

# Rhode Island History

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Volume 46, Number 2

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## Working Lives: An Oral History of Rhode Island Labor

### Part Two

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**Errata from previous issue**

Page 30, footnote 3. Though the Chafee family was represented on the board of the *Providence Journal* during this period, Zechariah Chafee, a distinguished professor at Harvard College and influential civil libertarian, was not involved with the newspaper.

Page 34 The Statement beginning "We worked fairly steady ..." should have been attributed to Al Sisti.



## Entering the Modern Era,

1941–1960

The Second World War affirmed many of the changes that had taken place for working people since the mid-1930s. It also set those changes into a context of more active state and federal government. The War Labor Relations Board oversaw the delayed unionization of many industries. In making organized labor more legitimate, government rulings and the wartime spirit of cooperation helped raise the stature of labor leaders to unprecedented levels. Unions and their members, meanwhile, consolidated a labor role (if not necessarily a leading one) in the state Democratic party.

Rhode Island continued for decades further to experience a labor dynamism elsewhere fading from sight. With a minimal communist presence and a somewhat enlightened Roman Catholic leadership, Rhode Island suffered only a minor

version of the “Red Scare” which severely damaged labor reformism from Connecticut to California. Class lines and older loyalties, reinforced by ethnic factors, also remained relatively firm. New generations of blue collar workers established themselves as labor activists, broadening the democracy of representation.

Later, the negative effects of postwar consumerism would become increasingly evident. For the moment, workers enjoyed the material improvements unionism had helped to bring. And even the least-organized sectors of the economy, such as clerical work, basked in the prosperity.

**Eleanor Jacquard:** The working girl always dressed

Eleanor Jacquard went back to work when her youngest child was six and has been working as administrative secretary to a vice president at the same educational institution for twenty-one years. She was interviewed by Gail Sansbury, 16 November 1982.

*The bookkeeping department of the Rhode Island Hospital Trust, 1941. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Hospital Trust Bank.*



up. She liked to dress up. Coming out of the Depression for a lot of people, you see, working and having money to spend on yourself. But you used to wear gloves in those days and hats. Not that you'd wear a hat and gloves to work all the time but if you were to go out on something special.

*Rhode Islanders of all social classes feared the return of the Depression, and the outbreak of conflict. Both sides, labor and management, jockeyed for position. Working people had trouble articulating the meaning of their own unrest, as a Woonsocket union leader recalls.*

**John Skiffington:** If anything [in safety] needed attention right away, we'd shut down the plant. In Woonsocket, right after the war, I'd just gotten into the [U.S. Rubber] plant at the time, and we'd be at the union hall at least once a month after a walkout. [We would go on strike] for all kinds of reasons. We'd be at the union hall and, of course, an international rep. would tell us we'd have to get back to work. People seemed to be very militant in those days. You could get away with those things. The company just sort of took them as, this is the way it's going to happen at this time. Later on things calmed down.

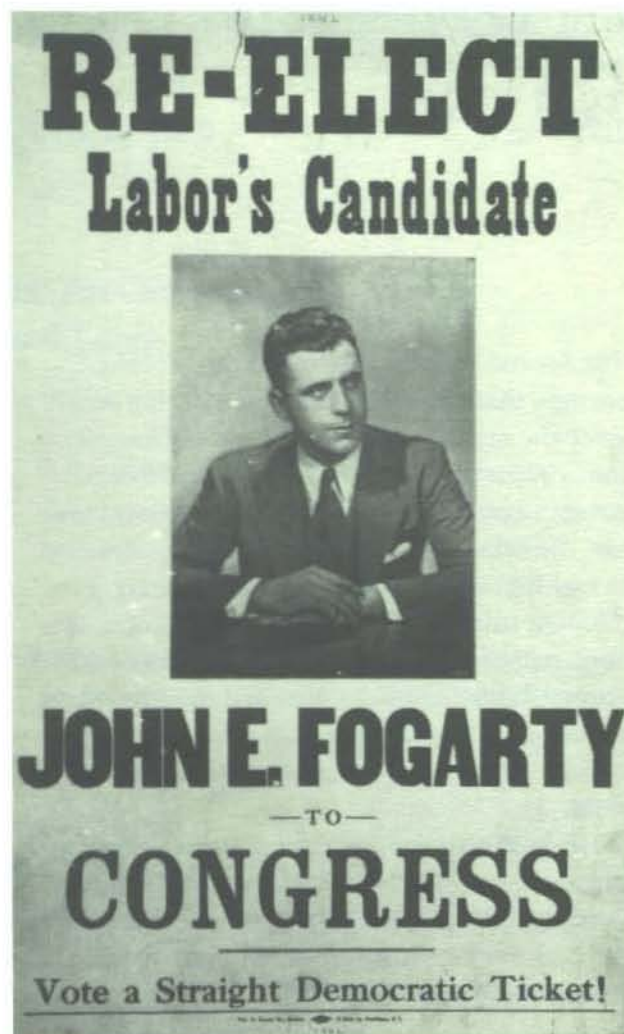
*Labor's increased political participation was symbolized in the 1940 congressional election of John Fogarty, later to become House Appropriations chairman of Health, Education and Welfare and a prominent advocate of many public causes. Ed Brown recalls.*

**Edwin Brown, Jr.:** The Democratic party didn't welcome John Fogarty. He was forced down their throat.

*Was he labor's candidate?*

He was his own candidate, and he got labor's support. He went around, the first year he was trying to do it, the first election, the one before he got it—I'm not sure; I don't think he failed the first time, but it might have been early in the campaign—he went around getting union sup-

John Skiffington was treasurer and then president of United Rubber Workers local 66. He also served as the Majority Leader of the state legislature for eight years, and one term (in 1976) as Speaker of the House. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 14 June 1984.



A 1942 campaign poster for John E. Fogarty boasted of his advocacy for organized labor. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5977)

port, and, of course, most of us that were active in the unions didn't even know who the hell he was. You know, he was president of the Bricklayers Union, his real roots were as chairman of the Gloucester Democratic Town Committee. And he went around, and naturally went to the building trades first, got the buildings trades' support. And when he was spreading out, he went to the Central Labor Council. I was the secretary of the campaign. And from then on it really brought labor together very actively politically. We brought the CIO in.

I drove him the first campaign and it was rallies, outside rallies, and you were praying that there was a microphone at the place to speak from.



He worked hard at being able to speak. He was very crude; like most of our young guys that are coming up today would be very crude. Well, I think they're more polished today than he was at the time, but he became a very good orator. Father [Ambrose] Regan up at Providence College took him in hand, and the people up at Providence College worked with him. And he did very well.

*How did the Democratic party machine, the mainstream, take to him?*

Oh, they didn't—they were scared to death of him. They didn't want him at all. It was a labor convention the next Democratic Convention because we packed the thing. There was no dropping Fogarty because we all became delegates to the convention at that time.

*So do you feel like you were, in a certain sense, taking over the state Democratic party and making it more of a people's party or something?*

No. It was just—it wasn't no great philosophy behind it; it was just a chance to elect a guy that was from the labor movement. It was no—that's a mistake we made.

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*Linked to positive industrial leadership, this political energy helped bring a wider and deeper sense of unionism, a completion in many respects of the earlier efforts. Organized labor grew to an unprecedented size.*

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**Edwin Brown, Jr.:** You know the textile union had about forty business agents at one time. You tell people that. Forty business agents? What the hell do you do with forty business agents? But they had that many members. They had maybe twenty-five thousand or thirty thousand members in the American Woolen and J. P. Coates and all them—Lorraine's and all them big goddamn companies. And you wonder how the hell—because there was only textile workers that were running it, you know. The stores were all organized. Meatpackers were organized.

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*In and through the state legislature, a continuing series of improvements developed in the New Deal package of benefits. Frank Sgambato, a most cautious and unradical spokesman for the AFL position, found his conservative opponents*

*more open-minded to these changes than he had imagined.*

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**Frank Sgambato:** I ran for the [state] Senate in 1940 and I was elected. I became the vice president of the union at the time in the New England area. The Senate only met sixty days per year, but I kept my labor job.

*What was your platform?*

[I ran as] a labor man, prohibition of night work for women, a state labor relations act giving the right to organize, and labor law. I kind of liked it.

In those days, labor was not so accepted. You had to move. Every bit of legislation that was approved for labor never had one bit of criticism from the Republican administration [because it was] good legislation. We passed the labor relations act in 1941 [giving state employees the right to bargain collectively], my first year in the Senate, patterned after the New York state law. I finally got the Republicans going along with me. This was the way it got through: the Republicans wanted some credit for it. [They didn't want it as] the Wagner Act. They said, put a new dress on it. But the Republicans sort of liked me.

I think we had sixteen Democrats out of forty-four in the Senate. But we got it passed. And when it went over to the House, the speaker of the House, who was Harry Curvin, said, State Labor Relations Act from the Senate? Who is this guy Sgambato with his name on the act? He was going to ditch the act. I said, it was checked by the secretary of labor in Washington, or in the Labor Department. So he said, okay, and it passed.

We amended the Workman's Compensation law, we got a surplus of money in the act, then we decided to pass the temporary disability [act]. We were one of the first [states to have it].

If the House passed any labor legislation, I would explain it to [the Senate]. I said, it's not going to hurt business. You're just recognizing [labor] and you're not giving in to labor as such, you're at least being reasonable. I'd say, a few years later, anything wrong with the labor legislation? They'd said, no.

