the leading officials of the AFL-CIO, who affirmed that labor's rank-and-file wholeheartedly supported the war.  

^17 "Labor Power," *Trade Union Press*, Folder 12, Box 74, Jay Lovestone Files, International Affairs Department, George Meany Memorial Archives (Hereafter GMMA).

^18 Ibid.
A month later at the AFL-CIO convention in Bal Harbor, Florida, George Meany counterattacked. There were no UAW delegates at the meeting since the autoworkers' officers had resigned from all posts in the council and its sub-committees due to sharp disagreements with the AFL-CIO’s leadership. Commenting on the Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace in Chicago, Meany stated:

That meeting was planned in Hanoi by a special committee that went there. I read the Sunday Worker and I will tell you that I have seen that resolution, every term of it, every line of it in the Sunday Worker two weeks before the meeting was held in Chicago. 19

Emil Mazey responded to Meany’s charges in a scathing letter accusing the AFL-CIO’s president of having “equated dissent with disloyalty” and of “twisting the facts.” Mazey was outraged at Meany’s “fancy arithmetic” that made him conclude that union members approved of the Vietnam War by a margin of six hundred to one. Mazey demanded that Meany apologize to the millions of union members who thought that the American involvement in Vietnam was wrong. 20 Mazey’s letter was additional evidence of the sharpening tensions between the Meany administration and the UAW leadership. By the end of 1967, the American labor movement was at a crossroads. As head of one of the most progressive unions in the United States, Reuther had repeatedly accused the AFL-CIO leadership of immobility, indifference, complacency and rigid anticommunism. 21 The organization was undoubtedly far from Reuther’s ideal of a vital

19 President Meany’s speech to the AFL-CIO Convention, Daily Proceedings, 11 December 1967, 49-50, George Meany Files, Office of the President, GMMA.

20 UAW, Correspondence Disaffiliation, AFL-CIO, George Meany Files, Office of the President, GMMA.

21 Lichtenstein, 280.
and socially progressive labor movement. Yet faced with a deep political crisis and escalating antiwar sentiment, Reuther himself was unsure how to respond.

The Democrats and their labor allies thus entered the 1968 campaign in disarray. "As the architect of one of the least popular wars in U.S. history," Newsweek said, "Lyndon Johnson faces the year as one of the least popular incumbents in memory." After four years, the grand promises of the Great Society programs remained largely unfulfilled. Political observers said that the president would probably seek a middle-of-the-road formula. His economic program would be "more modestly priced than earlier administration offerings." Johnson, the quintessential Cold War liberal, intended to stick to his promise of building a Great Society while pursuing the war in Vietnam.

The Republicans, meanwhile, entered the 1968 presidential race with the smoothest-running and best-funded campaign machine in years. As the political year opened, Richard Nixon appeared to be the front-runner. After his defeats in the 1960 presidential elections and in his 1962 California gubernatorial bid, he had gained a reputation as a political loser. In 1968, his strategy was to present himself as the GOP's great unifier, an experienced politician who was acceptable to all factions of the party. In his congressional days, Nixon was a fierce anti-Communist but since the early 1960s he had worked to create a more fair-minded image for himself. In preparation for the presidential race, he underwent a public re-engineering that the media called "the New Nixon." The Republican candidate's prospects for victory in New Hampshire, the first 1968 primary, were so favorable that Governor George Romney of Michigan withdrew

---


23 Ibid., 18.
from the race. Governors Nelson Rockefeller of New York and Ronald Reagan of
California were Nixon’s major opponents. Yet Nixon easily won most of the primaries.
When opinion surveys showed that Nixon had at least as good a chance as any other
candidate to win the presidential election, his nomination at the Republican convention
was secured. 24 Nixon’s was, as Hodgson and his co-authors pointed out, “a laborious
enterprise of resurrection.” 25

Throughout his campaign, Nixon skillfully appealed to the “Middle Americans,”
who he claimed were angry at the excesses of antiwar protest and ghetto violence, tired of
the Vietnam War, disappointed at the results of the Great Society programs and
discontented with the deteriorating economy. In his acceptance speech at the Republican
Party convention, Nixon stated:

In a time when the national focus is concentrated upon the unemployed, the
impoverished and the dispossessed, the working Americans have become
forgotten Americans. In a time when the national rostrums and forums are given
over to shouters, and protesters and demonstrators, they have become the silent
Americans. Yet, they have a legitimate grievance that should be rectified and a
just cause that should prevail. 26

24 Encyclopedia Americana: Richard M. Nixon; Newsweek, 8 January 1968, 17-21; Jules
1969, 13-16.

25 Chester, et. al, 258.

26 Quoted in Garry Wills, Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man (Boston:
As an AFL-CIO News editor pointed out, “law and order” became a staple in the Republican candidate’s campaign because it offered “a sizable segment of the voting public...a convenient hook on which to hang its discontent.”

In 1968, George Wallace also tried to cater to the “forgotten Americans,” but through a third party run. The former Democratic Alabama governor became the focus of national attention in 1963. Three decisive acts enshrined him as a symbol of unspeakable racial hatred. In January, Wallace delivered his “Segregation for Ever!” speech. In June, he blocked the enrollment of the first two African-American students at the last legally segregated state university. In September, Wallace belittled the bombing death of four black girls during church hours. To the shock of many Americans, the Alabama governor ran successfully in a number of Democratic Party primaries in 1964. Those experiences convinced Wallace that there was a wellspring of resentment against the federal government that he could tap.

Wallace’s strategy was less sophisticated than Nixon’s. Critics regarded Wallace’s American Independent Party campaign as “a black-humor caricature” and Wallace as an old-time Dixie demagogue. In his speeches, the former Alabama governor repeatedly used catch phrases such as “law and order,” “state rights,” “property rights,” and “support for the police” that appealed to his white constituents’ frustrations.

---


29 Newsweek, 8 January 1968, 17.
Wallace’s campaign, some politicians claimed, could become a rallying cry for a vote of bigotry, fear and protest, especially among Southern whites. His key message was that neither the Democrats nor the Republicans offered the voters a real choice. The Alabama candidate’s speeches went like this, according to columnist Jules Witcover:

You take that Lyndon Baines Johnson, and that Hubert Horatio Alger Humphrey, and that Gene McCarthy, and you put them in a sack. And then you take that Richard Milhous Nixon, and that Earl Warren...And then you put in that Socialist, Nelson Rockyfeller, and that left-winger George Romney and that Clifford Case of New Jersey and that Wild Bill Scranton of Pennsylvania and that radical Jacob Javits of Noo Yawk, and you shake ‘em all up. And you turn that sack up side down, and the first one that falls out, you pick him up by the back of the neck and drop him right back in again, because there’s not a dime’s worth of difference in any of ‘em.\footnote{Jules Witcover, “George Wallace’s Potential for Mischief,” \textit{The Progressive}, July 1968, 19.}

Although most of his political opponents dismissed Wallace’s crude simplifications, they drew from the audiences not only amused chuckles but also knowing nods. There was no doubt that the American Independent Party could draw significant support from the Deep South. Wallace, however, was also intent on eroding the Democratic vote in the white working class wards of the industrial north.

Both Meany and Reuther believed that supporting LBJ’s bid for re-election in 1968 would be the best strategy for organized labor to follow. Johnson was a safe choice. If conservative forces took over the presidency, the Senate and the House, anti-labor legislation could undermine the workers’ hard won gains. Despite Reuther’s frustration with the limited nature of the Great Society programs, he still believed that a Republican ascendancy would deal a hard blow to the American working class. The AFL-CIO had a close relationship with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and since the New Deal
years had treated Democratic candidates as labor’s own. Reuther thus did not want to disturb organized labor unity, even if it meant supporting LBJ’s Vietnam policy.

Trade-union anti-war groups faced a similar dilemma: were they prepared to translate their opposition to Johnson’s Vietnam policy into opposition to the president’s re-election? One alternative was to sit out the national election and channel labor anti-war efforts into electing “peace and pro-labor” congressmen. The United Electrical Workers (UE) would eventually adopt this position. UE’s representatives had participated in the Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace on equal footing with other delegates, a dramatic step for a union that had been purged from the CIO twenty years earlier. UE’s unwavering anti-war position was reflected in its convention’s resolution not to recommend a choice of presidential candidates: “Our union must make a major contribution to the nation by campaigning vigorously for congressional candidates with a record of devotion to peace and domestic progress...”31 The UE considered neither of the major parties’ presidential nominees to be “peace candidates.”

The Tet Offensive heightened the tensions within organized labor. Eighty five thousand NLF guerrillas and their North Vietnamese allies launched their devastating offensive on January 30, 1968. They attacked thirty-six of forty-four provincial capitals, five of six major cities and the U.S. embassy in Saigon. The Tet festival celebrates the lunar New Year. The Vietnamese believe that the first week of the New Year will determine family fortunes for the rest of the year. In 1968, it did just that: not only did it

determine Vietnamese fortunes, but Americans' fortunes as well. By exposing the vitality of the NLF and the North Vietnamese, the Tet Offensive demoralized many Americans. Within a week of the attack, the enemy had suffered a serious tactical defeat. Yet they had scored an overwhelming psychological and political victory. Support for Johnson's handling of the war plummeted, the doves' challenge to the administration grew stronger, and divisions within the labor movement deepened. A few weeks before Tet, George Gallup had noted: "The solid support given President Johnson and his Vietnam politics demonstrated by the heads of organized labor at the AFL-CIO convention in Miami is not in line with the views of rank-and-file union members."

Forty three percent of union families thought that the United States' decision to get involved in Vietnam had been a mistake. The Tet Offensive confirmed many workers' fears that Americans were hopelessly trapped in Indochina and that the president was unable to break the stalemate.

Eugene McCarthy's surprisingly strong showing in the nation's first presidential primary, on March 12 in New Hampshire, seemed to prove the depth of anti-war sentiment. By winning 20 of the 24 New Hampshire delegates to the national Democratic convention, the Minnesota senator revealed that there was widespread

---


34 George Gallup, "Union Members Split on Vietnam," *Washington-Post,* 3 January 1968, Folder 12, Box 74, Jay Lovestone Files, AFL-CIO International Affairs Department, GMMA.
concern over Johnson’s Vietnam policy. Despite the efforts of the AFL-CIO’s Committee on Political Education (COPE) on the president’s behalf, McCarthy received one fourth of the vote in labor districts. As historian George Herring says, the New Hampshire primary “transformed what had seemed a quixotic crusade into a major political challenge.” In fact, McCarthy’s New Hampshire performance started the swift rush of 1968 politics.

On March 16, New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy abandoned his reluctance to challenge President Johnson for the nomination and decided to enter the race. Kennedy’s unexpected political move sent a shock wave through the ranks of organized labor, and in particular through the UAW leadership. With huge name recognition, RFK was a viable candidate who had the potential to actually win the nomination in a way McCarthy did not. After the Tet Offensive, the union’s doves had grown increasingly outspoken in their condemnation of both LBJ’s Vietnam policy and Walter Reuther’s unwillingness to criticize the administration. Kennedy’s candidacy heightened the tensions within the union as it offered a new opportunity for the UAW’s doves to challenge the president. Thus those who supported RFK were really challenging LBJ in a very direct and powerful way, which put Reuther, an ally of the president, in a very awkward position. Jack Conway, Reuther’s long-time administrative assistant and Executive Director of the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department, and Paul Schrade, West Coast Director, were the first UAW leaders to join the Kennedy camp. Conway served as a campaign aide, Schrade as a member of the Kennedy slate in the California primary. Conway’s decision

---


36 Herring, 199.
infuriated Walter Reuther. After intense debate, however, the UAW Executive Board decided that union officials could support any candidate they wanted. The UAW International would not endorse any candidate until after the Democratic convention.37

LBJ’s unexpected decision to withdraw from the race on March 31 further complicated political alignment within the UAW’s ranks. Reuther was torn between his friendliness with RFK and his long-standing political sympathy for Hubert H. Humphrey, who joined the presidential race a few days later. Humphrey was one of the foremost liberals of the postwar era. He had been a leading Democrat in the U.S. Senate for sixteen years and enjoyed a reputation as an abrasive “do-gooder.” As vice-president, he served as coordinator of the antipoverty program and chairman of the Civil Rights Council. Humphrey also worked with Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act and Medicare. Although well known as a progressive politician, due to his defense of American participation in the Vietnamese conflict, antiwar activists vilified him as much as they did LBJ. While Reuther was doubtful of Humphrey’s candidacy, Meany immediately threw the full support of his organization behind the vice-president. The AFL-CIO president regarded Humphrey “as a staunch friend of the worker throughout his public life and a supporter of the unions in good times and bad.”38

Peace activists, for their part, were thrilled by the turn in the campaign: in less than a month, LBJ had been toppled from power. As Todd Gitlin put it, “No sooner had the euphoria settled than the political fever soared again.” Only four days after Johnson’s decision not to seek reelection, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. The civil rights’

37 Boyle, The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 238-239.

leader was in Memphis, Tennessee, supporting a strike of sanitation workers for union recognition, decent wages and better working conditions. The night of the murder, eighty riots broke out across the nation and federal troops were sent to Baltimore, Chicago, Washington, and Wilmington.\(^{39}\)

RFK joined in the march that carried Martin Luther King Jr.’s body from Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church to the cemetery. The black community received him warmly. Kennedy would need their support. To stand a chance of winning the Democratic nomination, Kennedy had to win the upcoming primaries in Indiana, Nebraska, Oregon and California. Once Kennedy entered the Indiana primary, the Democratic senator was careful to denounce violence when speaking to white audiences: the ghetto rioting that followed King’s assassination had generated white fears that could not be ignored. Kennedy’s major difficulty in Indiana was not his relationship with American racial minorities, however, but his lack of solid labor union backing. The senator could not count on the traditional AFL-CIO machinery to consolidate the blue-collar vote or to raise funds. Kennedy nevertheless scored two clear victories in May. In Indiana, RFK took 42 percent of the Democratic vote, against 31 percent for Governor Roger Branigin, a stand-in for Humphrey, and 27 percent for Eugene McCarthy. In Nebraska, Kennedy took 52 percent and McCarthy 31 percent. In Oregon, however, McCarthy took 45 percent of the vote against Kennedy’s 39 percent.\(^{40}\)


\(^{40}\) Caute, 126-127.
The Democratic race thus came to a turning point in the June California primary. RFK depended largely on the support of the state’s Mexican-American community and of Cesar Chavez, the militant leader of the United Farm Workers Association (UFWA). Since 1965, the UFWA had been fighting for workers’ most basic right, union recognition. RFK had repeatedly voiced his support of Chavez’s fight for farm workers’ bargaining rights. In 1966, his Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor held hearings in Delano, a town of 14,000 that was at the center of the UFWA’s struggle with California’s agro-business. “The simple act of coming to the Mexican-Americans’ aid when they needed it,” the elections British reporters explained, “lit a durable flame of loyalty in the people of the Valley, and Kennedy returned the affection.” RFK rekindled that flame during the California primary.

Early in 1968, Kennedy traveled to Delano to attend an ecumenical Mass in Delano’s city park, during which Chavez broke a twenty-five-day fast. RFK hailed the grape pickers’ leader as “one of the heroic figures of our time” and congratulated those who were “locked with Cesar in the struggle for justice for the farm worker and the struggle for justice for Spanish-speaking Americans.” Now Kennedy turned to Chavez for support. Paul Schrade, who had been committed to the farm workers’ organization since 1965, asked Chavez to serve on the list of delegates pledged to Kennedy. Though doing so would risk losing the support of the AFL-CIO, Chavez agreed to Schrade’s

---

41 Chester, et. al., 315.

request. Schrade, for his part, had also jeopardized his position by openly defying the UAW leadership.  

By the California campaign, the Kennedy and McCarthy forces had become bitter foes. The candidates’ positions on the Vietnam War differed only slightly. Neither contender proposed an immediate withdrawal of American troops from Southeast Asia. McCarthy emphasized the need for de-escalation and the creation of “a new government of some kind” in Saigon. The Minnesota senator also argued that the NLF had to be invited to participate in a new South Vietnamese government: “this [was] a prerequisite to any kind of negotiations,” he insisted. Kennedy accused McCarthy “of forcing a coalition on the government of Saigon, a coalition with the Communists even before we begin negotiations.” The National Liberation Front, Kennedy said, would play “some role” in the political future of South Vietnam, “but that would be determined by the negotiators.”  

Kennedy won the California primary by the closest of margins, taking 46 percent of the vote to 42 percent for McCarthy. He would not be able to celebrate his last victory, however. Kennedy’s assassination on June 6 came as a shock to a nation that had not yet recovered from the slaying of Martin Luther King, Jr. In the midst of the political confusion that Kennedy’s murder caused, one thing became clear: Humphrey was now sure to win the Democratic nomination.  

Throughout the primary season, Humphrey had been securing pledges of support from the host of party regulars whose states did not hold primaries. After Kennedy had lost the Oregon primary to McCarthy, the vice-president’s chances of being nominated

---

43 Chester, et. al., 316.

44 Ibid., 339-340.
dramatically increased. By the time of Kennedy’s murder, Humphrey was already close to having the commitments he needed for nomination. After RFK’s death, organized labor was left with just one option: to back a candidate that was the epitome of Cold War liberalism. Humphrey had a perfect record of support for labor and had been an advocate for federal aid to education, urban development and Social Security throughout his political career. As for the war in Vietnam, Humphrey simply skewed the issue by pledging to seek a “swift, honorable and lasting peace” in Southeast Asia.  

As the turmoil within the Democratic Party seemed to end, the AFL-CIO leadership broke into open conflict. On July 1, the long exchange of accusations between Meany and Reuther came to an end when the UAW Executive Board decided to leave the AFL-CIO. A few months earlier, Reuther had petitioned the AFL-CIO Council for a special convention “to create an opportunity so that [labor leaders] could have a serious, a frank, a meaningful discussion about the internal weaknesses in the American Labor Movement, and the things [they] ought to be doing.” The UAW leadership declared the AFL-CIO to have failed in organizing the unorganized, in developing an effective bargaining program, and in fighting for equal opportunity and equal rights for all workers.

The defection of the UAW, with its 1,600,000 members, was a severe blow to the AFL-CIO. Unions as diverse as the United Steelworkers of America, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, and the American Bakery and

---


46 Statement of President Walter Reuther to the Seventh Constitutional Convention of the Industrial Union Department, AFL-CIO, Micro 82 - Reel 11, George Meany Files, Office of the President, GMMA.
Confectionery Workers, urged the two organizations to resolve the differences that had brought about “the tragic split.”47 A few weeks after the UAW’s disaffiliation, however, Reuther announced a new labor venture: the Alliance for Labor Action (ALA). The new association would bring together America’s two largest unions, the UAW and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, representing four million workers.

“The American labor movement has a New Left wing today,” declared Scripps-Howard journalist Stanley Levey in his appraisal of the ALA. The new organization was certainly “committed to a massive drive at home and peace abroad.”48 Yet, the alliance between such disparate partners as the UAW and the Teamsters did not merit the name “leftist.” The ALA was not a merger and did not intend to rival the AFL-CIO. Reuther was simply looking for a new forum to organize the unorganized and carry out social programs. The organizing drive was supposed to reach 36 million white-collar workers, migratory workers, working poor and southern industrial workers.

In contrast to Reuther’s “messianic” projects for a revitalized labor movement, Frank Fitzsimmons, the Teamsters’ acting president, was seeking some respectability for his union. The Teamsters had been expelled from the AFL-CIO in 1957 for corruption and its president, Jimmy Hoffa, was serving an eight-year prison term for jury tampering. The Teamsters were among the most conservative of American unions: their leaders seldom made pronouncements on foreign policy and confined themselves to bread-and-

47 United Steelworkers of America Resolution, Micro 82-Reel 11, George Meany Files, Office of the President, GMMA.

butter issues. Hoping to broaden the base of support for the ALA, Reuther and Fitzsimmons stated that “any autonomous national or international union [could] obviously choose to associate itself with this voluntary cooperative effort to help build and strengthen the labor movement.” Reuther tried to woo the most progressive AFL-CIO unions: District 65 of the Retail Workers, the Oil and Chemical Workers, the Meatcutters, the United Farm Workers, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees and the American Federation of Teachers. Two clearly left-leaning unions, the International Longshoremen and the Electrical Workers (UE), were also on Reuther’s list of possible affiliates.

The UE News triumphantly asserted that, Reuther, “the CIO architect of the AFL-CIO,” was making the same indictments of the federation that they had made in 1955: “At the time UE declared that the merger did not represent real unity that would advance the interests of the workers” since it was based on “the continuation of the red-baiting policy which had already reduced the CIO to impotence.” As the labor-liberal coalition was teetering on the brink of collapse, Cold War ideology was becoming less compelling to Reuther than it had in 1955. Many political analysts wondered whether the ALA could become the rallying point for a socially conscious labor movement or whether it was bound to be Reuther’s greatest blunder. The odds were against the ALA’s success. It was Reuther’s initiative; the UAW staff or local activists were not involved in the organization. The unions that Reuther approached, moreover, were not interested in

49 Walter Reuther and Frank E. Fitzsimmons’ letter to Paul Jennings, Folder 7, Box 338, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.

becoming affiliates of the new organization. They had little to gain from joining, while doing so risked almost certain expulsion from the AFL-CIO. It seems clear that in the thirteen years of the merger of the AFL and the CIO, American trade unions had been drifting inexorably towards the consolation of business unionism. By 1968, Reuther's UAW was one of the few voices opposing "the pursuit of institutional security" as unionism's main objective. Reuther's hopes for the ALA were unrealistic, however, since the New Deal alliance was on the verge of collapse and the Democratic Party was entangled in internal warfare over the Vietnam War.

The August Democratic convention in Chicago exacerbated the conflicts within the AFL-CIO. Newsweek's report of "The Battle in Chicago" stated that the Democratic Party convention had "held up a mirror to America." The city became the stage for a brutal encounter between anti-war demonstrators and the defenders of "law and order." Mayor Richard Daley's police charged against hippies, yippies, peace demonstrators and onlookers in the parks and on the streets. The demonstrators, who clearly outnumbered the small groups of extremists, were no more than 10,000, less than half the number of Chicago police officers.\(^{51}\)

A pre-convention Gallup Poll revealed that Eugene McCarthy trailed Nixon by five points, while Humphrey was sixteen points behind the Republican candidate.\(^{52}\) These grim numbers had no effect on the course of the convention, however. Humphrey came to Chicago with 1,450 delegates committed to his nomination, enough to secure his victory on the first ballot. Meany's role in the triumph of the New Deal coalition -the


\(^{52}\) Goulden, 364.
white South, labor, northern blacks, and the big city machines—was crucial. The AFL-
CIO president commissioned Al Barkan, head of the Committee on Political Education
(COPE), to attend policy-planning sessions of Humphrey’s inner circle. The Federation
had 221 delegates and alternates spread throughout forty-four state delegations. This
allowed Meany to keep an eye on every major state caucus and to make the necessary
political moves to secure Humphrey’s nomination.\(^{53}\)

The UAW leadership was as divided as the Democratic Party itself. The rift
between those who supported McCarthy and those who were for Humphrey seemed
impossible to bridge. *Ramparts* reproduced a statement by Paul Schrade which, whether
real or fictional, summarizes the conflict within the ranks of the United Automobile
Workers: “Don’t give us that bullshit about a possible compromise. Humphrey will be a
hawk all the way.” The *Ramparts* reporter added that, although one could expect a
conversation between two union leaders to be “earthy and frank,” this was Paul Schrade,
West Coast director of the UAW, talking to his boss, Walter Reuther. The UAW
president had promised his people that he would work out a more “dovish” Vietnam
position with his candidate, Humphrey.\(^{54}\)

As one of the first major UAW leaders to speak against the war, Schrade was
outraged at the role that Meany’s hard liners were playing at the convention. To rival a
Humphrey luncheon that Meany had hosted, Schrade offered a McCarthy luncheon at the
Essex Motor Inn. Schrade had been seriously injured during Robert Kennedy’s
assassination and this was his first public appearance after leaving the hospital. The

---


\(^{54}\) Ibid., 34.
event brought together important members of labor’s liberal wing: the UAW’s Victor Reuther and Jack Conway; the Amalgamated Clothing Workers’ Association president, Frank Rosenbaum; the Teamsters’ Harold Gibbons; and Dave Livingston, head of New York District # 65 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. Most of these liberal union leaders had participated in the National Labor Leadership for Peace in Chicago the year before. Dolores Huerta of California’s Farm Workers’ Organizing Committee was also at the luncheon. She sounded particularly disappointed at the tenor of the convention: “We have had some high hopes for the farm workers. But then I came into Chicago, and I ask myself, how can we expect anything for the brown people of America when we find ourselves in an armed camp in the city of Chicago.”

Meany, for his part, had gathered the biggest single block of delegates to the Democratic convention. At the Humphrey luncheon, the AFL-CIO president spoke to a cheering crowd and exhorted them to vote for Humphrey, the man who “sympathized” with labor. Al Barkan counted on the support of twenty of the most influential labor leaders to analyze convention delegations and discuss floor strategies. Barkan was the AFL-CIO hard liners’ “political captain” who would guarantee the nomination of Humphrey, “the labor candidate.” To Eugene McCarthy’s young supporters, he was “Meany’s number one man” who “cracked labor’s whip from the front-line command post on the convention floor.”

---

55 Ibid., 35.

56 Victor Riesel, “Union Chiefs Fight To Elect First Labor President of U.S.,” Folder 1, Box 436, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.

57 “The Decline and Fall of the Democratic Party,” 35.
The crux of the convention was the Vietnam War, as Humphrey was well aware. In less than three days, the vice-president met with twenty-three delegations in a desperate attempt to keep them in line by preaching unity against Republicans. By the time of the Democratic convention, Humphrey’s line on Vietnam had hardened from earlier in the year; he now completely supported Johnson’s approach to the conflict. Although he tried to sidestep the most contentious issues, Humphrey could not avoid Vietnam in his meeting with California’s uncommitted 174-vote delegation. When asked to describe the specific ways in which he disagreed with President Johnson’s position on the Vietnam War, Humphrey retorted: “Would you mind if I just stated my own position on Vietnam? Because the President of the U.S. is not a candidate and I did not come here to repudiate the President, I want that made clear.” The vice-president eventually received only fourteen votes from California. 58

Newsweek referred to the debate over the platform plank on the Vietnam War as the convention’s “one interlude of impressive reason.” 59 Before the platform debate, the party’s various factions honed their positions. Humphrey and his supporters had to determine whether or not the candidate would cut himself loose from the Johnson Administration. The peace forces had to work hard on their differences in order to reach a compromise. Eugene McCarthy’s proposal was for the U.S. to urge its South Vietnamese allies to accept a coalition government that included elements of the National Liberation Front. Senator George McGovern and most of the late Robert Kennedy’s

58 Newsweek, 9 September 1968, 30-31.

59 Ibid., 32.
supporters were adamant that the NLF not be included in a coalition government; they viewed McCarthy's position as a dictated settlement.

The dissidents agreed to demand an end to the bombing of North Vietnam but promised to continue full support for U.S. troops. The peace delegates also committed themselves to an immediate de-escalation of the war that might involve an early withdrawal of a significant number of American troops. The hawkish majority offered a conditional halt of the bombing of North Vietnam. The U.S. would reduce its military involvement in Southeast Asia as South Vietnamese forces were able to assume larger responsibilities for the war effort. The convention discussed the opposing planks for hours. As the debate drew to a close, McCarthy concluded: "Now, the lines are clearly drawn between those who want more of the same and those who think it necessary to change our course in Vietnam- the convention as a whole will decide."  

The convention decided by ratifying a plank on which LBJ could have run. The doves, however, managed to roll up 1,042 ¼ votes for their proposals to 1,567 ¾ for the majority. Texas' solid bloc of 104 hawk votes finally killed the minority plank. The New York and California delegations responded by standing up, flashing "V" signs and singing, "We Shall Overcome." The Vietnam War had split the party in half, and Humphrey picked up the pieces with "a little help from his friends." The vice-president won his party's nomination with 1,761 ¾ votes, to 601 for McCarthy, 146 ½ for McGovern and 67 ½ for Rev. Channing E. Phillips.  

---

60 Chester, et. al., 537.

Throughout the convention, Humphrey tried to play the role of the peacemaker, but the divisions within the Democratic Party ran too deep. He appeased northern liberals by supporting the seating of integrated Southern delegations, but he did not give the doves what they wanted, an open repudiation of LBJ’s Vietnam policy. During his acceptance speech, Humphrey made an attempt to please every faction within the Democratic Party. The vice-president expressed sympathy for the injured demonstrators, made a pledge to uphold law and order, promised social justice, and talked of disarmament and of building bridges to the Communist world. Most importantly, Humphrey concluded: “If there is any one lesson that we should have learned is that the policies of tomorrow need not be limited by the policies of yesterday.”62

By the time Humphrey accepted the nomination, newspaper headlines proclaimed that his campaign was “in a shambles.” By the end of the convention, the vice-president had won the support of doves like McGovern and Oregon Senator Wayne Morse but McCarthy and most Kennedy men were conspicuously absent in the show of party unity on the podium. The future was not bright for the Democratic nominee: Wallace and Nixon were challenging the Democrats’ hold on the Deep South; his ticket appeared in trouble in the large industrial states, except for New York; and the Midwest looked like Republican territory. Only in the Northeast could Humphrey count on a sure win. The Democratic hopes to win the presidency in 1968 seemed to have died in the streets of Chicago. Humphrey had little more than two months to revive the party.

Despite the complaints of those who believed that Humphrey could only offer a continuation of the Johnson Administration’s policies, both the AFL-CIO and the UAW

62 Ibid., 29.
worked strenuously for the Humphrey-Muskie ticket and campaigned against both Wallace and Nixon. After all his talk of new understandings, Reuther remained the quintessential “practical liberal.”  He would not sit out a presidential election because of political feuds. Moreover, UAW delegates met in fifteen regional and state conferences and committed the union to support the Democratic ticket. The results are not surprising. Humphrey and Muskie received 2,319 votes in the UAW conferences, 87.8 percent of the total; Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew won 27 votes, one percent of the total ballots. Wallace, the candidate of the American Independent Party, received 271 votes, 10.2 percent of the votes. Humphrey was, after all, the labor-friendly candidate. He had supported President John F. Kennedy’s decision to extend unemployment compensation payments by sixteen weeks, voted against a bill to cut minimum wages and against an attempt to deny workers protection of federal law. The Democratic platform proposed to build upon the successful existing programs to expand educational opportunities, supply needed housing and achieve full employment. On the thorny “law and order” issue, Humphrey proposed massive aid for local police forces but also programs to fight poverty and attack the drug problem.

The unions’ all-out effort for Humphrey revolved around bread-and-butter issues. In a pre-election message to the UAW membership, Reuther insisted:

Members of the UAW should be under no illusion: what we do at the ballot box in 1968 will have a tremendous impact upon what we will be able to do at the

---


64 UAW Solidarity, October 1968, 11; AFL-CIO News, October 1968, 17.
bargaining table in 1970 and 1971 when our major contracts are up for re-negotiation.  

The UAW Community Action Department’s campaign for Humphrey had none of the “crusading tone” usually associated with Reuther’s progressive agenda. The UAW reminded its members how important Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB) were and how Republicans in Ohio and Indiana “kept thousands of laid-off workers from getting SUB at all.” Organized labor made consumer issues a central element in its campaign for the Democratic candidate. Pamphlets highlighted the Democrats’ sponsorship of strong legislation for adequate meat inspection, fair auto insurance, and protection against garnishment and against high prices of the drug industry. The UAW’s campaign literature rarely mentioned Vietnam. 

Labor leaders were certainly concerned about Nixon’s possible “come-back” in 1968, but they were shocked at the substantial response accorded to the Wallace-LeMay ticket. Both Reuther and Meany agreed that Wallace was a real menace to labor. The Alabama candidate was the “spoiler” who could not be elected but hoped to carry enough states to prevent either party from capturing a majority of Electoral College votes. Having accomplished that, Wallace would be in a position to strike a deal with one candidate over federal policies and appointments. Wallace had identified the discontents

---

65 *UAW Solidarity*, November 1968, 5.

66 “Would you trust the Republicans?” Folder 5, Box 436, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.

67 “Protecting You and Your Family,” Folder 5, Box 436, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.
of a political minority and could deal the fatal blow to whatever was left of the old labor-liberal coalition.

In May 1968, the former Alabama governor had the support of only 7 percent of the voters outside the South. According to a Gallup survey, Wallace had the vote of 30 percent of the electorate in the thirteen states of the South and the vote of 53 percent of the electorate in the five states of Deep South. According to polls, he was winning his largest support outside the South from the same groups as in the South: manual workers, farmers, and those who described themselves as independents in politics. To the Democrats’ shock, by the end of July, the Wallace vote had reached 16 percent nationwide, and the percent of union families that supported the Alabama presidential candidate had jumped from 9 to 17 percent. Wallace, it seemed, was cutting deeply into Humphrey’s core support.

Meeting in New York on September 18, the general board of the AFL-CIO issued its official statement on the 1968 campaign. The board regarded Wallace as a candidate who had “no platform, no policies and no program for America – save racism and hatred.” The AFL-CIO leadership had reason to be concerned. On September 10, Flint, Michigan’s UAW local 326 wholeheartedly supported Wallace for president. Two weeks later, a group of Wallace backers interrupted a meeting at UAW Local 25 in St. Louis,

---


69 Ibid., Report No. 38, August 1968, 5.

Missouri, when Walter Reuther mentioned presidential candidate Humphrey and referred to “a handful of local Wallace supporters who packed a local meeting in Detroit...” About fifty unionists left the hall shouting and waited for Reuther outside. The UAW president had to leave through the back door to avoid a confrontation. In mid-October, Local 25 staged a straw poll to gauge the workers’ support for Wallace: 76 percent backed the Alabama candidate. To the UAW leadership’s relief, only 10 percent of the local members had voted in the straw poll. Yet, the “Wallace sickness,” as the *New York Times* called it, clearly required a strong counterattack if the labor vote for Humphrey were to be preserved.

George Meany counted on the ability of COPE’s Al Barkan to “cure” the Wallace sickness, but Barkan was not alone in rallying the labor vote for the Democrats. As labor columnist Victor Riesel put it, “feuds are feuds, but politics is politics.” AFL-CIO’s COPE, the Teamsters’ Democratic-Republican Independent Voters’ Education (DRIVE) and the UAW’s Community Action Program (CAP) set common goals and blanketed industrial districts with flyers highlighting the anti-labor records of both Wallace and Nixon. As union publications in thirty-three key states reached 20 million unionists and their families almost every week, organized labor hoped it could still turn the tables.

---

71 Bob Mason’s Notes, no date, Folder 7, Box 436, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.


In times of heightened racial tensions, the former Alabama governor simply articulated some Americans' deepest fears, frustrations and prejudices. Political analyst Jules Witcover, who covered Wallace extensively in the South and on his national trips, explained: "If there's any politician who can make hay while the cities burn, that politician is George Wallace, self-styled champion of the 'little people.'"74 The issue that seemed to attract blue-collar workers to his ranks was "law and order," a combination of anti-black, anti-youth and anti-dissident feelings. Labor leaders responded by sidestepping a direct argument with Wallace on social issues and appealing to workers' economic self-interest. In a number of publications, the UAW Community Action Department ridiculed the man who claimed to speak for "the little man." Alabama's per capita personal income rated 48th among the states and was $900 below the national average; 39.1 percent of Alabama's families earned below $3,000 a year; Alabama's unemployment rates were among the highest in the nation, 4.3 percent, compared with the national rate of 3.5 percent; forty states had higher workmen's compensation benefits than did Alabama. Finally, the man who promised "law and order" governed a state whose rate for both murder and aggravated assault was fourth highest among the fifty states and the District of Columbia.75

The UAW also poured funds into the Southern Committee on Political Ethics (SCOPE). Former Arkansas Congressman Brooks Hays headed the organization whose membership included prominent Southern editors and professional men and businessmen.


75 Pamphlets, Folders 5 and 7, Box 436, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President's Office, WSUA.
In a personal letter, Hays thanked Walter Reuther for “the United Auto Workers’ generous contribution” that had enabled them to launch “a very effective program.” SCOPE did not define itself as an “anti-Wallace” group but as an organization that sought to elevate the tone of politics and ensure full participation in the political process by racial minorities. However, SCOPE documents such as “The Wallace Labor Record and “A White Paper on George C. Wallace” provided unions with valuable data that could be used to dissuade workers from voting for the Alabaman.  

Although his speeches were implicitly racist, Wallace did not speak openly against African-Americans. Rather he targeted for attack the federal government, the bureaucrats, the “pointed-head pseudo-intellectuals,” the media and the Communists. According to a September 1968 Gallup survey, when asked who they considered to be the biggest threat to the country, 46 percent of Americans answered “big government,” 26 percent “big labor” and 12 percent, “big business.” In his American Independent Party platform, Wallace called for limited government and lower taxes. In Alabama, however, he had accepted federal funds for a variety of programs and increased taxes on beer, tobacco, drivers’ licenses and auto tags, all of which bore heavily on the “little people” he claimed to champion. The steady stream of mailings from union headquarters slowly turned many blue-collar workers away from Wallace. 

It is hard to determine when the presidential campaign turned and Humphrey became revitalized as a candidate. Most political observers agree that the pivotal point

---

76 Elections 1968, Folder 3, Box 436, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.

came with the speech that Humphrey delivered in Salt Lake City on September 30. The address outlined the candidate's position on one of the hottest issues, the Vietnam War.

Humphrey said:

As President, I would be willing to stop the bombing of North Vietnam as an acceptable risk for peace, because I believe that it could lead to success in the negotiations and a shorter war. This would be the best protection for our troops.

However, he concluded, "if the Government of North Vietnam were to show bad faith, I would reserve the right to resume the bombing." Humphrey's pledge did not depart radically from President Johnson's position. Yet his promise was strong enough to gain the support of some of the peace people, who sent the candidate contributions amounting to a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The Democratic candidate's vote began to rise.

As for Nixon, organized labor found it easy to prove that he was not "labor-friendly:" the Republican candidate had supported the postwar era's major anti-union legislation, the Taft-Hartley and Landrum-Griffith Acts. The General Board of the AFL-CIO noted that the Republican platform attacked "crippling economic strikes" and "government intervention" that resulted in wage increases. During a Republican administration, the AFL-CIO charged, workers could expect the destruction of industry-wide bargaining and the adoption of "right-to-work" legislation. The AFL-CIO executive council also emphasized the fact that Republicans said nothing about unemployment, workmen's compensation, occupational safety or situs picketing.

---

78 Chester, et. al., 649.
79 Ibid., 650.
80 Fink, 1769.
During his low-key campaign, Nixon adopted two main issues: small government and law and order. The Republican candidate thus expected to exploit the “middle Americans’” dissatisfaction with the Great Society programs as well as their concerns about widespread social unrest. Nixon stated that in order to reduce federal spending, “Welfare and poverty programs [would] be drastically revised to liberate the poor from the debilitating dependence that erodes self-respect and discourages family unity and responsibility.” Nixon’s program offered little hope to those who looked for vigorous federal action on behalf of the disadvantaged. At the same time Nixon said that the solution to civil disorder was “decisive action,” by which he meant existing police power needed to be applied with a heavier hand. Nixon avoided the Vietnam War issue by arguing that he did not want to “jeopardize” the Paris Peace talks then under way. Thus, the American electorate was unable to measure his intentions toward the conflict in Southeast Asia.

In October 1968, Business Week stated that “the labor movement [had] never campaigned as hard or on as many fronts on a presidential election.” It was clear to most labor leaders that if Humphrey lost the race for the presidency, organized labor’s future was uncertain. George Meany, however, also admitted that a Wallace victory was more “disastrous” than a Nixon’s victory: “We could live with President Nixon,” said the AFL-CIO president, “We lived through eight years of President Eisenhower, and we could live with Nixon. We’ll be able to deal with him—if he’s elected- and I’m sure he’ll deal with us.” Organized labor’s aim in the closing days of the campaign was therefore threefold:

\[81\] “How the Democratic and Republican Party Platforms Compare,” Folder 2, Box 436, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.
rally support for Humphrey, discredit Wallace as a viable presidential candidate and elect labor-friendly candidates to the 91st Congress. 82

A key element of organized labor’s campaign for Humphrey was “the get-out-the-vote-drive”, what Joseph C. Goulden called “the time-honored labor stratagem.” 83 Both the AFL-CIO’s COPE and the UAW’s Community Action Department urged workers to register their friends, discuss the key issues, and get them to the polls. Pamphlets emphasized the importance of getting labor members to vote: “It’s crucial that Humphrey-Muskie organizations get out the Democratic vote among traditional voters, and that we mine the electoral gold among 43 million who wouldn’t normally vote.” 84 Organized labor’s campaign was a crucial factor in Humphrey’s almost miraculous comeback in October. A November Gallup report indicated that “organized labor was a major shift group in this year’s election, with many labor union members leaving Wallace to vote for Humphrey near the end of the campaign.” 85 Unionists’ efforts, however, were not enough to get the Democratic candidate elected.

The 1968 election returns offered political analysts a wealth of material for study. Nixon’s margin of victory was extremely slim: 43.4 percent of voters supported the Republican to 43 percent for Humphrey. Wallace received the vote of 13.6 percent of the electorate, his support having faded considerably from his high-water mark of almost 20

82 “Blue collar tightens against Nixon drive,” Business Week, 26 October 1968, 55-56.
83 Goulden, 368.
84 Victory ’68, Folder 3, Box 436, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.
percent. According to nationwide data, 50 percent of blue-collar workers voted for the Democratic Party ticket, compared to 41 percent of white collars, 34 percent of professionals and businessmen and 39 percent of farmers. The steam that Wallace had built up during the turbulent 1968 presidential campaign had evaporated by election day. The third party candidate nevertheless claimed: "This movement has already won. Both national parties have changed direction because of our movement." Before dismissing Wallace’s statement as merely the reaction of a defeated politician, one should reconsider whether or not the former Alabaman governor was "the most influential loser in twentieth-century American politics."