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*Meanwhile, in the neighborhoods and parishes, the sense of support for labor developed a*





*Not all of Patrolman Sam Raponi's duties involved picket lines. Here he appears with Mrs. Dorothy Almonte, who summoned Raponi when she discovered this unidentified baby in a locked car parked in Downtown Providence. Providence Journal Bulletin photo courtesy of Sam Raponi.*

*solidity. A patrolman recalls his attitude.*

**Sam Raponi:** I handled strikes for years. I handled that strike at Monawat. And I remember one morning Lt. McCormick told all the men to get on the property. And I said to him, I said, 'Lieutenant, you can't do that.' I said, 'Once you get on the property there, now you're taking sides. Now the union can come back at you.' He says, 'I'm the superior officer. Don't you tell me what to do.' He says, 'You get there!' I says, 'okay.' Well, about fifteen minutes later I got a call. 'Sam Raponi, you stay there and all the other men leave.' And the

Sam Raponi has been a Providence police officer for forty years. He was instrumental in securing the right of collective bargaining for the Rhode Island police force. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 12 July 1984.

lieutenant left. He said, 'You can handle it.' I never had no trouble during that Monawat strike. They kept me there every day. I was the man on the beat there anyway. Never had any trouble. Then Narragansett had another strike, and I went to them—I always got the leader—and I'd talk to him, and I'd explain to him that we can work together as a team. If you've got a gripe, you come to me. We won't get on the property because we're neutral. Once they knew, the leaders knew you were neutral, and you were not taking any part, they would work with you. And I would say to them, 'Now, you have to let the people in. If they cross the picket line, you have to let them in. But what I will do, is I will turn my head, making



believe I'm directing traffic, and then give you a chance to harass them a little bit, you know. No hitting, no—you, know, verbal, but no violence.' And they'd say, 'okay.' And then I'd put on the act and say, 'Hey fellas, you can't do that. You can't do that. You've got to break it up. Let that man through,' you know. And so I convinced them that they would do it better this way; and like I told them, I said, 'Why make enemies with these bosses?' I said, 'You've never had a strike before.' This was Narragansett Electric. I said, 'It may only last a week. Why make enemies of your bosses? Now you've got to go back and work for these fellas and they're going to remember how you mistreated them.' Well, I got along fine with them. There was three fellows that gave me trouble, and they were all kids I grew up with in South Providence, so I said to the labor union, 'Put them at gates where there's no activity. And keep the fellas that are more understanding in the front.' So we did. We got along fine. The end of the week, that labor union man came to me and says, 'Sam, you were right. It didn't last that long. We did a hell of a job. We had no trouble. The bosses are all glad to see us come back.' In fact, the bosses came out shaking hands with the union people, they were so happy, you know, to have them coming back. And I never had trouble with unions because I always took a neutral position, and I always got along with them. I had teamsters on teamster strikes in Allens Avenue. No trouble. They put me there. I had the gas company strike. Never had any trouble because I knew how to handle it. But once they know that you take a neutral position, that you're not favoring management and you're not favoring the union—because naturally you're going to favor a little bit more the union because you're a working man yourself—you're going to be all right and you're not going to have any trouble. Very seldom do you have any trouble if you approach it right; but when a policeman starts getting stick-happy and letting the authority run to his head, then you're going to start trouble.

I'm going to tell you something. I've been on the job thirty-eight—I'm in my thirty-eighth year. I've never used the stick; I've never used the blackjack. I've never hit anyone. I've never used

the gun. Thank God for that.

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*Not even the recalcitrant conservatives of public life, like an antilabor judge, could foil the labor movement's strategems.*

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**Lawrence Spitz, Jr.:** For a long period of time, in Rhode Island, there was a [Superior Court] judge by the name of Judge [Charles A.] Walsh—he must have been sired by a scab—because Judge Walsh could not resist the temptation to grant an injunction to an employer in any strike or threatened strike situation, whether it was warranted or not. And it didn't matter whether the Norris-LaGuardia Act [making the use of injunctions against strikes more difficult] terms were violated, although he was not a federal judge, and it certainly didn't matter whether he was ignoring the anti-injunction act, which we so laboriously pieced together, and I drafted that legislation. I suspect I drafted most of the labor legislation in Rhode Island—and he ignored it.

Well, I used to avoid his injunctions by appealing to Joe Caldwell [the most prominent socialist in Rhode Island], who although he was old and terribly crippled with an arthritic hip—poor Joe Caldwell would answer the call like a fireman. And he would slide down that pole literally because he lived in a loft in Olneyville Square where he had his photography shop. Joe was making a very very scanty living by his photography in the Depression, and there was a curtain stretched across this so-called shop, and in back of it is where Joe cooked, slept, and lived on a cot. For anyone who fought so hard for people as Joe Caldwell did, that was a pretty horrible sort of way to start ending your life, and he was towards the end of his life. But he never failed to come out and picket. And he would picket in the name of the Socialist party or in the name of Joe Caldwell, and defy the injunction, because the injunction didn't run against him anyway. And this left Judge Walsh in a very peculiar position, because he recognized that if he issued another injunction against Joe Caldwell, that would make him look stupid by finding Joe Caldwell's kin and bring them in. [Caldwell] had served time as a conscientious objector during World War I with Gene Debs.



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*And Ed Brown remembers the support the Catholic church, especially the erstwhile labor historian Monsignor Edmund Brock, gave to the movement for industrial amity through acceptance of unions as the legitimate and permanent voice of workers.*

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*Isn't the religious training or background kind of a basis for supporting the labor movement, becoming part of the labor movement and feeling there's something unjust about workers being poor?*

**Edwin Brown, Jr.:** There's been a close relationship because I knew what religion was doing. I was familiar with the role early in my activity. How I really got started—put it that way, and then it will come into the religious—When I first went to work, my father says, 'You know, there's going to be a time when, wherever you're working, they're going to try to form a union and all that kind of stuff.' He says, 'Be with them,' you know, because he was active in the Jewelry Workers Union years ago. And he says, you know, 'Don't deviate from that.' So when the machinists started to form, and I was working in the shops, I was with them right as soon as I found out about it.

I got talking to Jim Hanley about labor schools. He was superintendent of schools in the City of Providence, and he went to Bishop Francis Keough, and Bishop Keough assigned Father Brock, and we had the labor schools.

Through the labor schools we got—and we ran these courses at the Knights of Columbus hall on Green Street for a long period of time. And then Father [Charles] Quirk up at Providence College picked it up and invited us up there. And he started the Thomistic Guild at the Labor Institute. And we'd meet up there I guess every week up at Providence College.

Father Quirk put quite a group together and we were running courses in Providence, Pawtucket, and up in Woonsocket and, you know, all around the state, which I think at that time did do a lot of good. And at least it got us acquainted with some of the guys. Because the feeling was bitter between the CIO and AF of L. And it was mostly a Textile Workers' fight. And it was very bitter.

But at least you'd get acquainted with the guys, and you found out that they weren't the bad sorts that you always thought, you know.

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*The organizing drives to complete unionization of steel and steel-related workers, to replace corruption-filled unions with honest organizations and honest leaders, and to raise up a new generation of vigorous unionists marked the last step in this industrial cycle. Lawrence Spitz, after 1946 the District Sub-Director of the United Steelworkers, based in Providence, reflects upon this process.*

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**Lawrence Spitz, Jr.:** The CIO was a rather closed corporation totally dominated by the textile union. All the emphasis and the thrust was on collective bargaining agreements and a particular local union. There was great dissatisfaction among other affiliates of the CIO that they were not given representation on the executive board and in the leadership capacity. The steelworkers were not a real factor in Rhode Island at that time. They were constantly shunted to one side. As the steelworkers grew in size, a number of the small international unions began coming to our office, asking for assistance. And I felt that was what the labor movement was all about—you gave it. And over a period of time, there were not very many unions in Rhode Island who had not been given assistance, support, for them; we raised funds, we manned their picket lines, and we helped them build their size. I was operating primarily on the basis of what we had done in Woonsocket, and it worked. We had become involved in social issues, and as a result we had widespread support from many segments of the population that were not members of the union. I felt that was the role the labor movement, and in particular the CIO, should follow.

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*A social compact of sorts evolved piecemeal. One can see the compact from the viewpoint of management, as described first by James Rigney of Brown & Sharpe.*

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**James Rigney:** Fifty-one was a big strike. There was a general strike. Through that period was absolute chaos. Two thousand formal grievances, arbitrations, absolute wild times, adjustments



being made. Of course that's when old man Sharpe was around. He died, I think, maybe 1950, and young Henry Sharpe took over. Now he, Henry Sharpe, in spite of his present image—was not a liberal, but he was an intellectual; and he didn't see much, he told us, he didn't see much point in thrashing around—told Jack Hall and I—and wasting all of our energy on this stuff. We ought to get about the business of making some products. And that's the message we got. So from 1950, one strike, right? Until 1974, I think it was, we had no strikes. Okay? And that included Jack Hall's time and my time. Had no strikes in my time until 1974. And that's not because we gave the store away. It's because we developed a problem-solving style.

If we had a valid management, something to defend, by jimminy we defended it, and everybody knew we had a solid case. On the other hand, if it was not defensible, or if it wasn't fair and consistent with what we were trying to do, we got rid of it and solved it. So the result was that after the strike in 1951, we had very few grievances. Sometimes we would go a whole year with maybe one or two formal grievances.

\* \* \*

This is a craft union par excellence. And a craft-oriented management par excellence. A perfect marriage. Great respect for their skills because we trained all these people. See, there's another thing needs to be said about this apprenticeship. We were training literally thousands of apprentices—many of whom left the company, where they went out in the world and became great advocates of Brown & Sharpe—but the ability to train apprentices also gave the supervisors ability to train people off the street.

\* \* \*

My style as it evolved was one of helping the union politically, and I set myself up with sometimes what they call in the textbooks, 'blue sky-ing.' 'Blue sky-ing' meaning that—set up impossible demands or conditions, which got everybody mad at me, right, for asking for such crazy things, which I never really intended to get; and then back off wherever I wanted to be. Now that made the union look like they had beaten me into submission. Everybody's a winner, right? They win.

I win. 'Cause I told the management in the first place, 'This is where we're going to be.' And everybody's happy, except psychologically. Management has to be able to take the humiliation of backing away. A lot of guys can't do that. I can. I'm not embarrassed. I can eat crow any time if I get what I want.

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*A top manager of the Cranston Print Works, Douglas Martland, had a similar experience:*

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*Let's get back to those technological changes between 1945 or '46 and 1952. You say you developed high blood pressure. This wasn't hyperbole; it really was true.*

**Douglas Martland:** Oh, this was true. They call it 'something fatigue.' I don't know. And it was nervous frustration as far as I was concerned because we couldn't get things done.

*Because you didn't have the capital?*

We didn't have the proper equipment to do it and we were trying to do more than we could do. And we always said you either had a heart attack, or you had ulcers, or you had nerves, or, you know, something happened. We were always working; we worked long hours.

*Did you come back after supper?*

Oh, sure. Be a regular routine quite often on that. My day—I generally worked—I'd rather come in early and go out late than [have] to come back. I hated to have to go home and come back. But we did it. We used to—just to find out what was going on these other shifts. You know a three-shift plant is hard to operate. Everybody in the daytime can tell the night guys how to do it, but—Many's the time we'd go on a routine and pick five of the boys and so I'd come in every Monday night. Go home and have supper and come back every Monday night. Somebody else would do it Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. So they'd see the day guys and we'd see them. But I think that had a good effect on the help.

The supervisors, to a large extent, the ones who were going up in management, they had to

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Douglas Martland graduated from Brown University in 1940. He then worked at the Cranston Print Works for forty-one years, rising to Vice-President for Production. He retired in 1981. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 3 August 1984.



work. Really push. They might not have liked it, but, you know, I don't think the people have ever objected to being pushed. They'll go just as far as they are pushed or led, whichever way you want to call it, whichever way you want to do it, and there's two ways of doing it. But I don't want you one day to be pushing and the next day to try to be a leader. They want you to be consistent, and if you're going to give them hell for something one day, do it every day. And if you're going to call their attention to something, to call it to your attention, but also to his, don't have favoritism. In a close community that was very important, because if you gave the Salisburys hell but you didn't give [somebody else] hell, that was favoritism.

I always tried to operate on that fact and try to be consistent. And even after it's over, even if you do have a squabble, you can't have bad feelings. I don't know how many times in talking to the union I said, 'It's something like being married. You're going to have a fight with your wife. No matter how good you are at it, you're going to have a fight with her, but then you're going to have to keep living with her.'

*Didn't retooling constantly challenge work rules or create problems?*

Oh, yeah. Always. But we did—we worked out a pretty good thing in our contracts, and the union went along with it; it saved them a lot of trouble, too, I think. In most of our contracts management had a right to set workloads. It was hoped that you would explain, but they had a period of time, which might vary from one contract to another from thirty days to sixty days or by mutual agreement extended.

*Did the plant size through this period stay the same, the total number of hourly workers in the plant?*

No, it decreased. It decreased. It had to decrease because we were increasing our productivity by having fewer people. But one of the things that was good was we never—I can't remember ever, and that's a big statement to make, but I can't remember ever having put in a major change, like we would in the put-up room or some of those where a lot of people would be involved, laying anyone off because of technological advances and

changes.

*What did you do?*

Well, you faced up to it; you put some—we had red circle rates, for instance; we'd carry a few people, but we knew they were going to retire in two years, or someone would leave and quit, or someone would get sick, or someone would die, you know, those things. And so in almost every case we worked the thing out so we made the changes without saying, 'Well—.'

*Four hundred of you get out.*

Yeah. We had things like we were trying to cut maybe forty people out of the put-up room, and to get those forty people spread around took quite a bit of doing. But we had to spend a lot of time thinking that way. The union was cooperative because, you know, the automobile workers always had big fusses about 'You're negotiating away the rights of people who should be coming to work.' We didn't have that problem.

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*Labor leaders came to share the same philosophy. Meanwhile they attained their own amity through the merger of the AFL and CIO, the joining of membership and talents symbolized in the persons of Edwin Brown, Jr. and Lawrence Spitz, Jr. Here, Spitz recalls some of the public campaigns, and the spirit behind them, in making the labor movement truly "social."*

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**Lawrence Spitz, Jr.:** Impact [a progressive business group] was started, and they wanted to have some labor participation. And they approached me and I told them that I was not interested in being their window display. And T. Dawson Brown spent a lot of time talking to me about it. We finally made a pact that for every project that would affect the downtown area of Providence they would subscribe to any strongly supported projects that would enhance the quality of life in the various neighborhoods in this city—South Providence, Federal Hill, and so on. And they agreed. And on that basis, I agreed to be vice president of Impact.

In the 1950s, 1953, '54. And they remained true to their word. In addition to that, without any prompting on my part, many of those who were involved in Impact were highly critical, some of them publicly critical, of the Weekapaug Group





*Bishop Russell J. McVinney appeared with labor and business leaders in a ceremony commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical on the condition of labor, Rerum Novarum (1891). Monsignor Edmund Brock, a leader in the diocese's efforts on behalf of working people appears at the far right. Photo courtesy of Monsignor Brock.*

[a conservative business group]. And they constituted a counterbalance to the Weekapaug Group, who set its sights only on the labor movement, to weaken it; if achievable, destroy it. They were not successful, and after a while they just dried up and floated away.

I was highly critical of them. I was one of their major critics. And I was a strong supporter of Impact because I felt there were people who were running industrial plants; they were involved in finance, they were involved in commerce, and they had open minds, and they were willing to—although many of them were critical of some aspects of the labor movement—they were willing to sit down and reason, and they were seek-

ing reform rather than destruction of the labor movement.

When the merger [of the AFL and CIO] was achieved I did not detect any resistance to, disinterest in, or opposition to the social concerns that we had been expressing and the ventures that we had been engaging in.

An example of that was the drive for group health programs. It developed as a result of my going to a retiree's dinner for Grinnell and the retirees complaining to me that their Blue Cross fees had been increased 27 percent. And I responded by saying they must be mistaken because in order to increase the rates there had to be a public hearing. And the next morning they



came in with their bills and showed them to me, and they were right.

I had been a strong supporter of the establishment of Blue Cross, and every plant that we had a contract in we insisted on Blue Cross rather than an insurance company that the employer [offered].

*Was there something like RIGHA [Rhode Island Group Health Association] elsewhere in the country that was the inspiration for this, or is this just a concept that you cooked up, or they'd cooked up?*

The only inspiration, if you can term it as such, was my contact with the Group Health Association in Washington, which was a fledgling organization at that time, just starting, and with what the Central Labor Union in New York City was doing.

This was an example of a social concern being expressed—I felt it was terribly important, and as time went on the large number of telephone calls, letters, personal visitations, and contacts that we had from people who were outside of the labor movement strongly supportive convinced me that the whole swing to an emphasis upon social issues was terribly crucial for the labor movement's welfare as well as for the welfare of society. Now, AVC, the American Veterans Committee, had started—and I played a role in that organization with Mike Straight [publisher of the *New Republic*] and others—and they had a slogan which I felt the labor movement in Rhode Island at least could well adopt: Citizens first, veterans second. And we frequently referred to ourselves as citizens first and trade unionists second. And I think that slogan summarizes—although we can't claim that we developed the slogan—it summarizes the thrust that we—and the concerns that were being expressed. And I think during that period we gained a lot of understanding and support from a lot of people in the community who would never have been identified with or understood what the hell the labor movement was all about if it weren't for these excursions into the social arena.

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*All this amity had its limits, both external and internal. Prosperity had been bought at the price of Rhode Island's involvement in a per-*

*manent war-production economy. The effort to create prosperity through world peace and shared economic development, championed by the Progressive party presidential campaign of former Vice President Henry Wallace in 1948, had considerable initial support in the labor movement and among Rhode Islanders faithful to the New Deal, but was crushed in anti-communist hysteria. Ray Bell, a prominent labor organizer in Pawtucket, recalls his dismay.*

**Ray Bell:** We figured that it was time to make the big political move in 1948 with Wallace. We figured that if we followed it up economically, we could do it. So we went around the state collecting signatures to get on the ballot. I collected myself, 634. This is for about two weeks, day and night. From early morning until it got dark at night. And then I realized something. During the '30s like 1939, 1940, houses were shabby and this and that and nobody had a refrigerator. There were only ice boxes. This time I went around and I saw rugs on the floors and new linoleum and bedroom sets and pretty good furniture. And I stopped to realize that for Christ's sake we were making a big mistake here. We have to realize that these people, that I thought we could get five million votes as a result of the organizing we did, I said that we were not just organizing shops. We were organizing the shop that changed society. This is a fair step. And we have to have these people to support us. So I said that we would get five million votes. I would go to those houses and talk to those people. They would sign the petition because they were sort of happy and smug. And we had meetings in New York and in Boston. We were going to get five million votes? I don't think so. But I have been in these people's houses. So we wound up with a million and a half votes. That started the contribution to the downfall of the left-wing section of America.

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*Lawrence Spitz, Jr., notes how deeply such hysteria marked even the labor movement, grown so fearful of its radical past that it could not honor its fallen heroes.*

**Lawrence Spitz, Jr.:** Everybody in the labor movement agreed that Joe Caldwell was a saint. But when Joe Caldwell died he didn't have the good



sense to die in the non-McCarthy period; he died in the McCarthy period. And no one from the organized labor movement, AF of L, CIO, would go to his funeral. I by that time had returned from the army and was in the steelworker's union. And a pathetic little band of old Socialists came to me, and they were concerned about Joe Caldwell. Reverend [Robert] Shacht [a prominent East Side reform figure], who was a Unitarian minister, preached the sermon in the funeral home, and did a magnificent, superb, and courageous job. The *Providence Journal* wrote an editorial that was kindly, and the *Journal* was never pro-Labor. And the labor movement was silent. And the only labor representative at the funeral was myself.

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*Where, then, had labor really come and what did its progress mean in public life? Another attendee at that funeral and an activist in the Wallace movement—also one of Rhode Island's most prominent journalists—recalls the work-scene at our most prominent public institution, the Providence Journal, and the sweep of changes from the 1940s to the 1950s.*

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**Ben Bagdikian:** I think a lot of us came out of the war with altered feelings about what we ought to do with our lives. Before the war, having entered journalism and being interested in writing, I had a rather indiscriminate view of what one does as a journalist. What one does is to go to New York and work for any big paper that will hire them. Then, I think as a result of the war and maybe getting a little older, I determined I would not work for anybody, certainly any newspaper, that was destructive, that was going to do the sort of things that the Hearst papers did and other things which in any way would produce things like a war, a depression, and so forth. And that's initially why I was not going to go back to work for a newspaper. But I found that the *Journal*, which was not perfect but nevertheless was exciting and serious, was a rewarding place to work in. And so in the '50s we did do, I think, very

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Ben Bagdikian, Dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, was a reporter and a correspondent for the *Providence Journal* and *Bulletin* for sixteen years and "got to know everyone—from unemployed millworkers to the state's leaders." He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 5 September 1984.

good things—not just I, of course, but lots of us.

We had the G.I. Bill. It was the first time working class people went to universities in large numbers and that began breaking down all kinds of barriers. And so there was a new generation, which was full of beans and had different perspectives, much more cosmopolitan. And there were interesting people coming into the *Journal*.

[The owners] hired a publisher, Sevellon Brown, who happened to take journalism seriously, understood what good journalism was. And I've always assumed that there was a kind of implicit understanding: He would produce the kind of paper he wanted to do but he would render unto Caesar. Rendering unto Caesar meant, as it does, I'm afraid, on most newspapers, that you endorse Republicans whenever they run, you report labor-management problems in the manner of the Christians and the lions; and once you have regarded as sacrosanct the interests of the ruling people in the state—you editorialize against tax issues and public sector spending—and so once you had done that, then you could do some other things. And those other things were very good. And I think the paper continued to be that way.

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Mr. Gladding had a department store. And he called some of us younger people in the state—I was there as a journalist, and a couple of younger business people, and we had a long session with him. He said, 'I'm worried about this state.' He said, 'Something's got to be done to bring the parts of this state together. There are people we don't even see, Italians and Portuguese and so forth.' But he was rare. I was then in the [Providence] Art Club, which, as you know, is the training ground for the Hope Club except it's for artists, so every now and then you get these strange people like Italians and Jews in it too, but, otherwise, it's for the WASPs who are on their way up. And I've been in there when Theodore Francis Green, who was the senior senator from Rhode Island and a staunch New Dealer who was hated by the ruling people because they considered him a traitor to his class [came in]. And they turned their back on him. He had not even redeemed himself as governor when he called out the National Guard.