It is important to note that, despite the mounting social unrest that characterized the politics of 1968, both majority parties nominated men of the center with a strong grip on the political system and its bureaucracy. Nixon had the luxury of a $20 million campaign treasury for TV and radio propaganda and counted on the support of 85 percent of company presidents who had shares in the New York stock exchange. In the aftermath of the Chicago convention, few political analysts believed that Humphrey would make the presidential race as close as it turned out to be. The Democratic candidate made a tremendous effort to reassemble the pieces of the Democratic coalition. Humphrey

---

86 Ibid., 3.

87 Newsweek, 11 November 1968, 34.

counted on the support of the big-city political machines and labor leaders who were determined to keep Nixon away from the White House.

If organized labor contributed to Humphrey's almost miraculous comeback, it was because unions fed into their members' fears of what a Nixon or Wallace administration could mean to the ordinary worker. In its evaluation of why Humphrey had suddenly picked up strength in the industrial districts, *Newsweek* concluded: "Some of this support came from the disaffected Democratic left while much of the rest of it came from blue-collar workers who finally decided to vote their pocketbooks instead of their prejudices." Whatever the reasons, working-class voters had helped to transform a sure Democratic defeat into a very narrow loss.

Nixon was the first new president since Zachary Taylor in 1848 to win the presidency while the opposition party retained control of both houses of Congress. "A shift of less than 75,000 votes in Illinois and Missouri," a labor columnist claimed, "would have destroyed the Republican's electoral vote majority." Humphrey captured twelve states in the industrial east plus the District of Columbia. Of the eight largest states, the vice-president took four—Michigan, Texas, New York and Pennsylvania—and came close in the other four, New Jersey, Ohio, Illinois and California. Nixon carried all the other regions, even the South, where Humphrey ran third to Wallace. In 1960,

---

89 UAW Washington Report, Election Facts, p. 2, Folder 8, Box 436, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President's Office, WSUA.

90 *Newsweek*, 11 November 1968, 32.

Leonard Hall, the Republican campaign manager, had told Nixon: “You know, Dick, a shift of only fourteen thousand votes, and we would have been the heroes and they would have been the bums.” In 1968, there were no heroes.

As *UAW Solidarity* reminded its readership, “the greatest tragedy in American politics” remained “the low voter turnout.” Out of the 120 million American citizens of voting age living in the United States, 48 million did not vote. According to a Gallup poll, “25 million could have voted if they had made an extra effort;” they were simply disinterested, did not like the candidates or did not bother to register. Nineteen million voters said that at some point during the campaign that they intended to vote for a candidate other than the one they supported on the election day. None of the parties had managed to overcome apathy among voters.

In broad terms, the political struggles of 1968 can be described as a contest between the “pragmatic professionals” and the “ideologues.” The “ideologues,” whether liberal or radical, lost their battle on the Democratic convention floor and in the streets of Chicago. They had viewed politics as a vehicle for causes, such as peace in Vietnam. Once the presidential race started, the “pragmatic professionals” in both majority parties dominated the struggle and avoided the causes to look as moderate as possible. Organized labor joined the “pragmatists” and fought Humphrey’s opponents by exposing their records on “bread-and-butter” issues. Their efforts almost paid off.

---

92 Quoted in Chester, et. al., 746.

93 *UAW Solidarity*, May 1969, 34.

It was the “tactical approach of business unionism,” rather than a “revitalized labor movement” that almost took Humbert Humphrey to the White House. In the aftermath of the presidential election, the high aspirations of the Alliance for Labor Action (ALA) seemed increasingly difficult to fulfill. Could the labor movement “acquire a new sense of renewal and rededication to social programs,” as the ALA’s statement of purpose proposed? Now that the labor-liberal coalition had been seriously weakened, how would organized labor “respond to the realities of a swiftly changing world?”

By the end of the “year of the barricades,” the future of American politics was, at best, uncertain. As Jonathan Rieder put it, “Millions of voters, pried loose from the habitual loyalty to the Democratic Party, were now a volatile force, surging through the electoral system without the channeling restraints of party attachment.”

In November 1968, it was not yet clear whether the presidential election had been an “American melodrama” or an “American tragedy.”

---

95 ALA’s Declaration of Purpose, Folder 7, Box 338, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.

CHAPTER 2
THE BLUE-COLLAR BLUES

The 1968 presidential campaign was crucial in bringing working-class issues to the forefront of public concern. George Wallace’s success in attracting a considerable number of union members to his cause at the onset of the campaign shocked many Americans. The press then labeled trade unionists “snobs,” “bigots,” “reactionaries” and usually assigned them to the affluent middle-class. Unionized workers had supposedly “made it” and were bent on just one thing: the defense of their hard-won economic gains. When George Wallace cried before working-class audiences, “Don’t let them take it away!” the “them” he had in mind were African-Americans, the poor minority who, due to the sweeping social legislation of the Johnson years, now allegedly threatened white workers’ standard of living and economic security. The average blue-collar worker was undoubtedly anxious about his job, income and commitments and often felt ignored by his government. Both Wallace and Nixon reminded the American worker that he had been “forgotten.” Although most of the early Wallace supporters switched to Hubert Humphrey before the November balloting, the “blue-collar blues” caused a flurry of working-class studies in the elections’ aftermath. Journalists, intellectuals and activists from across the political spectrum tried to determine the economic and social problems of the workers.

Voting analysts grappling with the 1968 election returns provided a number of explanations for the apparent rightward turn in American politics. During the presidential campaign, analysts “re-discovered” blue-collar workers as a volatile segment
of society whose vote might be crucial in determining the next president of the United States. Workers could either support a populist conservative such as Wallace or follow their unions’ advice and turn an anticipated Nixon landslide into a very close election. Conservatives viewed the “affluent” blue-collar workers as potential members of a new Republican majority. Democrats—both conservative and liberal—analyzed their Party’s electoral defeat and proposed ways to revive the crumbling New Deal coalition. Finally, the New Left took a renewed interest in the rank-and-file as potential agents for social change. As the 1960s came to a close, the blue-collar worker stood at the center of an ongoing political and intellectual debate.

In *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969), Kevin Phillips, a former Nixon campaign aide, claimed that the Great Society had provoked an angry reaction among large segments of the white working and middle classes. Issues of race—affirmative action, school busing, residential integration, and racial preferences in job selection and government contracting—along with a reaction against the antiwar movement, cultural permissiveness and crime had fractured the New Deal coalition. Phillips argued that voting power was shifting from the Democratic stronghold of the northeast to the southern and western states of the Sun Belt; top growth states such as California, Arizona, Texas and Florida would play a crucial role in future elections. In this new cycle in American politics, Phillips said, populist conservative Republicans would replace an entrenched liberal Democratic elite.¹

"The long-range meaning of the political upheaval of 1968," Phillips argued, "rests on the Republican opportunity to fashion a majority among the 57 percent of the American electorate which voted to eject the Democratic Party from national power." Due to the poor Democratic and liberal record in Indochina, in domestic economics, in welfare policy and in law enforcement, Phillips argued, Nixon had been able to usher in a rightward political swing in 1968. Phillips admitted that the 1968 presidential election had become a close race, "as once-dissident liberals rallied behind Humphrey and Democratic union leaders whipped their pro-Wallace rank and file back to the party line." In sum, Wallace's backing among blue-collar workers and poor whites was highly unstable. Many working-class voters remained loyal to the Democratic candidate, as they feared that a Republican president might undermine Social Security, Medicare, and collective bargaining.

Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg's The Real Majority (1970) offered a Democratic response to Phillips' book. These analysts contended that the "middle voters" were no longer worried about economic issues such as unemployment, labor union rights, or broad based welfare proposals; such concerns had been superseded by "the Social Issue." According to Scammon and Wattenberg, Americans were "beginning to array themselves politically along the axes of certain social situations." These situations became potent political issues because the great majority of voters in America

---

2 Ibid., 461.
3 Ibid., 35.
4 Ibid., 464.
were “middle-aged, middle-class, middle-minded.” The “Social Issue,” a term coined by the authors, pivoted on the electorate’s increasing fears of crime, racial militance, campus disruption, drug use and the apparent decline of moral values.

There were more similarities than differences between Phillips’ *The Emerging Republican Majority* and Scammon and Wattenberg’s *The Real Majority*. Yet Phillips’ analysis was much more deterministic than was Scammon and Wattenberg’s. The latter believed that the political realignment was not yet complete and that all was not lost for the Democrats. The authors of *The Real Majority* argued that the Democratic Party could win the allegiance of “Middle America” by co-opting the law-and-order issue and avoiding measures that exacerbated racial conflict. The “middle voter,” Scammon and Wattenberg said, “is a forty-seven-year old housewife from the outskirts of Dayton, Ohio, whose husband is a machinist.” This prototypical “middle American” was afraid to walk the streets alone at night, had mixed views about blacks and civil rights, and was deeply distressed because LSD was found on his son’s school campus. Blue-collar families thus resembled the “middle class” in that the Social Issue had eclipsed economic concerns.


---


6 Ibid., 70.
and militance of organized labor had become complacent and "middle class." There were no Labor Day parades or Labor Day speeches, as workers preferred to spend the weekend "playing golf or vacationing at the lake resorts in the cool pine forests to the north."

Younger workers did not care about the union because they had the benefits that they wanted. Their primary concerns were no longer workmen's compensation or the union shop but "suburban school taxes and the sanctity of the neighborhood."^7

Mainstream magazines reinforced the view of American workers as "middle class," "generous" and "optimistic." In a special report entitled "The Troubled American," Newsweek thoroughly examined the "white middle-class majority" that included white-collar and blue-collar workers. The magazine's reporters claimed that, in a malignant racial atmosphere, middle-class whites felt victimized and thus were increasingly willing to voice their prejudices and hostility against blacks. 8 Middle Americans were troubled by the squeeze of taxes and inflation, Newsweek contended, but these were not their paramount concerns. Above everything else, the report claimed, these Americans cherished "order" and wanted "everybody to just quiet down and quit threatening to destroy what they [had] worked so hard to build and preserve." Middle Americans resented the poor for being on welfare and the rich for not paying taxes. 9

Newsweek's "troubled American" was Richard Nixon's "forgotten American," his "great silent majority." The middle American was also George Wallace's and Spiro Agnew's

---

7 New York Times, 1 September 1969, 1, 8.


9 Ibid., 49.
“little man”. To many political analysts, the Middle American was simply “the reacting American.”

Journalist Richard Lemon expanded the Newsweek article into The Troubled American, a book whose conclusions were based on 2,165 interviews of white adults carried out by the Gallup Organization. The author admitted that the middle Americans were not “a monolithic group” since they were divided by income, age, occupation, education and ethnicity. Yet the core of his analysis lay in the disturbing fact that the “great American middle class,” which formed the backbone of the country, was now described as “alienated,” “frightened,” “uneasy,” “forlorn,” “angry,” “resentful,” “confused.” By appealing to “the silent majority,” Lemon argued, Nixon had apparently offered the reassurance that the decade’s conflicts had been exaggerated: “He would seek out these forgotten, orderly men and women, and the squabbles of the past would fall into perspective, because the people had had enough of them.” Lemon’s study attempted to prove just the opposite: the silent majority was not satisfied.

Similarly, in The Middle Americans: Proud and Uncertain (1971), Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles attempted to identify the common political and cultural attitudes of the “forgotten Americans.” Based on interviews with a handful of workingmen—a steam fitter, a policeman, a filling-station operator, a machinist, a fireman, a welder, a druggist and a bank-loan officer—Coles offered a vindication of the

---


11 Ibid. 19.

12 Ibid.
“Silent Majority.” The middle Americans that Coles interviewed showed varying degrees of hostility towards blacks, hippies, and the educated. They needed to believe that American involvement in Vietnam was justified and feared going into debt. Despite some bleak aspects that the book presented, *Time* magazine found Coles’ portrait “encouraging:” “Middle Americans still possess[ed] a wisdom (or virtue) that now seem[ed] rare...They believe[d] in reticence, especially about their private lives.” The study implied that middle Americans were more often than not unwilling to talk about the issues that concerned them. In his conclusion, Coles highlighted a woman interviewee’s words: “I make things worse when I talk about them; and I make myself seem lonelier.”

In a time of burning ghettos, escalating antiwar demonstrations and explosive university campuses, many analysts cherished the middle Americans’ alleged “reticence.”

By calling white workers “middle Americans,” sociologists, political analysts and journalists alike reinforced the perception of the United States as a middle-class nation. Studies of self-classification showed that a majority of workers did *not* use the term “working class” to describe their position in society. If asked to locate themselves on a scale of upper, middle or lower class, the overwhelming majority called themselves “middle class.” On a five-class scale, however, on which the working class was placed between the poor and the middle-class, many more identified themselves as working class. “Middle class,” then, did not necessarily refer to a majority of affluent and secure individuals but simply to the social class between the rich and the poor. The use of terms...

---


such as “middle class” or “middle American” to describe white and blue-collar workers was misleading in the sense that a wide disparity of lifestyles passed for “middle class.”

There is no doubt that the American working class has never fit into the Marxist model of class structure as contending groups organized and mobilized for struggle over clashing economic interests. American sociologists, for their part, have largely favored a non-economic definition of social classes as “aggregates of persons or families differing in values and behavior and forming a rank order of status levels.” Social classes therefore have often been presented as “ranked subcultures.” Richard Lemon’s The Troubled American, with its emphasis on values and behavior, conforms to this definition of class.

Studies such as Kevin Phillips’ The Emerging Republican Majority, Scammon and Wattenberg’s The Real Majority, Lemon’s The Troubled American, or Coles’ The Middle Americans stressed the existence of an American “Silent Majority” as well as the validity of a non-economic conception of social class. This perception led analysts to underestimate the role that economic inequalities play in determining working people’s aspirations and views. In fact, as sociologist Dennis Wrong states, “classes are groups whose members’ aspirations and opportunities, beliefs, and life-styles—far from reflecting a coherent self-sustaining culture or subculture—are basically shaped by their


16 Dennis H. Wrong, “How Important is Social Class?” in Irving Howe, ed., The World of the Blue-Collar Worker, 303.
market position in the national economy, and [...] by their differential “life-chances” in
the commodity, credit, and labor markets.” The phrase “Middle America” reduced a
vast group of Americans to a neatly labeled lowest common denominator of status and
concerns. The classification obviated the variations in the nature of blue-collar work. In
1969, the nonagricultural labor force in the United States numbered 77.902 million; out
of these, 48.993 million Americans were employed in production and non-supervisory
jobs. The “old” working class, which was primarily blue collar and did physical work
in the country’s industrial economy, was still a great force in America’s political scene in
the late 1960s.

As conservative and liberal analysts critiqued workers as middle Americans, new
leftists increasingly discovered the workers’ revolutionary potential. This was a
surprising turn. Since its 1962 convention at a labor camp in Port Huron, Michigan, the
Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)—at the time the student department of League
for Industrial Democracy—had a stormy relationship with the social-democratic left and
the liberal-labor coalition. Tom Hayden, a twenty-two year old student and a rising
reporter on the University of Michigan newspaper, presented on that occasion a
manifesto that attempted to summarize the position of the new student radicals. During
the Convention, the document exacerbated the political differences between two leftist
students’ camps, one led by SDS president Al Haber, Tom Hayden, Steve Max and their
followers, and the other by New York socialists Rachelle Horowitz, Tom Kahn and

17 Ibid.

Richard Roman, whose mentor was Michael Harrington, a leader of the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID).

Those student radicals who followed the lead of Hayden believed that the fundamental problem of American society stemmed from the glaring contradictions that existed between Americans’ democratic ideals and its national experience. Hayden proposed to bridge the gap between theory and practice by fostering “participatory democracy,” a political system through which the people could take more control over their own lives. As historian Allen Matusow has put it, “participatory democracy” was “obviously similar to the anarchist dream of inherently good men and women liberated from hierarchic institutions and living in decentralized communities where the individual counted.” According to the Port Huron Statement, one of the most widely read radical documents in American history, students would be the agents of social change.

The students’ elders had more faith in organized labor. The SLID’s old leftists, such as Michael Harrington and Irving Howe, were loyal to the ideas of Max Shachtman, the one-time Bolshevik and secretary of Leon Trotsky who broke with his mentor in 1939 to produce his own analysis of Stalinism. Shachtman rejected Trotsky’s view of the Stalinist bureaucracy as a degenerate caste temporarily ruling in the name of the proletariat. In Shachtman’s view, Stalin’s bureaucrats formed a new permanent and totalitarian clique. By the time the student radicals convened in Port Huron, the Shachtmanites had dropped their revolutionary rhetoric, joined the Socialist Party and discarded the possibility of building an American version of the Labor Party.

---

Shachtmanites hoped to advance their social democratic ideals within the two-party system: the aim was to turn the Democratic Party into a coalition of left-liberals and socialists. The labor movement was to play a crucial role in such a political realignment.²⁰

Harrington vehemently objected to Hayden’s Port Huron Statement draft. The clash epitomized the differences between the Shaectmanites and the infant New Left. In his analysis of the birth of the New Left, Todd Gitlin claims that “Harrington was pivotal, for he was the one person who might have mediated across the generational divide.”²¹ The veteran Shachtmanite, however, judged the new radicals’ manifesto more harshly than the students had expected. Two issues started the rift between the old and the new leftists: the young activists’ rejection of anticommunism and their disregard of the workers and their unions as agents for social change.

Anticommunism was a defining feature of the postwar liberals’ and social democrats’ identity. In the new leftists’ view, “an unreasoning anticommunism [had] become a major social problem for those who want[ed] to construct a more democratic America.” To the SDS founders, communism was not monolithic and the Soviet Union was not a military threat to the United States. Furthermore, Cold War rhetoric only damaged American political life as “the demands of “unity” and “oneness” in the face of the declared danger” restricted any kind of debates. To Harrington and to all those


political activists with vivid memories of Stalin’s crimes and the Hungarian Revolution, the SDS theorists were simply “soft” on communism.\(^\text{22}\)

The second issue dividing the Old and the New Left was the new radicals’ evaluation of the labor movement. The Port Huron Statement was contemptuous of organized labor, “the historic institutional representative of the exploited, the presumed [my emphasis]‘countervailing power’ against the excesses of Big Business.”\(^\text{23}\) Industrial unions were in a serious crisis, SDS argued: automation was causing a decrease in blue-collar jobs, the unorganized were not being organized, and labor leaders were turning increasingly bureaucratic, materialistic and self-interested. Rank-and-filers were not that different: many were “indifferent unionists, uninterested in meetings, alienated from the complexities of the labor-management negotiating apparatus, lulled to comfort by the accessibility of luxury and the opportunity of long-term contracts.”\(^\text{24}\) In 1962, the young radicals who adhered to the Port Huron Statement shared the mainstream view of organized labor as economically affluent and politically conservative.

From the draft of its pivotal document in 1962 to the organization’s collapse in the summer of 1969, SDS leaders remained obsessed with the debate over the agents of social change. Although well meaning, the student radicals found it increasingly hard to formulate a definite ideology. Who would lead the revolution that they deemed necessary to make American society truly democratic? College students alone, as the

\(^{22}\) The Port Huron Statement, Appendix in James Miller’s *Democracy is in the Streets*, 350.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 343.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 344.
Port Huron Statement seemed to imply? The poor living in the American cities’ slums? The “internal colony” of oppressed blacks? Third-World peasants? The “new working class” of salaried professionals and highly trained technical employees? In its short history, SDS embraced strategies that aimed to promote each of these groups as the vanguard of political change.

In its early years, SDS leaders found in the work of German philosopher Herbert Marcuse an ideological foundation in which to root its radicalism. Marcuse’s most important books, Eros and Civilization and One-Dimensional Man, went to great lengths to explain why the beneficiaries of the Affluent Society felt so oppressed and alienated. To Marcuse, and to many new leftists, “a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevail[ed] in advanced industrial civilization...” Furthermore, in a post-scarcity society, “independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition” were things of the past. The Marcusean “Great Refusal” to conform to “oppression and domination” legitimated the youth movement’s confrontational approach.

In 1964, SDS tried and failed to organize the poor in the slums through its Economic Research and Action Projects. On campus, Mario Savio’s Free-Speech Movement revitalized the SDS chapter at the University of California, Berkeley. Savio’s denunciation of the depersonalized and unresponsive university bureaucracy echoed the Port Huron Statement. In 1965, the escalation of the Vietnam War further radicalized the New Left and offered SDS president Carl Oglesby the chance to link corporate liberalism

---

to U.S. imperialism. In 1966 and 1967, as the anti-draft movement grew, radical students not only denounced American imperialism but also increasingly identified with Third World guerrillas and their Marxist leaders. Ho Chi Minh, Mao Tse Tung, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro became heroes to emulate.

By June 1968, Allen Matusow writes, “like the old left before it, the new splintered into Marxist sects that often hated each other more than they hated their capitalist enemies.” At that year’s SDS convention in East Lansing, Michigan, radical students divided into two camps. On the one side were the SDSers whose analysis and tactics were guided by Third World Marxism. On the other side were the Marxist-Leninist members of the Progressive Labor Party, who believed that the American industrial working class, not Third World guerrillas, would topple the capitalist system. Despite the division, SDS still appeared to be “in good health” in 1968. A year later, however, the organization cracked when SDS expelled the Progressive Labor Party and its Worker Student Alliance caucus. As historian Peter Levy says, “SDS ultimately collapsed in the process of debating the correct line on the working class.”

Early in 1969, there were clear indications that the various new left factions and SDS chapters were seriously revising their stand towards the American working class. In January 1969, new leftist John Spritzler triumphantly announced that “Dartmouth SDS [had] been building a student-worker alliance and learning to apply a pro-working class strategy to student struggles.” The Dartmouth decision to build an alliance with the

Matusow, 335.

workers had grown out of an anti-Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) demonstration. Initially, the Dartmouth anti-ROTC petition simply stated that ROTC was “incompatible with a liberal arts education.” The university’s SDS members denounced the document as an “ivory-tower” students’ demand that someone else fight the Vietnam War: the working-class youth.\(^\text{28}\)

Despite the introduction of a “worker friendly” strategy, the activism of Dartmouth SDS chapter still centered not on the grievances of American workers but on the connections between U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia and the consequent oppression of the Vietnamese revolution. SDS’ task was to show American workers that the same power that subjected the peoples of Vietnam could be used to break their strikes at home. SDS members’ ultimate aim was, however, to win the workers’ support in their anti-ROTC struggle. New leftists argued that a student-worker alliance, especially leafleting and support of local strikes, had increased both on-campus and off-campus support for SDS.\(^\text{29}\) In sum, it had diminished the isolation of the student movement.

SDS’ determination to build a student-worker alliance increased in the spring of 1969. This was reflected in the numerous articles that the *New Left Notes* published on the issue. For instance, the leaders of the San Diego Workers for a Democratic Society explained why they, university drop-outs, had decided to do factory work and join the working class: “We organize workers because they are the only sector of the population with the potential power to defeat the American ruling class. Students can annoy the


\(^{29}\) Ibid.
rulers; workers can seize the means of production and shut down the country. The activists' ultimate goal was to transform the workers' trade union struggles into revolutionary battles. The strategy to follow, they admitted, was not yet clear. It was essential, however, that workers became aware of the connections between the Vietnam War, racism and the international class interests of the workers. The organizers of the San Diego Workers for a Democratic Society had apparently abandoned the belief that the students could lead a revolution and had placed all their hopes on the revolutionary potential of blue-collar workers.

By 1969, then, a growing number of new leftists had traveled the long distance from Marcuse's pessimistic appraisal of industrial workers as affluent, passive and easily manipulated, to the "optimistic" Marxist-Leninist view of blue collars as the only group capable of overturning the capitalist system. In his analysis of the Old Left and the New Left, Paul Mattick Jr. provides an interesting summary of the metamorphosis of SDS between 1962 and 1969: "It has moved, in the terms of its slogans, from protest to resistance, from dialogue to confrontation, from organizing pressure groups to base-building, from peace to anti-imperialism, from civil rights to black liberation; perhaps from participatory democracy to socialism."

In January 1969, PLP leaders made a Work-In pamphlet available to all SDS members. In the document, radical students admitted that they had isolated themselves by neglecting the largest section of the population, the working class. The increasing


level of strikes, SDS acknowledged, debunked the myth of working-class apathy.

"Workers ARE on the move," the SDS members concluded. They proposed a summer work-in aimed at breaking down the barriers between students and workers, talking about political issues with blue collars and changing the image of the youth movement from that which the press had presented. The pamphlet stressed the fact that the Summer Work-in was "an opportunity for students to learn from workers [my emphasis]."

Furthermore, the document warned students against patronizing the rank and filers:

"Don’t talk to workers like you know everything and they know nothing. First of all, it’s not true (probably the reverse)."

The 1969 SDS work-in program indicates that, while most student radicals saw the need to forge some kind of student-worker alliance, many were reluctant to adopt the highly doctrinaire position of the Progressive Labor Party and its Worker-Student Alliance caucus. These staunch Marxist-Leninists maintained that the working class, by its own effort, could develop trade union consciousness but not revolutionary consciousness; the latter could only be brought to the labor movement by revolutionary intellectuals from without. The SDS summer work-in pamphlet, in contrast, was grounded on the assumption that students could profit from the workers’ own experiences of class struggle. "One important result of your job may just be," the SDS pamphlet concluded, "an appreciation of what workers are up against in their fight against the boss, the government and sellout union leadership."

---

32 S.D.S. Student Summer Work-In, pamphlet, Special Collections and Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

33 Ibid.
This student drive brought alarmed responses from business associations, the news media, and union leaders. The business community feared that SDS's infiltration of manufacturing plants might agitate rank and file. Business associations held briefings and sent out thousands of letters informing executives about the SDS work-in plan and recommending screening procedures to keep activists off payrolls. The Commerce and Industry Association of New York sponsored a meeting of businessmen to "plan strategy against a Students for a Democratic Society project to forge a worker-student alliance." The Illinois Manufacturers Association published the student summer work-in plan verbatim, describing it as "food for serious thought." "Troublemakers" were expected to flood into the plants.

_Time_ denounced the radical students who, "having alienated themselves from most of society's cherished institutions," were now abandoning their summer vacation to create a revolutionary student-worker alliance. The workers' attitude, _Time_ contended, ranged from coolness to hostility; blue-collar workers had "no patience with revolutionary jargon and little sympathy for comparatively privileged college students." A cartoon summarized what the magazine considered to be the workers' reaction towards the SDS summer work-in. The drawing showed a stout blue-collar worker, in overalls and hard hat, leaving behind a small barking dog wearing sunglasses and waiving an SDS flag.

In a similar vein, _The Wall Street Journal_ viewed any form of student-worker alliance as highly unlikely. The newspaper based its argument on the mainstream

---


assumption of American labor’s well being. Staff reporter Alan Adelson contended that, judging from the “politically conservative mood” of the working class, the students’ revolutionary approach would strike most Americans as nonsensical. Workers had joined students in the 1968 “May Revolt” in France because French workers were poorly paid. In the United States, the situation was very different: the vast majority of workers had been integrated into the middle class. They were “well-paid, insulated from the impact of the recessions.” Having moved from economic insecurity to economic security, workers had adopted “the political philosophy that traditionally goes with security.”

Union leaders’ responses to the SDS summer plan were varied. Labor reporter Victor Riesel, a close friend of AFL-CIO president George Meany’s and a staunch defender of the organization, alerted the unions to the SDS summer program. In his “Inside Labor” column, Riesel claimed that labor leaders would be sure to give “the provocateur work-in summer rebels a thorough workout.” Union leaders such as Joe Behme, president of the Communications Workers of America, and Charles Luras, head of the United Transportation Union, took preventive measures. Union chiefs, according to Riesel, would not allow unionized shops to be taken over by new leftists. To labor leaders, the SDS summer work-in was much more than “a youthful rehearsal for summer soldiers of a playful revolution.” Student radicals were working on even more “violent and explosive documents” for the coming SDS national convention.

---


Gus Tyler, assistant president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), had a much more welcoming attitude towards the radical students’ attempt to bridge the differences between the American working class and the New Left. Like several other Democrats at the time, Tyler was calling for collaboration between unions, liberals and radicals; consequently, the ILGWU leader applauded the New York Labor Committee of SDS for its critique of student insularity. This Committee advocated the creation of “a movement of students, working people, and unemployed...fighting together for what we all need...Campaigns which turn black and white against each other or students against working people are absolutely wrong. They are doomed to failure.”

Tyler celebrated the committee’s rediscovery of the working class as a crucial agent of historical development. Nevertheless, Tyler questioned the SDS Summer Work-in that was supposed to “sow the seeds of revolution” among workers.³⁸

In Tyler’s view, the SDS’s “infiltration” of manufacturing plants was not necessary for labor to become an agent of social change. Labor unions, Tyler argued, had the capacity to go beyond the purely economic concerns of their members and become more sensitive to other dilemmas in society such as housing, education, taxation, civil rights, foreign affairs, full employment and poverty. Tyler regarded unions as “inveterate income re-distributors.” Yet for effective redistribution to be achieved and for the working class to become politically constructive, programs had to be pursued “in tandem with other progressive elements in society: blacks, youths, and intellectuals.” If ignored, workers who harbored resentment against not only the rich but also against politicians,

militant blacks, radical students, liberals and insensitive union leaders might turn into a negative force in American society.39

Labor reporter Riesel was right in predicting that the SDS national convention would be more "explosive and violent" than the 1969 SDS summer work-in program. When SDS convened in Chicago on June 18, the key question was which road the country's largest radical organization would take. After heated disputes over the best revolutionary strategy, SDS split into various factions. Paul Mattick Jr., a New Left Notes contributor, explained: "The American New Left...has produced very little in the way of theory of itself and its goals. What kind of revolution are we aiming for? What styles of organization are appropriate to the work we want to do? What are or ought to be our relations to other tendentially or potentially oppositional groups in society like blacks and workers?"40 By the time of the 1969 national convention, radical students had produced no clear answers to these crucial questions. Rather, SDS had divided into three major factions, each seeking to organize radical activity in its own direction.

During the national convention, SDS expelled the Progressive Labor Party, a self-styled cadre of Marxist-Leninists that had been infiltrating the organization for over a year. The Worker-Student Alliance (WSA), a faction that the PLP had built into SDS, was also purged. In its trade union program, the PLP claimed that "since the effects of the wars of aggression spread by the U.S. ruling class throughout the world [fell] ever more heavily on the workers here at home, any force rebelling against that ruling class policy [was] fighting in the direct class interest of the workers." The PLP argued that

39 Tyler, 13.

there was a clear identity between the interests of workers and students. Whether young radicals demonstrated against the Vietnam War, resisted the draft or walked picket lines along with the workers, they were fighting “against the same ruling class that misdirect[ed] both of them.” Hence the importance of a worker-student alliance.\(^{41}\)

Other SDS factions resented the PLP for presenting itself as the “vanguard of the proletarian revolution.” They condemned the PLP’s disregard of women’s, blacks’ and students’ own organizational expressions within the revolutionary movement. The PLP, opponents asserted, embraced a vulgar Marxism that reduced racism and male chauvinism to mere devices to split and divide the working class. The WSA was based on the misconception that only PLP qualified cadres were capable of “organizing” working people. SDS’ decision to put an end to PLP-WSA politics within the organization was largely based on two fundamental differences in principles between the PLP and SDS. First, most radical students supported the struggle for liberation launched by black and Latin “colonies” within the U.S. and even recognized those “nations’ rights” to secession. The PLP, in contrast, deemed these revolutionary movements as racist. Second, mainstream SDS members supported the national liberation movement of the people of Vietnam as well as all similar movements around the world that fought U.S. imperialism. To the PLP, however, all forms of nationalism were to be condemned as reactionary. A virtual ultimatum from the Black Panther Party and the Mexican-American Brown Berets finally forced the purge of the PLP from SDS.\(^{42}\)

\(^{41}\) Progressive Labor Trade Union Program, June 1968, 108, Special Collections and Archives, W.E.B Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

\(^{42}\) “SDS,” Reprinted from the Guardian, in News From Nowhere, Summer 1969, 8.
Broadly speaking, the SDS members who pushed for the expulsion of the PLP agreed on the need to build a Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM). After the national convention, however, this larger faction split in two: the Weathermen and the Revolutionary Youth Movement 2 (RYM 2). Although these groups shared some ideological foundations, they differed on issues such as black liberation, nationalism, the white working class and direct action tactics. 43

The Weathermen described themselves as "not part-time students, but full-time revolutionaries." This faction believed that white radicals must link with black guerrillas and Third World insurgents on tactical as well as on ideological grounds. These young revolutionaries were charged not only with absolute indifference towards the white working class but also with indiscriminate violence. Third World revolution coupled with white youth revolution at home, the Weathermen contended, would bring about socialism. 44 Many years after the Weathermen had disbanded, Tom Hayden remembered that "they had started, characteristically, as idealist and benign people...[but then] it became a matter of whether or not you were a man, which was measured by how outrageously subversive you were willing to be." 45

The RYM 2, meanwhile, viewed the proletariat as the main force in the socialist revolution. Blacks, women and students were the agents who, through their struggles, raised the consciousness of the white working class. RYM 2 viewed African-Americans

43 Ibid.

44 Boston Sunday Globe, 30 November 1969, 37, 47.

45 Hayden interview, in James Miller, Democracy is in the Streets, 311.
as comprising a nation onto themselves, oppressed as blacks and exploited as workers. Because of this dual position, blacks’ liberation was a precondition to any kind of socialist revolution in the United States. Women would contribute to the development of “proletarian unity” and revolution by liberating themselves from male supremacy. Revolutionary students would be the catalysts of change.  

The divisions at SDS Chicago national convention and the subsequent split into warring factions turned a worker-student alliance into mere wishful thinking. The radical students’ “rediscovery of the American working class” failed to materialize. To old leftists such as Howe and Harrington, as Maurice Isserman has said, the New Left “must have seemed sometimes a surrealistico parody of the worst ideological excesses of the Old Left.” SDS, as the nation’s largest radical organization, had collapsed, but new leftists continued to debate the labor question. Young radicals, as individuals, would adopt varied positions on the working-class struggles that were to come in the Nixon years.

If trade unionists chastised the student radicals for their revolutionary dreams, they were equally angered by the mainstream media misrepresentation of blue-collar life. Steel Labor, the United Steel Workers’ publication, took issue with the Newsweek report and argued that “the troubled American” was in fact “the exploited American.” The very existence of “Middle America” was a myth: the majority of people who worked for a living were not part of “affluent America.” Blue-collar family income was below the modest but adequate standard defined by the government. To be above the poverty line did not necessarily mean that workers enjoyed economic and social well being.

---

46 “S.D.S,” 8.

47 Isserman, 122.
Moreover, *Steel Labor* claimed, workers were “angry at being exploited by the Wallaces, the Agnews, and the Nixons who cater[ed] to their fears and anxieties yet offer[ed] nothing in the way of positive programs.” White workers were tired of being stereotyped as affluent and racist when, in fact, they themselves were victims of class prejudice.\(^{48}\)

In a similar way, Frank Rosen, the International Representative of the United Electrical Workers (UE), bitterly complained about the media’s distorted portrayals of blue-collar workers. As the American ideal was “white collar in the suburbs,” Rosen claimed, in movies or on TV the blue-collar worker was presented as either “the funny nice guy” or as a racist, ignorant and vicious individual. “People who work in the plant,” Rosen added, “work in the heat, they work in the cold, they work in the dirt and get hurt. All good reasons for factory work not having the greatest status in the world.” The differences between the middle class and the working class had not vanished by the late 1960s. If the United Automobile Workers made the *New York Times* headlines on Labor Day, it was because they “looked” middle class, not because they were middle class.\(^{49}\)

Bayard Rustin, the cochairman of the A. Phillip Randolph Institute, joined trade unionists in their criticism of both conservatives and radicals for their view of workers as affluent and acquiescent members of “Middle America.” Rustin saw this portrayal as an attempt to portray the United States as a “classless” society. In 1971, Rustin argued:

> The prominent racial and ethnic loyalties that divide American society have, together with our democratic creed, obscured a fundamental reality—that we are a class society and, though we do not often talk about such things, that we are engaged in a class struggle.


\(^{49}\) *UE News*, 7 April 1969, 9.
Because of Rustin’s steadfast commitment to the labor movement—and to hawkish AFL-CIO leaders such as George Meany—many argued that he was out of touch with the black community. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, his defense of organized labor as the most progressive force in American might have sounded exaggerated; yet Rustin was right in arguing that it was unfair to paint the trade union movement as reactionary.

“Many of the sophisticated right-wing attacks on labor,” Rustin claimed, “are frequently couched in left-wing rhetoric.” There was a certain convergence of the left and the right on their view of unions as anti-black institutions that selfishly defended the economic interests of their members. Irving Howe, the founder of the quintessential Old Left journal Dissent, agreed with Rustin. He summed up the media’s attitude towards blue-collar workers in the following way: “You had better pay attention to these guys, otherwise they might raise a lot of hell, and many might even go over to the racism and reaction of George Wallace.” Rather than representing a genuine interest in the American blue-collar experience, they were “a prudential admonition as to the consequences of neglecting them.”

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Dissent offered a forum to those old left intellectuals and trade unionists who appraised America from an anti-communist but social democratic stand. Even if there were significant differences in the political analysis of the various contributors to the journal, most agreed on the importance of the American working class as an agent of social change and on the need to refashion a


labor-liberal coalition. As Maurice Isserman has described it, "Dissent prided itself on its freedom from illusion, its ability to face what Howe later called "the sheer terribleness of our time." During the Nixon Administration, Dissent opened the debate on the realities of the American working-class life. Dissent's editors, as Howe stated, attempted to challenge the view of American workers as "brainwashed clods, hopelessly "one-dimensional," mere creatures of the belly who are manipulated by the Establishment and the media."^53

In the May-June 1969 issue of Dissent, Brendan Sexton, director of education activities for the United Automobile Workers, discussed the "middle-class" status of workers. Sexton set out to clarify "the assumption that blue-collar workers [were] "middle class and sitting pretty."^54 In 1966, Sexton said, the median income of skilled workers—"the aristocrats of labor"—was $6,981. For that year, the U.S. Department of Labor had stated that $9,191 would provide a family of four with "a moderate standard of living." By that criterion, Sexton concluded, only one out of three American families lived moderately well. Second, millions of families combined two or even three incomes and still earned less than $5,000. Young workers were the hardest hit, Sexton argued: they received the lowest pay and were the most likely to be laid off. Third, working-class

---

52 Maurice Isserman, If I had a Hammer... The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1987), 76-77.

53 Howe, 5.

children were “over-represented in the mass of those excluded from college.” Thus, they were not sheltered against the draft for four years as were the middle-class youths who secured student deferments.

In Sexton’s view, the myth of working-class affluence was widely sustained for two reasons. First, many liberals and new leftists in college circles—out of touch with the workers’ every-day realities—believed that labor had become “middle class.” Secondly, the success story of the unions’ gains had led many Americans to assume that the workers “had made it too.” To be sure, Sexton asserted, unions had made important advances in wages, working conditions and fringe benefits. But there was a long way to go. Trade unions faced many limitations. Middle-class liberals, Sexton pointed out, were often outraged by strikes that upset the general public. New leftists, for their part, seemed to show as much contempt for the working class as for the union leaders whom they regarded as selfish and backward.

Andrew Levison echoed Sexton in his book, The Working Class Majority (1974). In the late 1960s, the working class still constituted the majority of American society, Levison contended. Through an impressive interpretation of census data, he proved that the U.S. was not a middle-class society: over sixty percent of the population worked with their hands as the decade came to close. Levison claimed that the “typical” affluent American worker constituted only 12 to 15 percent of labor, white and black. Eighty five

---


56 Sexton, 238.
percent of workers were not “typical”: the average worker earned $9,500 in 1970, a
figure that placed him closer to poverty than to affluence.\textsuperscript{57}

After debunking the myth of working-class affluence, Levison turned to
discussing labor’s alleged apathy and conservatism. Throughout the 1960s, he pointed
out, a rising discontent with conditions of work and life was evident in the growth of
rank-and-file militancy. The increasing number of strikes, Levison concluded, “exposed
how shallow “the Social Issue” [was] as a description of what was going on in working-
class America.” Far from being irrelevant, as many politicians believed, “it was the
economic issue, not the Social Issue, that moved millions of workers in active protest.”\textsuperscript{58}
The 1969-1970 strike against General Electric, for instance, reflected not only rank-and-
file dissatisfaction over the “old-fashioned” economic issues but also the workers’
determination to reject un-negotiated contracts and to strike for longer periods despite—or
because of— the faltering economy.

Levison thus offered a sharp rejoinder to the mainstream press and the television
networks, which projected images of a middle-class America in which the blue-collar
worker was either to be feared for his bigotry or dismissed for his irrelevance. Like
Levison, labor leaders and radical students called for a new understanding of the working
class. Unionists tried to debunk the myth of labor’s affluence and smugness. Inflation
and the price squeeze clearly showed the instability of the workers’ “middle-class” status.
Radical students admitted that they had underestimated the role workers could play in

\textsuperscript{57} Andrew Levison, \textit{The Working Class Majority} (New York: Coward, McCann and

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 229
changing American society. Rank-and-file militancy, new leftists now contended, could be channeled into a radical transformation of labor-capital relations at the point of production. While unions viewed collective bargaining as “the blueprint for a better tomorrow,” SDS members regarded it as a flawed system. Collective bargaining certainly protected the workers’ interests. Yet, radical students argued, it also recognized the companies’ right to make huge profits while paying meager wages to workers who did not share in the widely publicized American prosperity.

For their part, workers were unlikely to view themselves as either agents of world-transformation or victims of exploitation. Left-wing intellectuals had to abandon their abstract ideas about the union leadership and the rank-and-file and look closely at the lives of the workers and the workings of unions. Union leaders had to prove that they could still obtain tangible advantages for their membership but also transcend their pragmatism. In 1969, Fortune described organized labor as “angry, aggressive, and acquisitive,” and predicted that “the coming year” would be “a time of epic battle between management and labor.” This would be a great opportunity for intellectuals and union leaders to show what they could do for the American worker.