Well, that's the way the state was when I came here, and that part was appalling and fascinating. But the other parts of the *Journal* were almost as much, I think, as any journalist could ask for.

It was a very Catholic state, and the Catholic hierarchy and the main body of Catholicism, to the eye, was supporting [United States Senator Joseph] McCarthy. And it was hard here. I got more vicious hate mail during that period because I was—one of the good things the paper did was that they covered Joe McCarthy's activities. I covered his hearings in Boston and elsewhere, and I did a series on the impact of McCarthy and the Truman security program in the *Providence Journal*, and they republished it, and it was a very popular pamphlet. It was reprinted in places around the country. It was called *What Price Security!* And what it was directed at is how McCarthyism and everything that we call McCarthyism had actually decreased the security of the United States.

A member of the board was Henry Chafee, who was Zechariah Chafee's family. And Zechariah Chafee was a great civil libertarian at Harvard and a Rhode Islander. And I think there was that streak, which always impressed me.

Well, you get a lot of devotion for a paper like that. And, as I say, they cut me loose to do this long series. I traveled all over the country, talked to some of the top people in the Atomic Energy Commission and the scientific community and various institutions around the country about what was happening, did a thing on—there was a big army laboratory in Fort Monmouth that Joe McCarthy went through and shattered, and it showed that it destroyed this whole military technical operation, didn't help it.

When it was all done, Mr. Brown called me into his office—this was old Sevellon, a short man, but very domineering—and he was sitting at his desk, and I remember walking in. He didn't

*The Providence Journal newsroom 1948. Providence Journal Bulletin photo.*





ask me to sit down. And he had these galleys of these series that I'd done. And he said, 'I just read what you wrote about Fulton Lewis, Jr.' [an ultra-conservative radio broadcaster]. And I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'There are some very important people and very intelligent people who think he is very good.' And I said, 'Yes, I know that.' He said, 'There are very important and very intelligent people who are very important in this newspaper who believe very strongly that you are wrong and Fulton Lewis is right.' And I said, 'Well, that could be.' 'Well, what do you say about that?' I said, 'Well, I think what I wrote is true,' I said, 'You want me to change that?' He just nodded and then sort of dismissed me. And he ran it. And I think he was testing. He was testing. As a matter of fact, he took great pride in that, such great pride. That year it won the Peabody Award. He was so proud of that that I think he wanted the credit himself.

The pay was not good. Now, there were papers that were worse, but it was not good. Well, I

should condition that. Newspaper pay at that time generally was absolutely wretched. Just before World War II, I had gone to work for the *Springfield Morning News* in Springfield, Massachusetts, at eighteen dollars a week. Got raised to twenty dollars. When I worked in New York I got paid much more. But when I came here I went to work for forty-five dollars a week in 1947. Now, that wasn't considered—I don't know what that was considered, but it was considered acceptable. Obviously the cost of living and standards of living were quite different then. But the assumption was you weren't supposed to get paid a whole lot. You lived sort of a genteel poverty, and there were no benefits, there was no pension. And the old Yankees who ran the paper really had pretty much the mill owners' attitude that you're lucky to have a job where you don't go out and get callouses digging ditches. . . . So that the management, in a way, contributed as much as anything to the formation of the [Providence Newspaper] Guild.



# Working People in the Postindustrial Age, 1961–Present

Rhode Islanders have lived a paradox in the last quarter-century. Basic industry continues to decline, this time with no future revival likely. And yet abundant symbols of an apparently vanished age have survived. Traditions associated with working people and their social history, from the physical mill buildings to styles of food, language, and entertainment help to make up a culture inseparable from any distinct Rhode Island identity. Sources of social idealism, especially those directed at our newer immigrants, still find in organized labor the mechanism and the driving purpose for their expression. If the era of the "labor state" has truly passed, so far nothing fills the vacuum that remains.

For the many descendants of immigrants and for first-generation escapees from the city to the suburbs in particular, the mills and the triple deckers quickly receded into childhood memories and family lore. For them, the old fashioned labor movement had served—and achieved—its purpose. Others did not feel so fortunate. Present-day blue collar workers and their once-characteristic urban neighborhoods bore the brunt of the declining real wages, declining prestige within the workforce, and worst of all, factory shutdowns. For them, unfortunately, the weakened labor movement could no longer reliably deliver the steady improvements once possible. Even white collar unionists such as teachers and state workers who made considerable gains in pay and condition of work, saw unions, understandably, as something less than the salvation that the old workers had envisioned. Not surprisingly, the organized labor movement, and labor-based ethnic politics both narrowed.

Meanwhile, the old production-for-use ethic

that manufacturing classes once held in common eroded severely in the face of new developments. Production for war and war-related materials, originally considered a regrettable necessity, became a long-run source of employment in the early Cold War years. What President Dwight Eisenhower called the "military-industrial complex" rapidly evolved into an important vested interest, shifting the source of manufacture from the old domestic market of textiles or useful machines to the federal government and the politics of the arms race. Moral issues aside, this development ultimately accelerated the downward industrial spiral by postponing policy alternatives. In a larger sense, it made Rhode Island working life hostage to international tensions, dependent upon the very prospects of nightmare-Armageddon.<sup>1</sup>

Production and employment changed in other important ways as well. To some extent, Rhode Island evolved toward an "information economy" of highly skilled technicians. To a greater extent, rooted deeply in the 1930s–40s historical experience, it evolved a service economy in which the state became a chief employer. These various workers, from teachers to video-display terminal operating clerks, began to stamp their image upon working life and the labor movement.

Rhode Island had also grown into an old state (second only to Florida in age structure of inhabitants) with special needs for social services. Many of the young, especially those with education, fled to better jobs elsewhere, leaving friends and relatives behind with an eerie sense of aban-

1. See Edward J. McElroy's comments on the defense industry in Ira Chinoy, "AFL-CIO Chief Sees Progress in '86, Despite Internal Discord," *Providence Journal*, 27 Jan. 1987.



donment. This development underlined the decline of the New Deal-Democratic party coalition and its labor component. Aging electoral activists from the rank-and-file had neither the jobs nor the neighborhood constituents to pass on to the next generation. Media politics largely displaced the old base-building, except for local elections.

The cumulative result of more automobiles, new use of toxic chemicals, and expansion of urban and recreational housing also drastically changed the relationship of working people to their environment. Many more of them have the money, the leisure, and the personal transportation to reach the woods or the shoreline on a summer weekend. But nature itself had been seriously and probably irretrievably diminished for a long time to come.

*New highways, including Interstate-95 shown here under construction in 1962, gave Rhode Islanders new mobility but also helped to break down community cohesiveness in areas such as Pawtucket. Providence Journal Bulletin photo.*

The very gap between old and new highlights persistent rituals. From the St. Patrick's Day parades to the public's reluctance to cross a labor picket line, the memories remain. To the superficial glance, streets and neighborhoods in Rhode Island still look and almost feel like scenes of an earlier era. Not without reason do Rhode Islanders' directions for lost motorists notoriously contain the phrase, "turn at where the old \_\_\_\_\_ used to be." Spatially, intellectually, culturally and in many other hidden ways, Rhode Islanders continue to relate themselves to their collective past.

In an American society perpetually restless and uncertain of direction, this sense could be a great source of strength. Is the unleashed individualism of a postindustrial, high-technology society reconcilable with a particular quality of





Rhode Island life extending from past to future? Would the still newer immigrants—Portuguese, Asian, Latin American, and others—find ways to create social movements appropriate to their needs? And would children or grandchildren of earlier immigrants understand the importance of making common cause with them? What will be the general fate of working people, so much the traditional heart of human Rhode Island? On all counts, the outcome remains uncertain. The classes described in this oral history have now more education, a more universal access to events and to cultures across the world, and, very likely, a greater sense of themselves as unique figures. This is not only an important achievement but also a basis from which to create life anew.

A direct descendant of the founding Jencks family in Pawtucket speaks about the contradictions of life in that city as mill shutdowns had begun to alter permanently its economic life, a time just before highway construction devastated its neighborhoods.

**Norma Jenckes:** I grew up between McCoy Field and Pawtucket Memorial Hospital. So much of what I remember is gone now. One place was the 'Blue Pond,' next to a blueing, a dyeing mill. The sand was absolutely blue, pitch midnight blue, and it stunk in the summer. But in the winter it froze, and was the most beautiful place, because you were skating on a black surface—like a mirror. It was a miraculous place.

The back of McCoy Stadium, behind Rhode Island Avenue and opening to all the tenements around, was called the Back Lots. There was a reservoir, open woods and fields. A little further was Dunnell's Lane, Dunnell's Pond, finally closed in the polio scare. People would come down there at night and go swimming, from Lebanon Mills and the neighborhoods. It was a lovely place, with a sandy bottom.

Further away, there was the Moshassuck River and the Limerock Quarry. You can still see it from Route 146. The limerock made the water look

Norma Jenckes is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati. She was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 5 September 1986.

milky and before the highway was built, we used to go there. It was cold, because it was so deep. And you had to be able to swim. Getting back up on the rocks was slippery because of the lime on them. But I loved it.

Everybody took buses, around the city and outside it. I could catch the Prospect Street bus right from my street, and go to Crescent Park, which had a beach for children, mostly. I can still remember certain horses on the carousel. Sundays, during the summer, my family would all take the bus to Narragansett.

The city was walkable then, before the highway overpasses. Social life revolved around the neighborhood, and what was then a bustling downtown Pawtucket. There were three movie theatres downtown, and at least two others in the neighborhoods. All the buses stopped at a big department store, Shartenberg's, and there were lots of places to go and have coffee or tea. My mother would dress up every Saturday and go downtown while I was watching my sisters. I would go to the movies that night, and Sunday evening, and also sometimes Wednesdays, most of the time walking. On summer days I would walk all the way to Lincoln Woods.

The good life, in my world, was the second floor of a tenement. You were up above things, and you had a nice porch. I had never been in a single-family house until I was in graduate school. I couldn't believe that somebody could just live in a house by themselves.

Everyone in Pawtucket seemed to think of nationality. I went to St. Joseph's on Walcott Street, and many of the childhood parents would speak French at home. Their parents had come from Canada, or even New Hampshire. There were schools like Notre Dame in Central Falls and St. Matthew which taught half the day in French. I remember growing up knowing about Ireland's wrongs, singing songs about Ireland. I don't remember a time that I didn't know that I was half-Irish. I used to wish I were all Irish, although I loved my father's family dearly.

I think what I remember best is that there was always something going on. I never felt isolated or lonely. The idea of privacy was something I had to acquire later in life. Someone down the



street would be outside; or you could hear conversations. There would be courtships, like one summer the man of the family downstairs became very ill, and his wife had to go to the hospital, so she asked her younger brother, a teenager, to come and care for the household. And he had just fallen in love. Every day he would sing, 'Wake the Town and Tell the People,' at the top of his voice, and he would put in the name of his girlfriend and his own name. And my mother would say, 'There's Frankie, waking the town and telling the people.' It seemed to me as if there was always someone to turn to. You knew everybody. And most people had been there a long time. Even though you might say, 'so-and-so is a character,' they knew you. It felt very secure.

They could be very supportive, in a quiet way. Many years later, I heard a former neighbor say, 'we were always rooting for you, Norma.' They *wanted* me to get out, to go to college. And I wasn't the only one. Our downstairs neighbor, who owned the house and set our rent very low, was Business Agent of Local 57 in the construction trade. There's a building named for him on Gano Street: John White. Everyone knew they were union people and therefore could be depended upon. He was a good man. People would come to him when they needed work. His son [John White, Jr.] later won the Pulitzer Prize.

My mother never wanted me to live a life in the mills. But I would always work in mills during the summer. That was seen as beneficial: you would see what that was like, and that it was waiting for you if you fell back. I worked in a shoelace factory near Cottage Street, inspecting and putting shoelaces in the bubbles. A few weeks later, my sister snapped her shoelaces, ready to get on the bus. And my mother said, 'Give us some shoelaces, will you?' I said, 'I haven't got any shoelaces.' And she said, 'My god, three weeks in the place and she hasn't pinched a single shoelace. There's no hope for her!' It was expected that you would use what little advantage jobs like that offered.

Factory jobs were pretty awful. I also got a real sense of worker-injuries, how dangerous working class jobs were. You would take jobs in sweat shops for a day or two if you had to, and you'd

quit to [go to] another job. To go a week without a job would be panicking. I was making whatever the minimum wage was, \$1.75. The sweatshops had an oppressive atmosphere, no possibility of taking a break, all sorts of punitive things, or speed ups. I usually worked the second shift, which let you go to a local beach, then go to work at four.

I couldn't imagine what was going to happen with all the mills closing down. I remember even as young girls we would talk about that. I had the sense, through my mother's experience, of entropy, things coming down. She began working at the age of 10, and by the 1950s she went from place to place that closed. That was a common experience. People like my aunt, who worked at Corning Glass, were envied. You would hear of some new jobs, like at Electric Boat. But most of the people knew the work in the mills, that's what they were used to doing.

Everybody was constantly talking and was shocked by the change. I remember my uncle coming up and saying, 'This is a ghost town.' No one even talked yet about the environment, or cancers, or concentrations of toxic waste in certain neighborhoods. I can remember thinking how fast single-family homes were being built over dumpsites. The idea of Ann & Hope becoming an outlet instead of a mill was the great symbolic change. As a child, my mother had lived in that mill housing and often took lunch to her mother in the old Ann & Hope.

But I think what strikes me now was the solidarity, the stability, of the people around me. Pawtucket was a move upward from Central Falls, so much so that when I got married and found an apartment in Central Falls, my mother wept at backward movement. It was presented to us as a sadder place; when they talk about the 'poor people' in school they're never talking about you.

Our family, we've been here for three hundred years. Like the Blackstone River we're always passing through Pawtucket but never quite leaving.

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*Old labor arrangements began to come to an end. Out-of-state competition entered Rhode Island markets swiftly, and the strategies of these*



*new industrial owners did not necessarily include the improvement of Rhode Island lives. No one tells the story of transition better than the last president of the historic union at Narragansett Brewery. Until the mid-1960s, the Narragansett could be viewed as a rather archaic production facility surviving through the loyalty of managers, workers, and beer-drinkers.*

*Did you have any idea why you chose to go into the Brewery?*

**Martin Odsen:** Well, at the time, my uncle was president of the local. We had a lot of people in our family that were union representatives one way or another. He was one of three boys and eight girls. There were eleven in the family. And three brothers worked in the Brewery. And probably after that, between married in and everything, married in people who married McGetricks, which was that side of the family, one time or another we probably had thirty-five to forty people connected with the family in some way or another.

Which wasn't unusual for anybody who was a union representative at the time where they were hiring heavy, back, oh, late forties, after the War when they started to hire heavy, mostly all union representatives had relatives or friends that they got in there. So it wasn't unusual for just him.

*How was your uncle as union leader?*

The best. Maybe we're not going through what they had to, but somebody went through it, just like Jesus Christ went through it for somebody.

But I think after that and through the forties, fifties, I think unions settled in, because the economy was pretty good, and you thought, like if you worked in the Narragansett Brewery, you thought you'd died and went to heaven, that that was it forever and ever. You could drink your beer there; we always made a good salary there; the management, the Haffenreffer family, when they owned it, were very good to us. If you could even say so, they allowed jobs, I think, to be there that

they didn't have to at the time. Where later on they got time specialists in there and automation and everything and found ways to cut our work force probably in half at one time, cut it right in half and still produce the same amount of beer. Bring in high-speed filters and be able to put out as much beer with half the men. What I'm getting at is I think there was a better relationship in the forties and fifties and right into the sixties probably between labor and management, probably all over the country, because, like you asked about my uncle; he could be as much of a diplomat as a union leader. In other words, he could talk on a level with the Haffenreffer people who owned the brewery, and they were pretty high and mighty people, considering they owned the Mount Hope Bridge; they owned half of Rhode Island. But he would talk to them on a man-to-man basis, and a lot of things were settled without a thought of a strike, because we weren't—we knew we were making a fairly good salary and there was no use to hang them up.

We had contracts back then and even in my time where the company came to us and said, 'Look, we want to get this over with. We have an approximate idea of what you want. Here it is. What do you think?' We looked at it, 'Beautiful.' Bang. It was settled that fast.

*How was Narragansett doing in the local market? There weren't any other local beers, right?*

No. They had the market cornered, probably all of Rhode Island. In fact, at one time, I heard a figure once that they had 78 percent of Rhode Island in beer and probably 50 percent of New England at one time.

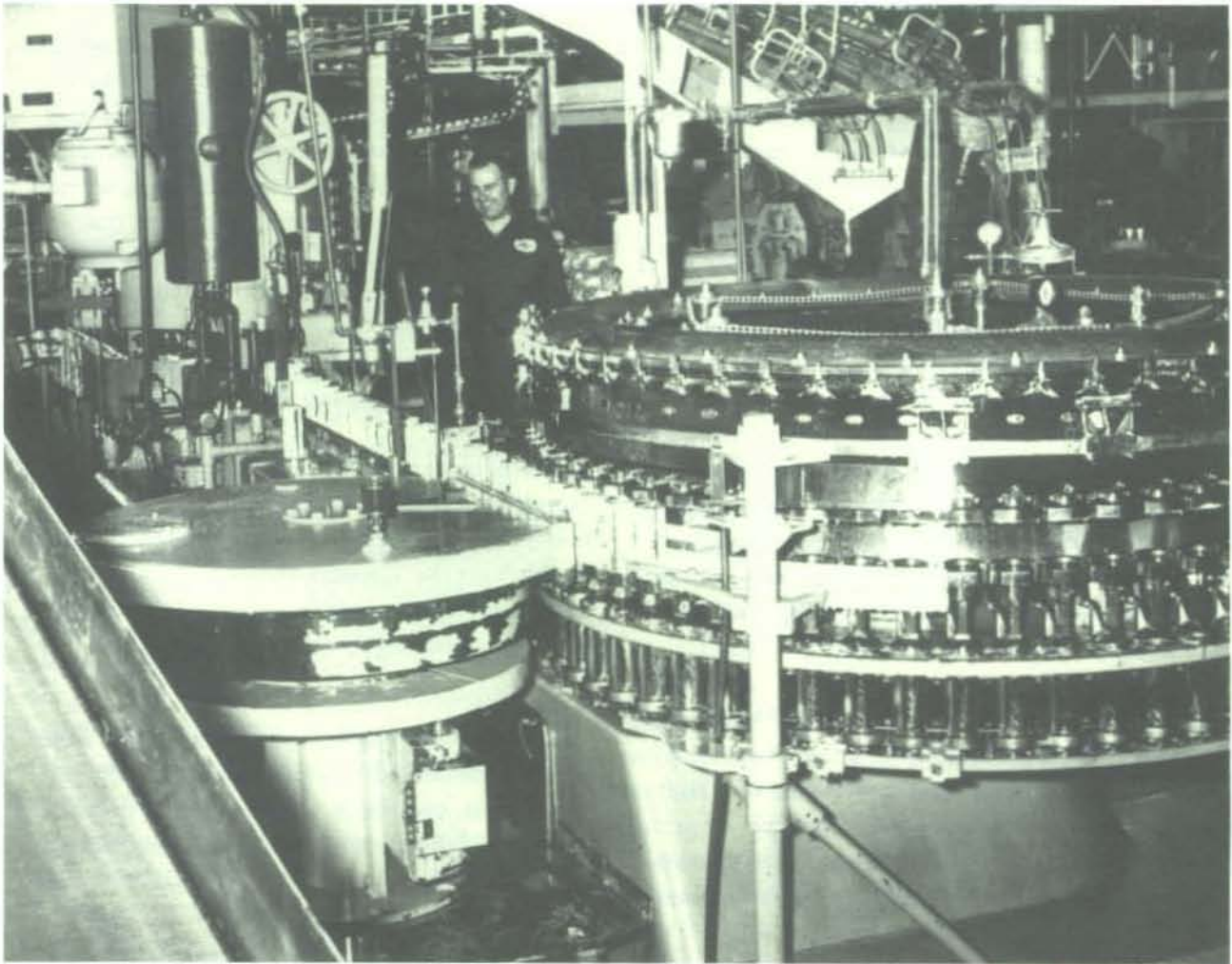
*And what were the other beers in New England that were competitive at all?*

Oh, God, well, Hanley's. Hanley's was in operation then. Haffenreffer up in Boston. Pickwick Ale, people like that, that have long since gone by the boards. In fact, in the '50s, the early '50s, there were something like 750 breweries in the United States. Now there are something like 40. And very few independents.

*And this was partly because there was no competition from the national market at all for Narragansett? People didn't drink Budweiser or Miller in Providence in 1950?*

Martin Odsen was the Secretary Treasurer of Teamster's local 1114 until 1981 when the Narragansett Brewery closed. As he says, he put his "heart and soul" into union work and things have not been the same since the closing. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 30 September 1984.