CHAPTER 3
THE GE STRIKE

As Fortune predicted, the winter of 1969-1970 was indeed “a time of epic battle between management and labor.”¹ The 102-day strike against General Electric that started on October 26, 1969, was the most significant struggle of U.S. organized labor since 1946. In order to explain this renewed militancy among the ranks of labor, it is necessary to look at the changes that the U.S. economy was undergoing in the late 1960s: the history of American trade unionism cannot be divorced from the evolution of American capitalism. David Gordon, Michael Reich, and Richard Edwards have developed a market segmentation schema that explains how organized labor has fit into the contours of nineteenth and twentieth century U.S. capitalism.² Their approach is based on the analyses of prevailing “social structures of accumulation” that the authors define as “the constellations of institutions which condition growth and accumulation in a given capitalist economy.”³

According to Gordon, Reich and Edwards, the U.S. entered “the stage of contemporary capitalism” at the end of World War II as a new social structure of


accumulation arose. In this new phase of capitalist development, the government avoided depressions and managed aggregate demand by using fiscal and monetary policies; the country's military and economic leadership guaranteed a stable world market and "a limited capital-labor accord" contained and institutionalized conflict within a collective bargaining system. As the 1960s came to a close, Reich contends, "the system of aggregate demand management, the structure of the international political economy, and the domestic limited capital-labor accord each were no longer functioning to promote prosperity..." This triggered "a shift from contained to disruptive class conflict." Between 1966 and 1973, strike activity increased 40 percent over the relatively low level of the 1959-1966 period.

By the time Richard Nixon took office, a quarter century of American prosperity was in jeopardy. Increasingly competitive European and Japanese firms were undermining the position of the United States as the world's dominant economic power. Moreover, foreign liberation movements, such as the revolutionary tide in Vietnam, were challenging the U.S.' hegemonic position. The military spending necessary to maintain such a position was a major drain on the productive capacity of the country. On the home front, the limited truce between corporations and organized labor began to dissolve as the promises of rising real wages, heightened job security and improved working conditions were not met. The shift from economic boom to stagnation had begun in the mid-1960s: between 1948 and 1966, the real median family income had risen at a rate of 3.1; between

---


was 1966 and 1973, it would fall to 2.2. "The typical U.S. family," Gordon claims, "was racing simply to stay in place. Prosperity had clearly given way to eroding well-being." In 1969, the average American worker was worse off than he had been four years earlier.

During the 1969-70 recession, consumer prices rose by 5.5 percent. The increase in cost-of-living seriously affected workers, since unions had given up cost-of-living escalators in a number of contracts. In an age of inflation, what mattered was the trend of real wages; if rising prices threatened to reduce real wages, workers would try to keep abreast or ahead of inflation. Beginning with the electrical manufacturers in October 1969, followed by trucking, meatpacking, rubber and automobiles in 1970, five major industries were scheduled to negotiate new three-year contracts. Not only did organized labor react vigorously against the decline in their members' real wages but it also dealt with issues related to health and safety, intensification of the work pace, retirement, and bargaining conditions. The 102-day walkout against General Electric not only indicated the willingness of workers to strike for long periods of time but also revealed a reduced corporate leverage over the workforce. On the one hand, unemployment, a traditional source of capitalist leverage, was not a threat in 1969. On the other hand, the increased availability of union strike funds, social insurance and unemployment compensation provided laid-off workers with a cushion. In October 1969, GE employees decided to take advantage of this reduced corporate leverage and use their most powerful weapon, the strike.

---

6 Gordon, 45.

7 Irving Ross, "How to tell when the unions will be tough," Fortune, July 1975, 100.
In the course of the GE walkout, 147,000 workers in 34 states struck for more than three months. Fifteen unions coordinated their efforts, while the AFL-CIO conducted a successful fundraising campaign and mounted a nationwide consumer boycott. The GE strike also offered a golden opportunity to those militant students who hoped to forge an alliance with the rank and file. During the walkout, there were instances of cooperation between the student left and the striking unions, but these moments did not amount to a student-worker alliance. Instead, the strike proved that blue collars were neither acquiescent nor comfortably middle class, as many observers had assumed. In fact, rank and file were turning militant, but they were doing so on their own terms. Considering that the workers were striking one of the richest corporations in the US, it is ironic that the Wall Street Journal should attempt to tarnish labor’s militancy by pointing out that its “prime goal” was “money;” “such mundane matters as workers’ pay.”

The goal certainly was not mundane to GE’s workers.

The two unions holding national contracts with the corporation spearheaded the campaign against GE: the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) and the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE). The strike was the first called at GE since 1946 and marked the end of bitter rivalry between the independent UE and the AFL-CIO affiliated IUE. As historians Ronald L. Filippelli and Mark McColloch point out, “The Cold War’s chilling effect on American society struck deep into the heart of the American labor movement.” In 1949 and 1950, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) expelled eleven of its affiliates for being under “Communist domination.” Due to its left-wing leaning and, at the time, unacceptable position on

---

8 Wall Street Journal, 8 December 1969, 22.
foreign policy, the UE was one of the casualties in the purge. Immediately after the UE charter was revoked, the CIO Executive Board established another union, the IUE, with jurisdiction in the electrical, radio and machine industries. In its organizing drive, the IUE leaders were supported not only by the CIO but also by the government, the Catholic Church, the media, and the electrical corporations that did not miss the opportunity to exploit the division among their employees.9

Twenty years later, the GE walkout transformed the relationship between the UE and a number of AFL-CIO affiliated unions. For almost six months before the onset of the 1969 strike, the UE and the IUE had been developing an understanding on the presentation of economic issues and on allied cooperation with other unions. “All agreed that come what may,” unionists later recalled, “they would stick together.”10 That would be the key to success in negotiations with GE.

When picket lines went up on October 26, 1969, the workers’ demands were both economic and contractual. Not only did rank and fileers intend to obtain a wage increase, they also attempted to deal a fatal blow to GE’s take-it-or-leave-it approach to labor relations. In his evaluation of the GE strike, Michael Harrington rightly pointed out that “the issues which make the rank and file the most intransigent are those involving

---


whether they are treated as human beings or as cogs in a machine." Contrary to the perception common in intellectual circles at the time, by the mid-1960s, life at work had not been superseded by life outside work; there had not been a shift from the “primacy of labor” to the “primacy of consumption.” In sociologist David Halle’s words, “Life at and life outside the workplace coexist as usually separate spheres, sometimes in harmony, more often in various degrees of tension. And life at work remains an important source of class conflict that can take several forms.” GE workers struck because their wages lagged behind rising prices, but they also struck against “Boulwarism,” the company’s paternalistic approach to negotiations.

Lemuel R. Boulware, the retired head of GE’s employee relations, had designed “a formula”-which came to be known as “Boulwarism”-to weaken and destroy the unions representing the corporation’s workers. GE’s method of negotiation was a year-round program of “employee communications,” which portrayed the corporation as the sole defender of the workers’ economic interests. GE allowed the unions to present their contractual proposals for months before bargaining began. Before signing a contract, however, GE would present a counterproposal on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. According to James Crompton, chairman of the AFL-CIO Coordinated Bargaining Committee, the

---


company’s technique rested “on the assumption that workers are primarily cost items and like all costs, something to be minimized by any means.”

Unionists used “Boulwarism” as a pejorative term meaning the refusal by management to amend a first offer in labor negotiations. In the past, the UE and the IUE, which represented seventy percent of GE’s organized workers, had negotiated separate contracts with the company. The smaller and isolated unions that represented the rest of GE’s employees were forced to bargain individually with the local plant management. According to UE leader James Matles: “Everyone understood that this was no more than marking time, that they were waiting until GE handed terms to UE and IUE.”

The corporation unveiled its offer in its own time, once workers had become impatient enough to accept GE’s proposal. As soon as the terms had been announced, the company tried to sign individual plant contracts as quickly as possible. By publicizing plant-by-plant “progress” in negotiations, GE created the impression that its offer was good enough for the workers. Eventually, when GE said, “take it or leave it,” UE and IUE had no option but to take it.

By fostering antagonism among the different unions, GE had managed to make the wages and working conditions of its employees inferior to those of other mass production industries. On October 7, 1969, GE made its first offer. IUE president Paul Jennings described it as “a horrible example of deceptive packaging which gives with one

---


14 Ibid., 251.
hand and takes away with the other, adding up to one of the worst offers in GE history."\(^{15}\)

Although the biggest money-maker in the country, the corporation made the smallest offer to its workers: twenty cents per hour the first year, nothing proposed for the second and third years. This amounted to a 6 percent increase for the average employee. But over the past three years, workers had lost 12.9 percent in raises due to cost-of-living increases. The company offered practically nothing in pension, health, welfare, vacation and holidays, and little in cost of living adjustments. The GE hospitalization plan was “better than nothing,” UE charged, but it was “next to nothing.”\(^{16}\) According to a 1969 \textit{UE News} report, sick or injured GE workers got approximately fifty percent of their regular wages. The company had not changed the plan for over thirteen years, although health care costs had increased considerably.\(^{17}\)

According to an \textit{IUE News} editorial, the GE strike was “a fight for economic justice, on-the-job dignity and true union recognition.”\(^{18}\) Workers expected to gain wage increases in each of the three years of the contract, a cost of living protection, additional holidays and vacations, and a fair sick leave plan. The striking unions also sought substantial improvements in pensions. GE offered to raise the minimum pension from $4.50 per month to $5.00 per month for each year of service; the unions were asking for a

\(^{15}\) "GE’s offer far shorter of worker needs," \textit{IUE News}, 16 October 1969, 3.

\(^{16}\) Interview with Steve Testor and his wife, members of the UE Local 703, \textit{UE News}, 17 November 1969, 6.

\(^{17}\) \textit{UE News}, 19 May 1969, 3.

\(^{18}\) \textit{IUE News}, 18 December 1969, 4.
minimum of $7.50. Finally, workers were fighting for their right to take unresolved grievances to arbitration as well as to engage in genuine contract negotiation.  

Many new leftists saw in the GE walkout an opportunity to illustrate their new-found faith in the working class as an agent of social change. Stanley Aronowitz' *False Promises* (1973) is a good example of Herbert Marcuse's popularity among new leftists as well as of their disenchantment with trade unionism and, at times, with the workers themselves. Like most radicals in the late 1960s, Aronowitz regarded unions as totally integrated and subordinated to the large corporations. The 1969 GE strike, however, led Aronowitz to concede:

Despite the conservative ideology of labor leaders and legal constraints upon them, rank-and-file pressure today is *occasionally* (my emphasis) able to force unions to lead the fight against employer efforts to transfer the working class the burdens of recessions or the dislocations of the labor force that occur during periods of technological change.

The *Wall Street Journal* conservatives shared the new leftists’ low opinion of the role that labor leadership played. According to the journal, union leaders launched a crusade against “Boulwarism” only because this GE policy threatened “their own political survival as union leaders.” Under “Boulwarism,” *The Wall Street Journal* claimed, GE found out what its employees wanted, sought information directly and through the unions, and balanced these desires against the company’s situation, thus making the best offer possible. Employees, the newspaper admitted, were understandably concerned about inflation’s inroads on their earnings. Substantial

---


increases, however, would be inflationary when the economy was slipping into a slowdown. This rhetoric was part of the barrage of anti-union propaganda designed to confuse the issues connected with wages, prices, profits and inflation.  

The radical students’ and the conservatives’ appraisals, however, differed on a fundamental point. To the mainstream press, labor leaders needed the GE strike to guarantee their political survival. To the new leftists, labor leaders had been compelled by the rank-and-file to support the GE strike. One thing at least is clear: both the GE workers and their union leaders - whatever their ulterior motives- viewed collective bargaining as the most effective instrument in dealing with the corporation in the era of monopoly capitalism.

The Wall Street Journal was not exceptional in its anti-union stand. By the end of the strike, the organizers of the Citizens Committee to Support the GE Strikers claimed that it was “a sad commentary on the state of journalism in America” that accounts by Michael Harrington and Bayard Rustin should have been “the only columns to appear in the press in support of the strike.” Rustin’s appeal to support the strikers was published in thirty-two African-American newspapers. He contended that “the security of every worker in America, black or white, and the future of the collective bargaining process” were at stake in the drive against GE. Harrington stressed the fact that GE could not take “all the advantages in a boom of high profits and then expect the unions to be ascetics in the name of fighting inflation.”

---

21 Ibid.

22 “A New Coalition for Justice...A report on the activities of the Citizens Committee to Support the GE Strikers,” 8-9, GE Strike Files, Box 26, IUE Archives, RUL.
As wages failed to keep pace with soaring prices in the late 1960s, labor analysts were alarmed at the rising family budget and at the fact that workers' purchasing power had already fallen below the yearly average for 1965. Were the unions' demands for wage increases as inflationary as the corporations claimed? In his *Washington Star* column, Harrington provided a different explanation:

First of all, war and defense spending generally are, among their other tragic aspects, inflationary, since they pay people but do not provide goods and services on the domestic market. That is one more reason why, when the Vietnam horror ends, it is so crucial to reduce military spending...

The AFL-CIO, however, neither presented the strike as an instance of "class struggle," nor linked oppression by GE to the war in Vietnam or to U.S. imperialism. On November 28, 1969, after the fourth week of the strike, AFL-CIO president George Meany made the decision to take the dispute into the marketplace, and thus to build a broader base of support for the campaign. The AFL-CIO president explained: "It is with great reluctance but complete determination that we announce [...] a consumer boycott against all General Electric products." A union advertisement, which appeared in twenty-one major cities across the US, outlined the strike issues and called on consumers to turn off GE. "We need your help," the ad stated, "and the help of every American who believes in fair play."

The 1969 national boycott of GE products was the first ever to be called by the AFL-CIO. This was not, however, the first time that American workers viewed

---

23 Harrington, "GE Strike Points Up Social Issues."


themselves collectively as consumers rather than producers. As historian Dana Frank says, “The politics of consumption [...] have been central to class conflict and working-class self-organization throughout U.S. history, in periods of both expansion and retrenchment.”

By the mid-1960s organized labor had adopted a more defensive position toward consumption, but it could still mount boycotts under specific circumstances. Cesar Chavez, the director of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee had revived the boycott as a labor tactic in 1968. The AFL-CIO leadership fully supported Chavez’ crusade to organize California farm workers, whose yearly wages were far below the $3,000 poverty level. The mass boycott of table grapes was crucial in the drive to grant farm workers the legal rights that most other workers already held. To most Americans, it was clear that agribusiness exploited unorganized farm workers.

The boycott of GE products was a different affair. The GE striking workers were not only organized but also considerably better off than the California migrant farm workers. Yet inflation and the price squeeze clearly showed the instability of American blue-collar workers’ “middle-class status.” During the drive against GE, the AFL-CIO did not draw exclusively upon working-class solidarity—as the Seattle Labor movement had done in the 1920s—but on the widespread support of the American public. The unions presented the GE strike and boycott as a contest with a “greedy” corporation that


had a long record of contempt not only for collective bargaining but also for consumer protection laws.

The boycott strategy quickly became a major target of criticism in the mainstream press. Full-page company ads stated that “everybody loses” in a boycott and that a loss of business by GE would bring a loss of jobs. Regarding informational pickets outside the stores, labor critics claimed that “the line between “information” and coercion in such circumstances [was] extremely fine.”

Most newspapers failed to notice that the company was also using coercion: General Electric had attempted to prevent welfare payments to strikers in New York, Tennessee, Texas and other states.

During the 102-day strike, GE rank and filers proved to be capable of building considerable community support. At St. Michael’s hall in Lynn, Massachusetts, the union served between 500 and 600 meals a day. In Akron, Ohio, the Hudson’s Lumber Company gave workers free wood to keep them warm on the picket line. Strikers could also count on the money paid for picket-line duty and on donations from other workers. Those with high skills living in industrialized areas were able to find interim jobs; others went on welfare or simply dipped into their savings. Newspapers, however, seldom gave workers any credit for the organizing effort that the strike and boycott against GE demanded.

*Wall Street Journal* reporter David Gumpert explained how GE workers had struck “the modern, painless way.” As the workers had alternative sources of income, Gumpert argued, “ strikers did not suffer all that much.” The favorable social and

---


29 *Springfield Union*, 1 December 1969, 15.
economic conditions in the U.S. had made it possible for the workers to hold out for so long. Buttressing the myth of the “middle-class” blue-collar worker, Gumpert cited the example of Robert Thompson, an 18-year veteran with GE: “When things looked bleak at Christmas for the Thompson family, that symbol of middle-class opulence—the Master Charge credit card—came to rescue.” The reporter added that the Thompsons had not yet received the bills for the $400 worth of goods they had bought. America’s prosperous, middle-class society had taken care of the strikers.

The news coverage overlooked the fact that the GE workers’ most powerful weapon was the strike fund. James Matles, general secretary-treasurer of the UE, proposed a $1 a week contribution from all union members in support of the GE strikers. The UAW pledged to contribute up to $ 5 million to the eleven striking AFL-CIO unions. In a telegram to Meany, UAW president Walter Reuther stated that winning the strike GE was “the task of the entire labor movement” and invited the AFL-CIO president to meet in Washington DC and discuss the details of the UAW proposal. Paul Jennings, president of the IUE, found Reuther’s “readiness to help meet the challenge of […] the historic struggle of the GE worker and his family […] heartening,” but Meany never responded to Reuther’s telegram. In the end, the UAW simply deposited a million dollar contribution in the name of the United Labor Defense Fund to Aid GE strikers.

---


31 Walter Reuther’s letter to George Meany, 9 November 1969, GE Strike Files, Box 26, IUE Archives, RUL.

32 Paul Jennings’ letter to Walter Reuther, 14 November 1969, GE Strike Files, Box 26, IUE Archives, RUL.
The UAW’s “guarded conciliatory gesture toward its archrival,” as the Wall Street Journal described it, received a cool response from the AFL-CIO leadership. According to Reuther’s estimate, the AFL-CIO, which was nine times bigger than the UAW, should have been able to contribute up to $45 million to the strike fund. At the end of the strike, however, contributions by AFL-CIO individual locals’ amounted to approximately $2.8 million.

The GE strike also gathered support outside the ranks of organized labor. Late in November, the League for Industrial Democracy (LID) took the first steps towards setting up the Citizens Committee to Support the GE Strikers. A. Philip Randolph, the legendary trade unionist and founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, helped to assemble the Committee’s sponsors and officers. Prominent Americans from the civil rights movement, the religious community, the intellectual world and the political scene responded to Randolph’s appeal. Former Illinois Senator Paul H. Douglas agreed to serve as Chairman, Bayard Rustin as Vice Chairman, Father George B. Ford as treasurer, and Tom Kahn as Coordinator.

Kahn was also the Executive Director of LID, a staunch anti-Communist and a long-time foe of SDS. In The Sixties, Todd Gitlin portrays Kahn as “the son of a manual laborer from Brooklyn” who was “full of class resentment of an SDS elite” that disregarded both the labor movement and the liberal establishment. To Kahn, SDS

---


34 GE Strike Contributions as of 2/12/70, GE Strike Files, Box 26, IUE Archives, RUL.
regulars were “sort of playing a lot of intellectual games.”\(^\text{35}\) During the GE strike, Kahn welcomed the creation of a Youth Committee to Support the GE Strikers. Max Green and Penn Kemble, the new committee’s coordinators, reminded students that they were “supporting the unions --- not telling them how to run their strike,”\(^\text{36}\) and insisted that the boycott of GE products was the area in which students could be most effective.

Student radicals did not intend to “teach” workers how to organize their drive against GE, but many shared Stanley Aronowitz’ view of the strike as “a unique opportunity for the Left.” Aronowitz argued that the GE struggle was giving radicals “a chance to make the connections between corporate responsibility for imperialism and war and the malevolent hypocrisy of this corporate leader and the conspiracy against American workers’ living standards and job conditions.” Despite the factional divisions that plagued SDS at the time, radicals found numerous ways of supporting the strikers. In fact, some organizers of the Citizens Committee to Support the GE strikers were concerned about “the low level of activity on the part of the official (my emphasis) Youth Committee.”\(^\text{37}\)

New leftists contributed money and food, walked on picket lines, boycotted all GE goods and protested against GE recruiters on campus. Massachusetts’ students were the most militant in their support of the strikers. Anti-GE actions were staged at the


\(^{36}\) Youth Committee to Support the GE Workers, letter addressed to students, GE Strike Files, Box 26, IUE Archives, RUL.

\(^{37}\) John Haynes’ letter to Paul Jennings, GE Strike I File, Box 26, IUE Archives, RUL.
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston College, Holy Cross, Northeastern, Boston University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst. On October 30 and 31, 1969, radical students along with a group of strikers from Lynn and Ashland picketed a GE recruiter at MIT. The protesters sang "Solidarity" and chanted "Six, Five, Four, Three; Organize to Smash GE!" Students saw such activism as an opportunity to protest GE's exploitation of the workers in its plants, and more importantly, the company's complicity in U.S. imperialism as the fourth largest defense contractor. Among the slogans were "GE world scab" and "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh."³⁸

Students at Boston College and Holy Cross also prevented GE personnel recruiters from conducting interviews on campus. The Boston College SDS and the Young People's Socialist League contended that, if the strike were to succeed, GE had to be "shut down at all points," including campus recruiting. Their success had been "a great boost to the BC students who participated."³⁹ A similar action at Holy Cross evolved into racial protest. One hundred members of the Revolutionary Student Union blocked students from seeing GE recruiters. As protesting students chanted, "Workers yes. GE no," counter demonstrators chanted, "Freedom yes. Students yes." This anti-GE action resulted in the suspension of twelve white and four black students. The Black Student Union contended that a disproportionate number of black demonstrators – four out of five- had been selected for punishment. In protest, sixty-four black students –the

³⁸ *Old Mole*, 7-21 November 1969, 7.

³⁹ *Old Mole*, 21 November- 4 December 1969, 8.
whole black student population—along with forty whites quit school until the sixteen student demonstrators were reinstated by the Holy Cross administration.\textsuperscript{40}

At Boston University, an anti-GE demonstration ended in a bloody melee. About a hundred SDS members tried to break up a seminar that George Meyer, a GE personnel officer, was conducting at the BU Business School. As soon as the police arrived, skirmishes broke out. Twenty-four students were arrested while three officers and a number of protesters were injured. BU radicals, however, did not give up on their struggle. On December 10, activists occupied the BU administration building for twenty-seven hours. Among the students’ demands were the banning of GE recruiters from campus—unless they agreed to debate the strike against the company—and also the university committing to participate in the AFL-CIO boycott of GE products. A few days later, UE Local 205 Treasurer Charles Lovell and International Representative Florence Criley delivered “union thanks” at a meeting of 1,200 BU students. UE appreciated the students’ “wide support for the strike.”\textsuperscript{41}

Striking workers were rarely involved in student demonstrations against GE on university campuses. The protests at MIT, Boston College and Boston University are examples of such participation. But the cooperation between students and workers was highly limited. The strikers who directly supported the radical students’ demonstrators were overwhelmingly from the UE. If students were intent on using the GE strike to connect corporate responsibility for U.S. imperialism to the Vietnam War, the UE’s stand

\textsuperscript{40} Boston Globe, 13 December 1969, 1, 5; Boston Globe, 14 December 1969, 1, 14.

\textsuperscript{41} Springfield Union, 12 December 1969, 37; UE News, 15 December 1969, 7.
on the conflict made it easier for the radicals to establish a link with some of the union members.

Long an opponent of the Cold War, the UE had spoken against the Vietnam War since 1965, when the U.S. had turned the conflict into an American war. In its publications, the union linked the declining workers' living standards both to the war and to raw corporate power. "The current inflation," the _UE News_ stated in July 1969, "is due to the sharp increase in military spending...and company price profiteering to take advantage of these military expenditures." As one of the pillars of the military-industrial complex, GE was a perfect target for the New Left: a corporation that both fostered U.S. imperialism and exploited American workers.

Rather than the organizational worker-student alliance (WSA) that the Progressive Labor faction envisioned, the cooperation between workers and radical students resulted in more individual activism. Boston College activists claimed that, although small, their protests had shown to "a few students" that workers were not "redneck bigots;" and to "a few workers" that radical students were not "spoiled kids who hate their fathers." New leftists tried to capitalize on the workers' determination to oppose the power of GE. However, the similarities between the UE and the young radicals should not be overstated. While the PLP worker-student alliance viewed trade unionism as totally inadequate to improve the lot of the working class, the UE, as well as the IUE, intended to protect the living standards of their members through collective bargaining.

---


43 _Old Mole_, 21 November-4 December 4 1969, 8.
At the University of Massachusetts, the GE strike brought the issue of working-class affluence and conservatism to the forefront. Don Glickstein, the editor of the *Daily Collegian*, the student newspaper, contended that the allegedly oppressed workers earned a wage that was good enough for an American worker: $3.25/hour plus benefits. Although he admitted that “Boulderism” was “unjust and illegal,” the 20¢/hour increase that GE had offered was fair enough. Consequently, it was hypocritical for the SDS to support the “racist” IUE, or the UE, which had close ties with the “highly-Wallace veering Auto Workers” and “the crime ridden Teamsters.” Organized labor was not only affluent, in Glickstein’s view. It was racist and hawkish.⁴⁴

In a letter to the editor, SDS member Peter H. S. Dillard responded to Glickstein’s accusation. Dillard said that $3.25 amounted to $6,760 per year. This sum was well below the $10,000 needed for a family of four, according to the federal government. The new leftist added that it was “good propaganda to point out the figure $3.25/hr., to a college community, since the average college kid...gets even less on his summer job and remembers that he “made” it. Yet, most college students, Dillard claimed, were single and not bound to spend the rest of their lives in a factory. Finally, he lamented such anti-working sentiment among students who would graduate into “one of the most class-oriented societies in the world.”⁴⁵

Campus protests against GE also prompted a response from IUE leaders. To the University of Massachusetts radicals’ dismay, Paul Jennings sent them a letter of “warning” the night before a campus sit-in to protest the presence of GE recruiters.

---


Violent protests, the president of the IUE asserted, would not help the strikers. At an SDS meeting, students condemned Jennings for two reasons. First, SDS members argued, his statement was also an attack on the rank-and-file strikers who had taken militant action. Second, they felt that the recruiters had “no place on campus because they were scabs.” The UMass SDS chapter finally opted for a “non-obstructive” demonstration and a petition to the administration, calling for the halt of GE recruitment meetings on campus.

On December 12, 1969, about 20 members of the Students for a Democratic Society at UMass staged a brief, peaceful sit-in outside the administration building. Henry Lussier, secretary-treasurer of the New England IUE, met with the students and told them that the union appreciated their support. He also asked the protesters to stop distributing literature that contained misstatements of fact: it was not in the union’s interest to prevent the hiring of competent GE employees. The best way for students to collaborate with the strikers, Lussier claimed, was to take part in the boycott of GE products. In an official statement, the IUE leadership praised the efforts of “socially conscious young people” who supported the GE strikers. However, the IUE president disavowed “those who break up meeting and deny others their freedom of speech.” Campus disruptions worked to the advantage of the company, not the union or the workers.

---


48 *Springfield Union*, 12 December 1969, 37.
IUE officials were embarrassed by supportive gestures coming from such groups as the Progressive Labor Party or the Youth Revolutionary November Action Coalition. The *Boston Globe* reported that some Lynn strikers were “downright hostile” toward both the rhetoric and the tactics that the new leftists used. John Heim, aged thirty-three, claimed: “We don’t want to smash GE. We want to return to work after this strike is over.” Mal Mitchell, another employee at the Lynn plant, told the newspaper that workers preferred to demonstrate in their own way, “picketing without violence.” Many strikers also feared that the students were simply trying to garner publicity for themselves. The unions welcomed the students’ support as long as it was confined to helping conduct a boycott of GE. Peter Di Cicco, business agent of striking Local 201 of the IUE preferred the student demonstrators to follow the “union’s guidelines.”

Historian Peter Levy rightly claims that “the New Left’s collaboration with the IUE and the AFL-CIO was built on a shakier foundation” than the cooperation between the UE and the student activists. Contrary to Levy’s conclusion, the AFL-CIO did not eventually “warm” to the new leftists’ participation in the unions’ drive against GE. Jennings issued a “Statement On Confrontation Tactics, Vietnam and the General Electric Strike.” The IUE president admitted that there were “many well-meaning students who want[ed] to join their support for the strike to their opposition to the war in Vietnam,” but, to the AFL-CIO, this was “a serious mistake.” The GE strikers, Jennings explained, wanted the “support of responsible anti-war students” as well as that of “others on the

---

In an *AFL-CIO American Federationist* article, entitled “American Youth: Which Way Now?” Kahn chastised the New Left for being “a mélange of grouplets, projects and styles with no shared sense of direction, and very often, with profound and even bitter internal differences.” Nevertheless, Kahn admitted, numerous students had responded positively to highly publicized labor struggles such as the farm workers strike and the nation wide campaign against GE. In Kahn’s view, LID had helped build student-worker collaboration through workshops, student-labor institutes and different action projects. This attempt to strengthen the ties between the labor and academic communities, however, was far from the “revolutionary” coalition that some SDS factions had sought when turning to the labor movement in the winter of 1969-70.

James Higgins, a staff contributor for *The Nation*, argued that the GE strike had been a turning point in the relations between intellectuals and organized labor. For the first time since the upheavals of the 1960s, “union and campus” had “been talking together.” This cooperation paved the way for a more formal academic-labor alliance in October of 1970. Among the alliance’s promoters were MIT professor and Nobel


Prize winner George Wald; Harold Gibbons, vice-president of the Teamsters; Leonard Woodcock, president of the UAW; and Joseph Rhodes Jr., Harvard Junior fellow. Members of the alliance's executive committee were intent on redirecting public attention from "student unrest and "permissiveness"" to issues that troubled the working class, such as unemployment, inflation, and racial injustice.\(^{53}\)

New leftists, however, did not maintain the newly developed cooperation between campus and union. As Higgins admitted, "the definitive character of the student movement in the US...has been its rootlessness. To date, this has been both strength and a weakness. A strength in that it has enabled the New Left to stay clear of outgrown institutional forms and functions. But a weakness ... in that there is no permanent base of support, nothing from which consistent operations can be constructed."\(^{54}\) This undercut the possibility of an alliance between radical students and the rank and file. Despite the support it provided, new leftists were not instrumental during the GE strike.

Many factors allowed the fifteen striking unions to maintain a strong coalition until a settlement was reached. In order to rally widespread support behind the GE workers, the unions appealed not only to its members but also to the general public. In their counterattack on the company's anti-labor propaganda, the unions presented GE as a greedy profiteer, a "Robber Baron" whose 1968 return on investment had been 22 percent above the average for the nation's industrialists. This figure, the unions contended, was easy to explain: it resulted from unusually low wages—worker exploitation—as well as


\(^{54}\) Higgins, 174.
unusually high prices, consumer exploitation.\textsuperscript{55} By calling a nationwide boycott against GE products, the AFL-CIO took the dispute into the marketplace and thus made it possible for the public to join in a labor cause.

Although the company claimed that GE’s “most important product” was “progress,” organized labor let the public know that it was “profit.” The corporation had a long history of price-fixing and antitrust violations. Since 1911, GE had been the defendant in 65 antitrust cases, 49 of them filed between 1959 and 1969. The last big price-fixing indictment dated from 1960 and involved $1.75 billion in sales. By the end of the strike, the UE stated, “Millions of Americans [had] seen in the General Electric Company a prime example of corporate arrogance.”\textsuperscript{56}

References to a new “Robber Baron era” were not unusual in the labor press as the 1960s came to a close. In a review of Ferdinand Lundenberg’s \textit{The Rich and the Super Rich} (1968), \textit{Steel Labor} asserted that the years of the great family fortunes when wealth was concentrated in a few hands were not over. “Not only are they still with us,” he said, “but bigger than ever- they own most of the action in America today.”\textsuperscript{57} In a similar vein, Ray MacDonald, an AFL-CIO research economist, condemned “the corporate octopus.” The 1960s movement toward concentration of economic power, MacDonald argued, surpassed the peaks of the two previous merger waves in the 1900s and the 1920s. The consolidation of new conglomerates affected both consumers and

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{UE News}, 1 December 1969, 6.


\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Steel Labor}, April 1969, 11.
workers. It raised the prices of goods and services and posed potential problems for collective bargaining.  

According to the UE general officers, the unity of the UE and the IUE at the bargaining table was sustained because both unions “cast aside anything which interfered with winning their fight.” The unions’ clashing positions on the Vietnam War constituted, undoubtedly, the major rift between the two. The UE repeatedly argued that inflation was caused not only by GE’s profiteering on civilian goods but also by its extraordinary gains on selling military equipment. GE profits on defense contracts, a 1969 UE report stated, were “25 percent higher than they were during the 1959-1963 period, before the War in Vietnam.” For its part, IUE remained consistent with the AFL-CIO’s support of American foreign policy, never referring to GE as a pillar of the military-industrial complex. Union ads meant to counteract the company’s propaganda did not tie organized labor to the antiwar movement in any way.

The union coalition’s approach to the strike won widespread backing. This in turn enthused the workers with a renewed militancy. Baltimore employee Hugh McCrukin Jr. explained: “People can’t believe that the company is doing this to the workers because GE has a big name. They didn’t believe the company was so bad. With the prices they sell the appliance in the market, they couldn’t believe GE pays the


workers so little." Community groups gave sandwiches and coffee to pickets. Fire stations were open to collect food for the strikers. Workers were invited to explain their grievances before religious groups. Teachers designed special material to discuss the strike with their pupils. Retired workers contributed money. Nationally known writers, scientists, editors, lawyers and public officials requested aid for the GE employees. Hundreds of local unions collected money for the strike fund. Was this, as union leaders claimed, "a glowing chapter in the history of American Labor}?  

The three-month strike ended with the first negotiated settlement with GE in twenty years. "Our members have nailed shut the casket of Boulwarism," claimed Jennings. The company’s take-it-or-leave-it dictates for collective bargaining had collapsed. The agreement provided 50c an hour across-the-board wage increases; pay increases of 55c to 75c an hour for high-skill workers, and four cost-of-living adjustments in a forty month period. More importantly, general wage hikes were in cents per hour rather than percentages. This was intended to help those workers who earned the least and were hurt the most by the increasing cost of living and geographical differentials.

The unions also won a new minimum pension of $6.50 per month for each year of service, the company’s first offer had been $5.00. The settlement also included numerous health insurance improvements: payment of the full cost of a semi-private room and miscellaneous hospital expenses for 365 days, plus elimination of the

---


contributory aspect of employee insurance. Moreover, workers obtained a fifth week of vacation after 30 years of service, and a fourth week after 15, rather than 20 years. There had been real negotiation and GE’s management had moved substantially in the course of the bargaining. The final settlement was far better than GE’s October 7 and December 6 offers. In wages and cost-of-living adjustments, the difference resulting from movement by the company since the December proposal was almost 20 cents an hour. To the IUE president, the new contract was “an incredible victory, won by the strikers through unity, determination, courage and militancy.”

New leftists, for their part, regarded “the strike itself” as “far more significant than the settlement.” Radicals viewed the renewed labor militancy as highly promising. Some workers, they contended, had started to see the connections between the oppressive GE policy and the U.S. government goals in Vietnam. New leftists nevertheless still considered collective bargaining to be inadequate since it recognized the company’s right to make millions of dollars in profits each year while paying meager wages to employees who had little control over production. To the radicals, GE had the last word in the strike by announcing, on February 6, a 3 percent price increase on all major appliances.

When a long strike ends in contemporary capitalist society, the media usually point out that workers would have “saved” a lot of money -and trouble- if they had settled for the last offer that the company made. This is based on the assumption that all strikes are “only” about money. As Michael Harrington argued, however, strikes “are often

---

64 Ibid., 1-3.

65 Old Mole, 20 February- 5 March 1970, 8.
concerned with much deeper, more social emotions and values, with the right of men and women to have, as some of the current theorists of American labor put it, a 'voice.'”

Harrington did not aim to romanticize the workers' drive against GE but to stress the fact that vigorous wage demands from the rank and file call for considerable organization and coordination and involve the workers' identity both at and outside the workplace. The fact that workers viewed themselves as “consumers” as well as “producers” did not necessarily mean that they had become incapable of challenging the power of corporate America. In a message addressed to high school students, GE strikers from Ashland, Massachusetts, summarized their aims: “We expect to work hard, but we want honest pay for it and we want an end to the back-breaking speed-up.” Rank and filers also made it clear to the students that the corporation's attitude affected everybody: GE tried to “get people to pay the highest possible price for the products” that workers made.

The GE strike brought to light a number of important facts about American workers in the late 1960s. Blue-collar workers were not fully integrated into the middle class. At best, they nibbled at the edges of affluence. At worst, they were below the poverty line. Contrary to what political analysts Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg claimed, “The Social Issue” had not come to replace the “old-fashioned” economic concerns. On December 21, 1969, the Citizens Committee placed an ad in the *New York Times* headlined, “A Word About Some Forgotten Americans.” GE workers

---


67 “A Message to High School Students from General Electric Strikers,” GE Strike IUE/UE Reports, Box 26, IUE Archives, RUL.
were some of the “forgotten Americans,” but they were not the quiescent members of Nixon’s “silent majority.” The sponsors of the advertisement stressed the fact that these forgotten Americans were not “the poorest of the poor;” they were not “unemployed or unemployable;” and they did not work in “marginal industries or in sweatshops;” they worked for a corporate giant. Readers were urged to express their solidarity with the GE workers by joining a picket line, boycotting GE products or making a contribution.⁶⁸

Even if radical students were among the most supportive of the GE workers, they still viewed trade unions as bureaucratic and manipulative institutions that could only obtain the quantitative economic demands that the leaders framed. The GE strike, however, was not “merely” about bread-and-butter issues. It was also about power. Rank and file workers were confronting an international corporation that had held an intransigent position for over twenty years. The New Left revolutionary project, however, did not appeal to the overwhelming majority of workers. To the radical students’ disappointment, workers still resorted to collective bargaining and to labor unions. Yet, this did not necessarily mean support for the status quo. In Them and Us, James Matles contends that “seeds for change in the labor movement are sown among rank-and-file workers by the conditions forced upon them.”⁶⁹ By the end of the GE strike, it remained to be seen if the seeds for change would grow.


⁶⁹Matles, 304.
CHAPTER 4

THE GM STRIKE

After the settlement that ended the 102-day GE strike, union leaders insisted that the workers’ victory had “severely limited the ability of the fourth wealthiest corporation in the United States to unilaterally dispose of the welfare of the working people and their families.” Throughout 1970, blue-collar workers continued to make headlines as they tried to “limit the ability” of the Big Three automobile manufacturers—the General Motors Corporation, the Chrysler Corporation and Ford Motor Company—to set the terms of a new three-year contract with the United Automobile Workers (UAW). White House economists regarded the results of the automobile negotiations as crucial since they were bound to set the pattern for talks in other industries and thus have a decisive impact on the U.S. economy. Following the auto settlement, contracts would be negotiated in the steel, copper, can, railroads, meatpacking, and aerospace industries as well as in the postal service.

Early in 1970, Richard Nixon claimed that the nation’s economy was slowly but appreciably recovering from its 1969 slump and exhorted both organized labor and management to avoid inflationary settlements. Gradualism characterized the Nixon Administration’s economic agenda in 1969 and 1970, as the president waited for fiscal and monetary policies to do their slow job of stimulating economic growth. The combination of fiscal austerity and monetary restraint, however, eventually plunged the

country into a recession. By mid-1970, Robert M. Collins contends, “The economy was mired in a new condition —“stagflation”- which combined the problem of inflation with sluggish output and rising unemployment.” It was clear to Nixon’s most realistic advisors that the state of the economy could prove the Republicans’ Achilles heel in the November congressional elections. The UAW could choose to mount a strike not only against the General Motors Corporation but also against the administration and the Republican Party.

The UAW did both. As contract negotiations collapsed, the union decided to stage a walkout against GM, the world’s largest, most powerful and profitable manufacturing enterprise. By 1970, the corporation employed around 800,000 workers worldwide, paid more than 1.7 billion dollars in taxes and spent 200 million dollars on advertising. It sold 52 percent of the cars, 49 percent of the trucks and 80 percent of the buses bought in the United States. There is no doubt that the autoworkers were taking on the toughest target that they could find. The strike against GM became a test case for both the UAW and the Nixon Administration. The walkout revealed the extent to which the various tensions within the union membership could —or could not- be overcome. In an off-year election, moreover, the economic and political impact of the GM strike tested Nixon’s ability to capture the working-class vote that he so badly needed. As the

---


economic downturn deepened, the president’s greatest challenge was to win the support of organized labor.

As the year began labor leaders were unwavering in their criticism of the administration’s economic policies. The AFL-CIO Executive Council periodically issued reports that described a bleak economic outlook. Throughout the first quarter of 1970, the AFL-CIO leadership insisted that “the worst combination of economic trends continue[d] to plague the American people.” The inflation rate kept rising from 4.2 percent in 1968, to 5.4 percent in 1969 to nearly 6 percent in the first quarter of 1970. Unemployment had jumped from 1.1 million in 1969 to 3.9 million in early 1970; this equaled 4.7 percent of the work force. The AFL-CIO Executive Board claimed that the Nixon Administration had chosen “economic restraint” instead of “selective measures to aid the economy.” In the union leaders’ view, three factors were slowing down the economy, depressing residential construction and causing rising employment: tight money, high interest rates and the reduction of federal appropriations for essential government programs. Despite its negative appraisal of the government’s economic approach, the AFL-CIO Executive Council showed its willingness to collaborate with the administration under very specific circumstances:

If the President determines that the situation requires overall stabilization measures [...] the AFL-CIO will cooperate. But such mandatory controls must be equitably placed on all costs and incomes –including all prices, profits, dividends, rents and executive compensation, as well as employees’ wages and salaries.