The production line at the Narragansett Brewery, Cranston. "We had a lot of Rube Goldberg runs like roller coasters," recalls former brewery worker Martin Odsen. Providence Journal Bulletin photo.

Well, don't forget, any local brewery could make deals and had good deals going because, see, the other beer had to be brought in, and salesmen for other breweries couldn't make the deals Narragansett could make. At the time, they had like an advertising campaign, Narragansett, that anybody who owned a barroom or a lounge or anything, usually—you don't see it so much now—every sign outside of anyplace was Narragansett Lager Beer and then the name of the place. And that's who you bought from. They pretty well had it sewed up. And they could give you the deals.

*So the only beer on tap in Providence was Narragansett, practically speaking!*

Oh, yeah. In those days, when you went into a barroom and said—you didn't say 'Give me a

'Gansett. Give me a Miller,' you said, 'Give me a beer,' and you got 'Gansett.

*How was the beer in those days?*

Oh, fantastic. Then I think that a big part of it is that people really enjoyed the beer. It was a good beer; it was a local beer, and they were faithful to it.

At one time we had twelve, I think, different beers, twelve different brands in our brewery. Some you'd never even hear of in your life. Andy's Beer was one of them at one time. They would do that for a supermarket chain, and name it a different beer. You know, a lot of times I believe Narragansett was put in other type cans, which was, if anything, a benefit, because we knew they were getting good beer. There was never a time at the Narragansett Brewery that I



ever thought that they were putting out a bad brew, never! We raved about it.

The guys who worked there, we were probably the best advertisement they had. It was our job. And we'd go to a place that we would frequent a lot, and they'd be cutting down on the Narragansett; we'd say, 'What are you doing? We got a lot of people come in here and drink everything.' 'Well, they're fooling with the beer. They're doing this—' 'No, no, no.' We'd have to sell it back to them and try to get them back.

*Was the equipment new when you were working there?*

Well, I'd say over the years, I suppose there's equipment still in the Narragansett Brewery that was there in the twenties, I would imagine, or when the brewery was built. It's still there. Then you'd have improvements, like I told you before, like high-speed filters. Pasteurization came in later. We were never a new brewery.

In the Narragansett Brewery, we had like four or five levels from the cellar to the top floor, and your beer used to come out at the street into the bottling shop to be bottled, go up a couple of floors, be piled up on another floor, then go down to another floor to be shipped. And we had a lot of Rube Goldberg runs like roller coasters, because that's how we had to utilize our space.

We were an extraordinary brewery! We left more hair and skin on runs than you could believe, because you always had to duck under a run or step over one. Oh, I had injuries in there. There was always something leaking or grease on the floor. It was just an old brewery. And they worked it to its maximum at one time, and, you know, you have to give the machine a rest. You weren't supposed to run it more than twenty hours at a stretch. 'Cause they actually would get tired; the machines would get tired and start to screw up badly. We had a company man bang his head too, and we'd laugh.

From the change of ownership forward, Rhode Island brewing was doomed: One time we made, oh, probably around 1968 or around in there, Narragansett hit 1,300,000 barrels. One brewery. And we fell down to I don't know what it was at the end.

*And when did the national beer start crashing*

*in on the market?*

Well, I'd have to say the demise started when they sold the plant to Falstaff, and that was in 1967, or '68 they sold it to Falstaff. And Falstaff immediately started pulling the advertisements out. 'Cause those days, if you remember, we had the Red Sox baseball games. I mean had that. That was our account. They had award-winning television commercials. You know, they had an ad agency that put out commercials for them, cartoon-type—and Falstaff slowly started taking that advertising away. And then we started going down.

Falstaff never really caught on, and we lost accounts, and little by little people started to get cocky that ran barrooms and this and that. If they couldn't get the 'Gansett, they'd take anything, and they'd take deals from other people, and little by little we started to slide.

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But nearly everywhere you went, people were waiting for the brewery to come back. Now it's three years, over three years now since they closed, and there isn't one day, that I don't meet someone that says to me, 'Are you going to open up again?'

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*On 18 October 1981, International Association of Machinists members of Lodges 1142, 1088, and 883 voted to strike the Brown & Sharpe Manufacturing Company. On both sides, the stated issues were somewhat less than tangible, symptoms of a deeper malaise. For that reason, perhaps, they could not be settled. Thus commenced the longest major industrial conflict in Rhode Island since the massive 1922 textile strike, and like that earlier event it was a calamity. By March 1982, strikers and their sympathizers faced off against a private security force, during a wild melee in which state police—for the first time since 1934—gassed those who would not leave a plant entrance. Few of the strikers returned to their jobs as the labor relations case moved from court to court. Brown & Sharpe, once key to Rhode Island's special role as the nation's master machinist and toolmaker, would not in the near future regain that stature.*

*Here a former top Brown & Sharpe official and*



*an Irish immigrant toolmaker arrive at surprisingly similar conclusions.*

*From the early seventies, you saw a return to the days of conflict, or a conflict because the cloud was on the horizon.*

**James Rigney:** Sure. Because of management attitudes. Yeah. It went back to the early thing.

You know, in 1967, I had successfully negotiated out a crazy incentive system. It was a major accomplishment. But anyway, this pressure was mounting, and it finally got to the point in 1978 where I said to my wife, and I said to myself, and I said to my cohorts, 'I cannot go on, after all these years, with the role that I have played with the unions of being fair, reasonable, accessible, pliable. To be fair, but not to give the store away. I cannot turn around—I don't know how I can do it—to turn around and come on [L.R.] Boulware [a vice president of General Electric]. I couldn't switch to "Boulwarism" [i.e., unwillingness to negotiate with labor], the opposite number of what I was. So I had to quit.

*Very sudden end to an enormous tradition. And a wonderful tradition.*

**John Coen:** I first started at Brown & Sharpe—  
*What year was that?*

Sixty-five, which is, you know, close to nineteen years ago. The union, say, at the shop floor level, at the time, really had a lot of power. You know, the workers were really a lot more protected then than they are now. And the whole atmosphere within the shop was totally different, where many of the disputes that occurred on the shop floor, whether it was wages or seniority issues or whatever, were always resolved at the shop floor level. And then, at the time, too, in Brown & Sharpe we had one of the old-time unionists, one of the original organizers of the union at Brown & Sharpe, as the president who was just a very strong type of person, and a person that was willing, I think, to call the shop out or to walk them out if the situation warranted, and had, I think, the loyalty of the troops, so to speak, on the floor

John Coen worked as a machinist at Brown & Sharpe, where he was also an officer of the International Association of Machinists. He has remained active in the union since the strike. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 16 March 1984.

that if he decided he would do that, I think they would have followed him.

*Why don't you describe the old-line managers who were forced out. Because they seem to me to represent an era that is now substantially gone.*

Yeah. They were the kind of people that, you know, had respect for the people that worked for them. They knew, well, he has a sick wife, you know, and he's got a retarded kid, and he has all these personal problems. So if something came up like an absentee problem or somebody coming in late for work, and they said, 'Hey, my wife was sick again,' the manager would understand these types of things, that this guy's had this kind of a problem, and you have to kind of deal with that on a kind of one-to-one basis. And it always worked that way.

...

You know, the old types of managers, even though you'd get into confrontations with them on the shop floor, and you'd argue and scream at them and everything, but they still had, you know, we still could get down to basics and sit down and work something out that was usually agreeable to both. And so I think the company saw that, too, and then they just started to move these people into nonsupervisory-type jobs or moved them out altogether. And in most cases, they just moved them out. So by the time the strike started, you know, this last time, in '81, most of the old-time managers that were there when I first started were all gone or had lost their supervisory jobs.

*What happened to those people who had been in management for years and got bounced?*

I saw guys walking out the door, that had thirty years in Brown & Sharpe, crying, tears streaming down their faces 'cause they were called over to the front office and, boom, fired.

*As it stood, in a voluntary sense, a young, relatively unskilled worker, would have even liked it better to be able to go from job to job, because you wouldn't be working on the same machine all your whole working life?*

I think many of us felt the same way. I did too. I mean, for years in there I used to question the fact that they used to restrict people to work





*The long and bitter strike at Brown & Sharpe in 1982 signalled the end of two decades of labor and management cooperation. Providence Journal Bulletin photo.*

on just on one machine; that I thought it would be better if we could, you know, like rotate different machines and do this kind of job for a certain amount of time; that it'd be better for the company because they'd have better trained workers and better for the people because it would ease the boredom of production-line work. But they never saw it that way. And then, of course, there were some people in the union didn't see it that way either. But I think, overall, it would have been better. But at the same time, still retaining your basic seniority rights; that if the thing got out of hand you could say, 'Hey, wait a minute. That's it. You guys are abusing this thing now. I want to stay where I belong.' And you always had the right to do that. So under the thing that they offered in '81, you wouldn't have that right any more.

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I think for years, and probably at Browne & Sharpe it was a perception; I mean, I hate to—that the strength out there in the union ranks was very, very strong, and I think the company really saw it that way. And then after a while, I think they began to realize that the clout really

wasn't there; that the unions didn't really have the strength that they thought they had and that the company thought they had.

*Based upon the eroded loyalties? Is that what you mean?*

I think it's based on, not so much eroded loyalties, but on the new generation of workers that really hadn't been involved with—When you bring in a whole new generation of workers, and they hadn't been involved in the original organizing or the hard fights to get contracts and things like that of the new work force coming in, you're going to get a very small percentage that are really going to feel, you know, what unionism is all about and what it means. And I think the company began to sense that, you know, that the strength was no longer there. And I think which proved to be true, because when you look at it, you know, a lot of the people that crossed the picket line and everything were, you know, they weren't the real old-timers; they were kind of that in-between block of people.

I think a lot of it had to do with that whole Vietnam era, and, you know, people, I think started to look on everything just a little bit dif-



ferently, and, you know, they'd kind of lost all this faith in government and company and everything else and needed that—I know that was my case. I mean that one of the big turning points for me in my life was the whole Vietnam war situation. And I think it was the same for a lot of other people. And, you know, we saw that we really needed this union; we had to have it, and we saw that as the only thing that could preserve for us any kind of dignity or respect on the shop floor. Without that union you were nothing more than a pawn, you know, for the company to do with what they would.

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*The changes affected white-collar workers in very different ways. They perceived their underpaid professions as deserving the remuneration and conditions of work that only union organization could provide.*

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**Edward McElroy, Jr.:** I went to La Salle Academy, and I was a decent student, certainly not top of my class, but I was a decent student. But until close to the end of my senior year, or, I'm sorry, somewhere in the beginning of my senior year, I was intent on not going to college; I was going to go to work. As a matter of fact, I went to work at a place called H&H Screw Products and ran a semiautomatic screw machine, and worked as what they called a 'B assembler,' and worked with the tools—micrometers and things like that and learned how to do that kind of stuff, got reassigned to a degreasing machine up against the roof where it was 125 degrees months like this and days like this, and I realized that there must be something better.

We were in the middle of the recession. My father had been unemployed off and on during this period of time, and I think it was right at '58 or the end of '58 my father had lost his job and was now working like eighty hours a week driving a florist's truck at minimum wage, like one dollar an hour, just to keep—to make sure he didn't have to go collect [unemployment compensation], you know, that mentality.

In my early years of teaching—in fact, all of the years that I spent teaching I also did photog-

raphy. And, as a matter of fact, in most of those years I made more money as a photographer than I ever made as a teacher.

We had three children very quickly and—  
*What was your salary?*

I began teaching in Warwick in September of 1962 at forty-four hundred dollars. That was the starting salary.

*There must have been a lot of other teachers working second jobs to make it.*

When I went there, everybody was working. As a matter of fact, that was the way of life. Everybody was working a second job. Medical benefits were very poor. And there was really very little self-esteem in terms of the job. And what I was amazed at, some of the best people, some of the brightest people I ever met, I met in that school, and I was always amazed that they were able to get these people. Extremely, highly dedicated people. You know, you always had people who didn't fit that, but by and large, I just remember some of the names and the faces of the early days, and I said, 'My God, how are these people willing to—' I think the top step was—I think it was forty-four hundred dollars and after—It's just a guess now, but maybe after fifteen or seventeen years you made the lordly sum of seventy-two hundred dollars.

\* \* \*

I remember meeting at this kitchen table and drawing up what we ended up calling a Dynamic Action Program.

It was so good that we used it as the foundation for our collective bargaining program, I would say from when we were first certified in 1968 in Warwick probably until the mid-seventies and probably beyond the mid-seventies. There were so many good things in there, and it was so well done, that that program became part and parcel of what we went after when we actually had the right to bargain. And that's how I got involved. I got on the [teachers union] Executive Committee in 1967. Don't forget, I mean these weren't sought-after positions.

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Having a little understanding of what was going on, I had a feeling at least that public employees were going to play a larger role. Now, the

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Edward J. McElroy, Jr., is President of the Rhode Island AFL-CIO. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 15 September 1986.



other thing I did know was that in New York, the United Federation of Teachers, the AFT local in New York, had won a collective bargaining strike and election in 1960. And so we were cognizant of that, and that had happened while I was in college. And then there were a few others. Detroit started talking about it. Chicago started. And so I knew that there was something happening. Did I know that it was going to grow to be the American Federation of Teachers with 650,000 members, no, never. I can't say that I was that much of a visionary. I think my concerns were more local. But I did know that we needed—we had to depend on the people who were part of the trade union movement here in Rhode Island.

*While public employees, nurses, and other categories of "service" workers came to enjoy the benefits of collective bargaining, the continually expanding sector of female clerical workers had a more complex experience. Like their predecessors, they confronted multiple family issues at*

*home and the job.*

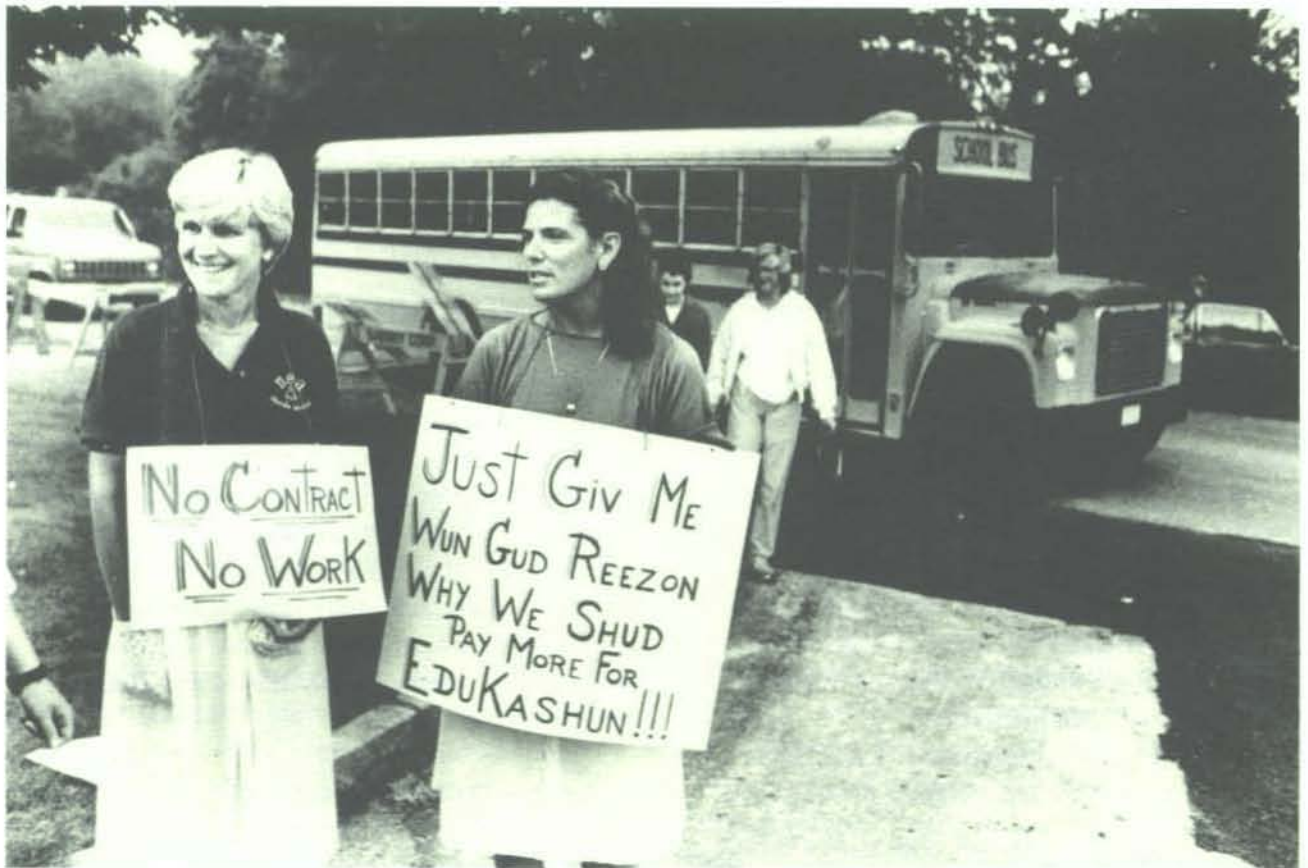
**Anonymous:** And of course, let's face it, we still did need the money too. But, that's beside the point. It was a situation where I felt as if I had to go to work. And it wasn't even the money. Because God knows I didn't need the twenty-eight dollars a week; I made a dollar and a quarter an hour, thirty-two dollars a week or some funny amount like that. Paid the nursery school ten dollars a week, you know? It wasn't the money, it was what I did mentally to get back into the outside world and to know there was something besides diapers and the kids—but it was hard to take.

*So at Grinnell, what was your job?*

**Rosetta Desrosiers:** I was a secretary there and I only stayed a couple of months. It wasn't a very

Rosetta Desrosiers recently retired from her position as Claims Examiner for the Rhode Island Department of Employment Security. She was interviewed by Gail Sansbury, 27 November 1982.

*Newport school teachers on strike in 1976. Providence Journal Bulletin photo.*





high-paying job, it wasn't a very difficult job. There were nice people to work with and if I wasn't under pressure to earn I perhaps would have stayed, you know. If I had been a wife at that time and it was just a second income in the family, it would have been ideal because Grinnell at the time was very male oriented. They believed in giving all the raises to the husbands and heads of households, so to speak, and not to their wives. I remember talking to one of the girls who worked there at the time and she said, 'Well, I know as a secretary, I'm not making very much money, but my husband also works here, and he makes out quite well, so we have to look at both sides of it and I know that even though my raise may only be two dollars a year, he will probably get fifty dollars.' It was that type of thinking, that was the way the place was run.

**Emily Paquin:** At that time my mother left the job and the factory shut down. She did jewelry work for a while but she really didn't like it. She did it after several years before she retired. They lived on the first floor of the house and I lived on the second so she offered to babysit for me if I went back to work. It was so easy. I'd leave the baby sleeping and I just had one at that time and she'd go upstairs she'd do my housework, cook, did everything. I really had it made. I was very fortunate now that I think back. She would do my laundry. After three years I had another one, I got pregnant again. I think I only stayed out four months that time, but I paid my mother. That way she would be independent and not have to rely on my father. I used to pay her—and with the two of them I was giving her twenty-five dollars a week. But I was earning good money for a woman at that time. It was the best paying job in the registry [of motor vehicles]. I do remember in the beginning, senior clerk stenographer was sixteen hundred dollars a year in 1949. I remember that. You see the pays didn't go up substantially until the unions came in say around seventy-two.

Emily Paquin, President of Local #2874, Council 94, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, at the Registry of Motor Vehicles, since the local's founding in 1976, has worked for the state of Rhode Island for thirty-seven years. She was interviewed by Laura Doud, 1 March 1986.

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*The possibility of unionization—especially in government offices—and the cultural influence of the rising women's movement emboldened many of these working women. Some resisted privately. Others moved openly to change things.*

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**Anonymous:** I told him right to his face, I said, 'You know, you ought to go to a psychiatrist and have your head examined, because you've got a beautiful wife and beautiful daughter, and you're talking to me like that.' And, I said, 'So help me God, if you ever come near me and touch me, I'll run right up that hill,' because I lived up the hill from the place of employment. He always asked me every morning if I got laid last night. Every morning, I could be sure, with my coffee I got that because he knew I, you know, I, at that time, I was a single woman.

**Diane Plante:** Well, we ended up having a union drive because the working conditions were—we felt, were intolerable. It was just various things. We were overcrowded. We didn't have job descriptions, per se. Booklets. We felt there was inadequate job training, you know. You were pushed into a job and expected to know it. And those types of things.

They brought their forces in, you know, to fight any type of union activity. And we ended up losing the election. They had us in little meetings of ten people to tell us what was wrong with having a union come in and I think that was what swayed people the other way. They were very effective. And they spent, I think—was it twenty times what we did on the campaign? They had colored brochures and the works. Every time we came out with something, they came out with something to eradicate what we said.