---


5 Ibid., 2027.
UAW president Walter Reuther, George Meany’s archrival, was less sympathetic to the president’s call for restraint in the negotiations between the UAW and the automobile industry. Reuther acknowledged that the economic climate was not favorable, considering that there were more than 100,000 autoworkers laid off. Yet the UAW president asserted that “no corporation [was] going to hide behind Mr. Nixon’s recession and try to deny [auto workers] ...equity.” Reuther stressed the incredible profitability of the American auto industry. From 1947 to 1969, General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, Reuther said, had combined earnings of $35 billion. This figure was equivalent to a return 14 times greater than their total investments. Autoworkers were entitled to a share of those profits and the UAW was “prepared to fight for that equity on the picket lines in 1970.” As Nelson Lichtenstein claims, “Walter Reuther seemed ready to strike out on his own, to test his new freedom with neither Lyndon Johnson nor George Meany looking over his shoulder.” The UAW president’s immediate challenge was to face a tough bargaining season and meet the expectations of a fractious membership.6

In the late 1960s, Reuther had been involved in many battles outside and inside the UAW. As we have seen, the UAW leadership had been stunned by George Wallace’s popularity with white autoworkers in 1968. Though they had been able to swing many autoworkers back into the Democratic column in November, it was clear that racism cut deeply through the white rank-and-file. Racism on the shopfloor, meanwhile, had led radicalized black workers to organize dissident rank-and-file groups that fueled “black power” ideology in the plants. The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM)

formed in 1968 and soon had offshoots in several other plants, such as the Jefferson Avenue Revolutionary Movement (JARUM) and the Eldom Revolutionary Movement (ELRUM) at the Eldon Gear and Axle plant. The RUMs were black Marxist-Leninist groups that opposed the UAW leadership as much as they antagonized the company. They accused the union of perpetuating in-plant racism and sub-standard working conditions. Because of their revolutionary ideology and overt hostility towards white workers, these groups soon became isolated. Their importance, however, should not be underestimated. The RUMs, contends Heather Ann Thompson, "had made the issue of racism central in ways that the UAW leadership had never done, and they had challenged the assumption that the leadership was always acting aggressively on the workers' behalf."^7

The 1970 round of contract negotiations took place amid these internal tensions. Mainstream publications dutifully covered the developments at the UAW, beginning with the union's April collective bargaining convention in Atlantic City. The union adopted a program for negotiations with the Big Three that stressed the losses workers had suffered as a result of inflation and called for substantial across-the-board wage increases and restoration of full cost-of-living protection. The delegates also voted that the union should have a pension goal of $500 per month at 30 years of credited service, regardless of age. "The loudest and longest thunderclap of applause," the UAW Solidarity reported, "boomed through the Atlantic City Convention Hall" when Walter Reuther voiced his

---

wholehearted support for the 30 years-and-out retirement program. The UAW president told the 3,142 delegates:

We have understood this demand. You do not have to be a social psychologist to know why it is that there is a deep human urge on the part of a worker who has been bucking a line for 30 years and who wants to get out of the rat race in the plant... Frankly, had I been bucking the line for 30 years I would have been raising hell about that a long time ago.

Reuther wanted his union to win what Newsweek called “the fattest package in UAW history.” Moreover, he rightly claimed that rank-and-filers were solidly behind him. When Reuther and his wife lost their lives on a plane crash shortly after the convention, many thought that much of the zest of battle in the negotiations between the UAW and the Big Three would soon die. Yet, contrary to most analysts’ predictions, Leonard Woodcock, who took charge of the union 55 days before negotiations started, skillfully guided the UAW through the summer bargaining, the autumn strike, the winter settlement, and the workers’ ratification of the pact. In a mid-term election year marred by recession, the GM strike, which idled 394,000 autoworkers for almost two months, took on special relevance.

Most analysts agreed that Reuther’s successor was likely to be UAW vice-president Douglas Fraser, but he withdrew from the competition for the union presidency. The UAW Executive Council eventually elected Woodcock, who had been the head of the UAW’s General Motors Department since 1955. The upcoming contract negotiations offered Woodcock an opportunity to prove his leadership skills. As president of the UAW, he could have delegated the task of negotiating with General

---

8“Reuther Urges “Total Fight” for Key ’70 Proposals,” 8.

9Lichtenstein, 440.
Motors to another member of the Executive Board, but he decided to get directly involved in the bargaining process. The mainstream media portrayed Woodcock as more "businesslike," "professional," and "generally unemotional" than his predecessor. Some observers believed that the union's change in leadership would avert a strike. Yet when the Big Three delivered their first economic offer in September, it was clear that the adversaries were far apart. Woodcock would try to live up to the union's reputation for tough bargaining.

The companies offered a wage increase of 7.5 percent for the first contract, and 3 percent for the following two years. The Big Three also expected to keep the existing ceiling of 8 cents an hour a year on cost of living adjustments. Proposed changes in Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB) were small: only one cent an hour per worker would be added to the SUB fund. The corporations also offered an unbroken Christmas-New Year's holiday but proposed no improvements in vacations, overtime or seniority. Finally, workers would have to pay part of the increasing health care insurance costs.

"Grim-faced United Auto Workers officials," The Detroit Free Press reported, "quickly rejected the three-year contract offers from the automotive Big Three." The UAW sought "substantial" wage increases, as much as a 16 to 20 percent hike for the first year. More importantly, the union aimed to remove the cap on the cost of living allowance (COLA) and to obtain greater supplemental unemployment benefits, which provided workers with income protection in the event of short-term layoffs. As far as


pensions were concerned, autoworkers wanted $500 a month, after 30 years in the plants, regardless of age. Apart from the unbroken Christmas-New Year’s holiday that the Big Three offered, the union was demanding longer vacations and the right of workers to refuse overtime. While the companies expected their employees to share the cost of health insurance, the UAW called for a company-paid dental plan plus improved health-care coverage. After the corporations had announced their first offer, Irving Bluestone, co-director of the GM’s department, pointed out, “the gap is enormous in every area.”

The UAW’s demands heightened the debate on a number of economic and social issues directly related to blue-collar life. The corporations as well as many political analysts argued that wage increases in the auto industry would be inflationary. Union leaders responded that there was not a “wage-price” spiral; a “price-wage” spiral drove inflation. Autoworkers were demanding higher wages because their purchasing power had been significantly eroded since the UAW signed its previous contract in 1967. Corporate leaders, for their part, complained that absenteeism had doubled in the past ten years, from two and a half percent a day to more than five percent. Moreover, younger members of the work force were absent more often than were other workers. This was allegedly the result of the widely publicized “blue-collar blues.” If the 30-and-out program was approved, the auto makers claimed, plants would be made inefficient, since the retirement plan that the union proposed was bound to deplete the companies of their most reliable employees.

During the UAW’s negotiations with the Big Three, it became evident that “old fashioned” economic issues were still central, as they had been at GE. The autoworkers

\[\text{\textsuperscript{12}}\text{Ibid.}\]
were often thought of as the aristocrats of the blue-collar world. But in fact the average blue-collar employee at any of the Big Three auto corporations earned $9,599 in 1969. This sum was below the minimum required for "modest but adequate" income, according to government figures. Inflation had taken its toll on autoworkers' purchasing power. Under the UAW's 1964 contract, workers had been guaranteed an extra penny an hour for each gain of four-tenths of a point in the government's consumer price index, no matter how high the index climbed. In 1967, the UAW had agreed to limit such increases to a maximum of 16 cents over the three years of the contract. Had the union not agreed to a cost-of-living cap, by 1970 the autoworkers would have been receiving 26 cents an hour over and above the 16 cents that autoworkers were now drawing. In view of the increasing inflation and unemployment, the UAW considered a return to the original cost-of-living clauses to be crucial. For the contract's first year, the union called for an eight percent increase over 1970 base pay rates. Added to that would be the 26 cents an hour cost-of-living "overage" that workers considered "owed" to them, plus another five cents an hour from the increase in living costs between April and July 1970. That amounted to an average wage increase of 61.6 cents an hour.

"Non-economic" demands such as the 30-and-Out retirement plan and the elimination of compulsory overtime reflected grievances directly related to working conditions in auto plants and to the nature of assembly-line work itself. Autoworkers commonly complained about speed-ups, long hours, unhealthy and unsafe environment and short breaks. Throughout 1970 autoworkers' stories appeared in a wide range of

publications. Even *Fortune*, the quintessential business magazine, devoted two articles to a thorough and empathetic discussion of the “blue-collar blues” on the assembly line. In fact, the auto corporations were particularly concerned about blue-collar workers’ discontent, as absenteeism was becoming a growing malady in the plants. The effect of missing men and women on an assembly line that depends on the unbroken chain of willing hands is obvious. Management officials, union leaders and intellectuals alike attempted to develop theories for such a phenomenon.

The workers themselves provided the most persuasive explanations. Grover Moses, an assembly line worker at the Ford River Rouge Complex in suburban Detroit, told a *Detroit Free Press* reporter: “I dropped my glasses yesterday and I didn’t have time to pick them up for two hours. You get behind and you can never catch up. They never stop coming at you.” Moses was twenty-eight, had worked at Ford for seven years and had had to take a week off—without pay—for being absent too often. Henry Wilson, another Ford Rouge assembly man, explained: “Each year the line is a little faster and the man with a stopwatch watches you all day and has the foreman add a little extra to your job...In three days, you do five days work.”

The increasing number of younger workers on the auto plants was undoubtedly linked to the growing absenteeism. At the General Motors Corporation, for instance, out of a total of 394,000 workers represented by the UAW, 114,000 were under twenty-five years of age. It was a fact of factory life that the more seniority a worker had, the easier the job he was assigned. Because their jobs were more onerous, some analysts argued,

---

the younger workers stayed away from the plant more often. The UAW leadership also recognized the problem of absenteeism among the younger work force. Shortly before his death, Walter Reuther said:

I believe that the most important factor is a new breed of worker who is not as willing to accept the discipline of the work place and to have a management decision that vetoes what he considers to be an individual decision on how he lived his life.

The UAW president told both managers and union leaders that to solve the problem of absenteeism workers had to be given “a sense of worth and dignity” and not be treated as an “extension of the production process.”  Although many reports pointed to boredom and monotony as the major causes for blue-collar workers’ restlessness, discontent often stemmed from a plant management system that workers considered oppressive and union contract gains that they regarded as insufficient to offset the corporations’ excesses.

At age twenty-nine, Gary R. Bryner, president of the 8,200-member Local 1112 in Lordstown, Ohio, had become one of the most vocal leaders of the UAW’s “new breed of worker” that Reuther had described. Bryner insisted that there was a question of “manliness in being able to stand up to the giant.” When the General Motors Assembly Division moved to his plant, the young unionist remembered, Lordstown became the most automated and fastest line in the world. GM production managers constantly used stopwatches and told assembly line workers how many seconds or hundreds of seconds it took to walk from one place to another; how many seconds it took to shoot a screw; how fast the gun turned; how deep was the screw’s hole. At one point, GM even tried to take

---

16 Jack Crellin, “Young worker to have his day in auto talks,” The Detroit Times, 26 July 1970, Section A, 23.
the newspapers off the line, Bryner recalled. The young leader claimed that in the numerous local disputes with management, assembly workers were telling GM:

We perspire, we sweat, we have hangovers, we have feelings and emotions, and we’re not about to be placed in a category of a machine. When you talk about that watch, you talk about it for a minute. We talk about a lifetime.

To the younger workers, Bryner argued, the most important incentive was not to make an extra dollar but to keep their senses while on the assembly line and to have the prospects of more leisure time.17

Many autoworkers shared those feelings. In late August, as negotiations between the union and General Motors heated up, the UAW’s 30 and Out National Committee paid for an ad in Detroit’s newspapers presenting voluntary retirement after thirty years of service as “the number one issue.” This grass roots demand, the committee argued, aimed at giving men who had spent thirty years in a plant “more of those Golden Years of retirement.”18 Gary Blonston, a Detroit Free Press writer, stressed the fact that 30 and Out was “not an issue concocted by the hierarchy of Solidarity House,” but rather “the product of a long-term, widespread, grassroots campaign.”19 The prospects of voluntary early retirement appealed to autoworkers of all ages. For the senior blue-collar workers, the major motivation was leaving the plants with enough money to enjoy life while they could still do so. To younger workers, 30 and Out meant something else: every time a

---


A worker with 30 years of service decided to retire, he opened up a possibility for a younger employee to move up the job hierarchy in the plant.

The 30-and-Out plan was anathema to the Big Three management. Earl R. Bramblett, GM vice-president for personnel and head of its bargaining team, viewed most of the UAW’s demands as “fantastic” and “deliberately vague”. He was particularly outraged, however, at the union’s proposed 30-and-Out plan. The major objection was “the potential loss of experienced skilled trades employees.” In September 1970, the number of GM hourly employees with thirty or more years of service reached 16,820; out of these, almost one third were skilled workers. Replacement of these employees would be extremely costly for GM. Using the on-the-job-employee-in-training method, Bramlett argued, it took eight years for an unskilled worker to become a journeyman.  

Moreover, the GM vice-president did not regard monotony on the job, harsh discipline or poor working conditions as causing the increasing absenteeism on the plants. In Bramlett’s opinion, the nation’s economic abundance along with the industry’s high degree of security and social benefits allowed autoworkers to insist on even more benefits and improvements. Bramlett insisted that the union’s demands were “just too many and too high.”

On September 11, GM presented a new contract offer to the UAW. According to the corporation, this was a final offer. Although the union quickly rejected it and announced that the walkout was inevitable, the proposal was a substantial improvement.  

---

over the Big Three’s offer of September 1. GM offered the UAW a 9.8 percent wage hike over a three-year period, compared with the original 7.5 percent. This increase would mean an additional 38 cents an hour the first year and 12 cents an hour in each of the next two years. The corporation also lifted the ceiling on the cost of living allowance from 16 cents to 28 cents over the life of the contract. The UAW was asking for a 61.5 cent an hour increase in the first year and an unspecified boost after that. The proposal was silent on the union’s demand for a dental care program and for improved benefits for retired workers. Finally, in order to address the 30-and-out demand, GM offered its employees the option of retiring at any age after thirty years of service but placed limitations on the benefits a retiree could receive. At age 58, an autoworker would retire on a monthly $500 pension. This amount, however, would be reduced by 8 percent a year when an employee retired prior to the minimum age of 58. “The burden of supporting large numbers of workers in a period of long retirement,” Bramlett insisted, “...was a responsibility that neither the U.S. economy or any industry [could] afford to assume.”

From the beginning of the negotiations between the automobile industry and the UAW, the company spokesmen had stressed the fact that it was in the interests of the entire American economy to reach a non-inflationary settlement. Michael Harrington, a UAW ally, described the corporation’s position as “the myth of greedy workers forcing civic-minded corporations into an inflationary spiral.” For his part, Woodcock depicted

---


GM as a “monstrous monopoly” and accused it of “chiseling and cheating” in drafting its economic offer. The possibility of a strike against GM, Woodcock stated, loomed large. A walkout against the nation’s biggest manufacturer could deplete the union’s $120-million strike fund within eight weeks. Nevertheless, Woodcock said, the UAW would conduct any such strike in the “old fashioned way,” by depending on other unions’ support and cutting down on strike benefits. Despite the UAW’s disaffiliation from the AFL-CIO and the clear differences between the two labor organizations, the AFL-CIO voiced its support for the autoworkers. In an attempt to preserve profits, Meany said, the Nixon Administration sacrificed the workers’ earnings. The AFL-CIO leader warned: “The reaction of America’s organized workers to this unjust and unfair economic policy is obvious. They can—and they will—seek to redress their grievances [...] at the collective bargaining table.”

President Nixon was well aware of the fact that workers could also “seek to redress their grievances” at the ballot box. In 1968, Nixon had built a conservative political base—the American middle class of business and professional people, farmers, skilled workers, suburbanites, and the “new South”—that had given him a very narrow margin of victory. Maintaining this coalition would guide White House politics for some time. It was clear to Nixon that the first major political test of his administration would be in the congressional election. To maintain its coalition, the Republican Party needed


25.“Unions aim for the blue-collar vote,” Business Week, 5 September 1970, 48-49, Folder 15, Box 031, COPE Research Files, Office of the President, George Meany Memorial Archives (Hereafter GMMA).
the support of organized labor. Dissatisfied blue-collar workers represented a potent political force and the key to building "a real majority." In 1970, the president felt pressed to prove that Washington was hearing the blue-collar blues; accordingly, he made several political moves. First, the administration issued a study by assistant secretary of labor Jerome M. Rosow, which sympathetically described the frustrations and concerns of blue-collar workers. Second, on Labor Day, Nixon hosted about two hundred union leaders and their wives "at a banquet under the glittering chandeliers of the East Room of the White House."26

George Meany was the guest of honor at the extravagant Labor Day dinner. Nixon toasted the AFL-CIO president and praised him as "a pillar in the storm—strong, full of character, devoted to his church, devoted to his family...standing with his country when he felt that served the interest of freedom." Following the president’s toast, Meany stood up and started his reply by saying that, regardless of their political differences, all the presidents that he had known had shared something: they had all wanted to be the best president they could possibly be for the American people. And then, with a nod toward Nixon, he concluded: "This applies to this man here. I may be bouncing on your head tomorrow morning, but this goes tonight."27

Meany’s comments in a pre-Labor Day interview prompted a number of articles and editorials on Nixon’s relationship with organized labor. The AFL-CIO president


reiterated organized labor's support of the president's policies on the Vietnam War and domestic unrest but repeated his disapproval of the administration's economic policies. The Democrats could not escape Meany's criticism either: he insisted that the party was "disintegrated" and about to be taken over by "extremists." Some analysts interpreted Meany's statement as a political tactic. The AFL-CIO president was warning the Democratic Party not to take labor's support for granted and lean farther leftward.\(^{28}\)

Former Vice President Hubert Humphrey was already following Meany's advice: he urged liberals to let working people know that they too condemned "criminality and riots and violence and extreme social turbulence" and scorned "extremists of the left as well as extremists of the right—black extremists with guns and white extremists with sheets and guns."\(^{29}\)

During the interview, Meany made it very clear that, despite the workers' economic concerns, the AFL-CIO leadership had not moved to the left. In his discussion of labor-management negotiations, Meany claimed that trade unionists increasingly viewed the strike as a "much less desirable weapon." The AFL-CIO president stated that it made no sense for "a well-established union" to strike "a well-established industry." Yet, workers needed to retain the right to strike in case an employer did not want to "listen." As the walkout against GM seemed more and more likely, The Detroit News claimed: "...the country owes [Meany] a debt for frankly admitting that the strike is an

---

\(^{28}\) Boyed, 1.

\(^{29}\) "Liberals for law & order, too?" The Detroit News, 13 August 1970, Section B, 10.
expensive weapon that doesn’t make sense, often doesn’t settle a thing and, in effect, is an anachronism in this day and age.”

The UAW leadership and membership did not share the newspaper’s view. On September 15, two weeks after the White House dinner, workers at GM plants in thirty-one states and two Canadian provinces walked off their jobs and joined thousands of others who had started wildcat strikes during the day. Bramlett, the chief negotiator for GM, considered the autoworkers’ action “a strike against reason.” To Woodcock, “the company [had] held out no other choice.” The strike lasted for almost ten weeks and idled 383,626 UAW employees in the U.S. and Canada, plus 9,676 IUE workers and 4,350 United Rubber Workers who were sent home as a result of the walkout.

The indictment of the UAW leadership for using an “anachronistic” weapon - the strike- against GM was mild compared to some reporters’ description of the GM negotiations and walkout as little more than a charade. This kind of accusation was grounded in the belief, shared by many leftists, that only wildcat strikes were legitimate signs of a rank-and-file militancy. These illegal walkouts were allegedly the only way that workers had to try and shape to their own needs a system built on bureaucratic business unionism. If workers made gains because of a legal strike, the union leadership had delivered the goods simply to take the wind out the dissident groups’ sails. A


32Strike Tally, Folder 29, Box 169, UAW-GM Department Collection, Part II, Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs (Hereafter WSUA).
majority of blue-collar workers, however, still regarded the union-sanctioned strike as a good enough weapon to negotiate better contracts.\textsuperscript{33}

The coordinated effort of the UAW leadership and the rank and file along with considerable community support, contributed to the success of the strike. On September 30, two weeks after the strike had begun, the UAW International Executive Board, fearing the strike fund would soon be depleted, reduced the salary of all Officers, Executive Board Members, International Representatives and other non-office and maintenance staff by fifty percent. Furthermore, as soon as strike benefits were not available for GM strikers, Secretary-Treasurer Emil Mazey announced, the union employees would receive no pay. These emergency measures were passed in an attempt to ameliorate a serious economic situation: as a result of the GM walkout, both income to the union’s General Fund and the Strike Fund would be reduced by $1,250,000 a month.\textsuperscript{34}

As had happened almost a year before during the electrical workers strike against GE, the automobile workers’ cause rallied the support of prominent American citizens. The National Citizens’ Committee to Aid the Families of GM Strikers was created only two weeks before the strike settlement was announced; however, its mere formation, UAW leaders argued, had “an immeasurable public relations benefit to the UAW and the

\textsuperscript{33} In his controversial \textit{The Company and the Union} (1973), journalist William Serrin argued that the UAW leadership had staged a strike against GM only to strengthen its own political position. The nine-week walkout, Serrin contended, had been totally unnecessary: GM would have signed the same agreement in September if the UAW had been willing to negotiate further.

\textsuperscript{34} UAW Inter-Office Communication, Folder 28, Box 169, UAW-GM Department Collection, Part II, WSUA.
numerous strikers.” One of the aims of the Committee was to counterbalance the numerous editorials that criticized those autoworkers who resorted to food stamps and welfare assistance to remain on strike. Some conservatives even argued that if the strikers and their families got hungry enough, they would eventually force their leaders to accept GM’s original offer.35

On October 30, the Citizens’ Committee ran an advertisement in twelve national and local newspapers. The key paragraph pointed to the inhumanity of those who expected the striking workers to go hungry: “We do not want the hunger and misery of the strikers’ families to be a deciding factor in the strike’s resolution.” The ad also urged American citizens to contribute “from $1 on up” to help the strikers who were in dire straits. The Committee claimed it was “not taking sides in the dispute.” It also claimed that any money raised would not go to the UAW; local committees would “make specific allocations to hardship cases.”36

On November 17, Secretary Lawrence Carlstrom reported that, in its short life, the Committee had received contributions from 550 donors amounting to $30,464. Although Carlstrom considered this sum to be “disappointingly small,” he believed that the Committee had served a useful purpose all the same. The most interesting section of Carlson’s report was, in fact, the inclusion of some of the numerous “for and against” letters that the Committee had received since its formation. Apart from the short notes of support that accompanied most donations, 66 citizens had expressed their disagreement

35 UAW Inter-Office Communication, Folder 8, Box 34, Leonard Woodcock Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.
36 Advertisement, Folder 7, Box 34, Leonard Woodcock Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.
with the Committee in signed letters, while 178 had sent unsigned responses that were written in vituperative and even obscene language. These anonymous replies were a clear indication of the extent to which the GM strike had polarized public opinion. Carlstrom pointed out that “not since the early days of the New Deal” could he remember “such a paranoiac reaction to a plea for help.”

The anonymous notes ranged from a mere “Let them starve!” or “You greedy bastards have got to be kidding” to “The hell with the stinking UAW! Congress should smash the goddam unions to pieces.” In other cases, the target was not the workers or the unions but the Committee members themselves: “You gotta be crazy! The list of supporters looks like a list of Who’s Who Communist Party U.S.A.;” “What percentage of the donations do you Jew radicals plan to split with the Negroes on said Committee?” or “Same old tired, worn out letter-head liberals. Not a dime when you have revolutionaries like Julian Bond amongst your group.” Julian Bond was in fact a member of the Committee, as were prominent Americans figures as disparate as George Meany, Caesar Chavez, Michael Harrington, Reverend Francis B. Sayre and Rabbi Jacob J. Weinstein.

The UAW strike against GM also reopened the possibility of a student-worker alliance that the GE walkout had raised the year before. Radical and liberal students alike mobilized to support the strikers in various ways. Two days before the strike deadline, University of Michigan student radicals organized a group that would back GM workers

---

37 Preliminary Report by Lawrence Carlstrom, Folder 8, Box 34, Leonard Woodcock Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.

38 Ibid.
if they decided to walk out. The Students to Support Auto Workers—as they called themselves—would provide “political and material support” to the strikers, a spokesman for the group said. The group’s intention to link GM policies to the defense industry and imperialism prompted responses from other students who believed that it was “not necessary to agree with the workers’ analysis of their problems to support them.” In an impassioned article that echoed his uncle Walter’s rhetoric, Al Reuther, a senior in history from Troy, Michigan, called on the student community to reject the Students To Support the Auto Workers’ “self-delusions.” These radical students, Reuther argued, had to “accept the workers as their equals—equals who [were] qualified to lead their own strike and determine their own destinies.”

During the GM strike, a comparatively moderate faction of the much-divided SDS also had the chance to forge a new student-worker alliance. SDS chose Detroit as the site for a demonstration to gather radical students from around the country on Election Day. On November 3, around a thousand students gathered on the Wayne State University mall and then staged a rally at the nearby General Motors Building. Most of the demonstrators were from the Detroit area, but there were also students from Georgia, Minnesota, Illinois, Ohio and New York. “Only a handful of workers” participated in the demonstration, The Detroit Free Press reported. Throughout the day, SDSers carried


banners that read, “War Maker, Strike Breaker, Smash GM” or “Smash Racism” as they chanted, “Elections are a pack of lies, don’t vote organize,” or “Same enemy, same fight, workers and students must unite.”

Though the activists explicitly distanced themselves from the Weathermen, the SDS radical splinter group, their rhetoric was inflammatory enough to estrange the vast majority of workers who did not want to “smash GM” but to win a fair three-year contract. Moreover, most workers still believed that their votes could make a difference. The students’ harsh criticism of GM’s “racist,” “war oriented” and “capitalist” policies were bound to rally few workers.

For its part, the UAW was also interested in fostering cooperation between workers and students. The union’s approach, however, was very different from that of the students’. The Alliance for Labor Action developed Worker-Student Support Committees that worked closely with UAW regional directors in Michigan, Los Angeles, Chicago and New Jersey, areas in which the largest numbers of strikers were concentrated. Carl Wagner, the twenty-five-year-old project coordinator, explained that students performed a number of “behind-the-scenes tasks,” such as collecting food for strikers in need. In California, for instance, UAW Local 645 voted to accept donations of food and money from University of California at Santa Barbara students and other community organizations except for the Progressive Labor Party, the SDS, the Communist Party, John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan. Paul Schrade, the UAW


43 ALA Worker-Student-Support Committees, Memo, Folder 8, Box 42, Leonard Woodcock Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA; “Students and National Leaders Backed Strikers,” UAW Solidarity, December 1970, 2.
regional director in California, insisted: “Neither the extreme right nor the extreme left is going to hijack our strike.” Yet, rank-and-filer Frank T. Shaw led a small group of workers who attempted to stop UC Santa Barbara students from unloading food on the union premises. GM workers did not want any of their “commie food,” Shaw argued.  

The Local 645 incident, which made the headlines in the Los Angeles Times, was an indication of workers’ distrust of college students. The UAW’s students strike support committees and strike schools served a double purpose. They attempted to show to the workers that the majority of students were “realistic” and “democratic,” and not “followers of the Weathermen, the rock-throwers, or the obscenity chancers.” They also catered to those students who wanted to get politically involved but were confused or frustrated. Patricia Cayo Sexton and Brendan Sexton, themselves members of the UAW leadership, summed it up in the following way:

Many students want to examine the real world and make it better. When they turn to action, they have almost nobody on campus to talk to, almost no intellectual leadership that makes sense. In their confusion and agitation they turn in wild directions—to drugs, freak-outs, Yippies, and the refurbished Stalinist elitism of Herbert Marcuse.

The UAW leadership was not alone in its effort to improve the relationship between organized labor and the university community. During the GM strike, initiators

---

44 Harry Bernstein, “GM Strikers Curse Students Bringing Them Load of Food,” Los Angeles Times, 11 June 1970, 1, 24, Folder 8, Box 42, Leonard Woodcock Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.

45 Penn Keble’s speech to participants in the UAW-GM Local 731 Strike School, Prenton, New Jersey. Kemble was the Director of the Youth Project on Democratic Change of the League for Industrial Democracy, Folder 8, Box 42, Leonard Woodcock Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA; Patricia Cayo Sexton and Brendan Sexton, Blue Collars and Hard-Hats: The Working Class and the Future of American Politics (New York: Random House, 1971), 9.
of a national movement to bring labor, faculty and students together held two meetings at Harvard University. Participants claimed that reactionary political forces were trying to "foment hostility" between these groups. "Peace, racial justice, job security and decent environments" were concerns that American workers, students and faculty members shared. The faculty group present was led by Nobel laureate Dr. George Wald and included academics from Columbia, Cornell, Brandeis, Boston University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard. Representatives of AFL-CIO unions, including the Steelworkers, the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, as well as leaders of the independent UE, UAW and Teamsters, also attended the meeting. Though probably very limited in scope, this was a clear attempt to revive the Democratic labor-liberal alliance that had been seriously weakened in 1968.46

During the nine weeks that the GM strike lasted, then, autoworkers were both backed and chastised by the American public. The UAW gathered support from prominent political, religious and union leaders as well as from students from a range of political persuasions. Strikers also became the targets of ferocious criticism for "selfishly" deepening the country's economic recession. On November 11, GM and the UAW settled the dispute. The new contract did not put an end to the controversy over the automobile negotiations, but rather furthered it. Was the settlement inflationary? Would the American public eventually pay for the autoworkers' gains? Had Woodcock led the UAW into a costly strike only to prove his leadership qualities? Had the whole affair essentially been a sham?

At the onset of the strike, many observers thought that it was senseless for the UAW -with a strike fund of $120 million- to confront a corporation that had liquid assets of more than $4 billion. On November 11, however, most observers thought the GM-UAW contract to be a union victory. A GM spokesman affirmed that the corporation could have afforded a much longer strike, but management estimated that in two weeks' time the employees' hardships "could have been the seeds of lasting bitterness." It was true that in another two weeks the autoworkers would have exhausted their strike fund, but it was also an important fact that GM was losing $90 million in sales daily.47

The turning point in the talks came the first week in November when GM agreed to restore the cost of living protection without a ceiling. Woodcock thus "corrected" the strategic error that the union had made in 1967 when limiting the cost of living allowance (COLA) to 16 cents per hour over a three-year period. The UAW leadership also managed to establish the 30-and-out retirement principle, but not "at any age," as the rank-and-file had demanded. GM workers with 30 years of service could retire at age 58 with a $500 monthly pension; in 1972, the age limit would drop to 56. On the wage front, the union's long-term gains -especially the COLA formula- were more important than immediate wage increases. GM initially offered a wage boost of 38 cents an hour for the first year of the contract, while the UAW demanded 61.5 cents. The UAW and GM finally settled on 51 cents. Due to inflation, however, 33 of the 51 cents were already owed to the workers; only 18 cents constituted the "real" hike.48


48 Ibid. 9.
It is evident that to obtain the cherished unlimited cost of living allowance, the UAW retreated from the first year wage increase of 61.5 cents an hour and compromised on the controversial 30-and-out demand. Yet there were other less published gains. The full amount of cost of living adjustments would be paid each week. Deferment of payment over three-month periods—provided under the 1967 contract—was ended. The company would also contribute 5 to 10 cents an hour per worker in Supplemental Unemployment Benefits, a clear improvement on the previous settlement. As regards fringe benefits, after 20 years of service, workers would be entitled to four weeks of vacation instead of three.\(^4\)

The UAW fared most poorly on its non-economic demands. In August 1970, when contract talks started, the union officers put on the table a number of proposals for “making the work more tolerable and the workers happier, thus improving plant efficiency and product quality.” There was no doubt that tensions on the shopfloor were high. In addition to the soaring absentee rate, the number of grievances in GM plants had increased from 106,000 in 1960 to 256,000 in 1969. In response to the mounting tensions, the UAW proposed to limit the company’s right to discipline a worker until proof of misconduct was officially recorded. The union also called for the introduction of a team system on assembly lines, varying each worker’s job content to lessen the monotony of performing the same task fifty to a hundred times an hour. Furthermore, the UAW sought the elimination of noise and fumes in the plants as well as the right of the worker to refuse overtime.\(^5\)


Most of the above demands virtually disappeared after the Big Three made their first offer on September 1. By the time of the settlement, only a highly restricted right to refuse overtime remained in the contract. According to the 1970 agreement, where there were sufficient workers available and capable of doing an assignment, GM employees who did not wish to work overtime were excused. Also, blue collars who had worked 13 consecutive days would be excused from work the next following Sunday.\(^5^1\) Compared to the union’s initial non-economic demands, these were token gains. This apparently lent credence to the accusation that the UAW won economic gains because it guaranteed a slow grievance process and never invaded the “sacred” area of management rights.

Yet those who defended the role that unions played in capital-labor relations viewed collective bargaining in a different light. Labor reporter Ralph Orr said of past negotiations in the auto industry,

> In the 59\(^{th}\) minute of the 11\(^{th}\) hour, when the choice was one less step in the grievance section or another five cents an hour in wages, reality dictated the choice: a nickel is visible and spendable, a shortened contract clause is not.\(^5^2\)

In 1970, practical and political necessity once again dictated that economic gains should prevail over worker prerogatives. The strike against GM cost the UAW about $160 million and almost bankrupted the union while the nation’s most powerful corporation lost millions of dollars in its nine-week resistance to the autoworkers’ demands. Eighty

---


\(^5^2\) Ibid.
five percent of production workers and eighty percent of the skilled tradesmen eventually ratified the GM-UAW pact that many critics referred to as a sell-out.\(^5^3\)

The Nixon Administration immediately singled out the GM-UAW contract as inflationary. Woodcock insisted that the government’s evaluation was incorrect. “...A large element of the wages that will be paid in this contract,” stated the UAW president, “will be as a result of the cost-of-living clause. Those payments will be made after [my emphasis] prices have risen.”\(^5^4\) The debate on the inflationary effects of increases in labor costs had been going on for months. In its reports on the national economy, the AFL-CIO leadership repeatedly argued that the rising inflation was largely “a profit inflation” caused by businesses that tried to “maintain or increase large profit margins.”\(^5^5\)

The President’s condemnation of the GM settlement highlighted Nixon’s political dilemma: the economic downturn had dramatically limited his ability to rally the blue-collar vote. As New York Times reporter James Reston put it, “the Nixon-labor alliance split at the wallet.” The considerable increases in the cost of living and interest rates combined with the 5.1 percent unemployment rate were enough to wreck the Republicans’ “blue-collar strategy.”\(^5^6\) As historian Alan Matusow points out, “The GM


strike and the grim economic news doomed Nixon’s hopes for major inroads among middle-income blue-collar workers. An October Gallup poll on Congressional preference indicated that 60 percent of the manual workers with incomes over $4,000 would vote Democratic, almost the same percentage as in 1966.57

The off-year election results made it clear to the president that the social issue had not yet replaced the Economic Issue in American politics. During the Congressional campaign, Nixon’s national strategy was designed to defuse and neutralize those issues of substance that might stimulate a broad-based political participation in the 1970 election. The Republicans managed to virtually eliminate the war as a political issue. But once the peace issue was obscured, the state of the economy assumed considerable importance. This was precisely what Nixon feared might prove the GOP’s undoing. By October, the president knew that the Economic Issue was killing him. Nixon and Vice-President Spiro Agnew then launched frenzied cross-country tours in a clear attempt to turn the elections on the Social Issue.

While the Republicans seemed to stake all their party’s hopes on the belief that the electorate’s major concerns were social, labor leaders revived the national economy as a campaign issue. Just a few days before the election, in a paid political radio broadcast on the CBS network, George Meany urged workers: “Cast your ballot as if your job, your health, your pocketbook and your family’s future depended on it. They really do. They are what is at stake in this election.”58 Whether union members followed


the AFL-CIO president advice or not, a post-election Gallup survey showed that in 1970 blue-collar workers had voted even more strongly for Democratic candidates than in previous elections.\(^59\)

Although Nixon insisted that the administration was pleased with the returns, on November 3, the Democrats scored several important victories. The party gained nine seats in the House of Representatives and a majority of state governorships—twenty-nine out of fifty—with a net increase of eleven. Democratic candidates also captured from the Republicans control of one or both houses of the legislatures in seven states and narrowed the GOP margin in a number of others. The Democrats kept control of the Senate, with a net loss of only two of the twenty-five Democratic seats at issue. Moreover, the turnout of 57.6 million voters set a record for an off-year election.\(^60\)

_The Progressive_ identified “some encouraging signs” in the election results. In California, Ronald Reagan, the foremost proponent of the “law and order” strategy, ran behind moderate Republicans on his ticket. Democrat John V. Tunny had defeated Senator George Murphy, Reagan’s close partisan, while African-American candidate Wilson C. Riles had defeated Dr. Max Rafferty, “long a symbol of jingoistic know-nothingism.” Nixon’s Southern Strategy did not appear to be infallible either. In Florida, moderate Democrats defeated racist Republican candidates. In Texas, a conservative


Democratic candidate for the Senate defeated a very conservative Republican, George Bush, who many already considered likely to become a figure in national politics.61 The GOP’s hopes lay on the belief that the “Middle American” was moving towards conservatism. Tired of crime, campus disruption, bombings and narcotics, the “forgotten American” would vote Republican. But the mid-term electoral returns shattered the fiction of a “silent majority” that blindly followed the administration’s “law and order” slogans. In the states in which Vice President Agnew aggressively campaigned on the Social Issue, six of the candidates whom he supported for Senate won while thirteen lost. Seven candidates whom he backed for governor were elected but fourteen were defeated; 111 candidates for House seats won with his endorsement and 121 lost with it.62 It was evident that the public was not swinging to the right and that the business-dominated Republican Party was finding it very difficult to win over a blue-collar majority. It was also apparent, however, that the Democrats could easily lose the blue-collar vote if they ignored the workers’ needs. In an attempt to capture the working-class vote, the administration had tried to exacerbate the differences that existed within the Democratic coalition between workers and unionists, who were mainly concerned with bread and butter issues, and the more ideological middle-class liberals. For their part, the Democrats found in the UAW walkout against GM an excellent opportunity not only to show that economic issues were not “old-fashioned” but also to revive the labor-liberal coalition. In an article published a couple of weeks before the elections, Michael Harrington praised the AFL-CIO president for backing Democratic candidates with


62Ibid., 2.
whom he disagreed on the Vietnam War. If President Nixon were to be removed from office in 1972, Harrington concluded, "middle-class reformers and anti-warriors" would have to "overcome their parochial righteousness and win with the trade-unionists." 63

Unfortunately, labor leaders and liberals found it much easier to agree on the Economic Issue than on the Social Issue. The Vietnam War remained as divisive as ever.

CHAPTER 5

ORGANIZED LABOR’S MOST DIVISIVE ISSUE:

THE VIETNAM WAR

During the first two years of the Nixon Administration, American labor unions were generally successful in coordinating their efforts in defense of their members’ standard of living. The AFL-CIO affiliated IUE, the independent UE and thirteen other unions collaborated during the walkout against General Electric and the AFL-CIO supported the disaffiliated UAW during the latter’s strike against General Motors. Union leaders usually agreed on their assessments of rank-and-file grievances. Yet on U.S. foreign policy issues generally and on the American involvement in Vietnam in particular, there were longstanding and deepening divisions within the ranks of labor. During their drive against GE, the IUE and UE leadership carefully avoided any reference to the Vietnam War in their presentation of the workers’ grievances to the public. The IUE continued to back the organization’s official position on the conflict: George Meany’s and Jay Lovestone’s unconditional support of American military intervention in South Vietnam. For its part, the left-leaning UE had opposed the war since 1965, and repeatedly linked the workers’ loss of purchasing power to the increase in military spending: “The war and profiteering corporations,” reported the UE News in 1969, “have undermined the U.S. economy, causing higher prices and taxes.” Similarly, by the time of the GM strike, the UAW had not only left the AFL-CIO but also joined those who called for an immediate withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam.

---

Conflict over U.S. foreign policy was not new to organized labor. During World War II, ideological differences had been submerged in the service of the cause. From the time of the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 until the end of the war, CIO president Phillip Murray allied with the communist members of his organization in support of the war effort. The onset of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union made such cooperation almost impossible. Labor divided ideologically into two camps and the pressures to choose sides became almost inescapable. Murray was determined to impress both the U.S. government and American society at large with organized labor's commitment to national values and goals. Consequently, the CIO president undermined the left within his organization. The 1948 presidential election proved to be crucial in the CIO unions' political alignment: "Murray," claims Ronald Schatz, "made support for Truman and the Democratic ticket the test of loyalty of the CIO." The leaders of the left wing unions supported Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace, and thus adhered to the Communist Party line rather than the Democratic Party line.

The UE, the largest Communist-led union, boycotted the 1949 CIO convention to show its disgust for the CIO's raids on its membership. The CIO's purge of left-leaning unions soon followed. Under Murray's leadership, the convention expelled the UE and a smaller communist-led union, the Farm Equipment Workers (FE). Delegates also approved several other decisive measures. Through a constitutional amendment, Communists were barred from holding CIO offices; the International Union of Electrical

---

Workers (IUE) was chartered to rival the UE; and hearing boards were set up to try ten other unions on charges of “Communist domination.” By 1950, the CIO had expelled seven other unions: the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers; the Fur and Leather Workers; the Food, Tobacco and Allied Workers; the Marine Cooks and Stewards; the Fishermen’s Union; the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union and the American Communication Association.³

The CIO’s indictment of the left-wing unions rested on the argument that the Communist labor leaders’ priority was not to strengthen the unions and thus defend the economic and job-related interests of their members but rather to use the unions as fronts to advance the interests of the Soviet Union. Their main objective was supposedly to radicalize American workers and achieve a proletarian dictatorship along Soviet lines. In sum, Communists were eliminated from the labor movement in the name of national security. Many American citizens probably shared Congressman Fred Hartley’s belief that “a single Communist in a position of power within the labor movement could act under the direction of Russian agents so as to seriously hinder this country’s ability to defend its people and wage war against its enemies.”⁴ Neither the quintessential labor bureaucrat George Meany nor the progressive union leader Walter Reuther remained aloof from the Cold War rationale that came to dominate American domestic and foreign policy.


⁴ Ronald L. Filippelli and Mark McColloch, Cold War in the Working Class: The Rise and Decline of the United Electrical Workers (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 185, 1.
Meany was a staunch anticomunist throughout his career. During World War II, he saw the U.S. alliance with the Soviet Union as a necessary evil to defeat fascism. In this period, he drew closer to leaders such as David Dubinsky of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) and the quintessential anticomunist and “spymaster” Jay Lovestone, who also regarded communism as an evil, expansionist and enslaving force. In their view, the Soviet Union was a threat to the U.S. in the international arena while Communist party members were a domestic menace. After the war, Meany became even more vociferous in his anticommunism: “The Communist conspiracy,” he proclaimed, “overshadows everything that we may think of.” Even in the darkest days of the Vietnam War, Meany steadfastly supported U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia.

In fact, for over twenty years, Lovestone wrote the AFL-CIO president’s foreign policy papers. A former communist purged from the party in 1928, Lovestone was crucial in steering U.S. foreign policy away from détente with the Soviet Union at the end of World War II. Dubinsky described this enigmatic personality in American politics as “the unofficial Secretary of State for the labor movement.” Working in close collaboration with the U.S. Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, and later the AFL-CIO, Lovestone turned the Free Trade Union Committee (FTUC) — originally created to aid European unionists—into a bastion of anticommunism within the

---

5 Quoted in Robert Zieger, “George Meany: Labor’s Organization Man,” in Labor Leaders in American, 337

American labor establishment. In 1963, he was designated as head of the AFL-CIO International Affairs Department and thus became an “openly prominent” character.

Nevertheless, as Ted Morgan claims, “while Lovestone’s appointment seemed to crown a long career, it was in fact the beginning of a ten-year-decline...Above all, his full support with Meany for the Vietnam War would contribute to his demise, dividing the labor movement, as it divided the nation.” Among labor leaders, however, there were disagreements on foreign policy issues long before the war in Southeast Asia escalated. It is even possible to talk about the Meany and the Reuther “camps.”

Walter Reuther began his participation in the labor movement as a socialist. The UAW president, as Nelson Lichtenstein claims, “came to combine the tactical approach of traditional business unionism of liberal Keynesianism and the social vision of western European social democracy.” Reuther consolidated his control of the UAW during the union’s 1947 convention, when his caucus took over almost every key position within the UAW hierarchy. Although a critic of the government’s increasingly virulent anticomunism, Reuther made sure that most CIO union leaders signed the anticomunist affidavits required by the Taft-Hartley act and repudiated Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace during the 1948 presidential election. Rather than taking issue with the emerging Cold War foreign policy consensus, Reuther accepted it. His

---


8 Morgan, 336.

assessment of communism, however, differed considerably from Meany’s. Reuther believed that communism was a system that thrived only where poverty and degradation allowed it to exist. If advanced capitalist nations waged an assault on poverty, Reuther hoped, the attack would produce a liberalizing effect within the nations under the Soviet sphere. He also believed that the U.S. should secure a *modus vivendi* with the Soviet Union and thus temper the arms race. Like most CIO leaders, Reuther regarded the support of social reform programs abroad as the best way to contain communism and disapproved of the obsessive anticommunism of AFL leaders. After the 1955 AFL-CIO merger, however, the AFL hawkish anticommunism dominated organized labor’s stand on foreign policy for more than fifteen years. But the differences between Meany and Reuther remained just below the surface throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s.

In the post-World War II period, cooperation between organized labor and the federal government in foreign policy issues was taken as a given. Most observers probably shared John Windmuller’s description of the labor leadership’s commitment to a variety of international activities and causes as “substantial, controversial, and probably irreversible.” Historian Ronald Radosh was far more critical of labor’s involvement in the implementation of U.S. foreign policy. Trade unions, Radosh claimed, participated actively in cold-war politics around the world because the survival of their “corporate unionism” depended on the continued existence of “corporate capitalism.” For this reason, unions supported a cold-war economy and production for military defense.

Radosh was categorical in his indictment of organized labor:

---

10 John P. Windmuller, “The Foreign Policy Conflict in American Labor,” *Political Science Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (June 1967): 205.
Unions are meant to be junior partners of the large corporations, and their leaders seek only those gains acceptable to the system's top leaders; they see the chance for these gains disappearing if they move to challenge corporate foreign policy.\textsuperscript{11}

Furthermore, rank and file, Radosh contended, were either unwilling or incapable to challenge their unions' support of "a backward and reactionary foreign policy."\textsuperscript{12}

In the mid-1960s, however, U.S. foreign policy issues triggered a major controversy within organized labor's leadership. In 1966, Meany and Reuther had a serious confrontation over American labor's boycott of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Geneva, a decision that Meany allegedly took without discussing the issue with other members of the AFL-CIO Executive Council. In that year, Leon Chajn, the Polish government delegate to the ILO, was elected chairman of the organization by a delegate vote of 184 to 183. After consulting with Meany, the AFL-CIO worker delegate Rudy Faupl walked out, refusing to "sit in the Conference presided over by a representative of a totalitarian country." Reuther learned about this incident by reading the newspaper headlines. He condemned the walkout as "unwise," "undemocratic," and "unauthorized."\textsuperscript{13}

The AFL-CIO policy in Latin America also provoked friction between the Meany-Lovestone dominated Executive Council and Victor and Walter Reuther. In 1962, a group of AFL-CIO leaders—Meany among them—established the American


\textsuperscript{12} Radosh, \textit{American Labor and United States Foreign Policy} (New York: Random House, 1969), 29.

\textsuperscript{13} Quoted in Windmuller, "The Foreign Policy Conflict in American Labor," 208, 212.

Interestingly enough, the ILO claimed 64 million affiliate members in 94 non-Communist countries.
Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) to increase U.S. aid to Latin American labor. As the AIFLD technically was not part of the AFL-CIO, it could receive funds from U.S. business firms and contracts from government foreign aid agencies. In 1966, Victor Reuther denounced the AIFLD for its inclusion of American businessmen with important holdings in Latin America and stated—in a published interview—that the Central Intelligence Agency was involved in its activities.\(^\text{14}\) In Reuther’s opinion, this was “a propaganda gift to the enemies of free trade unions who effectively characterize[d] these businessmen as symbols of Yankee imperialism and enemies of social progress.”\(^\text{15}\)

During an AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting in Chicago shortly after the ILO walkout, Meany and his close advisors presented a special report on the activities of the AIFLD. Victor Reuther’s harsh criticism of the AIFLD, though resented by those at whom it was directed, could not be disregarded, as it came from the high echelons of organized labor. In the course of the meeting, the board passed a resolution praising the AIFLD’s work in Latin America and rejecting Reuther’s “vilification” of the organization. Only Walter Reuther and Joe Curran of the National Maritime Union voted against the resolution. This was a clear sign of Reuther’s growing isolation within the AFL-CIO Executive Council.

By then, the Vietnam War was becoming another matter of contention within the labor ranks. Reuther was initially as opposed as Meany to an American withdrawal from


Southeast Asia, but the UAW president stood closer to the doves than to the advocates of escalation. In 1966, Reuther summarized his position in the following way:

We must work toward an international guarantee of peacekeeping in Vietnam and a negotiated settlement under the auspices of the United Nations or another international agency. Only this rational and responsible solution will enable the long-suffering people of Vietnam to process toward social betterment and economic progress.\(^{16}\)

In opposition to Reuther, the AFL-CIO Executive Council adopted a decidedly hawkish resolution on the American involvement in Indochina.\(^{17}\) Reuther, who had left the meeting before the statement was passed, later condemned the resolution as “intemperate, hysterical, jingoistic and unworthy of a policy statement of a free labor movement.”\(^{18}\)

By the time dissent began to appear within the union leadership, the antiwar movement was swelling. In the 1965-1975 period, a wide array of Americans embraced peace activism: liberals and radicals, men and women, blacks and whites, students and professors. Some scholars even argue that there were “many” antiwar movements in the United States during the Vietnam War. The movement did not have a single directing organization; there was not a unified leadership; and there was no consensus on “what was wrong” with American foreign policy. Peace activists, however, tried to subordinate their differences in the interest of ending the war. In its origins, the movement was an extension of the antinuclear campaigns of the late 1940s and 1950s. Between 1965 and

---


\(^{17}\) Windmuller, 206-219.

1967, as they faced pro-war majorities, peace activists engaged in respectful protests that were designed to build an antiwar consensus. They discussed the war, organized teach-ins, and marched peacefully. Some protesters burnt draft cards. This kind of antiwar effort aimed at influencing policy-makers and was largely perceived as middle class and respectable.  

“It will come as a surprise to many even inside the labor movement to learn,” Phillip S. Foner states, “that organized labor was an important force in the first anti-imperialist movement in American history.” Foner’s point is well taken. It has been widely asserted that American workers overwhelmingly supported a “hawkish” position on the conflict in South Vietnam. As early as in 1965, however, several traditionally left-activist unions – Local 1199 of the Drug and Hospital Employees Union and District 65 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union – came out against the war. The AFL-CIO Executive Council resolutions applauding the Johnson Administration’s escalation of the war, however, drowned the early voices of opposition to American military involvement in Indochina. The formation of the National Labor Assembly for Peace in 1967 broke the once seemingly monolithic stand of the AFL-CIO on the war issue.

Over the next few years labor leaders and rank and file members grew increasingly “dovish,” but most labor unions’ stand for peace did not match the anti-imperialist, antiwar position of the radicals. In fact, the overwhelming majority of union members


never spoke for or against the American military intervention in Indochina. In October 1967, more than two years before Nixon introduced “the silent majority” in one of his speeches, leading members of the Cold War establishment created the Citizens Committee for Peace with Freedom in Vietnam. This organization was allegedly meant to give “the silent center an opportunity to support [the U.S.] commitment in Vietnam and the policy of non-compromising— although limited resistance to aggression.”

Founding members of the committee included former Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Harry Truman; former Senator Paul H. Douglas of Illinois as organizing chairman; and General Omar N. Bradley, Archbishop Robert E. Lucey of San Antonio and AFL-CIO president George Meany as co-chairmen. The AFL-CIO Executive Council voted to contribute $10,000 to the newly formed Committee.21

Just a month after the creation of the Citizens’ Committee, the Chicago Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace attracted nationwide attention. It was the first time that a large number of trade unionists really challenged Meany’s position. The 523 middle echelon labor leaders who attended the meeting represented sixty different unions, despite the fact that very few locals had taken an official anti-war position. For the first time in almost thirteen years, AFL-CIO unionists sat down with “outcasts” like the Teamsters, the International Longshoremen’s and Warehouseman’s Union (ILWU), the UE, and others, to discuss American foreign policy issues. To the UE leadership, the assembly was “an important step in the direction of redeeming the labor movement.”22


22 UE News, 1 January 1968, 8.
During the meeting, the highly respected socialist leader Norman Thomas called on trade unionists to unite for political action against the war. It was evident that an increasing number of union leaders had doubts about the righteousness of U. S. military intervention in Southeast Asia. Rank and filers’ sentiment towards the conflict, however, was more difficult to gauge.

Many workers considered foreign policy matters to be far removed from their daily concerns. It is not surprising, therefore, that on foreign policy issues, union leaders’ views should play a more prominent role than in other areas. Given the field’s “remoteness” from union members, labor leaders can follow their own preferences more freely in foreign policy issues than in collective bargaining or political action. Consequently, political commentators presented the AFL-CIO leaders’ support of the Vietnam War as representative of the workers’ attitude towards the American military involvement in Indochina.

There were several factors that contributed to a widespread—and often unexamined—view of blue-collar workers as staunch supporters of the war. First, working-class citizens were viewed as more “authoritarian” and willing to support “law and order” issues than other segments of American society. Second, the rather limited participation of union members in anti-war rallies led many observers to conclude that workers unconditionally backed the administration’s handling of the war. And third, scattered displays of patriotism, such as the 1970 hard-hat demonstrations in New York City, reinforced the stereotype of the American worker as hawkish.
A number of political scientists used sociologist Seymour Lipset’s theory of working-class authoritarianism to explain the workers’ presumed support for an escalation of the conflict in South Vietnam. In 1959, Lipset stated:

A number of elements contribute to authoritarian predispositions in lower class individuals. Low education, low participation in political or voluntary associations of any type, little reading, isolated occupations, economic insecurity, and authoritarian family patterns are some of the most important.  

Lipset’s argument was based on two assumptions: first, that sociocultural and economic factors determine personality traits such as authoritarianism, and second, that the more “authoritarian” an individual, the more prone he or she is to support “hawkish” policies.

Survey data, however, undermined that conclusion. In January 1968, for example, a Gallup Poll found that adults in union member families were almost evenly divided on the war issue. Moreover, 43 percent said that the United States had made a mistake in sending troops to South Vietnam. In an editorial comment on the survey, the New York Times claimed that on the war issue “labor leaders [were] not always good barometers of the thinking of their members.” Nevertheless, as the 1968 presidential campaign heated up, two developments apparently confirmed Lipset’s thesis that authoritarianism was more pronounced among working-class citizens. In August, a Gallup poll reported that seventeen percent of union families backed the independent party candidate George Wallace. White workers’ support of the Alabaman ex-governor seemed to show that

---

23 Seymour Martin Lipset, Political Man (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 100-101.


they were more hawkish than middle-class Americans. The working class' negative reaction to the Chicago 1968 antiwar demonstrations apparently also indicated the existence of higher levels of authoritarianism among lower-status groups. The AFL-CIO president assailed the antiwar protesters as “dirty-necked, dirty-mouthed demonstrators” who had tried Mayor Richard Daley’s patience beyond endurance and received from the Chicago police exactly what they deserved. Thus, a number of political analysts found in Lipset’s authoritarianism thesis an explanation for both working-class support of Wallace and rejection of antiwar protesters.

These conclusions were soon challenged. After a thorough analysis of data collected by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center in the 1964-1968 period, James D. Wright found that social class and support for escalation of the war were either unrelated or inversely related. Wright pointed out that the most “hawkish” working-class citizens were those most, and not least, integrated into middle-class political culture and exposed to mainstream media. The class argument that certain political attitudes are the inevitable result of certain sociocultural and economic conditions, Wright said, did not hold true. Workers’ attitudes changed over time and were “quite malleable” or “quite responsive to specific sociopolitical events.”


Wright also outlines the implications of the class authoritarianism argument:

...the educated upper middle class represents an enlightened culture which embraces the desirable norms of tolerance. These groups represent the bulwarks of liberality and are to be trusted in the democratic arena. The lower strata, on the other hand, are not, unless they can be indoctrinated into the enlightened culture. It is evident that political analysts tended to overestimate the liberalizing influence of education and social status. Conversely, many underestimated the working-class capacity for progressive reform.

Working-class authoritarianism, moreover, was not an adequate measure for attitudes on the Vietnam War. Workers could oppose the conflict in Indochina and at the same time reject anti-war demonstrations at home. Some observers—especially those more understanding of American working-class realities—explained this apparent contradiction by stressing the fact that low-income groups were more reticent to air their opinions than high-income citizens, particularly when those opinions might be viewed as “unconventional” or “unpatriotic.” Furthermore, while the middle- and upper-class citizens analyzed the Vietnam War in abstract terms—whether they viewed it as a necessary anti-Communist struggle or as an American imperialist venture—many working-class Americans saw the conflict in a more pragmatic way.

By the end of 1969, economic hardship at home coupled with the rising toll of American casualties led many union members to turn against the war. It was becoming evident that Meany did not speak for the 14 million AFL-CIO rank and file members, since unionists seemed to be as divided as the rest of the country on the war issue. A

---

30 Wright, 142-143.

December 1969 Gallup poll indicated that 55 percent of American adults described themselves as “doves,” and 31 percent as “hawks.” The lower a person’s income, the more likely he or she was to disapprove of the war. Fifty percent of those who made $15,000 and over called themselves “doves;” among those who made less than $5,000 a year, 62 percent favored de-escalation of the war.\(^{32}\)

The antiwar movement tried to tap into working-class opposition to the war in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By late 1967, Charles Chatfield claims, “the weight and initiative in the antiwar movement had shifted to the left.”\(^{33}\) As the conflict escalated and the political system did not seem to respond, opponents of the war despaired. Many antiwar activists moved from protest to confrontation. They abandoned their attempts to influence policy-makers and worked to mobilize large demonstrations. Protest grew sharper and more theatrical. A tiny number of extremists resorted to violence: they detonated bombs, attacked the police and vandalized buildings. To the pacifists’ dismay, the media played up these actions, which became attached to the public image of the antiwar movement.\(^{34}\)

After SDS collapsed in 1969 and Republicans assumed control of the White House, antiwar liberals felt in a stronger position to bring the anti-war movement into the political mainstream. In an attempt to rally popular support for U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, liberal and radical antiwar activists agreed to collaborate in the organization of


\(^{33}\) DeBenedetti, 391.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 391-392.
two efforts: the Moratorium and the New Mobilization. Peace campaign veterans Sam Brown, Marge Sklencar, David Hawk and David Mixner were the founding members of the Vietnam Moratorium Committee (VMC), which coordinated the nationwide antiwar demonstrations of October 15, 1969. The organizers’ aim was to take the antiwar movement into the communities where people who had never protested against the war before could do so “respectably.” Simultaneously, the New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam was preparing for a national demonstration in Washington D. C. for November 13-15. The New Mobe leaders rallied the support of radical groups yet pledged to keep the demonstration non-violent. Both the VMC and the Mobe were intent on countering the anarchic and violent protest of the 1968 Chicago demonstrations.

Prior to the October 15 Moratorium, the Alliance for Labor Action (ALA) placed large ads in leading American newspapers. Hoping to rally workers to the anti-war movement, the official statement began, “We take our stand with the millions of our fellow-Americans who call for an end of the war in Vietnam.” The advertisement was signed by the heads of the UAW, the Brotherhood of Teamsters and the Chemical Workers Union, who represented over four million members. Peace, the ALA claimed, would reunite America and allow it to fight against “poverty, hunger, ignorance and disease.” There was nothing to be won in Vietnam, the ALA insisted, but there were many problems to be solved at home.  

About a hundred unionists of the San Francisco Bay Area gathered in Oakland, California, a few days before the Moratorium. They unanimously passed a resolution that was most indicative of the antiwar trend within the ranks of organized labor. This

---

35 *UAW Solidarity*, November 1969, 11.
chapter of the Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace disavowed the AFL-CIO's support of the administration's Vietnam policy and called for an immediate withdrawal of American troops from Southeast Asia. During the convention, Ann Draper, officer of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, was unabashedly critical of the AFL-CIO president:

It is characteristic of the muddled mind of Meany and an indication of his unconcern for the membership that he should castigate all of Nixon's domestic policies and then endorse the Nixon war policy which is the major base and aggravation of our severest economic and social ills.

The assembly called upon union leaders and rank and file to support the October 15 Moratorium and the November 15 National Mobilization to End the War. "This stand symbolizes," the resolution read, "the great gulf between the labor bureaucracy and the membership."³⁶

Millions of citizens participated in the October 15 Moratorium. The activities, intended to suspend "business as usual," were varied: wearing black armbands, shining car headlights, passing out antiwar flyers from door to door, joining demonstrations. Over a 100,000 people gathered on the Boston Common and approximately a quarter million participated in various antiwar activities in New York City. Coretta Scott King led a candlelight vigil in Washington D. C. Political figures as varied as Dr. Benjamin Spock, former Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, pacifist David Dellinger and diplomat Averell Harriman voiced their opposition to the war. "The Moratorium was," Charles DeBenedetti stated, "a national demonstration, teach-in and memorial service."³⁷

³⁶Resolution, 1969, Folder 13, Box 74, Jay Lovestone Files, International Affairs Department, GMMA.

³⁷DeBenedetti, 263.
A cross section of leftists and radicals—especially those associated with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA)—was thrilled at organized labor’s participation in the Moratorium. George Morris, a contributor to The Militant, claimed that the alignment of a large section of the trade union movement with the Moratorium had played a crucial role in the massive eruption of national antiwar sentiment throughout the country. Ad hoc Moratorium committees of local and regional labor leaders had been formed in cities such as New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Washington D.C. October 15 1969 was, in Morris’s words, “a turning point in the struggle for an end to the war in Vietnam, and, objectively, against imperialism.”

The Moratorium signaled an unprecedented broadening of antiwar protest but analysts such as George Morris were wrong to believe that labor’s opposition was “anti-imperialist.” Neither the ALA advertisement nor the resolution passed by the San Francisco Bay Area unionists presented its opposition to the Vietnam War as part of an anti-imperialist crusade. Furthermore, the signers of the ALA statement disassociated themselves from the more violent antiwar demonstrators: “We deplore the reprehensible activities of a small minority who burn the American flag and equate anti-Americanism with anti-war, for their actions are indefensible and counter productive.” Radicals largely admitted that the decision of most Americans to speak against the war was less “ideological” than was the radicals’ opposition to the war. Yet many believed that the Moratorium had to a certain extent vindicated those militants who had resisted the draft,

---


39 UAW Solidarity, November 1969, 11.
demonstrated at the Pentagon, and confronted Mayor Daley’s police in the streets of Chicago.\textsuperscript{40}

The ALA’s criticism of U.S. foreign policy probably sounded mild to most radicals: “Let us now put the sad Vietnamese chapter of our history behind,” exhorted the labor alliance’s ad, but remember that “of all political systems, democracy is the least capable of being transplanted at the point of bayonet.” American military intervention in Indochina had been a mistake, the ALA said, but the decision had not necessarily been “imperialist.” \textit{Ramparts}—a publication largely representative of the New Left critique—stated that the military debacle in Indochina was a direct consequence of the U.S. “global empire’s” growth. The editors summarized the antiwar protesters’ role in the following way:

The job of the radicals in the Moratorium is to convince the new protesters that Vietnam is not simple aberration, but rather the natural outgrow of a system that seeks to lock the third world into a permanent state of indentured servitude.\textsuperscript{41}

The differences between liberal and radical antiwar dissidents thus were substantial. Broadly speaking, liberals saw the Vietnam conflict as a very serious mistake in foreign policy that could be corrected through civil participation and electoral politics. Radicals regarded American military intervention in Indochina as a counterrevolutionary war that the U.S. waged for American capitalism to remain hegemonic. The two factions’ willingness to downplay their differences made the massive support of the October 15 mobilization possible.

\textsuperscript{40} “The Moratorium, the War and the Empire,” \textit{Ramparts}, 29 October, 6, 8.

\textsuperscript{41} ALA flyer, 1969, Folder 1, Box 341, Walter Reuther Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA; “The Moratorium, the War and the Empire,” 6, 8.
In response to the Moratorium Day demonstrations, the Citizens Committee for Peace with Freedom in Vietnam published, "The Choice in Vietnam," a pamphlet designed to explain "the dangers of a unilateral standstill cease-fire" to "a war weary public." In the first place, the Committee claimed, such an action would encourage the victors to try more Vietnams in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Second, the Communists would take over South Vietnam and attacks on towns and villages would mount. And finally, if Americans turned their backs on their commitment in Southeast Asia, the U.S. leadership would be discredited throughout the world. Despite the undeniable increase in antiwar demonstrations, the Committee still insisted that "the silent center" represented the majority of the American people who was unhappy about the war but did not "want to buy an end to hostilities at the price of defeat, dishonor and of peace with freedom here and abroad." The AFL-CIO American Federationist reproduced the text of the Committee’s pamphlets, thus allowing it to achieve a wider audience within the working class. As members of the Cold War establishment, both the Committee and the AFL-CIO top ranks described those who supported immediate withdrawal as allies of the Communists. The October 1969 document concluded:

Hanoi is fighting on three battlefronts—in Vietnam, in Paris, and in American public opinion. The enemy’s only remaining chance for total victory lies here in the U.S.—in the pressures of American public opinion.42

Hawks and doves alike claimed to have the support of the so-called "silent center." And, in a way, the working class showed many of the characteristics that Nixon attributed to the "silent majority." The President introduced the slogan in his speech of

November 3, 1969, when he stated, “And so tonight—to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans—I ask for your support.” To enable South Vietnam to assume full responsibility for its security, Nixon stated, the country had considerably increased the training and equipment of South Vietnamese forces. The U.S. air operations had been reduced by twenty percent and American casualties had declined to the lowest point in three years. By December 15, 1969, Nixon promised, over 60,000 men would have been brought home. The president made it clear to the American public that the rate of U.S. troops withdrawal depended entirely on the progress of the Paris peace talks, the training program of South Vietnamese forces, and the Communists’ level of military activity in Indochina. To dismiss the importance of the increasing antiwar protests, Nixon said: “If a vocal minority, however fervent its cause, prevails over reason and the will of the majority, this nation has no future as a free society.” In other words, the “silent majority” could not allow the antiwar “minority” to jeopardize democracy at home and the U. S. role abroad.  

The AFL-CIO Department of Public Relations immediately released a statement by Meany on Nixon’s Vietnam speech. The AFL-CIO president praised Nixon’s decision to honor U. S. commitments abroad as well as his attempt to achieve “an honorable, negotiated peace.” Meany also chastised the administration’s critics for not accepting that continued hostility or peace was entirely Hanoi’s responsibility. Nixon’s detailed description of his Vietnam policies, Meany claimed, “deserved the backing of the AFL-CIO and the American public.” To the antiwar activists’ dismay, the hawkish

---

43 “Nixon Calls for Vietnam Unity, Says No Pullout Now.” Presidential Report, 1969, 2233-2236, Folder 19, Box 028, COPE Research Files, GMMA.
minority was not the only Americans that found Nixon’s arguments persuasive. Two
days after the president’s speech, a Gallup poll indicated that 77 percent of Americans
supported the president’s policies, whereas only 6 percent opposed them. With a
masterful address that exploited the “achievements” of his Vietnamization plan, Nixon
won the backing of “the silent majority.”

Despite the volatility of American public opinion on the war, liberal antiwar
activists claimed that “the silent majority” shared their concerns, and not those of the
administration. The publication of Vietnam and the Silent Majority: the Dove’s Guide
was indicative of the peace advocates’ preoccupation with the state of the antiwar
movement and with Nixon’s attempt to capitalize on the silence of most American
citizens. Social scientist Sidney Verba described “the silent majority” as both “a cleverly
designed symbol” and “a reality,” but said it was “more complicated than the monolith
suggested by the President’s speech and feared by many opposed to the President.”

Democratic Senator George McGovern praised the analysis presented by Verba, Milton J.
Rosenberg and Phillip Converse, and concluded:

The authors confirm that the war is in sharp conflict with beliefs and attitudes held
by most Americans. All that remains is to make the connection compelling
enough to alter their positions on Vietnam itself. There is a broad community of
interest in terminating the war waiting to be perceived and activated.

The silent majority argument presented the antiwar groups as antagonizing not
only the administration’s foreign policy but also the majority of Americans. In fact, the

---

44 “News from the AFL-CIO,” Folder 9, Box 031, Country Files, International Affairs
Department, GMMA; New York Times, 5 November 1969, 11.

45 Milton J. Rosenberg, Sidney Verba and Philip E. Converse, Vietnam and the Silent
majority of those who demonstrated against the war were not violent, and the majority of working-class Americans were not staunch hawks. Most Americans did not have definite and well thought-out opinions about foreign policy issues. Furthermore, the way in which survey questions were formulated often influenced the results that pollsters obtained. Citizens tended to oppose an American withdrawal from Vietnam when words such as “defeat,” “Communist take-overs,” or “loss of American credibility” appeared in the questions. More people supported de-escalation when terms such as “killings,” “continuing war,” or “domestic costs” were used in opinion polls on the war.\(^{46}\)

Patriotism, anticommmunism, and trust in the Executive’s handling of foreign policy supposedly hindered many American citizens from joining the peace movement. In *The Dove’s Guide*, Verba claimed that most people turned against the war because it was “intruding into their lives and hurting them in ways that [were] very close to home.” Among the most compelling pragmatic reasons for supporting a U.S. withdrawal of troops were the faltering economy and the decay in American quality of life due to social unrest.\(^{47}\) Economic hardship had led many workers to want an end to the war, as opposed to those peace activists whose motivations for participating in the antiwar movement were allegedly more “ideological.” Milton, Rosenberg and Verba presented an empathetic discussion of the views of lower-status groups on the Vietnam War. But these liberal analysts who avoided the excesses of more radical peace activists also overlooked several issues. First, the Vietnam War was “intruding” into the workers’ lives because in many cases their sons were doing the fighting in Indochina. And

---

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 24.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 40-41.
secondly, a large number of peace demonstrators were also motivated by pragmatic reasons, such as avoiding the draft.

Throughout the conflict in Southeast Asia, the social origins of those who were fighting in Vietnam were seldom the focus of debate; the only exceptions were some union publications that reported that workers paid the heaviest human cost of the U.S. military intervention in Indochina. The attention devoted to “Middle America” or “the silent center” in the early 1970s attest to the mass media’s attempt to mask or underestimate very tangible class differences that, contrary to widespread belief, existed in the country. The class inequalities of military service were not documented and the complex feelings of working-class families whose sons were in Vietnam were hardly considered. One of Appy’s interviewees summed up his class resentment towards the youngsters who managed to avoid the draft in the following way:

Where were the sons of all the big shots who supported the war? Not in my platoon. Our guys’ people were workers...If the war was so important, why didn’t our leaders put everyone’s son in there, only us?

Student peace activists believed that their anti-war crusade was a noble one, but they often failed to notice that while they avoided the draft, joined demonstrations, and confronted the American establishment, other youngsters—working-class boys—were doing the “dirty work” in Southeast Asia.

Antiwar liberals advised peace protesters to dissociate themselves from the public stereotype of the violent demonstrator, to avoid downgrading patriotism, and to cite the great number of leaders who opposed the war. “Respect for, and comprehension of, the

---

other man's concerns is the beginning and the basis for lasting political persuasion,” recommended The Dove’s Guide. Although many peace activists were genuinely committed to understanding “the other man’s concerns,” they did not always fully understand the war’s real impact on the lower classes of American society. Also, radicals often failed to acknowledge the fact that many workers viewed their antiwar struggle as an elitist attack by a privileged minority who could avoid the draft.49

Rather than resist the draft, many college men who opposed the war in Vietnam chose to evade it, taking what journalist James Fallows called the “thinking-man route.” Middle-class students knew the details of physical deferments; an “underweight disqualification,” for instance, could do the job. Working-class youngsters seldom had access to this kind of information. Fallows, a Harvard University alumnus, recalled how his humane Cambridge antiwar friends “let the boys from Chelsea be sent off to die.” Not only did college students often have very personal motivations to oppose the war, Fallows claims, but they also harbored class prejudices against the workers. In their narrow mindedness, he says, many peace activists thought that the working-class boys simply needed some lessons on the correct approach to the war in Indochina and to the draft at home.50 One of the priorities of the worker-student alliance that some radicals proposed was to launch political-educational campaigns to reach the American working class. A Cambridge pamphlet that circulated in the summer of 1970 admitted that the peace movement was largely middle class: “Though there is very wide opposition to the


war among workers,” the document stated, “as a class they stand back from the
movement.” As they had done in the summer of 1969, radical antiwar activists were
inviting students to participate in a work-in that would build ties between the antiwar
activists and the workers.\footnote{Vietnam Work-In II: A proposal to Radicals in the Professions, pamphlet, 1970, Folder 3, Vietnamese Conflict, Vertical Files, RWLA.}

The work-in was a well-intentioned effort, but college students were not always
aware of their class privileges. Although peace activists frequently mentioned casualty
rates in their speeches against the American military intervention in Vietnam, they rarely
stressed the “class” percentage of the dead and wounded. Students also often looked
down on the “ignorant” lower class who appeared to support the war. And finally, large
numbers of peace demonstrators used the word “pig” to refer to blue-collar citizens who
disapproved of antiwar demonstrations such as the one staged in Chicago in 1968. “We
hated the pigs,” Fallows stated, “and let them know it, and it was no great wonder that
they hated us in return.”\footnote{Fallows, 16-17.} The rift between the antiwar movement and the working class
was widely discussed throughout the late 1960s. Events in May 1970, however,
galvanized the image of the white worker as a reactionary and rampaging patriot.

By the spring of 1970, many peace activists felt that their efforts during the
October Moratorium and the November Mobilization to End the War had accomplished
little. “In April 1970,” Foner stated, “the antiwar movement was in a state of quiescence”
but “it was the calm before the storm.”\footnote{Foner, 96.} At the end of the month, Nixon’s decision to
send U.S. ground troops into Cambodia further polarized American public opinion on the war. According to Newsweek, the president "had plunged American troops into Cambodia in hopes of shocking the Communist enemy and stabilizing a turbulent world."\(^{54}\) Nixon's move was a gross miscalculation. His announcement of the invasion of Cambodia shocked Americans who believed de-escalation of the war was underway. In response, thousands joined antiwar demonstrations throughout the country.

Nixon's decision hardly moved Meany and his supporters. The AFL-CIO leadership simply reaffirmed its support for the administration's handling of the war. On May 1, 1970, the AFL-CIO Department of Public Relations released the following statement:

> The President has clearly outlined the problem to the American people. It is unmistakably clear that he made his decision on the basis of his clear obligation as commander-in-chief to protect American servicemen[...] In this crucial hour, he should have the full support of the American people. He certainly has ours.\(^{55}\)

A few days after Nixon's Cambodian decision, a violent confrontation between peace demonstrators and New York construction workers reinforced the image of working-class hawkishness.

Violent protests broke out immediately after the president's announcement of the Cambodian invasion and within a few days there was serious unrest at a number of colleges and universities. The list included the University of Maryland, the University of Cincinnati, Ohio State University, and Columbia University. But it was Kent State University in Ohio that made the shocking headlines on May 4, 1970. During a campus


\(^{55}\) News from the AFL-CIO, 1 May 1970, Folder 1, Box 12, Labor Today Collection, WSUA.
antiwar demonstration, the Ohio National Guard shot and killed four students and wounded another twelve. Nixon made his chilling response to the Kent State killings public through his press secretary: “When dissent turns to violence, it invites tragedy.”

The Kent State students were not the only victims of the widespread violence: this widely publicized tragedy was followed by the less reported police shooting of six African-Americans in Augusta, Georgia and another two at Jackson State in Mississippi.

The murder of peace demonstrators prompted more protest and eventually led to a violent physical confrontation between students and workers. On May 8, 1970, about two hundred flag-waving construction workers armed with hammers and lead pipes attacked a group of demonstrators who had gathered in New York’s Wall Street district to honor the memory of the students killed at Kent State University. After the assault, the “hardhats”—as the mass media would call them—invaded City Hall and then left to break into Pace College and attack some students there. As Maurice Isserman contends, “The “hardhats” were instantly enshrined in political myth, symbols of unthinking authoritarianism to the left, and of rugged patriotism to the right.” To journalists, social scientists, politicians and moviemakers alike, the construction worker soon became the symbol of American labor: the hard hat was the “Middle American,” the member of “the silent majority” who had finally decided to speak his mind.

---

56 “Mr. Nixon’s Home Front,” 27.


Peter I. Brennan, president of the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York, claimed that the construction workers’ violent protest had been spontaneous. The union leaders, Brennan insisted, had not played any role in planning it, “They did it,” Brennan said, “because they were fed up with violence by anti-war demonstrators, by those who spat on the American flag and desecrated it.”

Nevertheless, on May 19, during a Council meeting held at the Commodore Hotel, the union leadership approved the decision to hold a rally at City Hall the following day.

The union minutes summed up the purpose of the demonstration:

[...] let the general public know what we think of our flag and country...the one and only, U.S.A. [...] bring your banners and get your rank and file members to march, but once again...no violence. Let us show the city and the country that we are law-abiding citizens.

It would prove very hard for construction workers to recover their image as “law abiding” citizens after the mass media had portrayed them as believers in “God and country” and “not necessarily in equality for all and the right of dissent.” The hard-hats’ reputation was further damaged by the accusation that most workers had not participated spontaneously in the pro-war and “patriotic” demonstrations. Fred Cook, a contributor to The Nation, contended that most protests had been carefully orchestrated. Construction firms encouraged the demonstrations, by allowing workers to close down their jobs and paying them for marching instead of working. The New York City police

---

59 Cook, 716.

60 The Minutes of the Building and Construction Trades Council (1936-1984), Microfilm, George Meany Files, Office of the President, GMMA.

either turned a blind eye on hard-hats' violent behavior or simply cheered construction workers on. At a Washington Press Conference, UAW president Leonard Woodcock referred to the hard-hat demonstrations as “mobilized, organized, possibly paid violence.” Construction workers, Woodcock contended, had received “the same pay as if they had continued to work all week.”

The Cambodian invasion and the developments that followed deepened the divisions within organized labor as a larger number of leaders and rank and fileers became more vocal for or against the war. Jack Barnes, the Socialist Worker Party secretary, claimed that the post-Cambodia upsurge had brought about crucial changes in the labor movement:

[The] open breaks in the labor bureaucracies make it possible for opponents of the war inside the unions to effectively argue their view and mobilize the sentiment against the war that already exists among millions of American workers.

Barnes' claim, though probably optimistic, was well taken. For the first time, a number of union leaders did break with the AFL-CIO official stance on the Vietnam War.

At about the same time that hard-hat demonstrators stormed into the Wall Street district to beat up peace activists, a different kind of labor activism was taking shape on the West Coast. Organized labor in the San Francisco Bay Area directed its anger against the Nixon Administration's escalation of the war and not against the antiwar movement.

---

62 Cook, 713.

63 *UAW Washington Report*, 1 June 1970, 3, Folder 2, Box 12, Labor Today Collection, WSUA.

On May 18, 452 Bay Area trade union officers, executive board members and shop stewards placed a full-page advertisement in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "Dear Mr. President:" the ad began, "American working people and their families are deeply disturbed at your expansion of the war into Cambodia. Those men being killed are our sons..." The unionists’ petition stressed their distrust of the administration and demanded U. S. immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam and Cambodia.65

Another important development took place on May 24. Jacob S. Potofsky, a member of the AFL-CIO thirty-five man Executive Council, publicly broke with the top bureaucracy’s position on the war. The president of the 417,000-member Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America contended that the union’s rank and file, "like the majority of all Americans," longed for "peace now, without delay, without further military adventures, without more killing." In a similar vein, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which represented about 490,000 workers, called for an end to the war. The union passed a resolution stating that the AFSCME not only opposed "the expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia" but also called for "the immediate and total withdrawal of all U. S. armed forces from Southeast Asia."66

A day after Potofsky’s break, August Scholle, the Michigan State AFL-CIO president, also distanced himself from Meany’s position on the war. At a news conference held at the Michigan AFL-CIO headquarters in Detroit, Scholle stressed the need for the labor movement to join students in their opposition to the war. The highlight

65 "We’ve had it!," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 May 1970, 15.

66 Labor Says: "End the War," flyer, Folder 1, Box 12, Labor Today Collection, WSUA.
of the press conference was the unionists’ call for an Emergency National Conference Against the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam War. The sponsors of this antiwar parley stated that the conference was not intended “to hammer out the strategy of tactics of social revolution or to found a new political party or movement;” its major aim was to organize massive opposition to the war. The Cleveland Area Peace Action Council would host this antiwar meeting, the first one with significant trade union sponsorship.67

Nixon’s decision to invade Cambodia and the social unrest that followed further polarized U.S. society. The May 1970 events marked a turning point in organized labor’s stance on the Vietnam War. A large number of leaders and rank and file workers decided either to break openly with the AFL-CIO top bureaucracy’s position or to embrace a pro-war position by participating in “patriotic” demonstrations. Numerous unions made public statements against the war and distanced themselves from the “official” AFL-CIO’s support of Nixon’s handling of the war. But it was the New York hard-hats’ pro-war demonstrators that made the headlines in the media.

In public discourse, the mass media and commercial iconography, the construction worker would replace the factory worker as the prototypical American blue-collar. The New York hard-hats matched the stereotype of the American rank and file worker as relatively affluent and satisfied with his job but also authoritarian and hawkish. Many observers argued that the hard-hats were simply “Middle Americans,” members of the “Silent Majority” who were now openly demanding law and order at home and peace with honor in South Vietnam. Reports of the hard-hats’ displays of patriotism soon eclipsed the discussion of the “blue-collar blues” that had occupied political analysts at

the end of the decade. In the construction workers Nixon saw an unprecedented opportunity to expand his political base in the direction of the blue-collar workers, especially in northern industrial areas that had traditionally aligned themselves with the Democratic Party. As the president prepared for the 1970 Congressional elections, the first political test of his administration, a White House strategist stated that workers were "swimming toward the Nixon Administration on grounds of patriotism, support for law and order, and against the left-wing extremists in the Democratic Party."^68

As Senator McGovern stated in his foreword to *The Silent Majority and the Vietnam War*, U. S. military intervention in Indochina was "in sharp conflict with beliefs and attitudes held by most Americans." The war's consequences such as high taxes, inflation, social unrest and rising casualties were debasing the "American Dream." In order to turn "the silent majority" against the Vietnamese conflict, McGovern argued, peace advocates needed "to make the connection" between the war and the people's hardships "compelling enough."^69 As the Congressional elections approached, it remained to be seen who would be the most successful in making the "right connections." Inspired by the hard-hats' patriotic demonstrations, Nixon exacerbated the Social Issue. The 1970 election results eventually showed that the Economic Issue could not be underestimated.

---


^69 Rosenberg, et. al., xii.
CHAPTER 6  
THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY IN DISARRAY

In the months preceding the 1970 congressional elections, it was clear to Richard Nixon that he faced an uphill struggle to win workers away from the Democratic Party. Jerome M. Rosow, the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Policy, Evaluation and Research, was one of the administration's blue-collar strategists. At Nixon's request, in 1970, Rosow produced a report on *The Problems of the Blue-Collar Worker*. The working group that joined Rosow in his venture included George P. Schultz, the Secretary of Labor, Attorney General John N. Mitchell; Donald Rumsfeld, director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, and Daniel P. Moynihan, counselor to the president. Rosow stated that his objective was to prove that there was a "blue-collar problem" and that the administration was intent on solving it. "We know the United States is an affluent society," added the assistant secretary of labor, "and it goes against our preconceptions to think that the American worker is in a bind."\(^1\)

The public release of Rosow's report on August 13, 1970, was a clear indication of Nixon's intention to win over the votes of blue-collar workers during the forthcoming elections. The analysis focused on the problems of families with incomes between $5,000 and $10,000 a year. This income range covered families living above the poverty level but below the $10,664 a year that the Labor Department considered necessary for an urban family of four to enjoy an "adequate" standard of living. The report advocated

---

\(^1\) *CPR National Journal* (January 1, 1971), 236, Folder 17, Box 031, COPE Research Files, George Meany Memorial Archives (Hereafter GMMA).
better educational opportunities for working-class children and adults, tax breaks, improved housing, and better transportation. He proposed, however, no concrete measures to achieve these goals.

Most labor leaders gave Rosow’s report a cold shoulder. When questioned about *The Problems of the Blue-Collar Worker*, union presidents Paul Jennings, I. W. Abel and Leonard Woodcock, who represented the electrical, steel and autoworkers respectively, agreed that it was facile and that the conclusions were obvious. The administration was dramatizing facts that union leaders had been saying for many years. Moreover, the report was flawed in that it downplayed the impact of unemployment and inflation. Woodcock stated, “There is no question that the blue-collar believes that he has been neglected. People do want to know that the leaders of unions and political leaders are aware of their problems and thinking of solutions to them.”² Despite the administration’s efforts to express concern for the plight of the worker, the labor leaders asserted, it would prove very difficult for Republican candidates to woo the blue-collar voter with a an economic “game plan” that entailed tight money, unemployment and high interest rates.

The “game plan” was the administration’s first response to rising inflation, which was perceived as the most pressing economic problem by the time of Nixon’s inauguration. The president was undoubtedly a conservative, but his conservatism was often hard to categorize. On the one hand, Nixon believed that the federal government’s intervention in the economy should be minimal. On the other hand, he viewed “activism” as the key to a great presidency. In its successive attempts to solve the country’s

²Ibid., 238.
economic problems, the administration would not only be active; it would also contradict most of Nixon’s conservative tenets. Ironically, to a president so intent on exploiting the Social Issue, the Economic Issue became a paramount concern. Historian Allen Matusow explains:

[Nixon] spent countless hours pondering how to prevent the economy from defeating him, how to manipulate foreign trade and monetary issues to woo labor, how to appease voters with doubtful policies he did not believe in while keeping his conservative base intact.3

In the late 1960s, Keynesianism and monetarism were the two dominant and opposing economic theories. Keynesian economists regarded the private sector as responsible for economic instability and the government’s fiscal policy as capable of keeping the economy running smoothly. By cutting taxes and increasing expenditures to raise aggregate demand and maintain employment, Keynesians asserted, the government could avoid recessions. By raising taxes and cutting expenditures to take pressure off prices, conversely, the government could curb inflation. Monetarists disagreed. Milton Freeman of the University of Chicago, monetarism’s highly regarded theoretician, contended that governments, not the private sector, caused economic instability. The U.S. Federal Reserve, which controlled the money supply in the country, was the true cause of booms and busts. Economic stability depended largely on the Federal Reserve’s monetary policy.4 While Keynesianism prevailed during the Democratic administrations of the 1960s, monetarism dominated the economic policies of Nixon’s first two years in office.


4 Ibid., 12-14.
In 1969 and 1970, Paul McCracken, a monetarist and the first chair of Nixon’s Council of Economic Advisors (CEA), shaped the administration’s game plan. The Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the chair of the Federal Reserve and the secretary of the treasury completed Nixon’s quadriad of economic advisors. McCracken sought to cool off the economy and curb inflation by resorting to both fiscal and monetary restraint. His policy, McCracken told Congress, was to slow the economy “gradually”; consequently, it came to be referred to as “gradualism.” The government extended the existing 10 percent income tax surcharge and repealed the investment tax credit while the Federal Reserve slowed the growth in the money supply from 7.9 percent in late 1968 to less than 5 percent in mid-1969.\(^5\) Intended to stifle inflation, the “game plan” ran the risk of causing a recession. By the end of 1970, gradualism had not worked in the way economic analysts expected. The economic downturn that Nixon feared so much had cost him substantial political losses during the off-year election.

The 1970 Congressional election returns reinvigorated labor leaders’ confidence in the New Deal coalition of workers, liberals and minorities as an effective base for winning elections. That year’s voting patterns seemed to indicate that the American public rejected conservatives. Democratic candidates drew 69 percent of the votes of blue-collar workers, 75 percent of low-income voters, 59 percent of city dwellers and 90 percent of African-Americans. Nationally, the Democratic Party received 53 percent of

the vote.  

The presence of George Meany and other top labor leaders at the 1970 Labor Day dinner held at the White House created the impression that the AFL-CIO president was on the verge of supporting Republican candidates. During the Congressional election campaign, however, Meany chastised the Nixon Administration and urged union members to vote for labor-supported candidates.

Al Barkan, director of the AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education (COPE), contended that during the 1970 electoral campaign the Republican Party had misjudged the appeal of the law-and-order issue to workers and underestimated the importance of their economic concerns. In a statement issued at the end of 1970, Meany claimed:

While people are losing their jobs, the Administration is talking about its game plan...Approximately two million more Americans are out of work today than a year ago. Those who still have jobs have been hit hard by an economic policy that increases unemployment, continues inflation, cuts the workweek and reduces production. Its game plan has failed. Economically and humanly, it flopped.

In the aftermath of the 1970 congressional election, Nixon’s political strategists thought it evident that the Republican candidates would not secure endorsements from the unions in the near future. The Republicans’ aim therefore should be to capture votes from the rank-and-file. If the economic difficulties were turned around and the Democrats did not have a program to take on the offensive, the administration was confident that the Republican Party would make a strong appeal to union members in the next election campaign. This would be more a “Middle America strategy” than a blue-collar strategy.

---

6 Memo from COPE, Committee on Political Education, AFL-CIO (January 4, 1971), 2, Folder 17, Box 031, COPE Research Files, GMMA.

7 CPR National Journal, 233.
The crucial issue in 1971 was the administration’s ability to reverse the economic downturn. While gradualism had hurt the administration in the 1970 election, it had achieved some victories, according to Alan Matusow. "At relatively little cost," he says, "the administration had reduced excess demand and now stood on the brink of non-inflationary recovery." Although his economic policies were producing slow results, Nixon stayed with gradualism a few more months. Nixon still trusted the judgment of George Schultz, the head of the Office of Management and Budget and a Friedman disciple. Yet the president promised that his 1971 State of the Union Message would be "the most comprehensive, the most far reaching, the most bold program in the domestic field ever presented to an American Congress." This was Nixon’s attempt to assume the role of a domestic reformer and thus pave the way for a reelection bid in 1972.

During his address, Nixon anticipated expansionary policies. In a demagogic effort to align himself with the dissatisfied "middle Americans," the president made what Time referred to as a "self-condemnatory statement:"

Most Americans today are simply fed up with government at all levels. They will not—and should not—continue to tolerate the gap between promise and performance. A "new American Revolution", Nixon contended, "a peaceful revolution in which power was turned back to the people," would remedy the situation. The president’s most significant proposal was a 25 percent net increase over the 1971 budget in the funds that

8 Matusow, 87.


10 Ibid.
flowed from the federal government to states and communities. Although Nixon proposed total spending of $16 billion, only $6 billion of that sum was newly appropriated money. Nixon told a newspaper reporter after the speech, “I’m now a Keynesian in economics.”\(^{11}\)

Organized labor received the State of the Union message as coolly as did the democratically controlled 92\(^{nd}\) Congress. Soon after the address, UAW president Leonard Woodcock, testifying before the Joint Economic Committee of Congress, contended that Nixon’s budget was “simply a mildly expansionary budget.” The administration would spend the same amount it received in revenues and thus achieve “full employment.” In the UAW president’s view, however, Nixon’s “full employment” was actually a four percent rate of unemployment. Moreover, Woodcock criticized Nixon’s plan to share federal revenue with states, since “the greater part of the funds for revenue sharing would come from cutting back existing federal programs.” Woodcock contended that state and local governments were often less concerned with the needs of the people and more subject to the influence of special interest groups than was the federal government.\(^{12}\)

The presidential decision that really infuriated labor leaders was his thumbs-down on the manpower bill. During the highest unemployment in more than a decade –6 percent in January 1971- Nixon vetoed a bill that could have created thousands of public service jobs and provided funds for urban development, pay raises for federal workers, and an extension of a hospital construction aid program. The bill had passed in the

\(^{11}\) Business Week, 16 January 1971, 22.

\(^{12}\) UAW Solidarity, March 1971, 3.
House of Representatives by a 177-159 vote, and in the Senate, 68-13. The AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education contended that “the manpower legislation stood as one of the most important pieces of domestic legislation” because it had intended to establish for the first time “federally-supported public service employment.” The bill would have enabled local and state governments and nonprofit institutions such as community hospitals to hire unemployed workers for needed services, with the federal government paying 80 percent of payroll costs. Both Meany and Woodcock condemned Nixon for distorting the bill’s language and intent in his veto statement. Labor leaders viewed the bill as indispensable to creating “useful jobs needed by the community,” not “dead-end, make-work jobs,” as Nixon called them.  

The first months of 1971 were undoubtedly one of lowest points of Nixon’s first term as president. In his memoirs, he admitted that the administration’s problems were so overwhelming that even his nomination for reelection in 1972 was being questioned.  

In February 1971, the construction industry presented a profound challenge to Nixon’s ability to control the inflationary spiral. The nation’s largest industry had negotiated first-year wage increases averaging 8 percent; to administration officials, something close to 6 percent would be justified. The president had two options. He could institute a clampdown on construction prices and wages under the authority granted to him by

---

13 Memo from COPE, Committee on Political Education, AFL-CIO (January 4, 1971), 1, 3, Folder 17, Box 031, COPE Research Files, GMMA.


15 “Wage-price guides: hard hats only?” The Christian Science Monitor, 30 March 1971, Folder 17, Box 031, COPE Research Files, GMMA.
Congress—despite his opposition—in August 1970. Or he could suspend the Davis-Bacon bill that since 1931 required contractors to pay union rates on federal or federally supported construction projects. Despite advice to the contrary, Nixon chose to suspend the Davis-Bacon bill and thus permit federal construction contracts to be negotiated below prevailing wage rates.

Unions regarded this action as union busting. Construction firms that were unionized were alarmed at the possibility of losing contracts to nonunion contractors. Nixon’s decision caused a flurry of activity among union leaders who viewed it as a crackdown on unions. Meany made it clear that the AFL-CIO did not consider the administration’s effort to restrain construction wages even-handed or workable. “It is absolutely, completely unfair to make the construction worker the whipping boy,” the AFL-CIO president insisted. In an April Senate appearance, Meany roasted Arthur F. Burns, one of the architects of the administration’s economic policy and chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. Meany lashed out at the administration’s “double standard” of rewarding big business and banks while demanding wage restraints from working people. In the AFL-CIO leadership’s view, the Nixon Administration intended to cover up the failure of its economic policies by making a “scapegoat” of American workers.16

In May 1971, a Gallup survey indicated that public concern over inflation was greater than during the 1958 recession. The Vietnam War continued to be named as the

---

country's top problem but economic issues were now a close second.¹⁷ A few months later, public confidence in the Nixon Administration's game plan reached a new low. More than five million workers were unemployed and several million more were working less than full-time because of production cutbacks. Unemployment rates for construction workers were up to 9.6 percent, 10.1 percent for African-Americans and 10.1 percent for young men 20 to 24 years of age.¹⁸

By June 1971, the CEA seriously doubted that gradualism could work. Nixon's economic advisors seemed to be slowly metamorphosing into Keynesians. There were calls for a 7.5 percent growth in the money supply over 1972, an 8-million tax cut and even wage-price controls. Years later, Nixon stated:

> The economy remained sluggish in the early months of 1971. There were signs of improvement ahead, but patience had worn thin and we ran out of time. Demands for action poured down on the White House from all sides. Media criticism of our policies became intense. Republicans as well as Democrats reflected the pressure they were receiving from their constituents and vociferously called for new policies.¹⁹

On August 13, the president and his top economic advisors left Washington D.C. for a secret meeting at Camp David. The key figures making the trip were Treasury Secretary John Connally, head of the OMB George Schultz, chairman of the Federal Reserve Arthur Burns, and chairman of the CEA Paul McCracken. As Nixon recalled, they were

---


¹⁹ Nixon, 517.
"running out of time." The president’s chances of reelection depended largely on his successful handling of the economy.

The administration desperately needed to find a way to promote economic recovery and reduce unemployment while solving the problems of inflation and the international standing of the dollar. The New Economic Policy (NEP) agreed upon during the Camp David meeting was an all-out war on the nation’s economic woes. The new plan relied largely on three key measures. First, Nixon’s advisors expected a series of tax cuts for business and individuals to stimulate the economy and bring down unemployment rates. Secondly, a 4.7 million-dollar cut in federal spending along with a 90-day freeze on wages and prices would supposedly cool off the inflationary spiral. And thirdly, the president’s top aids argued that the termination of the dollar-gold convertibility and a 10 percent border tax on imports would protect the dollar and the country’s economic position in the international scene.\footnote{Collins, 120-121; Matusow, 150.}

On August 1, 1971, the \textit{New York Times} pointed out, "It may well be, as President Nixon’s top advisors have been suggesting, that with more patience and persistence everything will work out fine. But the ranks of the doubters seem to be growing steadily and substantially."\footnote{\textit{New York Times}, 1 August 1 1971, Section III, 1.} Two weeks later, the president unveiled "the most comprehensive New Economic Policy to be undertaken by this nation in four decades." \textit{Time} compared Nixon’s swift reverse in policy to the sweeping changes introduced during the first hundred days of the New Deal in 1933. Faced with mounting inflation and unemployment, the president imposed direct controls on prices and wages for the first
time since the Korean War and committed the federal government to a major role in businesses’ pay and pricing decisions. When Nixon announced the wage-price freeze, the president based his action on the Economic Stabilization Act of 1970. This law granted stand-by powers to the president to “issue such orders as he may deem appropriate to stabilize prices, rents, wages and salaries.” Ironically, Nixon had vigorously opposed the bill and insisted that he would never use it. Not only was the president taking the Democrats' advice in economic matters, he was also resorting to legislation that the opposition party had forced upon him.

The most controversial element in Nixon's package was the freeze on prices, wages, rents and dividends for a 90-day period. Labor leaders quickly spelled out their objections to the president’s grand design for economic recovery. Meany was outraged at what he considered a highly discriminatory program that favored big business at the expense of workers. Wages were frozen but there was no freeze on interest rates, profits, stocks, the price of land, capital gains and dividends. Employers, the AFL-CIO president argued, would be happy to enforce the wage freeze but there was no effective machinery to enforce price controls.

On August 19, the AFL-CIO Council issued a report that described the freeze as "unequitable, unjust, unfair and unworkable." The practical effect of the president’s design for recovery was to nullify every collective bargaining agreement that provided a wage or salary adjustment during the 90-day period. The statement concluded with a pledge that the AFL-CIO Executive Council had made on other occasions since 1966:

We will cooperate with fair, equitable, across-the board mandatory controls on all costs, prices and incomes including profits, interest rates, dividends and executive

---

22 *Time*, 30 August 1971, 8.
compensation as well as workers’ wages and salaries. The president’s program
does not meet that test.²³

Within forty-eight hours of the president announcing his new game plan, the
UAW International Executive Board met in special session to analyze the implications of
the freeze. The Board unanimously agreed that the union would not permit abrogation of
wage provisions, including its cost-of-living and annual improvement factor clauses. The
UAW board also authorized Woodcock to propose to Meany and Teamsters president
Frank Fitzsimmons “joint action” to mobilize other unions against the wage freeze. In an
August 18 wire sent to the AFL-CIO chieftain, Woodcock stated: “we are ready to join
with you and all of American labor in necessary action to obtain an economic policy in
the interests of the broad mass of the American people.”²⁴ Labor leaders appeared to be
united on their all-out campaign against Nixon’s order. Woodcock’s appearance at
Meany’s Washington office shortly thereafter fueled press speculation that the UAW
might soon re-affiliate with the AFL-CIO.

Shortly after the AFL-CIO report was issued, a group of labor representatives was
invited to the White House to meet with the president, John Connally, George Schultz,
Paul McCracken, Arthur Burns, Hebert Stein and Jim Hogson, the men in charge of
making the wage-price freeze work. The Cost of Living Council, under the chairmanship
of Treasury Secretary Connally, was the agency empowered to impose the controls. “We

Folder 2, Box 4, Leonard Woodcock Papers, UAW President’s Office, Wayne State
University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs (Hereafter WSUA).

²⁴ Leonard Woodcock’s wire to George Meany, Folder 2, Box 4, Leonard Woodcock
Papers, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.
told them,” recalled Meany, “that we would suggest the establishment of an independent, voluntary agency free from government control, of a tripartite nature, similar to the War Labor Board of World War II.” The AFL-CIO president’s recommendation eventually shaped Phase II of Nixon’s new program, which was to begin on November 13 when the 90-day freeze on prices and wages expired. The administration’s NEP in general and the price and wage controls in particular earned considerable public approval. Trade unionists were the biggest exception. This posed a serious problem for Nixon as the president was convinced that his building of a New Majority depended largely on organized labor’s support. Before Phase I was over, Nixon set out to make peace with the upper echelons of the labor leadership.

The administration’s first conciliatory gesture came on October 5. Labor Secretary James Hogson announced that the president had agreed to the AFL-CIO’s plan for an independent voluntary agency. The three major economic watchdogs to police Phase II of the program would be the Price Commission and two semiautonomous groups, the Cost of Living Council and the Pay Board. The Price Commission, composed of several private citizens appointed by the president, was to develop price and rent guidelines and to provide supervision, interpretation and enforcement. The fifteen-member Pay Board would be composed equally of representatives of labor, business and the public. The five union leaders would be Woodcock, Meany, Fitzsimmons of the Teamsters, I. W. Abel of the Steelworkers, and Floyed E. Smith of the Machinists. This agency would set up wage yardsticks and see that labor and business respected them.

After the brief television address in which the president announced the guidelines for Phase II, Meany told the press, “Speaking for organized labor, we will agree to help make it work.”

Union leaders’ optimism about labor’s participation in the enforcement of an equitable wage-price freeze soon disappeared. It was not clear to the AFL-CIO Executive Council that the Pay Board would be a truly independent agency, and Meany demanded total autonomy. “We were not going to provide a facade for an agency that really was not voluntary, but was under government control,” Meany claimed. In an October 11 Memorandum, Nixon reassured the Pay Board’s labor representatives that the Cost of Living Council would not “approve, revise, veto or revoke specific standards or criteria developed by the Pay Board and Price Commission.”

The veto issue clarified, labor leaders then had serious objections to Nixon’s choice of public representatives for the board. Judge George Bolt, the appointed chairman of the Pay Board, was on the federal payroll. The second member, William Weber, had been on the government payroll from January 1969 until October 21, 1971, when he became a public representative. Another board member was William Caples, a retired businessman who had spent most of his life in industry as executive vice-president of Inland Steel Company. The fourth and fifth members were Kevin Gordon and Dr. Neil H. Jacoby. Gordon was from the Brookings Institution and one-time Director of the Budget and Jacoby was a conservative economist from the Council of Economic

---

26 Newsweek, 18 October 18 1971, 26.

27 Quoted by Meany in his opening remarks to the ninth convention. AFL-CIO American Federationist, December 1971, 4.
Advisors during the Eisenhower Administration. Considering the public members, Meany concluded that being on the board was like “playing with loaded dice.” The AFL-CIO president saw “very little hope for equity.”

The rift between organized labor and the Nixon Administration deepened in November when the business and public representatives of the Pay Board refused to grant retroactive wage increases that fell due during the freeze period of Phase I. In an attempt to confront labor on its own turf, Nixon attended the AFL-CIO Convention in Bal Harbour, Florida, and delivered a speech that received, at best, polite applause. Nixon’s message was clear: the administration would press wage-price controls whether labor liked it or not. In his address to the convention the day before, Meany had said: “If the President of the United States doesn’t want our membership on the Pay Board on our terms, he knows what he can do.” In his speech, Nixon asserted that the AFL-CIO president was correct: “A great majority of the American people, and a majority of union members want to stop the rise in the cost of living – and that’s what we are going to do.” Nixon’s presence at the convention made headlines in all the major newspapers. Most reports said that the president was shocked and angered when Meany banged his gavel and ordered delegates back to their seats and added, “We will now proceed with Act II.”

---


The AFL-CIO Executive Council stood firm in its criticism of the administration’s wage and price control mechanisms, issuing a scathing resolution on labor’s role on the Pay Board. The statement made two major accusations. The board’s public members, the AFL-CIO council claimed, were “not independent but rather ... handmaidens of the Administration.” The second accusation referred to the Pay Board rulings against wage increases due contractually during the 90-day freeze: “We flatly reject the concept that anyone,” stated the report, “has the power to abrogate any legal collective bargaining agreement.”

The president did not miss the chance to exploit the rift between organized labor and his administration and to speak over the labor leaders’ heads to working people, the middle Americans whom he had targeted. Nixon had done this during the 1968 presidential campaign when he spoke to the “forgotten American” and again in 1970, when he praised the hard-hats for their pro-war march down Wall Street. In the midst of the controversy over the wage-price freeze, the Administration brought up the old question of “who represents labor?” Government officials pointed out that only 25 percent of the American work force of 80 million people were unionized and that the AFL-CIO unions represented only 16 percent of workers. Treasury Secretary John Connally told the press: “We cannot permit one man to put himself above the interest of all the working people of this country. He does not represent all of those people.”


Surveys conducted after Nixon's announcement of the wage-price freeze gave substance to the accusation that labor leaders were "out of touch" with their membership. According to an August Gallup poll, seven in ten Americans approved of the president's new economic program: 46 percent approved of it strongly and 22 percent only mildly. The report stressed that 91 percent of the persons interviewed had heard or read about the president's 90-day program, "the highest awareness figures registered in Gallup surveys in recent years." In October, Albert E. Sindlinger took a consumer confidence poll for Time. His findings appeared to confirm the results of the August Gallup Survey. Of 1,114 people polled, 73 percent thought that the freeze was a good economic measure, while 16 percent thought that it was not. The survey results among union members were slightly different. When asked if they thought that Meany and Woodcock were right in their opposition to the freeze, 37 percent agreed with the labor leaders while 54 percent disagreed. In non-union households, 20 percent considered that the leaders were right and 60 percent that they were wrong.

In March 1972, the clash between organized labor's leadership and the Nixon Administration reached a climax when the International Longshore and Warehouse Workers Union (ILWU) won a strike with a 21 percent wage increase. The ILWU's gains violated the Pay Board standards that set a ceiling for annual wage increases at 5.5 percent. Harry Bridges, the West Coast dockworkers' leader, threatened to resume the strike if the Board reduced the settlement. The Pay Board responded on March 16 by


cutting the ILWU’s contract from 21 percent to 16 percent. Bridges eventually capitulated, handing the Pay Board an important victory. Two months later, the Board applied the ILWU settlement formula to the Atlantic and Gulf contracts negotiated by the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA). First-year wage increases were cut from 15 percent to 12 percent in some ports and from 12 percent to 9 percent in others. The Pay Board’s actions won it the respect of those Americans who regarded the unions’ gains as inflationary.

The AFL-CIO president and three other labor members walked off the Pay Board in protest. In a unanimously adopted statement, the AFL-CIO Executive Council stated: “We will not be part of the window-dressing of a system of unfair and inequitable government control of wages, for the benefit of business profits.” Meany, Abel of the Steelworkers and Floyd E. Smith of the Machinists resigned immediately. Woodcock resigned the following day after a meeting with the UAW Executive Council. Teamsters president Fitzsimmons decided to remain on the board although he was said to be dissatisfied with its composition and major decisions. By the time the labor leaders left the Board, however, almost all control procedures and policies had been formulated and the year’s major bargaining problems had been settled. Despite the labor leaders’ indignation at the Pay Board’s wage cuts, Newsweek contended, “it was politics more than economics that compelled the labor members to quit even then.”

---

34 Newsweek, 27 March 1972, 83.

35 Matusow, 197.

Soon after the labor representatives’ resignations, Nixon announced a revamped Pay Board. The tripartite structure was dropped and a single public unit set up. The new board would consist of the five public members, labor leader Fitzsimmons, and a businessman to be selected by Nixon. The seven new board members would represent “the public,” Nixon said. The president did not miss the opportunity to win support for the new arrangement by pitting union members against non-unionized workers. After accusing the three labor leaders of being “selfish and irresponsible,” Nixon said:

As president, I cannot permit any leader representing a special interest, no matter how powerful, to torpedo and sink a program which is needed to protect the public interest.  

Nixon figured that there might be resentment among nonunion workers over the wage increases that the most powerful unions won for their unions. An attack on the labor bosses, he thought, could win blue-collar voters.

In the months that followed the labor walkout from the Pay Board, the president’s fortune shifted dramatically. Early in 1971, few political analysts would have predicted a Nixon landslide but in 1972 the incumbent swept the electoral map of the United States except for liberal Massachusetts and the mostly African-American District of Columbia. Many different factors contributed to the record defection of Democratic voters and the dramatic alteration of traditional voting patterns. But Nixon’s decision to capitalize on the grievances of “Middle America” and downplay the Economic Issue was crucial. The president’s strategy was to concentrate his efforts on stimulating a pre-election economic

---

boom and on capturing the blue-collar vote. As Matusow puts it, "1972 was the year everything seemed to break right for Richard Nixon."\(^{38}\)

On the home front, Nixon used his New Economic Policy in an effort to steal away from the Democrats their key issue, the economy. As the 1972 presidential campaign approached, Democratic politicians struggled to turn the Economic Issue against the administration once again. Criticism of Nixon’s New Economic Policy was varied. Senator Edmund Muskie argued that the president had taken too long to react to the faltering economy. In two and a half years, Muskie stated, Nixon’s economic policy had been “no economic policy.” Senator George McGovern contended that the administration’s tax proposals benefited only businesses and hurt the working man and woman and the middle-class taxpayer. To Senator Hubert Humphrey, the new policies were not stimulative enough to solve the problem of rising unemployment. “What the administration just does not understand,” insisted Humphrey, “is that the No.1 domestic priority of the nation is jobs, jobs, jobs, jobs.”\(^{39}\)

The Democratic senators’ indictments were well grounded. Yet Nixon had made Democratic proposals the heart of his economic programs. The president thus left his critics with few additional suggestions to make. To the Democrats’ dismay, by the first anniversary of Nixon’s New Economic Policy, most analysts rated it as “a success.” As the presidential campaign heated up, the administration talked only about the previous year. Herbert Stein, then chairman of the CEA, recounted the good economic tidings:

Production and employment are rising strongly. Unemployment is declining.

\(^{38}\) Matusow, 182.

\(^{39}\) *Business Week*, 8 January 1972, 16.
The rate of inflation has been reduced. Our international economic position is improving. These favorable trends will almost certainly continue throughout the year.\footnote{Business Week, 29 July 1972, 16.}

Under Phase II, inflation had fallen from 4.9 percent in 1970 to 3.2 percent. In the second quarter of 1971, real output had grown 8.9 percent. The least satisfactory progress had been made in reducing unemployment, but Nixon’s advisors expected it to be around 5 percent by the end of 1972.

The president also scored a couple of important victories on foreign policy issues. By late 1971, with increasingly powerful North Vietnamese forces to China’s south and Soviet forces aligned all along their country’s northern borders, Chinese leaders decided to seek a rapprochement with the United States. Nixon exploited that decision to normalize diplomatic relations with China. His ten-day visit to China in February 1972 was a brilliant diplomatic move that forced the Soviets to invite Nixon to Moscow for a summit of their own in May 1972. Both trips took place with considerable fanfare. The administration’s surprising reversal in foreign policy seemed to indicate a softening of the conservative view of the communist regimes. A nationwide Gallup survey conducted at the close of Nixon’s summit meetings with Soviet Party leader Leonid Brezhnev showed Nixon’s popularity at its highest point in nearly two years. Sixty-one percent of U.S. citizens approved of the way the president was handling his duties as Chief Executive.\footnote{The Gallup Poll Cumulative Index, Report No. 84, June 1972, 1-2.}

The apparent success of Nixon’s “Vietnamization” program also contributed to his boost in popularity. By reducing U.S. troops in Indochina from 536,000 in 1969 to 24,000 in
December 1972, Nixon neutralized the Vietnam War issue and gradually removed it from the center of American politics.\(^4\)

The Democrats’ self-destructing behavior also increased Nixon’s chances for re-election. They nominated as their presidential candidate George McGovern, a liberal senator who conservatives tagged as the proponent of the three A’s: “Acid, Abortion and Amnesty.” Despite the support of liberal Democrats and the efforts of the United Automobile Workers and other unions, McGovern proved anathema to large sections of an American electorate. When asked in a June 1971 Gallup poll how they would describe their political philosophy, 11 percent of those interviewed responded “very conservative;” 28 percent “fairly conservative” and 29 percent “middle of the road.” Nineteen percent considered themselves “fairly liberal” and only 7 percent “very liberal.”\(^5\) In such a political climate, Nixon’s efforts to court the “Silent Majority” paid off.

In the first half of the 1972 presidential campaign, the Democratic Party went through an unprecedented series of twenty-three primaries. The season extended over a four-month period, the first primary taking place in New Hampshire on March 7 and the last one in New York on June 20. During the 1972 State of the Union Message, Nixon won an appreciative chuckle from the audience at Congress when he remarked: “There are more candidates for the Presidency in this chamber today than there probably have been at any time in the whole history of the Republic.” Nixon was referring to Maine’s


Senator Edmund Muskie, Minnesota’s Hubert Humphrey, and Massachusetts’ Edward M. Kennedy. Other potential candidates such as George McGovern and Henry Jackson missed the speech because they were campaigning.44

When McGovern declared his candidacy in January 1971, he expressed his concern about American politics:

The most painful new phrase in American political vocabulary is “credibility gap” — the gap between rhetoric and reality. Put bluntly, it means that people no longer believe what their leaders tell them... The kind of campaign I intend to run will rest on candor and reason... I make one pledge above all others — to seek and speak the truth with all the resources of mind and spirit I command.45

The key elements on the Democratic candidate’s platform were an immediate withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, important cuts in defense spending, and redistribution of income. By 1972, McGovern’s position on the Vietnamese conflict was widely known. In fact, his proposal to slash the Pentagon budget by $32 billion over a three-year period was more controversial. Basically, this would mean cutting armed forces and civilian Pentagon employees by nearly 30 percent. Apart from the practical and political problems of laying people off, American allies might be disconcerted at such a defense cut. Simultaneously, McGovern contended that his major goal was to provide employment for every able-bodied American. If elected president, the Democratic candidate claimed, he would tell American people, “Look, everybody who wants work is going to have a job. We don’t know quite yet what you’ll be doing, but

44 “Mr. Nixon takes the hard road,” Newsweek, 31 January 1972, 11.

you're going to have a good job. And the Government is going to guarantee employment at decent wages."

As for income redistribution, McGovern's program involved profound changes. He proposed to raise the corporation tax rate from 48 percent back to 52 percent, its level before the tax reform of 1964, to end investment tax credit, and to tighten depreciation rules. In practical terms, this meant not only less profits for the corporations but also reduced dividends for stockholders. McGovern's most controversial proposal — and eventually worst fiasco — was the "Demogrant." He would substitute welfare payments with minimum income grants of about $1,000 per person annually. A family of four without any income would receive $4,000 a year. A family of four making $8,000 a year, would keep $2,000. Families with incomes above $12,000 would be taxed at progressively higher rates. In this way, about $43 billion a year would be shifted from the more affluent to the relatively poor. Median family income in 1972 was $11,000. In sum, those who barely made ends meet would be paying higher taxes to support the very poor. During the California primary, Hubert Humphrey dealt a fatal blow to McGovern's plan. Humphrey correctly pointed out that the program would, for instance, require an unmarried secretary earning $8,000 to pay $567 in additional taxes; a family of four making $12,000, would have an increase of $409.

As chairman of a Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection prior to the Democratic National Convention in 1972, McGovern helped enact party reforms that

---


gave increased representation to minority groups at the convention. After the Democrats' Chicago debacle in 1968, the party modified the mechanics of its delegate selection to make the whole process more democratic and "open." Primaries rather than the state party caucuses became the major route of delegate selection. Before 1972 most states did not rely on the primaries to choose delegates to the presidential nominating convention. At the Chicago convention, for instance, organized labor had 200 delegates and 100 alternates among the 3,500 present. Under the then-existing rules, most of them were political appointees. That would not be the case in 1972.

Primary procedures varied substantially from state to state. In "delegate primaries," voters only selected the delegates, but in the "binding primaries" the elected delegates were obliged to back the specific candidates who had won the primary. In South Dakota and California, voters cast their ballots for a complete slate of delegates committed to a single candidate, but they did not know the delegates' names. In New York, the opposite happened: voters knew the delegates' names, but not whom they would support at the convention. The diverse and intricate nature of the multi-candidate twenty-three primaries made it difficult to predict the future of the Democratic Party in 1972.

In February 1972, several Democratic presidential candidates attended a meeting of the AFL-CIO Executive Council in Miami Beach, hoping to woo the vote of their old supporters in organized labor. Humphrey, "the darling of labor for 25 years," was confident about the union leaders' backing, but the AFL-CIO Council had decided not to


49 White, 72.
endorse any Democratic candidate before the July party convention. AFL-CIO hardliners considered Edmund Muskie, who appeared at the time one of the most promising Democratic candidates, to be “dangerously soft” on the Vietnam War. Two other hopefuls were also present: Indiana’s Vance Hartke and Washington’ Henry Jackson. Though considered “friends of labor,” these two candidates’ chances of success were very slim.

Forty years before, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had transformed the Democratic Party into a coalition that allowed it to win seven of the next ten presidential elections. Roosevelt’s coalition included the South, family farmers, blue-collar workers in the big cities, minority groups and liberals. In the evolution of the Democratic Party, 1972 was a watershed year because George McGovern, the Democratic candidate who few predicted would win the nomination, channeled his energies into capturing the vote of the intellectuals, the middle-class suburbanites and the young. In most states, McGovern focused directly on his antiwar constituency and then tried to expand his appeal to the discontented working class. During the Democratic Party primaries, the work of McGovern’s active followers was crucial in rallying support at the local level. Journalist Jules Witcover described the senator’s “grassroots leaders” as “independent and highly motivated “cause people,” who were strongly committed to registration drives, canvassing, and fund-raising.  

In May 1972, just before the California primary, a Gallup survey indicated that McGovern was in a three-way tie for the nomination with Hubert Humphrey and George

---

Wallace. The South Dakota Senator had two advantages over his rivals. He was stronger than the other Democratic candidates among voters who considered themselves independents, and he had more followers among college-educated and higher income voters. These groups usually vote in larger numbers in the primaries and work harder to win support during the elections. According to the Gallup poll, Democrats and independents with college background preferred McGovern over Humphrey by a 3 to 1 margin. The California primary was crucial because the winner would take all of the state’s 271 delegates to the nominating convention.

The Democratic primaries highlighted the divisive forces that were tearing at the party in the spring of 1972. Humphrey won four primaries, drawing 4 million popular votes, but lost to McGovern in California and thus fell behind in delegates. Humphrey was “an old face” in American politics and voters often perceived his attempts to cater to both the liberal and conservative wings of the Democratic Party as “fence-sitting.” By winning the Michigan and Maryland primaries, Alabama Governor George Wallace was strengthening his position as a national rather than a regional candidate. Yet his race ended abruptly on May 15 when he was shot and left paralyzed. Wallace had almost managed to match Humphrey’s delegate total. Maine Senator Edmund Muskie, who seemed to be the leading candidate in national polls early in the year, abandoned his candidacy after losing to McGovern in Massachusetts and to Humphrey in Pennsylvania. By that time, he had won two primaries and captured over 1.6 million popular votes.

---


With the middle-income vote, McGovern won the primaries in Wisconsin, Massachusetts and Oregon. He lost to Humphrey in Pennsylvania and Ohio and to Wallace in Michigan, three industrial states. These returns clearly indicated that the Democrats would have a very difficult time unifying their party and that the blue-collar vote was deeply divided. Hubert Humphrey was largely perceived as a liberal Democrat who offered programmatic solutions to social problems. Wallace remained the epitome of the racist Southerner who blamed liberalism and its social programs for the problems of “the little man.” By late June, McGovern had won the last six primaries and passed the most critical test in California. The South Dakotan had a potential total of over 1,300 delegate votes, fewer than 200 short of a first ballot victory at the Democratic Convention. As the 1972 National Convention approached, the Democrats were so divided that many feared the party would splinter. Although the South Dakotan had neither a majority of delegates actually pledged to vote for him nor sufficient votes to win the nomination, he was clearly the front-runner.

*Newsweek* stated that those who attended the Democratic convention “were as unlikely and as unpredictable a group as ever assembled under the banner of a major party to pick a candidate for president.” The report’s description of hundreds of delegates as “hippies,” “yippies,” and “zippies” was a clear indication of the mainstream media’s bias against the left-liberal wing of the party. There were certainly more young people, more women, more African-Americans and more Mexican-Americans, but they were not necessarily “hippies,” “yippies,” or “zippies.” The young dissenters who
supported the South Dakota senator were matched by a large number of old timers who rallied round the “Anybody But McGovern” (ABM) movement.\(^{53}\)

The ABM alliance was made up of Democrats who had traditionally controlled the presidential nominations: labor leaders, city bosses, veteran congressmen, and a variety of southerners. McGovern’s rivals—Humphrey, Muskie and Wallace—joined the movement. Probably no one did more than Meany and other AFL-CIO labor politicians to stop McGovern from receiving the Democratic presidential nomination. The AFL-CIO delegates in the Credentials Committee objected to McGovern’s claiming all of California’s 271 delegates. The South Dakotan had won 44 percent of the vote in the primary so members of the ABM movement contended that McGovern was entitled to only 120 delegates. After submitting the issue to balloting, however, the Credentials Committee seated all of McGovern’s 271 votes California delegates. Even with the support of organized labor, the “old party” of city bosses, veteran congressmen and Southerners was outnumbered. The ABM movement failed and the setback had long-lasting effects for both organized labor and national politics. Some Democrats feared that McGovern might lose horribly; others feared that he might win.\(^{54}\)

Ben Wattenberg, who thought Democrats might lose the presidential election on the Social Issue, said of the McGovern-dominated Platform Committee:

Their struggle is between the wild wing and the mild wing; what they’re doing is selling out their true believers on things like pot, amnesty and abortion. There

---


\(^{54}\) White, 170-175.
won't be any riots in Miami because the people who rioted in Chicago are on the Platform Committee—they outnumber us by three or four to one.\(^{55}\)

"Us" was the old party bosses. In 1968, 2.6 percent of the Democratic delegates were under thirty; 5.5 percent were African-American and 13 percent were women. In 1972, the convention's demographic breakdown looked very different: 23 percent of delegates under thirty, 15 percent were African-American and 38 percent were female. In 1968, the candidate most acceptable to the regular organization leaders won the nomination after having entered few primaries. In 1972, the candidate who lacked the party's organizational support won the nomination thanks to the primaries and the aggressive campaign of his followers. Yet the primaries had polarized the Democratic Party's constituencies along ideological lines and eventually deprived McGovern of the organizational support necessary to win a presidential election.

After the convention, Meany steered the AFL-CIO into a neutral course in the presidential race. The Democratic candidate was anathema to the federation's president and the Cold War establishment. McGovern was too "soft" on communism for the cold warriors to accept. The South Dakotan's attitude towards the Soviet Union was not new: in 1948, he had endorsed Henry Wallace, the communist-supported Progressive Party candidate. Although McGovern had an almost perfect congressional voting record on labor issues, that was not enough for the AFL-CIO president. For the first time in almost forty years organized labor did not endorse a Democratic presidential ticket. Meany explained:

\[\text{Under the circumstances, the AFL-CIO will refrain from endorsing either candidate for the office of President of the United States. Those circumstances call, rather, for the maximum concentration of effort upon the election of Senators}\]

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 161.
and Representatives whose records commend them to the working people of America.\textsuperscript{56}

The Executive Council’s decision barred any state or local AFL-CIO unit from supporting McGovern or Nixon, but the 117 member unions were free to adopt whatever position they wanted. This was hard blow for McGovern since he lost the use of the AFL-CIO’s political arm, the Committee on Political Education, and its war chest of approximately $6 million.

Yet not all labor leaders turned their backs on McGovern. After the nomination, the Democratic candidate’s strongest labor supporter was Leonard Woodcock, the president of the United Automobile Workers. Woodcock had initially backed Muskie but switched to McGovern when the Senator from Maine virtually abandoned the presidential race a month before the convention. In fact, Victor Reuther, the retiring director of International Affairs for the UAW, was the lonely voice for McGovern early in the year. Reuther was right in his prediction that substantial backing from the young—both college students and workers—would take McGovern to the nomination. “McGoven’s record is pro-labor,” Reuther insisted, “he only has to prove he can win.”\textsuperscript{57} As the presidential election approached, the South Dakota Senator’s voting record on labor issues became a matter of controversy, and McGovern found it increasingly difficult to prove that he could win.

\textsuperscript{56} George Meany’s Statement, Folder 4, Box 9, Rebhan Collection, UAW International Affairs Office, WSUA.

\textsuperscript{57} Sandy Grady, “Victor Reuther Keeps Role Of Maverick,” \textit{The Evening Bulletin}, 13 April 1972, B3, Folder 4, Box 9, Rebhan Collection, UAW International Affairs Office, WSUA.
McGovern's campaign quickly fumbled. Two weeks after the Miami Convention, Senator Thomas F. Eagleton of Missouri, the vice-presidential candidate, revealed that he had been hospitalized for treatment of emotional exhaustion and depression. Eagleton's qualifications for the vice presidency became the subject of nationwide debate. At first, McGovern pledged to support his running mate. He believed that Eagleton's past history of emotional illness could not and would not be a political issue. Under political pressure, however, the South Dakota senator persuaded Eagleton to withdraw his candidacy. R. Sargent Shriver, who had been director of the Peace Corps under John F. Kennedy and head of Lyndon B. Johnson's war on poverty program, replaced Eagleton. Shriver's appointment as vice-presidential candidate won McGovern the endorsement of some Democrat dissidents such as Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley. Republicans, however, skillfully exploited the Democratic candidate's indecisiveness as well as his last-minute attempts to appease the conservative elements in his party.\(^5\)

The Committee to Re-elect the President also did not miss the opportunity to exploit the weaknesses in McGovern's labor record. In October 1972, a newspaper revealed that a pamphlet denouncing the Democratic presidential candidate supposedly published by a labor organization — Labor For America Committee — had been paid for by Nixon's campaign committee. The document, which was entitled "Why Labor Can't Support McGovern," had originally been sent to delegates to the Democratic Convention and then mailed to union members across the country. The Committee to Re-elect the President had clearly violated the Corrupt Practices Act, which required that publications

attacking or supporting a candidate must contain the name of the organizations and individuals responsible for it. Kirby Jones, McGovern’s press secretary, referred to the publication as another act of sabotage by the Republicans, similar to the bugging of the Democratic headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington D.C. earlier that year.59

The document stated that although Senator McGovern had embraced a “new populism as a key campaign slogan,” he had “repeatedly voted wrong on legislation affecting working people and the trade union movement.” McGovern had supposedly distanced himself from the pro-labor liberal bloc on a number of civil rights issues, the Landum-Griffin bill, the 1960 and 1966 minimum wage bills, the 1966 unemployment compensation bill and health, education and welfare (HEW) appropriations, the 1968 Summer Jobs for Youth bill, and the repeal of 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act. Furthermore, the document stated, the Democratic candidate advocated wholesale resistance to the draft, had no comprehensive program to deal with crime and held an ambiguous position on the legalization of marijuana.60

The pamphlet also discussed McGovern’s position on foreign policy issues. The Democratic candidate, according to the document, saw communism as just “another economic system,” so he would cut the defense budget by $33 billion. As for the Vietnam War, McGovern would immediately withdraw the U.S. from Indochina: he believed that “begging was better than bombing,” the pamphlet said. The document pointed to the Democratic candidate’s supposed radicalism by discussing his position on


60 “A Response to “A Responsible Response,” Folder 27, Box 032, Series 3, George Meany Files, Office of the President, GMMA.
the three A's of amnesty, acid and abortion. McGovern, it was alleged, would extend amnesty to all those who had gone to jail or left the country to avoid the draft, would "regulate marijuana along the same lines as alcohol," and would legalize abortion.\(^{61}\)

The Communications Workers of America, which endorsed McGovern, became so upset over the "inaccurate and misleading charges" against the Democratic candidate that it published a pamphlet entitled "A Responsible Response to McGovern's Critics." The "pamphlets war," however, did not end there. The authors of "Why Labor Can't Support McGovern" issued "A Response to "A Responsible Response." The document admitted that their first evaluation of the McGovern's record had been inaccurate in a few instances. Yet "The Response to "the Responsible Response" insisted that the Democratic candidate's supporters "deliberately distorted McGovern's own statements."\(^{62}\) In fact, the differences in the appraisals of McGovern's congressional record often depended on which votes were regarded as "key" votes. At times the final passage of a law was considered; at times a vote on an amendment was. The contending groups obviously phrased the issues to suit their political purposes.

There were, however, a number of indisputable facts. McGovern's critics were wrong in their evaluation of the candidate's votes on civil rights issues. As regards the Landrum-Griffin bill and the repeal of 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act, McGovern's opponents were partly right. It was unfair to cite the Democratic senator's vote for the final passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act because the key vote was on an amendment and

\(^{61}\) "Why Labor Can't Support George McGovern," Folder 4, Box 6, Labor Today Collection, WSUA.

\(^{62}\) "A Response to "A Responsible Response," Folder 27, Box 032, Series 3, George Meany Files, Office of the President, GMMA.
McGovern had voted labor's way. In the case of 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act, the Democratic candidate admitted that he had failed to vote for repeal. For almost twenty years, labor leaders had tried to repeal the 14(b) provision of the Taft-Hartley Act that left it to state legislatures to permit or forbid unions to demand a union-shop proviso in their contracts. The AFL-CIO had several times intended to eliminate this restraint and leave the union-shop proviso to free bargaining. In 1966, the House of Representatives had already passed the repeal of 14(b). In the Senate, McGovern's vote was crucial and he had promised to vote labor's way. In the end, the Democratic senator did not honor his commitment. This "wrong" vote was one of the issues that the AFL-CIO president held against McGovern.  

The UAW also came out in defense of the South Dakota Senator. In a detailed discussion of McGovern's pro-labor voting record during fourteen years in Congress, UAW Solidarity contended that the Democratic candidate had supported UAW backed issues 73 times out of 76 key votes. The debate over McGovern's labor voting record became so intricate that it probably failed to go beyond the labor leadership circles and reach the rank-and-file. His position on the "three A's," however, was more controversial and better known as the opposition had picked on these issues in order to woo the vote of moderate Democrats.

During a Detroit rally in October 1972 before thousands of UAW members, McGovern attempted to clarify his views on abortion, marijuana and amnesty. The Democratic candidate considered abortion "a state issue" so a "McGovern

administration,” he insisted, “would take no action on it.” As for the legalization of marijuana, McGovern affirmed: “I don’t believe in legalized marijuana, but neither do I believe in sending teen-agers to a penitentiary for experimenting with this.” He also stressed his support for strict enforcement of laws against commercial sale of marijuana, especially to minors. As regards his amnesty program, McGovern insisted that his program would be similar to those ordered after other American wars and would apply to persons who “on grounds of conscience [had] refused to take part in the [Vietnam] war.”

The split in the ranks of organized labor over the presidential election campaign made it difficult for McGovern to capture the blue-collar vote. The formation of the National Labor Committee for the Election of McGovern-Shriver, a fund-raising agency parallel to the AFL-CIO’s Committee on Political Education (COPE), further deepened the rift within labor. The new Committee was headed by one of Meany’s oldest and closest collaborators, Joseph D. Keenan, secretary treasurer of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. The McGovern election committee also included other members of the AFL-CIO Executive Council: Joseph A. Bierne, the president of the Communications Workers of America and Floyd E. Smith, the president of the International Association of Machinists. The creation of this National Labor Committee was a few labor leaders’ desperate attempt to stop Nixon and a clear challenge to Meany’s political leadership.

In mid-August, Woodcock announced that the UAW had contributed $75,000 to the McGovern-Shriver campaign committee and that the money came entirely from

---

64 “McGovern Hits,” UAW Solidarity, October 1972, 10.
UAW members. Secret balloting by approximately 4,500 local UAW leaders indicated that 83.8 percent supported the McGovern-Shriver ticket. By October, thirty-eight international unions had endorsed the Democrats. With the exception of the UE, the United Auto Workers, the Distributive Workers of America and the Longshoreman’s and Warehousemen’s Union, all were affiliates of the AFL-CIO. The unions on the committee represented over eight million working men and women.  

After three years of Nixon policies, McGovern expected the persistent economic concerns of the American people to play a crucial role in the voters’ final decision. Unemployment, inflation and tax inequities still seemed to exceed the worries expressed over social issues such as crime, school busing, and abortion. McGovern’s economic and tax program, however, was too liberal to capture the vote of the “Middle American.” His commitment to redistribute both income and the tax load had alienated the business community as well as the upper echelons of organized labor.

After the nominating convention, McGovern aids started to revise some of his most controversial programs. The Democratic candidate’s tax proposals were the first to be modified: instead of immediately increasing corporate taxes by about $17 billion, a McGovern administration would postpone tax reforms until 1975 and would add “only” $14 billion to corporate tax receipts. The defense budget would be slashed by $32 billion, but McGovern advisors stressed that these cuts would not leave displaced defense workers unemployed. As far as income redistribution was concerned, the original “Demogrant” plan that would have raised the tax bill for everyone with an income above

---

65 News From UAW, 18 August 18 1972, Folder 4, Box 9. Rebhan Collection, UAW International Affairs Office, WSUA.
$12,000 was modified. Instead of a $1,000 “Demogrant” to families of four with an annual income of up to $12,000, a tax credit would be given to families of four with incomes up to $20,000, either by cash payment or tax reduction.\(^6\)

This modification attempted to dispel the fears of middle-class voters. The initial proposal for income redistribution overlooked the fact that about forty percent of American families had annual incomes of over $12,000 and McGovern’s plan would have increased their tax burden. In September, after additional changes, the income redistribution plan metamorphosed into an “income insurance plan.” Social Security would be expanded to cover 3 million more aged, blind and disabled Americans who would otherwise be on welfare, and the minimum monthly benefits would be raised to $150. Families of four with no other income would receive an annual minimum of $4,000. McGovern appeared to have dropped altogether the idea of supplementing workers’ incomes up to $20,00 for a family of four. “The senator’s new plan,” Business Week accurately pointed out, “is difficult to distinguish from that of the Nixon Administration.”\(^67\)

The Democratic Party strategy during the presidential campaign contained a number of contradictions. While McGovern advisors tried hard to take the radical sting out of the Democratic platform’s economic proposals, their candidate continued to use clearly anti-business rhetoric. “The cynical manipulative forces at the top of the economic pyramid,” McGovern said at a political rally in the South, “are guiding the

\(^{6}\)“McGovern revises his economics text,” Business Week, 15 July 1972, 18-21.

destinies of those at the low end of the scale.” In a similar vein, on Meet the Press, McGovern described his proposals in the following way: he was “for the blue-collar worker, for individual farmers as against corporate farmers, for small business as against big corporations like ITT.”

This kind of statements not only scared businessmen and high-income earners but led McGovern’s critics to compare him to a nineteenth-century populist. Fortune editor A. James Reichley’s appraisal was a clear example of such an accusation. “When McGovern attacks the depredations of the corporations – the only subject besides the war that really seems to excite him,” Reichley contended, “he burns with the old evangelical fire of turn-of-the-century populists, such as Jennings Bryan and Tom Watson of Georgia.” Although the Fortune editor’s description was an over-simplification, there was some truth to it. Moreover, McGovern supporters in the labor camp often echoed the Democratic candidate’s populist and anti-business rhetoric as they assailed the administration’s economic policies.

In order to rally support for the McGovern-Shriver ticket, the National Labor Committee’s strategy focused on the economic issues that concerned blue-collar workers most and portrayed Nixon as the candidate of the corporations and the wealthy. The various pamphlets that the Committee distributed among rank and file presented a laundry list of grievances against Nixon. Taxation was unfair because the administration

---


70 Reichley, 117.
had approved corporate tax cuts worth $80 billion. Wage-price controls had done little to remedy the problem of soaring food prices. The cost of living had increased 17.6 percent during the Nixon years. Moreover, unemployment continued to be a problem of paramount importance among workers: in 1969, there were 2.8 million unemployed; in 1972, the number had reached 4.7 million. Finally, the administration’s new economic policy had invalidated fairly negotiated contracts and put a 5 percent ceiling on wage increases.

McGovern, the National Labor Committee insisted, was a true supporter of the American worker. The Democratic candidate was against compulsory arbitration and wage controls which violated collective bargaining contracts and in favor of higher minimum wages, higher employment compensation, Medicare and greater social security benefits. Moreover, McGovern was aware of “industrial carnage” in the nation’s plants and had an eight-point program to “guarantee the American worker’s right to health and safety on the job.” His proposal included, for instance, the addition of 8,000 industrial safety inspectors and 4,000 hygienists to enforce rights under the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970.

If McGovern was such a pro-labor candidate, why did he find it so difficult to woo the blue-collar vote during the presidential election campaign? McGovern hoped that economic hardship would turn working-class voters away from Nixon. But by November 1972, the business cycle was rising strongly, surveys indicated that consumer

---


Confidence was increasing, and the fourth quarter GNP was expected to rise by 10 billion dollars over that of the third quarter. Moreover, in the second quarter of 1972, the unemployment picture seemed to brighten: it had come down a half point from its recession peak of over 6 percent and stayed at that level. For nonwhite workers the rate was still a high 9.7 percent but it had decreased from the 10.6 percent of the first quarter. For married men, the unemployment rate had dropped to 2.6 percent in August from an average of 3.2 percent throughout 1971.

By the time of the balloting, not only had Nixon managed to reduce criticism on the economic front but he had also neutralized the Vietnam War as the most divisive issue in American politics. Nixon’s proposal had always been “peace with honor,” a slow disengagement from Indochina while a peace settlement was negotiated. Two days before the presidential election, Henry Kissinger called a news conference and announced: “Peace is at hand.” Newspapers reported on a possible accord between the United States and Vietnam. The following day, however, negotiations halted when Nguyen Van Thieu, president of South Vietnam, denounced the settlement as a sell-out to the communists. There was no final agreement between the U.S. and Hanoi before the election day, but the announcement of progress in negotiations amounted to a timely, if cynical, diplomatic triumph for Nixon.

---


75 “Peace is at hand,” *Newsweek*, 6 November 1972, 33.
In contrast, McGovern called for an immediate and complete withdrawal of American forces from Indochina. Within 90 days of his inauguration, the Democratic candidate promised, his administration would remove remaining U.S. troops, stop bombing North Vietnam and providing military aid to South Vietnam. McGovern’s peace platform was based on a far-reaching critique of excessive defense spending and of the Cold War in general. If Vietnam would not be an issue by the time the presidential election approached, as many political observers claimed, the South Dakotan claimed that “Vietnam thinking” would surely be an issue. McGovern explained:

By “Vietnam thinking” I mean wasting our strength on paranoid defense policies while neglecting the needs of our own people [...] What I propose is that we spend all that is necessary for a prudent national defense, and no more. I propose that we conserve our limited resources [...] by repudiating the false world of old discredited myths, made up of blocs, puppets, and dominoes, facing instead a real world of today and the futures, with multiple ideologies and interests.  

This was too much for the devout cold warriors within organized labor’s ranks.

By September 1972, The New York Times reported: “The Nixon Administration and the labor leaders who have formally adopted a neutral position in the presidential race are developing an increasingly cordial relationship.” There were two cases in point: The International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the building and construction unions. The Teamsters, who endorsed Nixon, were pleased by the administration’s opposition to anti-strike legislation in the transportation industry. The construction workers, for their part, applauded the president for his opposition to racial quotas in hiring. A Democratic

---


campaign official summarized Nixon’s technique in seeking labor support in the following way:

Nixon gnaws around the edges of a worker’s life. He hasn’t touched the central trade union part. But he gnaws a little at the Catholic part, a little at the Polish part, a little at the patriotic part and a little at the anti-hippie part. After a while, he has an awful lot of that worker.  

The 1972 election returns seemed to indicate that Nixon’s labor strategy had been successful. The nation’s blue-collar workers-who made up a third of the electorate and represented since the 1930s the core vote of all Democratic presidential candidates- went for Nixon over McGovern by the ratio of 57 to 43 percent. Moreover, for the first time since the early 1930s a majority (54 percent) of members of labor union families voted the Republican ticket. Political analysts concluded that, having captured 62 percent of the votes, Nixon had finally succeeded in his quest to create a “New Republican Majority.” The Democratic coalition forged in the 1930s had finally collapsed. The president could safely claim that America’s “Silent Majority” had risen. As sociologist Jonathan Rieder contends:

In part, [the silent majority] emerged out of the center’s own efforts to name itself. But it also emerged from the efforts of others to capture and beguile it, most notably from the oratorical flourishes of Republicans, reactionaries, and conservatives who had their own ideological projects in mind.

---

78 “Nixon Wooing of Labor Vote Dates to 1970,” 12 October 12 1972, Folder 14, Box 031, COPE Research Files, GMMA.


80 Ibid.

But, had America clearly swung toward conservatism? Despite the landslide, a closer look at Nixon’s presidential election campaign indicates that the incumbent rallied the voters to a safe and solid middle ground. The 1972 Republican Party’s platform stated:

This year the choice is between moderate goals historically sought by both major parties and far-out goals of the far left...We invite our troubled friends of other political affiliations to join with us in a new coalition for progress.  

It was not difficult for Nixon to picture McGovern as the candidate of a small minority. Many citizens probably shared the Democratic candidate’s criticism of the tax system, the welfare system and economic policies, but his proposals did not seem workable. McGovern could never counter the charges that his economic plan would not only cause inflation but also a 50 percent increase in taxes. After the Miami convention, he was caught in a bind. In order to build a truly national base, McGovern needed to move towards the center. Yet the Democratic candidate could not jettison those positions that had rallied his ideological partisans.

In his post-convention campaign, McGovern gradually tempered most of his original proposals. The South Dakotan revised his tax reform and income distribution schemes, but he seldom brought them up in his speeches. As for defense spending, McGovern promised to keep local military facilities open almost everywhere he went. In the course of the campaign, even his Vietnam policy underwent changes. During convention week, McGovern issued a statement for Families for Immediate Release, an

---


organization of relatives of POW’s and servicemen missing in action. In order to accommodate their demands, McGovern promised that, while he would order an immediate cease-fire, end military aid to South Vietnam, and withdraw all U.S. military forces from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, he would maintain forces in Thailand and on the Gulf of Tonkin until POW’s were returned. The Thailand-Tonkin proviso was a departure from his previous position, which clearly stated that withdrawal of troops included Thailand and Tonkin, with no preconditions.  

If McGovern could not be trusted on Vietnam, what could he be trusted on? In spite of his good intentions, the Democratic candidate did not come across as sufficiently “presidential.” Although the Republicans extensively exploited the three “A’s”, McGovern himself was largely responsible for his political downfall. The result was a Nixon landslide.

The American electorate had not necessarily drifted to the right of the political spectrum, but the Republican candidate had certainly moved to the center. In 1947, on his first day in Congress, Nixon had said: “I was elected to smash the labor bosses.” In August 1972, President Nixon’s instruction to the Republican Platform Committee was: “There will be no anti-labor plank in this platform.” Over a two-year period, Nixon had in fact violated every single tenet of the conservative dogma, particularly deep deficits in the federal budget, militant opposition to major communist powers and non-intervention in the economy. In 1972, a well-known conservative won the re-election by presenting his party as the as the party of reform. While Nixon promised to bring the country

---


together under the banner of the “New Majority”, McGovern’s “new populism” picked up the rhetoric of class, which fostered division rather than unity and consensus.

“Nixon’s overwhelming victory,” an AFL-CIO American Federationist editor pointed out, “was not a victory of party and only peripherally a victory of person.”

Although Nixon carried an unprecedented total of 49 states for president, the Republican Party lost two Senate seats and one governorship, and while the G.O.P. won 13 House seats, the Democrats retained its majority in Congress. In view of the election results, Meany argued that the AFL-CIO’s decision to remain neutral in the presidential race and concentrate its efforts on the Congressional and gubernatorial elections had paid off. According to COPE, 57.5 percent of the candidates the federation supported won: in House races, 218 of 362, in Senate contests, 16 of 29, and in gubernatorial elections, 11 of 17. The AFL-CIO’s decision not to back McGovern had deepened the rift within the labor leadership. It was impossible to predict that a year later organized labor would call for the impeachment of the president. In 1972, only 53 percent of the voters were familiar with the Watergate charges, and only 3 percent thought it important enough for listing among their major concerns.


87 Ibid., 2.
CHAPTER 7
THE COLLAPSE OF POSTWAR PROSPERITY, 1973-1974

The American and world economies began sliding into sustained crisis as the 1960s came to a close and decline reached its lowest point during the 1974-1975 economic recession, the deepest since the 1930s. By 1973, when about 4.7 million workers were to negotiate new contracts, the post World War II accord between labor and capital had collapsed. The accord rested on a number of premises. On the one hand, organized labor accepted that pricing and production decisions were management prerogatives. On the other hand, unions sought rising real wages, greater employment security, and a safer work environment for their membership. At the same time, the government – due in large part to the pressure of organized labor- developed social welfare programs meant to improve the living standards of all workers, not only of unionized workers. Economists David Gordon, Richard Edwards and Michael Reich argue that “this accord effectively provided the framework, at least through the late 1960s, within which stable conditions of production fueled prosperity and production.”¹

Beginning in the late 1960s, the long-term trend toward rising income, increasing job security and improving working conditions began to reverse. As long as the terms of the labor-capital accord held, the relationship between unions and corporations was relatively peaceful. As the economy started to falter, the workers’ expectations were not met. In the second half of the 1960s, strike activity of all kinds – legal walkouts and

wildcat strikes increased dramatically, reaching their climax in 1970. In that year, according to the Board of Labor Statistics, 66 million work days were lost due to strikes. This figure far exceeded the level of strike activity of the 1930s and the 1940s, with the exception of 1946.\(^2\)

The 1969 UE-IUE strike against GE as well as the 1970 UAW walkout against GM were well under the control of the union leaders. Workers achieved important gains, despite the declining economy. Wildcat activity, however, posed as serious challenge to union officials, especially to the UAW leadership. In the early 1970s, wildcat strikes in auto plants placed working conditions and the nature of industrial work at the center of public debate. In 1973, the UAW faced the first round of bargaining after the 1970 strike. Union officials were under the pressure of rank-and-file militants who demanded not only higher wages and improved benefits but also dramatic changes on the shopfloor. UAW leaders, meanwhile, felt restrained by the government’s call for “moderation” in collective bargaining during Phase III of Richard Nixon’s economic program.

The economic stimulation of 1972 allowed Nixon to win re-election. In the long run, it proved an absolute economic disaster. There was undoubtedly “political calculation” in Nixon’s economic measures. Nevertheless, as Robert M. Collins claims, the president faced “the difficulty of framing policy at a volatile moment when the business cycle intertwined with an elemental secular transformation of the national and world economies in ways that were, at the time, difficult to discern.”\(^3\) Nixon’s economic


advisors miscalculated the inflationary dangers of economic stimulation and overestimated the potential of economic growth. In postwar America, economic growth had become widely accepted as the foremost objective of U.S. public policy. “Growth,” Collins claims, “was pursued as a goal in its own right in a variety of theoretical and practical ways...Postwar liberals saw growth as the vehicle for transformative social change; Richard Nixon viewed growth as a way to overcome the ravages of liberal decay.”

Buoyed by his landslide victory in the 1972 presidential election, Nixon told the nation in his second inaugural address:

> Above all else, the time has come for us to renew our faith in ourselves and in America...At every turn, we have been beset by those who find everything wrong with America and little is right. But I am confident that this will not be the judgment of history on these remarkable times in which we are privileged to live.

If Nixon’s claims sounded hollow in January 1973, they lay in utter desolation at the end of the year. Just a few weeks after the president’s speech, the Senate voted, 70 to 0, to establish a committee to investigate the 1972 break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington, DC. A “third-rate burglary” quickly turned into a national disaster that eventually caused the president’s resignation. In the course of 1973, moreover, a series of foreign policy crises pushed the U.S. economy into its worst recession in three decades. The economic

---

4 Collins, 235.

disaster, in turn, ushered in an age of retrenchment that in time would shatter the labor-management accord.

Nixon started his second term launching what some analysts called a "counterrevolution" against the general trend of social policy of the previous thirty or forty years. The president’s rephrased the Kennedy inaugural slogan: “In our own lives,” Nixon said, “let each of us ask not just what will government do for me, but what can I do for myself.” At the onset of his second administration, the president reaffirmed the Republican Party’s conservative tenets. First, the federal government could do little to advance social change. Second, revenue sharing returned power to the local governments and avoided bureaucratic centralization in America. And third, full employment was not the government’s commitment; if the economy needed stimulation, the uplift would come by enlarging capital’s investing power.  

To avoid an increase in inflation and taxes, Nixon argued, federal spending had to be reduced in 1973 from $283 billion to $269 billion. By slashing the allegedly inefficient Great Society programs of the 1960s, Nixon cut government expenditure and furthered his conservative agenda. The cuts affected programs in housing, education, employment, manpower training, health, pollution and poverty. The president proposed to cut these programs by $6.5 billion in fiscal year 1973, $17 billion in 1974, and a $100

---


billion over the following five years. In the view of most of his political opponents, Nixon’s claim that revenue sharing made social spending more efficient was not accurate. Decisions made at the state, municipal and county levels did not necessarily favor the poor, minorities or the working class. In his evaluation of the president’s economic plan for FY 74, Michael Harrington said:

He [Nixon] pretends that he is simply attacking the inefficient and overly lavish innovations of Lyndon Johnson, but he really assaults the aging, the poor, and, as Meany understands the working people.

Harrington understood the AFL-CIO president’s position. The friendly relationship that Nixon enjoyed with George Meany during the Fall of 1972 soon deteriorated. First, Nixon antagonized Meany by appointing as his new secretary of labor Peter Brennan, the New York Building Trades leader and the nation’s foremost hawkish hard hat. Brennan’s appointment was widely linked to the New York construction workers’ pro-war demonstrations of May 1970. The Progressive columnist Patrick Owens claimed: “This may be said to constitute the first time anyone was rewarded with a Cabinet job for perpetrating violence in the streets.” Even AFL-CIO leaders criticized Brennan’s appointment. Industrial unions were outraged not only because Brennan was a building tradesman but because he was widely known for his mediocrity. Meany openly chastised the new Secretary of Labor for proposing a minimum wage bill “worse than that presented last year on behalf of the Administration.”

---

8 Banfield et. al., eds., 44.

9 Ibid., 41.

The faltering economy further strained Nixon’s relationship with Meany. Despite the rapid expansion of the economy towards the end of 1972, 5 percent of the labor force, or 4.4 million workers, were still unemployed in January 1973. Moreover, an additional 2 million workers were employed on part-time bases because no full-time jobs were available. According to a Bureau of Labor Statistics summary, consumer prices during Phase II of the administration’s economic plan increased at an annual rate of 3.4 percent, compared to a 3.8 percent increase in the pre-freeze period. Food prices continued to rise at an annual rate of 5.0 percent. The president’s evaluation of the economy, however, was much more optimistic:

In short [he said] 1972 was a very good year for the American economy. I expect 1973 and 1974 to be even better. They can, in fact, be the best year our economy has ever experienced. I have established as the overall goal of this program a further reduction in the inflation rate to 2 ½ percent or less by the end of 1973. After seventeen months of tight regulation, the Nixon administration decided that the economy needed more flexibility in pricing and wage bargaining. In January 1973, the president launched Phase III of his economic plan, putting wage and price controls on what analysts of his economic plan described as a “self-voluntary or self-policing basis.” In an address to businessmen, treasury secretary George P. Shultz explained voluntarism in the following way: “We give you a reasonable standard and say to you, “It’s up to you. We will be watching...We can come out with our ball bat and swing it if

---


we have to.” Shultz thus offered no strict guidelines for employers and unions to follow.

Phase III’s complex enforcement machinery was different from that of Phase II. There were two important changes. First, the Price Commission and the Pay Board were abolished; secondly, labor leaders were added as members of the Cost of Living Council’s new Labor-Management Advisory Committee. AFL-CIO president George Meany, Leonard Woodcock of the United Auto Workers, Frank Fitzsimmons of the Teamsters and I. W. Abel of the Steelworkers agreed to cooperate with the government in the implementation of Phase III, not as administrators but as advisors. Despite their decision to serve on the CLC’s Labor-Advisory Board, labor leaders warned that if food prices spiraled out of control in a year of pattern-setting contract negotiations, they could not guarantee labor’s continued cooperation with Phase III.

During 1973, unions representing about 4.7 million workers in the transportation, construction, electrical manufacturing, auto and farm equipment, apparel, food, and rubber industries were to negotiate new contracts. The Phase II wage standard of 5.5 percent, plus another 0.7 percent for fringe benefits, was supposed to stay in effect during Phase III. As a minimum, unions would try to settle for what the guideline figures allowed and would press hardest to catch up with the cost of living increases. Corporate profits and rising productivity were also important bargaining factors. There was, however, widespread confusion as to whether or not the administration would “swing its bat” at union settlements that exceeded the 5.5 percent guideline for raises. The UAW International Executive Board opposed the proposed one-year extension of the Economic

---

Stabilization Act that was to expire on April 30. This act, the UAW claimed, “placed in the hands of the Executive huge and largely unrestricted powers to impose controls on wages and prices.” Many top AFL-CIO officers agreed.

By mid-June 1973, it was clear that the fragile fabric of confidence that the Nixon administration had built when it imposed wage-price controls in 1971 was beginning to unravel. A number of economic developments shook Nixon’s hopes for a “great year.” First, food prices continued to rise. The increase became critical in January, reaching a near-record 1.9 percent increase that month (2.3 percent in grocery stores). Secondly, the unexpected devaluation of the dollar put pressure on import prices. Finally, although Treasury Secretary George P. Shultz claimed that the 5.5 percent wage guideline (6.2 percent with fringes) was still in effect, businessmen were “clearly uncomfortable with the vagueness of the new approach.” In fact, when the new Labor-Management Advisory Committee issued its first policy statement, it did not specify a wage guideline number.

As the administration’s Phase III failed to free the nation from the grip of inflation, American citizens became increasingly skeptical of the president’s ability to govern. Public clamor and political pressure for further action against inflation grew more intense each time a new retail or wholesale price report was issued. In mid-1973, consequently, Nixon opted for a supposedly bolder approach to controls. His new

---

15 Memo, UAW Position on Phase III, 16 January 1973, Folder 17, Box 10, UAW International Office Department, Wayne State University Archives of Labor and urban Affairs (Hereafter WSUA).

16 “Phase III unsettles the truce with labor,” Business Week, 10 March 1973, 39.

economic policy, Phase IV, included a blanket 60-day freeze on retail prices but not on wages, rents or dividends. Raw agricultural products escaped controls, but prices on food and other farm items were frozen. Phase IV, government officials said, would concentrate on industries that showed major inflationary measures. For labor, the standards remained essentially the same as under Phase III. Nixon’s major economic advisors stressed the flexibility of the sector by sector approach, promised an active exception policy and pledged to free the economy from controls by 1974. The aim of Phase IV, the White House announced, was “to moderate the rate of inflation existing during the first six months of 1973 with minimum adverse effect on supply.”

In his television announcement of the new economic program, Nixon highlighted what was “right” with the economy: higher wages and an increasing growth rate. Only after mentioning the successes did the president refer to the runaway prices which, according to the administration, were largely caused by increased demand at home and abroad and by crop failures abroad and in various parts of the country. “But whatever the reasons,” Nixon added, “every American family is confronted with a real and pressing problem of higher prices. And I have decided that the time has come to take strong and effective action to deal with that problem.” Economic observers regarded the UAW talks as the “test” of Nixon’s Phase IV. The UAW strategists intended to negotiate wage and benefit gains totaling 6.1 percent to 7.2 percent a year, a clear violation of the


20 Ibid., 63.
administration’s 5.5 percent guideline. Nevertheless, a week before the negotiations started Business Week said: “There appears to be less emotion over big issues this year, and the UAW and management have shown a willingness to engage in give-and-take bargaining on these [issues] in the interest of peace.”

United Auto Workers contract negotiations were expected to be among the toughest. “If we can’t get it in the paycheck because of wage controls,” a UAW official stated, “we’ll get it in some other way.” The UAW International Executive Board regarded Phase III as “a step in the right direction,” but insisted that the measures did “not go nearly far enough.” The union’s main objection to controls was that they had increased economic inequities. In the second half of 1972, UAW president Woodcock pointed out, productivity in American industry increased at a rate of 5.6 percent, while the purchasing power of the country’s hourly workers rose by only 2.2 percent. The UAW leaders underscored the tremendous profits that the major auto manufacturers had made under the administration’s game plan. In the first nine months of 1972, General Motors’ profits rose 14.2 percent, Ford’s 39.2 percent and Chrysler’s 180.5 percent. In view of this, the union’s leadership expected the Big Three to stabilize prices and lower their profit targets. Woodcock insisted, “...should Phase III permit the auto corporations to continue their past irresponsible and inflationary conduct with respect to prices, there

---


22 “Militancy is the bargaining tactic for 1973,” Business Week, 6 January 1973, 64.

23 “UAW on Phase III,” UAW Solidarity, Jan-Feb, 3.
would be no sound or equitable basis for the Administration to restrict the gains of auto workers."

In March 1973, the UAW held a Production Workers Conference in Atlanta, preceding the Special Convention in Detroit that was to outline bargaining goals for the upcoming contract negotiations. "We've got to make a strong impact at the bargaining table this year on things that are non-economic," Woodcock declared. Conference delegates presented a long list of grievances. Most expressed their dissatisfaction with the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA). It was not uncommon for OSHA inspections to follow immediately upon the companies' clean-ups of violations. Health and safety hazards were undoubtedly some of the worst problems that the union membership faced. During the Vietnam War years, union officials claimed, more Americans had died in factories than fighting in Indochina.

Conference participants also stressed the need to shorten the time on the job and to make overtime voluntary. Production workers also wanted improved retirement benefits, cleaner production to combat speed-ups, better dental insurance and anti-discrimination provisions to protect ethnic and racial minorities and women. Delegates also touched on the issue of "morale": "We're losing this union at the bottom...Young people in the shops are dissatisfied, they are concerned about working conditions and safety." A year earlier, the 7,800 UAW Local 1112 had made the national newspaper

---

24 Ibid.


26 Ibid., 9.
headlines during a strike against the General Motors Assembly Division (GMAD) in Lordstown, Ohio. Gary Bryner, the union president, received extensive publicity during the stoppage by describing not only the mind-dulling character of the work, but the ear-damaging noise levels, the heat, the archaic shop rules, and the petty discipline. The young union president called Lordstown “the Woodstock of the working man:” the average age of the rank and file in the plant was twenty-five.²⁷

The 1972 stoppage over GM’s speed-ups at Lordstown became a symbol of the young autoworker’s alienation. This 24-day strike, however, was just one of many walkouts that had occurred since 1968, when GM’s management decided to push for a rise in production standards. The corporation’s Lordstown “super plant” was designed to meet the challenge of low-priced imported cars. The plant was equipped with the most sophisticated machinery in order to increase the production of the Chevrolet Vega, GM’s answer to the imported compacts of Volkswagen, Toyota and Datsun. The Lordstown facility was expected to turn out 101 Vegas an hour as compared with sixty an hour in conventional plants. To the rank and file, this meant thirty-six seconds to do a job operation up to 800 times a day. By 1972, the GMAD ran eighteen plants, employing 91,000 workers. The division was responsible for about 75 percent of the corporation’s production. “The division’s policies,” the New York Times reported, “have brought labor unrest to almost every plant it has taken over.”²⁸


²⁸ “The Excessive Example of Lordstown,” The Enquirer, 7 February 1972; James Toms, “Disassembling the Assembly Line,” Folder 1, Box 1, Guthridge Collection, WSUA; “GM’s Toughest Division,” New York Times, 10 April 1972, Folder 1, Box 1, Guthridge Collection, WSUA.
control of the Lordstown facility, but also plants in Norwood, Ohio, Willow Run, Michigan, and St. Louis, Missouri. Walkouts occurred at three of the four locations; only Willow Run avoided a strike.

Joseph E. Godfrey, the general manager of the GMAD, claimed that the corporation had to “compete with the foreigner” and to do so the division would have to continue to cut costs in all its plants. In order to measure efficiency, GM continually ranked its plants, with improvement in one factory pushing another down the scale.

Bryner explained the process:

They [GMAD] have an audit of their eighteen assembly plants to determine how they stand on a scale of one to eighteen in efficiency, cost wise. The eighteenth plant is then paid a visit and instructed as to why they shouldn’t be number eighteen on the list. Local management then explains to the Supervisor in the Plant why they can’t be eighteenth on the list and then the pressure is applied to the worker. This system is repeated each time the audit comes out and in turn, perpetuates the alienation of the workers, profits before people.  

During the Lordstown walkout, the UAW International supported the rank and filers. This widely publicized strike revealed that management was launching a new assault on organized labor and that the UAW could still fight back when corporations unilaterally changed work rules. The Lordstown strike cost GM about $150 million in lost sales.

Following the stoppages over speed-ups in auto plants, UAW officials thoroughly debated the “blue-collar blues.” In April 1973, during a symposium held at the Walter and May Reuther UAW Family Education Center, vice-president Irving Bluestone

---

29 Local 1112 Memo, Political Materials, 1969-1977, Guthridge Collection, WSUA.

30 “GM’s Toughest Division,” New York Times, 10 April 1972, Folder 1, Box 1, Guthridge Collection, WSUA.
assailed the corporations for not caring about their workers' job satisfaction. The head of
the UAW GM Department explained the rank and file's situation:

One very serious problem is created by the fact that the worker has no control or
voice over the workplace. As a free citizen in society, he can make things change
democratically, but the moment he enters the workplace, the democracy that he
enjoys as a free citizen, no longer exists.

Bluestone's words seemed to echo those of the radicals. There was a key difference,
however, Bluestone wanted to humanize the workplace, whereas the dissidents sought to
transform it. Radicals usually referred to assembly line work as the epitome of
tediousness. Yet only about 15 percent of the UAW membership worked on assembly
lines. Work in stamping plants, in forges and in foundries was no less routine or
alienating than on the assembly line. Some union officials were troubled by the way
"boredom on the assembly line" received extensive media coverage, while equally
important issues were largely ignored.

In the early 1970s, there was a flurry of research papers and mainstream
publications examining workers' changed attitudes towards their jobs. Most studies
indicated that blue collars were more dissatisfied with their jobs than past generations of
workers had been and were less willing to accept the authoritarian rule of the work
place. Newsweek reported:

They [American workers] are bored, rebellious, frustrated; sometimes they are
drunk on the job or spaced out on drugs. And though they are the newest darlings
of the sociologists and industrial psychologists, they're still a mystery to many of
the people who should understand them best: their bosses and their labor
leaders.

---

31“Do the "Blue Collar Blues" Really Exist?,” UAW Solidarity, April 1973, 2.

In November 1973, the *Monthly Labor Review* also addressed the issue of job satisfaction, comparing data from two national surveys of workers taken in 1969 and 1973. The research had been designed to measure working conditions and workers' attitudes toward their jobs. In 1973, the authors pointed out, the two major variables in determining the quality of working conditions were occupational group and collar color, followed in decreasing order of association by education, age and race. The poorest working conditions were reported by wage earners under 21 years old, with a grade school education or less, by African-American operatives, and non-farm laborers. These findings confirmed that, as the wildcat strikes on various auto plants seemed to indicate, young workers tended to have more grievances than older employees and that race remained an important variable.\(^{33}\)

Over the three-year period of the study, rank and filers had become less satisfied with their unions. In 1969, 18 percent of union members reported problems with how democratically their unions were run, and 17 percent reported dissatisfaction with how well their unions were managed. In 1973 these figures had increased to 29 and 23 percent, respectively. In sum, the percentage of union members reporting a problem either with union democracy or union management was 35 percent in 1973, representing an increase of 9 percentage from 1969.\(^{34}\)


\(^{34}\) Ibid., 23.
A 1973 Gallup survey indicated that the downward trend in job satisfaction paralleled the downtrend in workers' satisfaction in other areas, such as income, housing and education. According to a nationwide poll, 34 percent of American workers were dissatisfied with their jobs because the wages were poor. Twenty percent of those interviewed considered their job boring and 17 percent said that they were not doing what they wanted to. Ten percent claimed to be working too hard; 8 percent complained that the hours were too long and 5 percent regarded their fringe benefits as insufficient. As regards labor unions, the Gallup findings coincided with the trend identified by the *Monthly Review*: labor unions had declined in public esteem to the lowest point in four decades. While a majority of U.S. citizens continued to approve of labor unions, the approval figure in 1973—sixty-percent—was down ten points since 1965.  

A widely publicized study entitled “Where Have All the Robots Gone?,” conducted by Harold Sheppard of the Upjohn Institute and Neal Herrick, dramatized the problem of job dissatisfaction. After an in-depth analysis of 400 male union workers, Sheppard and Herrick concluded that one third of them—particularly the young wage earners—were alienated from their jobs and dissatisfied with the typical rewards of higher pay, shorter hours or longer vacations. Herrick’s study confirmed that, above all else, blue collars were concerned with the nature of their work. Rank and file, Herrick claimed, expected their work to be interesting and called for enough equipment and help to get the job done, enough information about and enough authority over the labor process. Other aspects of work that blue collars regarded as important were the

---

opportunity to develop special abilities and see the result of their work as well as to receive good pay and job security. More importantly, Herrick accused unions of having ignored work itself as a source of workers' frustration by having focused exclusively on problems of job security and wage increases. To the union leadership, however, these conclusions betrayed a superficial knowledge of the nature of collective bargaining.

A number of union officials and labor relations scholars took issue with Sheppard and Herrick, Bluestone among them. In a series of papers, Bluestone discussed the nature of factory work and the role that unions played in improving the quality of work life. The UAW vice-president admitted that better educated workers were probably less likely to bow to the authoritarianism of the shop floor than were their parents. Bluestone pointed out that this was "a healthy sign—not a phenomenon to be deplored," since the workers' demands were consistent with the principles of democracy. Although Bluestone conceded that there was unrest among younger workers, his interpretation differed from the one presented by Sheppard and Herrick. Bluestone used the Lordstown walkout to present his view of the relationship between workers' disgust over their jobs and their specific grievances. In the mid-1960s, Bluestone explained, GM's management decided to consolidate its assembly work in the General Motors Assembly Division. Obviously, such consolidation achieved manpower savings, but the company went beyond the

---


expected cut backs and reduced manpower on the assembly lines and off-line operations as well. Management also drastically cut down on the number of workers without changing the line speed. After the consolidation, fewer employees were expected to turn out the same number of units as had been produced under GM’s previous system.

This strike wave, Bluestone admitted, was related to the rank and file’s attitude towards their jobs; strikers vividly expressed their concerns about the drudgery of assembly line work. Nevertheless, the UAW vice-president claimed:

The workers did not go on strike, saying to themselves, “I’m alienated, I’m striking to make our jobs more meaningful and satisfying. They went on strike over particular complaints and abuses which they wanted corrected, such as speedup or working conditions or the denial of negotiated rights and privileges.38

There were basically two arguments that angered Bluestone and other UAW union leaders. First, they rejected the social scientists’ suggestion that the unions’ collective bargaining would never provide solutions to the blue-collar’s alienation. And secondly, they disagreed that the younger workers’ rebelliousness was radically different from that which had taken place in the American auto plants in the past.

William W. Winpisinger, vice-president of the International Association of Machinists, also assailed those government officials, intellectuals and academics who had not only discovered “an interesting new malady”—i.e. the blue-collar blues— but had also “provided it with a name, a diagnosis, and even a cure.”39 Winpisinger shared Bluestone’s assessment of the Lordstown strike: young workers were reacting against the same kind of grievances, in the same way, as had generations of workers before them.

38 Ibid., 12.

They were rebelling against speed-ups; protesting safety violations; and resisting working conditions that had been unilaterally imposed by management in the name of increased efficiency. Winpsinger concluded: “Anyone who thinks wildcats or slowdowns or even sabotage started at Lordstown doesn’t know much about the history of the American labor movement.”

Union officials insisted that they did not oppose efforts by management or industrial psychologists to make assembly line less monotonous and more fulfilling. Labor leaders contended that unions had addressed job dissatisfaction in the past and could do so again in the 1970s. To the defenders of trade unionism, higher pay, leisure and fringe benefits, on which union bargainers concentrated, were not peripheral to the quality of work. In sum, union officials argued, collective bargaining had always sought maximum benefits and the best conditions for workers. The 1973 contract negotiations would be a difficult test for unions facing the demands of their membership in the midst of a downward economic spiral.

Although the UAW expected the upcoming bargaining sessions to be “peaceful,” Detroit was not as calm as it appeared. As talks with the Big Three approached, rank and file militancy at several Chrysler plants worried the UAW leaders. “The 1973 wildcats,” Kim Moody argues, “symbolized the whole unresolved problem of the shopfloor regime.” The grievances of the Detroit wildcatters were not that different from the Lordstown militants. Yet the UAW leadership did not support the Chrysler workers.

---

40 Ibid.

Indeed, they broke one of their strikes. The Lordstown strikers articulated their demands in a language familiar to the UAW leaders and sought solutions within the existing framework of labor-capital relations. The Detroit militants, in contrast, spoke the language of black power, which union officials regarded as destabilizing and even dangerous. In a memo to union officers and board members, Secretary Treasurer Emil Mazey requested “any information on the activities of these groups ... as it relates to publications, literature, press releases, or other types of activities.” Among the most militant dissidents were the Workers Action Movement (WAM), the National Caucus of Labor Committees, and the Progressive Labor Party (PLP). They all charged the UAW with following “sellout policies” with the Big Three and using strong-arm tactics to block the radicals’ efforts to organize autoworkers.

Racism and safety hazards remained largely unresolved issues in Detroit auto plants. These grievances undoubtedly radicalized large numbers of workers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. On July 24, 1973, a wildcat strike at the Chrysler Jefferson plant made local newspaper headlines. Two African-American workers, Larry Carter and Isaac Shorter, took over an electrical control booth, shut down the lines and won the ouster of a superintendent who had made repeated racist threats. The workers had apparently filed grievances against the supervisor but management had refused to listen. After thirteen hours and a half of negotiations, the corporation agreed to fire the superintendent and promised that no worker would suffer reprisals from the sit-down. Carter and Shorter resented the fact that UAW officials had tried to persuade them to

---

42 Memo on Radical Groups, 1973, Folder 14, Box 7, UAW Washington Office, Steve Scholossberg Collection, WSUA.
come out before their demands had been met, arguing that the strikers had already made a point.  

On August 14, less than a month after the sit-down at the Chrysler Jefferson plant, a small group of dissidents held the corporation’s Mack Avenue Stamping Plant for 30 hours: Bill Gilbreth, a WAM leader, started the wildcat strike by sitting on an assembly line conveyor belt. Gilbreth had been fired a week before and had returned to the plant to demand reinstatement. The shut down started when a company guard tried to remove Gilbreth from the plant. He sat down and refused to leave. The approximately two hundred workers who supported the WAM leader demanded the re-hiring of all fired workers, improved safety conditions, and amnesty for the people involved in the sit-down. Over a thirty-hour period, the number of wildcatters dwindled to around forty. The strike ended after two days when riot-equipped Detroit police ousted thirty-six strikers from the plant. Moreover, about 1,000 officials from twenty UAW locals mobilized at the plant gates to assure that dissidents did not prevent workers from entering the facility when it reopened. Local newscaster Bill Bonds captured the irony of the situation: “For the first time in the history of UAW, the union mobilized to keep a plant open.” This was not true, but the statement presented the union officials in the worst possible light.


Union officials’ actions during the Mack Avenue wildcat strike ignited a controversy over the extent to which the UAW defended its members. The UAW leadership argued that the shut down had been planned by WAM, a communist splinter group that intended to take over the union and the companies. In a leaflet handed to members of UAW Local 140, union officials urged workers not to be “misled by outside agitators or dissident groups forming inside the plant.” Radicals, for their part, said of the supposedly “tiny cells of communists:”

They are the autoworkers, both black and white, the 20-30 year old Vietnam veterans who learned class oppression in the military and who realized they are stuck in the plants until they retire. These workers are serious about changing the conditions in the plants. 45

Radical dissidents such as the Workers Action Movement or the New Unionists claimed that, besides the basic questions of wages and working conditions, workers were especially concerned about the boredom and drudgery of factory work. In their first Newsletter, the Ann Arbor New Unionists stated that workers’ ultimate goal should be “democratic management of production” and called on the rank and file to “provide ideas on how things could be different.” Their program proposed the creation of one industrial union for all workers of each industry, including the unemployed; company management by elected workers instead of bosses; and replacement of “high-paid bureaucrats” with moderately paid union delegates. The New Unionists chastised Leonard Woodcock and the UAW for not discussing the workers’ job dissatisfaction or for simply regarding them as “solutionless.”46

45 Ibid.
The UAW leaders thus had to confront the issue of job satisfaction during the 1973 contract negotiations. By late September, after a week long strike, the UAW completed contract negotiations with the Chrysler Corporation. As Leonard Woodcock viewed it, the UAW had made a number of breakthroughs on old problems:

When those plants go back into operation, they’ll be just like they were last Friday, except that we have now created the mechanism for the union and its members to begin to change those health and safety conditions, to begin to humanize the workplace, to tackle the question of compulsory overtime and give the individual worker the right to have a greater control over his own life.47

The UAW leadership considered restrictions on the corporation’s right to demand overtime as one of the most substantial gains. Workers could only be scheduled nine hours a day, six days a week. Moreover, no employee could be forced to work Sundays or more than two consecutive Saturdays. To radical critics, however, this provision became “virtually meaningless” because it did not go into effect until January 1, 1974. This meant that between October and Christmas of 1973, when production rates were highest and workers were required to work longer hours, the voluntary overtime provision would not be in effect.48 The UAW also won changes in retirement provisions. Under the new contract, a worker with 30 years of service could retire before the age of 62 with a pension of $550 a month. The full pension of $700 did not go into effect until October 1978. Critics responded that, with continuing inflation, in five years’ time the increase in pension might become meaningless. In a similar vein, the radicals argued that


the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) formula had not been improved, as the UAW claimed. Under the new contract, COLA would pay 1 cent for every .35 increase in the consumer price index, instead of the .4 of the previous agreement. UAW leaders admitted, however, that one penny of the COLA payable each quarter between March 1974 and June 1976 would be diverted “to help pay for the very costly new fringe benefits, such as 30 and out at any age, the dental plan, the additional holidays and so on.”

To tackle the problem of working conditions, the new contract established health and safety joint union-management committees in the plants, but the new committees would not have enforcement powers. The new contract also formally sanctioned section 502 of the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947 that permitted workers to strike over safety issues. Even the harshest critics of the 1973 agreement regarded this as “an advance from previous contracts.” Finally, the wage increase of 3 percent each year over a three-year contract, which the union considered “the highest ever negotiated in the auto industry,” was well within the Nixon administration’s Phase IV wage control guidelines.

The increasing moderation of organized labor’s demands over the 1968-1974 period might account for the decline in the unions’ approval among rank and file. An analysis of the unions’ behavior in the Nixon years indicates that organized labor was tougher during the 1969-70 recession than during the inflation of 1973-1974. Contrary to

---


50 Jim Jacobs and Tom Wucetich, “Details of auto contract show few gains: UAW pact sets back workers,” Guardian, 10 October 1973, Folder 7, Box 52, Leonard Woodcock Files, UAW President’s Office, WSUA.
the conventional wisdom that unions were tough in times of prosperity but moderate in times of recession, during the 1969-70 economic downturn, as Fortune reporter Irwin Ross claimed, "unions seemed to bargain more aggressively than ever." During the 1969-70 recession, consumer prices rose by 5.5 percent and unions were determined to keep abreast or stay ahead of inflation. Strike activity also increased dramatically in the late 1960s, reaching its climax in 1970.

In 1973, unions were relatively restrained, perhaps because of the savage inflation. Even though the wage-control apparatus was much weaker under Phases III and IV, labor's wage gains fell behind the inflation rate. Moreover, as unemployment rose and employer resistance stiffened, the number of both wildcat and legal strikes declined. Unauthorized walkouts staged by radical workers virtually disappeared after the summer of 1973, as did the rank-and-file organizations of that period. Unions, for their part, became more concerned with retaining members than with increasing their pay. The high spirits that accompanied the settlement of the major auto contracts in September 1973 soon disappeared. In a few months, UAW president Leonard Woodcock gloomily admitted that the contracts had been dampened by the recession in the auto industry and in the economy at large.

Watergate would have finished Nixon sooner or later, but the oil crisis undoubtedly accelerated the president's political demise. The United States had suffered energy problems for several months but, as historian Alan Matusow explains, it was the Arab oil boycott of October 1973 that "turned energy into a full-fledged crisis, featuring

---

51 Irwin Ross, "How to tell when unions will be tough," Fortune, July 1975, 100.

panic, pessimism, gas lines, a plethora of conspiracy theories, accelerating inflation, and a recession.\textsuperscript{53} The United States was passing from a long period of cheap energy that had made it the world’s leading industrial nation into an era in which it could not meet its energy demands. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the country had become increasingly dependent on foreign sources and foreign-flag shipping of crude oil and petroleum products. Furthermore, the U.S. had lagged in the development of alternative energy sources and oil companies, with the help of lavish U.S. tax breaks, had emphasized crude oil and refinery investments abroad. In 1973, 35 percent of U.S. oil came from foreign sources, 18 percent from the Middle East.\textsuperscript{54} Between 1950 and 1973, the price of a barrel of Saudi Arabian oil cost less than $2; in this “golden age,” as historian Eric Hobsbawm points out, “energy was ridiculously cheap and getting cheaper all the time.”\textsuperscript{55}

During the Nixon years, the ownership of world’s oil shifted from companies to a relatively few producer government. This change allowed the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to restrict exports in the 1970s. Oil undoubtedly affected not only the economic but also the political relations among nations. To the Arab states the paramount political issue was Israel, the United States’ closest ally in the Middle East. On October 6, 1973, Egyptian President Anwar el Sadat sent troops into the Israeli-occupied Sinai Peninsula while Syria, Egypt’s ally, captured the Golan Heights. Sadat’s

\textsuperscript{53} Matusow, 241.

\textsuperscript{54} DOE, Energy Information Administration, 1980 Annual Report, 49, Table 21, quoted in Matusow, 255.

aim was to recover territory that his country had lost during the six-day war of 1967. The Soviet Union supplied the forces of Egypt and Syria, while a hard-pressed Israel, short of planes and ammunition, appealed to the U.S. to rush supplies. The Arab countries countered that they would use oil as a weapon against any country that aided Israel. Nixon paid scant attention to the threat, sending to Congress a $2.2 billion emergency aid package to re-supply Israel. On October 20, Saudi Arabia placed a total embargo on oil exports to the United States.

As the crisis in the Middle East escalated, the Watergate scandal reached its climax. "Watergate," journalist Jonathan Schell noted, "that uncontrollably spreading thing, had become entangled with the apocalypse." On October 24, the crisis in the Middle East took a dramatic turn. Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev urged the United States to join the Soviet Union in sending peacekeeping forces to the Middle East to enforce the cease-fire agreed upon a few days earlier. Brezhnev also stated that if the United States did not reply, the Soviet Union would consider acting alone. Taking the statement as a threat of unilateral intervention in the Middle East, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Defense Secretary James Schlesinger placed American forces on worldwide alert, the first time American officials had done so since the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962. The Soviets, who apparently had never intended to act unilaterally, did not respond. On October 27, after intense negotiations, a UN cease-fire went into effect and the war was over. The oil embargo, however, continued until March 1974, when most Arab governments canceled it.

---


57 Matusow, 258-262.
The Middle East crisis electrified the 1973 AFL-CIO Convention and offered George Meany a golden opportunity to revive his Cold War rhetoric and urge American politicians not to confuse *detente* with “unilateral concessions.” The AFL-CIO leadership called on the U.S. government to ship Israel all the war materiel necessary to maintain the balance of power in the Middle East. Secretary of Defense James R. Schelinger, who spoke at the Convention, reassured union officials by stating that the United States would guarantee continuing security for the State of Israel and equity for its neighbors. For his part, the AFL-CIO president contended:

> We are determined to speak out because we have a real stake in foreign policy. It is our members who must pay the taxes to sustain our government’s programs in the international field. It is the sons of workers who are called upon to fight the wars that result from failure to contain aggression and subversion.  

Meany was right in claiming that it was the “sons of workers” who did the fighting when an international crisis erupted, but it was evident that the lessons of the Vietnam War were oblivious to the AFL-CIO’s quintessential Cold Warrior.

The oil crisis that the Yom Kippur War unleashed had a tremendous impact on the living standards of low and middle-income families. In the twelve months between December 1972 and December 1973, retail prices of fuel oil and gasoline skyrocketed 46.8 percent and 19.7 percent respectively. Shortages resulted in widespread plant shutdowns, production cutbacks, layoffs, shorter working hours and economic dislocation. The rate of unemployment jumped from 4.6 percent in October 1973 to 5.2 in January 1974. An AFL-CIO Executive Council Report stated that “most Americans

---

should not be forced to sacrifice, while a few [were] allowed to profit from the emergency."\textsuperscript{59}

The staggering increases in oil prices added about $20 billion to consumers' energy bill in 1974. In the same period, U.S. oil companies made fabulous profits. Despite the embargo against the United States, the fall in crude oil production and the increase of price per barrel of crude oil, the combined after-tax profits of twenty-two large oil companies increased 52.7 percent from 1972. Of the five largest oil companies, Exxon reported that its after-tax profits in 1973 had increased 59.2 percent; Mobil's profits increased 46.8 percent; Texaco's, 45.4 percent; Standard Oil of California's, 54.2 percent; and Gulf's, 79 percent. More outrageous than the exorbitant oil industry's profits was the revelation in January 1974 that $5 million of the $60 million that Nixon raised for his 1972 campaign was oil money.\textsuperscript{60}

The economic situation was bleak indeed by the end of 1973. It did not improve in 1974. In the twelve months period from January to December 1973, inflation increased 8.8 percent—the highest one-year rate since 1947—whereas Nixon's goal had been 2.5 percent or less. Food prices, one of the major concerns of working people, had soared at a rate of 21.1 percent during Phase IV. The buying power of the average wage earner had declined 3 percent in the course of the year.\textsuperscript{61} The oil crisis soon took its toll


\textsuperscript{60} Fink, 2452-2453; \textit{Washington Post}, 2 January 1974, 1.

on the auto industry and, consequently, on autoworkers. The shock of gasoline shortages and skyrocketing prices caused a decline in consumer demand and triggered a shift to more fuel-efficient imported small cars. The changes threw the industry into a near depression. Industry employment that had peaked at 750,000 in September 1973 declined to 684,000 by January 1974.\[^{62}\]

Nixon insisted in his 1974 State of the Union address that “there will be no recession in the United States.” In fact, what followed was not a recession, but the Great Recession, in Matusow’s phrase: “the low point on the roller coaster ride of booms and busts that began in 1969 and lasted into the 1980s.”\[^{63}\] The inflationary spiral could be traced back to the American military intervention in Indochina. The Vietnam War machine used vast quantities of material and caused massive increases in demand for goods and services, thus setting an inflationary boom in motion. If the war had been financed with higher taxes—something unlikely considering its unpopularity—it would have reduced private demand to offset increasing government demand.

The initial boom ended in the 1969-1970 recession, but the government started to pump up the economy before the deflationary forces made a lasting impact on prices. Then came 1972 and 1973—both boom years—with the accompanying increase in prices. In 1972, Phase II price and wage controls dampened the nation’s inflation to an artificially low level. The relaxed Phase III program that began in January 1973 proved a disaster: the administration never used the “stick in the closet” that Treasury Secretary George Shultz had proclaimed as the administration’s back-up weapon. In the view of

\[^{62}\]“Economic Conditions in the Auto Industry,” *UAW Solidarity*, June 1974, 12.

\[^{63}\]Matusow, 302.
the UAW leadership, “war, ‘engineered slump’, profit-gouging, and wasted energy” had started the inflationary spiral. Moreover, the government economists were “deeply confused” and proposed “strategies for fighting only inflation while ignoring recession.”

By late October 1973 collective bargaining became less of an issue and the Nixon crisis dominated organized labor’s policy discussions. In his opening address to the AFL-CIO’s Tenth Convention, George Meany listed the key political developments of the preceding months. Vice-President Spiro Agnew, “the strong law and order man,” had resigned and had been convicted of a felony. Former Attorney General John Mitchell and former Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans were under indictment for conspiracy, perjury and obstruction of justice. Four members of the White House staff had been indicted, among them the president’s chief domestic affairs advisor, John D. Ehrlichman. A dozen more officials had either resigned or been fired in connection with the White House scandal. Finally, the president of the United States had been accused of tax avoidance, shady real estate deals and criminal abuse of presidential power.

During the biennial convention of the AFL-CIO, about 1,000 labor leaders supported the federation’s call for Nixon’s resignation or impeachment. The unionists found Nixon responsible for the problems that affected organized labor most: the possibility of a serious recession in 1974, the deepening energy crisis, the continuing inflation and the loss of U.S. jobs to imports. The president did not even receive the traditional invitation to speak at the convention in 1973, nor did his Labor Secretary Peter, J. Brennan. Although the economy continued to worsen, union leaders did not

64 “Inflation! How did we get into this mess?” UAW Solidarity, December 1974, 4.
discuss whether or not organized labor should continue to support the administration’s economic program. Organized labor participation in Nixon’s Phase IV was taken as a given. “There is a realization on the part of some people,” stated the Steelworkers president I. W. Abel, “that we have to bring a bit of order into the economy.”

After adopting a strongly worded resolution calling for Nixon’s resignation or immediate impeachment, the AFL-CIO launched what the Washington Star News called “the biggest and potentially most influential informational campaign” in the federation’s history. The AFL-CIO News published a nineteen-point bill of particulars outlining grounds for Nixon’s impeachment and editorials by Meany appeared in the publications of affiliated unions. On the same day that Meany launched his attack upon the president, Woodcock, with the unanimous approval of the UAW International Executive Board, also called for Nixon’s impeachment. The UAW president stated:

In calling upon the Congress to act, I am fully cognizant of the gravity of impeachment. We need unity and leadership, but we can afford neither unity won through cowardice and immorality, nor leadership stained by perfidy and tyranny.

The economic downturn exacerbated Nixon’s problems in office, but it was the Watergate affair that destroyed his administration. As early as June 1973, about three quarters of the American public believed Nixon was involved in the Watergate cover-up. Sentiment for his impeachment grew slowly, from 19 percent in mid-1973 to 35 percent at year’s end. With the revelations of early 1974, support for impeachment increased,

---


66 “Impeachment of the President,” Folder 27, Box 12, UAW Washington Office, WSUA.
reaching 65 percent at the time of his resignation in August 1974. A smaller majority, 57 percent, favored his removal from office.\textsuperscript{67}

On July 24, 1974, the Supreme Court, ruling 8-0 that Nixon had no right to withhold evidence in criminal proceedings, ordered the president to turn over sixty-four White House tapes of Watergate discussions. Three days later, the House Judiciary Committee recommended that Nixon be impeached because his actions constituted a “course of conduct or plan” to obstruct the investigation of the Watergate break-in and to cover up other unlawful activities. On August 5, three new transcripts of White House tapes revealed that Nixon personally had ordered a cover-up of the investigation of Watergate six days after the illegal entry into the Democrats’ national headquarters. The tapes, argues historian Michael Genovese, “showed a dark side of Nixon never before seen by the public.”\textsuperscript{68} Few now believed the president’s assertion that he was “not a crook.” Facing sure impeachment, the president resigned on August 8, 1974.

In the months that followed, the recession deepened and public confidence in the government’s ability to manage the economy collapsed. President Gerald Ford, furthering Nixon’s conservative agenda, offered no measures to halt the recession. Faced with economic disaster, both the UAW and the AFL-CIO leadership directed their efforts towards the 1974 congressional elections. UAW advertisements encouraged its members to vote: “Congress is only as able as the people you vote for,” the union officials claimed.

\textsuperscript{67} The Gallup Poll Cumulative Index, Report No 111, September 1974, 7.

Organized labor, now decidedly in retreat, saw in the off-year elections an opportunity to make the system work.” One UAW pamphlet enthusiastically stated:

We can get tax reform, we can get a strong plant-closing bill, we can put a halt to unemployment and rising prices, and we can get national health security. We can do this on Election Day 1974.69

It is unlikely that many rank and file believed Congress could do so much. Nevertheless, union leaders viewed the 1974 electoral returns as encouraging. The Democrats made sizable gains, picking up 43 House seats, four Senate seats and four governorships. The disastrous state of the economy and the widespread job insecurity explain why Republicans lost so many votes. “The liberal victories in 1974,” said the AFL-CIO American Federationist, “culminated the trend started in 1970 when Nixon’s ‘southern strategy’ was in full bloom and predictions of a conservative era were widespread.”70

The AFL-CIO was probably too optimistic, but surveys indicated that Nixon’s Middle America had not turned as conservative as Republicans had hoped. By 1974, the deteriorating economy and the Watergate scandal had almost totally submerged the Social Issue. As the 1974-off year election campaign came to a close, Gallup carried a public opinion referendum on a number of issues. According to the survey’s findings, there was conservative support on questions such as unconditional amnesty for draft resisters, the death penalty, busing and marijuana legalization. The majority of those interviewed, however, called for wage-price controls and defense budget cuts and

69 *UAW Solidarity*, October 1974, 3.

opposed limiting federal spending for social programs. “The public’s mandate,” Gallup added, “includes a call for stronger economic measures to deal with inflation, the problem uppermost in the minds of voters when they cast their ballots in the recent congressional elections.”^71

The 1973-1975 recession signaled the end of the postwar golden era of economic prosperity. In April 1975, Fortune announced that “ever increasing affluence” was “less of a sure thing.” Between 1945 and 1974, labor-capital relations rested on the assumption of economic growth. Unions were successful in gaining higher real wages, increased job security and better working conditions for their members. At the same time, the more progressive union leaders pushed for a broader social agenda that resulted both in the expansion of social welfare programs and the reduction of labor-capital conflict. ^72 “Work,” Fortune pointed out, “became more rewarding, but the bonanza [was] smaller than [was] commonly supposed.” In the late 1960s and early 1970s, inflation and taxes canceled out workers’ gains in nominal pay. In the 1963-1973 period, amid generally favorable economic conditions, blue collars’ spendable earnings climbed only 12 percent, an annual rate of 1.1 percent. ^73

The widely discussed “blue-collar blues” — often trivialized by the mass media — was a clear indication of the downward trend in economic gains. During the 1969-1970 recession, large numbers of industrial workers still channeled their protest through their

---


^72 Gordon, et. al., 216.

unions. Cases in point were the electrical workers strike against GE in 1969 and the auto workers walkout against General Motors in 1970. Two years later, the Lordstown strike of 1972 became the epitome of the young workers' rebellion against technology and the rank and file's rising concern over working conditions. There were wildcat strikes in Detroit auto plants in 1973 at the time of the UAW negotiations with the Big Three. Yet they did not signal permanent escalation in rank-and-file militance. On the contrary, after the summer of 1973, the leaders and the rank and file both went into retreat. From 1974 onward, the number of strikes diminished considerably: higher unemployment rates and the growing threat of layoffs and plant shutdowns had a strong "disciplinary" effect.

In 1974, Irving Bluestone was still optimistic about the future of labor-capital relations. The UAW vice-president contended that the 1973 auto contract negotiations had been an important step towards improving the quality of worklife. Chrysler, Ford and General Motors had responded positively to the union's proposal to jointly develop and implement programs directed toward "job enrichment." Auto was the first industry in the United States to engage in such an endeavor. Bluestone concluded:

The first steps may be halting and careful; considerable trying and testing may be necessary, for no one has all the answers and no two industrial situations are identical. If it is successful, however, it could alter intrinsically the decades old shop worn system of management-worker relations and the philosophy spawned by the concept of "scientific management." 74

By the mid-1970s, as Kim Moody says, "the contours of the U.S. economy began to change at an accelerating rate" as it became "part of an internationally integrated

---

74 Irving Bluestone, "Decision Making By Workers," 20 June 1974, 8-9, Folder Quality of Worklife, Box 156, Irving Bluestone Files, UAW-GM Department, WSUA.
economy. Drastic changes in the structure of industry as well as the workforce soon followed. Rather than improve the quality of worklife, as Bluestone expected, management adopted a more aggressive attitude towards their workers. In 1974, the ratio of supervisory to non-supervisory workers began to increase. Corporations started to move their fixed capital in manufacturing to regions where wages were lower and unions less influential. Anti-union activity also intensified and organized labor’s bargaining leverage began to decline. The future of blue-collar workers depended largely on the vision and initiative of their unions to negotiate the terms of labor-capital relations in America in a new economic era.


Gordon, et. al., 216-219.
EPILOGUE: FROM CHICAGO TO SEATTLE

Nineteen sixty-eight has gone down in history as "the year of the barricades;" the year in which "democracy" was "in the streets;" the year in which the presidential election became an "American melodrama." Those who lived through the sensational events of 1968 perceived that American society was undergoing profound changes. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, there is no doubt that 1968 was a turning point in U.S. history. Although then probably not obvious, that year's swift developments ushered in a new era for Americans, and especially for those at the lower end of the economic spectrum. The labor-liberal coalition was seriously weakened. As a result of the widely reported Tet offensive, anti-war sentiment grew significantly and opposition to the conflict, reaching its highest point in 1969, during the October 15 Moratorium Day demonstrations. The rift that the Vietnam War provoked within the ranks of labor would never be bridged. At the same time, an increasing number of Americans no longer took the economic prosperity of the immediate postwar period for granted. The American blue-collar worker was not so affluent after all and long strikes against major U.S. industries were not a thing of the past. Yet rank-and-file workers and leaders alike hardly imagined that the political and economic ground that they were losing would never be recovered.

Thirty years later, blue- and white-collar workers live under the constant threat of layoffs and plant shut-downs. Since the late 1960s, unions' power to protect their members has dramatically declined and their numbers have been reduced to almost half what they had been three decades ago. In 1968, unions represented 23 percent of the
work force. In 1998, organized labor represented only 13.9 percent, leaving six out of seven workers without union representation. Gregory Mantsios, director of worker education at Queens College, observes:

Why [...] has the working class, which is working more and making less in the richest and most powerful nation in history, failed to use its collective force, either in the workplace, the voting booth, or the streets, to demand fundamental changes in the way this country distributes its wealth and resources?

There is abundant evidence to prove that the American working class has failed to use its collective force, but the explanations for such failure in the last thirty years have tended to be simplistic.

Most historical accounts of the late 1960s portray blue-collar workers as considerably affluent, generally supportive of the president’s Vietnam policy and increasingly concerned about the Social Issue. Union leaders fare even worse. They are accused of failing to oppose the Vietnam War, organize the unorganized, capitalize on rank-and-file militancy, confront corporate power and develop effective political strategies. These accusations are well grounded. Yet scholars who place the blame for labor’s failure squarely on the shoulders of the workers, the union leaders, or both fail to acknowledge the impact that domestic and world economic changes had on the American work force in the manufacturing sector. As the present study shows, the relationship between a Republican administration, a traditionally Democratic labor leadership, a radicalized student movement and a volatile rank and file was highly complex.

In the Nixon years, unionized workers attempted to use their “collective force...in the workplace, the voting booth, and the streets,” though certainly not “to demand fundamental changes in the way [the U.S.] distributes its wealth and resources,” as Mantios points out. In the second half of the 1960s, the sharp increase in strike activity—both legal and illegal—revealed that the labor-capital relations were not as friendly as many analysts described them. On the shopfloor, there were a number of unresolved problems, such as safety hazards, poor working conditions, and racial and gender discrimination. Outside the workplace, blue-collar workers found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. Despite the rise in the number of wildcat strikes, most workers still supported union sanctioned strikes as well as their leaders’ collective bargaining efforts.

The 1969 strike against General Electric was significant for several reasons. The walkout, the first against the corporation since 1946, put an end to the rivalry between the independent UE and the AFL-CIO affiliated IUE and resulted in the first negotiated settlement for GE workers in twenty years. Beyond wage increases, cost-of-living adjustments and health insurance gains, many viewed the strike itself as a good omen for organized labor. A year later, the autoworkers’ strike against General Motors put the “blue-collar blues” back on the national agenda. The UAW’s decision to take on the largest and most profitable corporation in the world had important economic and political implications. After a nine-week stoppage, the union won back cost of living protection without a ceiling, obtained decent wage increases and established the “30-and-out” principle. The walkout also significantly reduced Nixon’s ability to capture the blue-collar vote during the 1970 congressional election, as it proved that economic issues were not old fashioned.
In the early 1970s, speed-ups at a number of GM plants also ignited the debate on the quality of industrial work life. The 1972 Lordstown strike came to epitomize the resistance of a younger generation of workers to the company’s arbitrary production standards and work rules. Yet after the summer of 1973, strike activity began to subside. The deepening economic recession took its toll on the rank and file and their unions. The decline in blue-collar militancy shattered the new leftists’ hopes for a worker-student alliance that, in the activists’ view, could radically alter labor-capital relations. The 1973 round of auto negotiations resulted in moderate wage increases and in the creation of health and safety committees. Inflation soon ate away the autoworkers’ economic gains, however, and the committees failed to improve working conditions on the plants. The blue-collar blues would soon disappear from public discourse.

Unions also resorted to the voting booth to protect and advance their members’ interests. In 1968, the AFL-CIO’s Committee on Political Education (COPE) as well as the UAW’s Community Action Program (CAP) flooded industrial districts with flyers that revealed both Wallace’s and Nixon’s anti-labor records. Organized labor eventually failed to take Hubert Humphrey to the White House, but the Democratic candidate owed his miraculous comeback to the unions’ campaign, which focused largely on bread and butter concerns. In the 1970-off year elections, labor leaders also revived the economy as a campaign issue and thus disrupted Nixon’s blue-collar strategy and his attempts to play up the Social Issue. The Democratic Party gained nine seats in the House of Representatives, a majority of state governorships and kept control of the Senate. The weakened labor-liberal coalition, however, did not survive the 1972 presidential election. George McGovern, the Democratic candidate, was enthusiastically supported by the left
liberal wing of the party but lacked the endorsement of the “old” labor bosses. Although a number of progressive unions campaigned for McGovern, George Meany’s decision to steer the AFL-CIO into neutral ground deprived the Democratic candidate of crucial organizational support. While the country seemed to be on the path of economic recovery, Nixon neutralized the Vietnam War as a campaign issue and presented himself as a reformer, a candidate of the political center. Though short-lived, the 1972 presidential election was an unprecedented political triumph for Nixon.

In the postwar period, blue-collars did not abandon their struggles either in the workplace or in the voting booth. Yet workers seldom took to the streets. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, streets belonged to the peace activists and college radicals. Rank and filers certainly were not as outspoken on foreign policy issues as the students were but organized labor’s opposition to the Vietnam War has often been underestimated. Left-leaning unions joined anti-war protests as early as in 1965. The National Assembly for Peace was formed months before the Tet Offensive, which would make many Americans change their minds about U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia. The alignment of a large number of unions with the Moratorium played a significant role in the success of the October 15, 1969, anti-war demonstrations. Nevertheless, the workers who captured the media’s attention were the New York “hard hats” that attacked peace demonstrators in May 1970. The construction worker soon became the symbol of American labor: affluent, conservative, and hawkish. In 1973, the biggest economic downturn since the Great Depression as well as the Watergate scandal undermined such image. Blue collars were neither complacent middle-class citizens nor unwavering members of the so-called new Republican majority.
The voting behavior theory that Benjamin Wattenberg and Richard Scammon presented in *The Real Majority* has been extremely influential in the scholarly work that deals with American politics in the postwar era. A large number of analysts agree that cultural and social issues have driven politics in the United States since the late 1960s. Robert Collins, however, has recently reassessed the importance of political economy. Collins observes:

One wonders ...whether [Wattenberg’s and Scammon’s] insight has not been embraced too fervently, leaving us with a one-dimensional way of thinking about public affairs that now overemphasizes the cultural determinants of political life and loses sight of the enduring, albeit never exclusive, significance of such “traditional” concerns as political economy.

“Traditional” economic problems have continued to afflict American blue-and white-collar workers in the last three decades. A wave of plant closings followed the recession of 1973 as foreign competition and inflation eroded workers’ wages. For the American blue-and white-collar, the 1980s turned out to be worse than the 1970s. President Ronald Reagan introduced aggressive anti-labor policies and accused workers of making selfish wage demands. The administration endorsed anti-union methods that included “replacing” strikers, firing those who favored unionization, closing unionized plants, transferring work to other locations and obstructing union elections. The assault on the unions was successful. In the first two years of the Reagan administration, organized labor lost three million members.

---


In 1995, the winds of change reached the AFL-CIO top echelons. John Sweeney, head of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), was elected president of the federation. Sweeney’s campaign slogan was “A New Voice for American Labor.” His ticket included Richard Trumka of the United Mineworkers, a well-known militant unionist, and Linda Chavez-Thompson, a staunch representative of women and racial and ethnic minorities. “No George Meany-style-bread and butter unionist,” Joel Kotkin claims, “Sweeny is an advocate of European-style Democratic Socialism.” The SEUI leader’s ascendancy marked an important power shift within organized labor. In the early 1970s, the traditional industrial unions—which rose as the vanguard of the labor movement in the 1930s—began to decline. At the same time, the public sector unions representing government workers and teachers increased their numbers dramatically. Since 1975, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) has grown from a quarter million to 1.2 million members. Forty-two percent of union members nowadays are public employees. The economic crisis of 1973 signaled the beginning of “de-unionization” of the American work force as well as the replacement of industrial jobs with service and information-based jobs.

At the onset of the twenty-first century, wage earners’ grievances have not diminished. In fact, many working-class Americans are worse off than thirty years ago. In the Internet era, the AFL-CIO’s website echoes the workers’ complaints that labor publications such as the AFL-CIO American Federationist, the UAW Solidarity or the UE News voiced three decades ago. “Real earnings,” the AFL-CIO webpage states, “have

---

been declining steadily since the early 1970s." Unionists fear the loss of hard won gains, such as the 40-hour week, prevailing wages, Medicare and Medicaid, social security, student grants and loans, job safety, and the right to organize. Despite the similarities between past and present worker grievances, the domestic and world environments have radically changed. The global economy has altered the rules of the economic game. "More and more unionized companies in the US," AFL-CIO leaders claim, "are based in Europe and Asia and move capital and resources across political boundaries, seeking the highest profits, the lowest labor costs and the fewest environmental restrictions." How can labor get back into the game?

In November 1999, organized labor seemed to find a way. In Seattle, union members joined anti-sweatshop activists, environmentalists, indigenous groups, farmers, small business people and anarchists, among others, in their demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO). Tens of thousands of men and women filled the streets of the city and halted the normal flow of business. The overwhelming majority of the demonstrators were peaceful. Yet, the media focused on the violent fringe that destroyed private property. Reporters immediately drew parallels between the 1968 Battle of Chicago and the 1999 Battle of Seattle. Todd Gittlin observes, "To those old enough, the images on TV—marauding street types, brutal cops, surreal chaos in clouds

---


of gas —were reminiscent of footage from Chicago and Paris in 1968. There are, however, important differences between the two movements. In Chicago, there was a single and unifying issue: immediate withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. In Seattle, the concerns were varied and numerous: demonstrators protested against corporate power and consumerism, against sweatshops, against unfair trade accords, against the destruction of the environment, against genetically modified food. The difference between Chicago '68 and Seattle '99, however, does not stop there. In 1968, the AFL-CIO leaders sided with the Chicago police. In Seattle 1999, organized labor marched side by side with students and intellectuals.

On November 30, an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 participants overflowed Memorial Stadium in Seattle for the labor rally. Workers from more than 50 unions, 25 states and 144 countries gathered to protest against global injustice. The list of participating unions included the Machinists, the Steelworkers, the United Autoworkers (UAW), the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), the Transport Workers, the Airline Pilots, the International Ladies Garments Workers Union (ILGWU) and the International Longshore and Warehouse union. Journalist and activist Janet Thomas vividly described the marchers:

The people who grow stuff, make stuff, move stuff, fix stuff, teach us, and take us places. The people who rely on a union to preserve the values of daily life — time for the kids, for leisure, health benefits. Values that fly in the face of “virtual”

---


reality with its fifteen-hour high-tech, high-paying workdays, and easy dismissal of the deep core issues of social justice.

The AFL-CIO’s rallying slogan for the march was: “WTO. If it doesn’t work for working families, it doesn’t work.” Blue-and white-collar workers who marched in the streets of Seattle demanded that the rules of the global economy protect people rather than property.

Reformers and progressives regarded Seattle as a milestone for a new kind of politics and became excited about the “Sweeny-Greenie” alliance. The 1960s divide between student activists and union people seemed to be closing. “I used to say the most beautiful thing in the world was a redwood deck,” said Cory McKinley, a streetworker from Spokane who walked at the front of the Seattle labor march. “Now,” McKinley added, “I’m hanging out with these green kids, I know there’s another way to do this. We can preserve the old-growth trees. We can have sustainability. I guess I’m an environmentalist now.” Icons of the sixties such as Tom Hayden and Todd Gitlin praised organized labor’s participation in the WTO demonstrations. Gitlin highlighted the “unions’ centrality” in the Seattle protest and pointed out that “the U.S. labor movement [was] at a make-or-break point.” For his part, Hayden stated, “It is pretty

---


11 Ibid., 9.


13 Gitlin, 2.
amazing to see the AFL-CIO head up there on the podium talking with a bunch of SDSers and people from the gay and lesbian community. I never thought I’d see something like that.”14 Yet it is premature to predict whether or not this brand new coalition will fare better than the short-lived student-worker collaboration of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

There is no doubt that the American unions’ abrupt loss of power in the last thirty years has been “an injury to all.” For unionized workers to recover their role as agents for social change, the AFL-CIO will have to revise the meaning of collective bargaining in a global economy, the effectiveness of its tactics and strategies, its definition of workers’ needs and interests, and the unconditional faith in economic growth that characterized unions in the postwar period. At onset of the twenty-first century, many American workers are still discontented and organized labor is once again at cross roads. It is up to the workers themselves and to their leaders to decide which way they are willing to go.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archival Sources

The George Meany Memorial Archives, official archives of the AFL-CIO, Silver Spring, MD.
  Building and Construction Trades Council of New York, microfilm collection
  COPE Research Division Files

The Rutgers University Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, New Brunswick, NJ.
  Archives of the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE)

The Tamiment Institute Library, New York University, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, NY.
  Book, pamphlet and ephemera collections: This is an extensive vertical file collection containing about 250,000 pamphlets, leaflets, flyers and internal documents from left and labor organizations.
  Labor Collections: They document the activity of national labor leaders, unions, federations and labor advocacy organizations. They contain American Labor Unions’ Constitutions and Proceedings from 1836 to the present.
  New Left and Recent Collections: People’s Coalition for Peace and Justice collection and underground newspapers

Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive Collections, New York University, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, NY.
  Central Bodies/Coalitions: NYC Central Labor Council and New York State AFL-CIO Legislative Department collections.
  Service/Communications: Communications Workers of America (CWA) Collection
  Wholesale, Retail and Manufacturing: District 65, UAW and International Union of Electrical Workers, Local 463, collections.

W.E.B. Du Bois Library, Special Collections and Archives, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
  Special Collection: Harvey Swados Papers
  Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), University of Massachusetts leaflets

Wayne State University of Labor and Urban Affairs and University Archives, Detroit, MI.
  Labor Today Collection
  The Concerned Unionist Collection
  The Guthridge Collection
  The Rebhan Collection
The Scholossberg Collection  
UAW, General Motors Department Collection  
UAW, President’s Office, Leonard Woodcock papers  
UAW, President’s Office, Walter Reuther papers  
UAW, Washington Office files

Books


**Articles**


Stein, Howard F. “‘All in the Family’ as a Mirror of Contemporary American Culture.” *Family Process* 13, no. 3 (September 1974): 209-315.


Windmuller, John P. “The Foreign Policy Conflict in American Labor.” *Political Science Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (June 1967): 205-234.


Periodicals

**Newspapers and Magazines**

*Boston Globe*
*Business Week*
*Detroit Daily Hampshire Gazette*
*Detroit News*
*Fortune*
*Free Press*
*New York Times*
*Newsweek*
*Springfield News*
*Springfield Union*
*Time*
*US News & World Report*
*Wall Street Journal*
*Washington Post*

**Labor Periodicals**

*AFL-CIO American Federationist*
*AFL-CIO News*
*Allied Industrial Worker*
*IUE News*
Steel Labor
Textile Labor
The Electrical Worker
UAW Solidarity
UE News

Other publications

Daily Collegian
Dissent
International Socialist Review
Michigan Daily
New Generation
New Leader
New Politics
Radical America
Ramparts
The Nation
The Progressive

Underground Newspaper Microfilm Collection

New Left Notes
News From Nowhere
Nola Express
The Old Mole