They would use scare tactics like you would have to punch a time-clock. And we always came back with the thing, well, we don't technically punch a time-clock, but, like I said, if we were in at 8:02, it had to be documented on our time

Diane Plante, mother of six children, worked in the insurance industry for eight years. She recently left her position as a marketing representative to return to school and is now pursuing a career in the automotive service industry. She was interviewed by Gail Sansbury, 27 November 1982.



sheet. And they were aware of that. There would be no—any type of extended lunch, that would be, you know, off limits. Would you want a friend who'd be the grievance officer? How would that—how would you want them to know your business and have it spread around the company? Those foolish things that really didn't make that much sense at all. Any type of fears that people had. Strikes. What happens when you don't have—they played on this a lot—what happens when you don't have food to feed your families because you're on strike; you can't collect unemployment benefits, etc.

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*The union lost the election. The most active unionists felt that later they were discriminated against. It was some time before any of them had a chance at new job openings. But they did win many of their demands.*

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**Diane Plante:** We ended up getting job descriptions, job training, better working conditions. We all moved to one building. We did get a Job Posting Committee, a Job Training Committee. And basically that came about because of union activities. And I might also note that we got—that year's the only year—never before and never after—we received 5 percent across-the-board raises.

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*Dynamic social movements of working people now grew from the most underprivileged sectors, where palpable needs drew a new generation of religious-based activists. As the rise of Edward McElroy, Jr., to the state presidency of the AFL-CIO symbolized the rise of the white collar worker, so the promotion of George Nee to AFL-CIO staff representative marked the first steps in expanding the labor movement to the "new poor" in America.*

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**George Nee:** I came to Rhode Island for the first time on a permanent basis in January of 1971. I was assigned by the United Farmworkers' boycott coordinator for New England, Marcos Munoz, to go to Rhode Island and establish the lettuce boy-

cott for the Farmworkers back in 1971. So at that time I got in the car, and I was given five dollars and a name, Gene Ryan, who was the business agent for the Retail Wholesale Department Store Union. And I came down and visited Gene, and he asked me what I needed, and I told him I needed a place to stay and a place to work, a secretary, money, paper, and everything else, and he said, 'You got it.' So I lived on the floor of his office for my first month in Rhode Island. And then I slept in an abandoned building up in Brown University, which is no longer there, and slept in the car for about a month.

Almost on a daily basis I would be picketing a certain number of hours a day at the food stores to educate the public about it. I would speak at union halls and at church groups and any other place we could speak; I would round up volunteers to promote the boycott and get endorsements and that type of thing. And at one point we in Rhode Island had the most successful boycott in the country. We had shut down the lettuce coming into Rhode Island from about three or four carloads a week to none.

There had been a very, very active grape boycott in Rhode Island starting back in 1968. There was a seminarian from Boston who had come down here by the name of Gary Hamlin. And Gary had gone on a hunger strike at the Almac's over in East Providence, and he had done that for somewhere in the vicinity of twenty-four or twenty-five days and kind of crystalized and made a moral issue here. There was a big court case that was taken by Julie [CIO attorney Julius] Michaelson, which gave the Farmworkers the right to secondary boycotts in Rhode Island and peaceful picketing in supermarkets on behalf of the Rhode Island Grape Boycott Committee. So there had been a good foundation here for the grape boycott. There had been a very good coalition of labor.

The way the grape boycott was successful is that there was a way to cut the issue so that you could appeal to people on a number of different grounds. And I think, from a lot of observations, for a lot of people it was never a labor struggle; it was a moral struggle; it was an issue of poverty. It was the kind of thing that at that point Robert

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George Nee was President and Business Agent for the Service Employees local 76. He is currently Staff Representative and lobbyist for the Rhode Island AFL-CIO. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 10 September 1986.





*A demonstration in support of the United Farmworkers, 1974. Providence Journal Bulletin photo.*

Kennedy and Martin Luther King and the civil rights thing fell into it more.

When I first came to Rhode Island, Father Henry Shelton, at that point, was a priest over at the Catholic Inner City Center on Prairie Avenue, and that was a hotbed of activity for, at that point, the welfare rights movement.

*Enter Henry Shelton, one of the most dynamic and controversial public figures of reform. Appointed and supported by Bishop McVinney, Shelton carried his mandate to the poor like a sword and shield of justice. Rhode Island had one of the strongest welfare rights movements in the nation during the 1960s and early 1970s. Shelton's many efforts to connect with the labor movement had one most remarkable beginning. Catholic labor associations had been, in the 1930s, staunchly conservative, directed more at the threat of communism than at improvements in conditions. In the late 1940s and early*

*1950s they became a mediating force, gently leaning toward labor's rights over property's prerogatives. By the 1960s, a new generation of Catholic organizations with tangled roots in the older movements stood squarely in the center of community organizing and social advocacy. Like the Latin American "base communities" of today they began to offer hope to the least hopeful.*

**Henry Shelton:** The Young Christian Workers were workers in different places, they were single people, and we came together weekly at St. Jude's at the time, and basically they'd talk about some problems at the workplace single people were having. That was the observed part of it. Then they'd read a scripture passage from the Bible,

Henry Shelton, currently Director of the George Wiley Center, has been active in Rhode Island community organizing since 1966. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 30 July 1985.



kind of like looking through the eyes of the Bible scripture.

*What would be a typical problem?*

Well, it might just be a person at work who people were abusing, isolating, you know. There was some discussion at times about getting—especially women—job stuff, you know, not getting equal pay, or not necessarily equal, but being treated badly by their boss or something. I think there were times when they got involved with just wages. I don't think there was any unionization out of it, but that would be a discussion. It would be any—again, it came from the workers, not from me or the other chaplains. It would be what problems are they experiencing? I got to know, I think, a lot more about what was going on in life, whether it was grammar school, high school, college students, or the workers, or the married couples than any other thing I did because it was talking from their hearts about their problems. Then the interesting thing was after the Bible discussion it didn't stay there. Then there was some action. It might be that they'd all try to seek out an isolated worker where they worked, you know, someone who no one cared about, you know. And they'd have to report then two weeks later whether they did or not and what they did. So it was a mutual sharing. I still think it would work today.

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*George Nee and others successfully harnessed the energy of such reform-religious movements to the models of community mobilization and a sort of social unionism.*

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**George Nee:** The Unemployed Workers Union kind of evolved into the Rhode Island Workers Association. And it was our feeling that we would put together an organization that would be kind of a catalyst organization.

The Unemployed Workers Union was basically an organization to deal with the needs of unemployed workers, and their initial demands were increase in benefits, extending the benefits.

We came up with this idea of the Rhode Island Workers Association. And that concept was to have an organization that met the needs of low-income workers and unemployed workers in the state around a host of issues, primarily fo-

cused on unemployment rights, but over time it broadened out into health care rights under the Hill-Burton Act [a 1946 law requiring hospitals receiving federal funds to set aside beds for indigent cases]. We did a lot of work with the Portuguese community.

Part of the meeting would be people just telling their problems to the group. And then we had—the next day after each meeting was called 'action day.' And we would get together twenty or thirty people or however many we could, sometimes less than that, and we would go in a group around to all of the agencies that we felt had been hurting these people, and we would demand, for example, that an employer give someone their job back, or we would demand that their unemployment check be restored, or we would represent them on an appeal, or we would do something. But it was a group action format to show people some power in the thing. And I remember an example where we went out to—we had a Hispanic gentleman who had worked for Esposito Jewelry and had lost four fingers in a press machine, and his Workers Compensation check had been delayed by the insurance company. Now this goes back to 1975. And we went out with a group of about fifty people and sat in at the insurance agency out on Reservoir Avenue in Cranston and sat there until he got his check, and he did. He walked out of that office with five hundred dollars. We then took the delegation and walked into the factory at Esposito Jewelry and stood by the machine and told the owners that we would not—we wanted the workers to know that this machine had been tagged as unsafe and was still being used and that this gentleman stood there with his four fingers missing saying that. By this time the plant was about half and half Spanish and American workers. And we stayed there until the police came and kicked us out, and then we picketed the plant for a while.

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[I] worked with the Rhode Island Workers Association in one capacity or another from 1971 to 1976. And during that period of time I began to see that what we were doing, although it was good and it was meaningful, it seemed that we weren't getting at the root of the problem, and,



in terms of an analysis of what I could see, the basic problem for the workers that we were faced with was basically lack of unions, whether it be health and safety problems, whether it be lack of health insurance when they were laid off, whether it be being fired unjustly, whether it be—it all stemmed back from the workplace, at least to people that we were dealing with. And we had had some efforts to move people into unions that were very good. If we felt the place was ready to organize, we would turn them over to people. So around 1975 I was looking for something, trying to figure out where we would go, and just by chance I was asked to go out to California to work with the United Farm Workers union as a body guard or security person for Caesar Chavez.

We went on a thousand-mile march from San Diego to Salinas and then from Sacramento to Fresno. So I had an opportunity to be with Caesar Chavez every day for eight or ten hours a day as we marched down the highway, and I had a chance to really study and learn from him and talk with him about how they had evolved the Farm Workers union from a community union concept of the community service organization. And the more I talked to him, the more I kind of got it in my own mind that I would go back to Rhode Island and start a union, which, you know, wasn't exactly something that—I mean a lot of people would say to me, 'You can't do that. I mean it's illegal.' I said, 'No,' I said, 'I've studied this thing, and you just start one.' 'Well, how can you do that?' I said, 'You just come up with a name and file a petition at the first place that you're ready to organize.' So I had this theory that I would convert this Rhode Island Workers Association into a union, and I felt that I had a unique opportunity, that I was in a position that I was getting all kinds of contacts with unemployed or low-income workers through this organization. Probably if I saw the obstacles ahead of me, you probably wouldn't do these things. Youth is terrific. And I started to leaflet nursing homes and hospitals.

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*The resulting Service Employees' International Union local was, and remains today, modest in terms of membership numbers. But it is unques-*

*tionably symbolic in its constituency of low-paid, predominantly female (and by Rhode Island standards, disproportionately nonwhite) health care workers. Its local director, educated at Andover-Newton Theological School and tempered in the national reform campaign within the United Steelworkers, was one of the founding circle of another remarkable Rhode Island working people's institution, the Injured Workers of Rhode Island. This movement of the industrially wounded responds to the changes in workers' compensation coinciding with the eclipse of New Deal-style labor benefits, and greater awareness of industrially related disease. A client, and now leader, of the organization explains himself and his new-found cause.*

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**John Scunzio:** I went to a place, and I filed an application there, and they called me within a week, and I was hired.

*And what were you doing there?*

Machine operator. That was the limit of my job there, just to operate this one particular machine, which was a cleaning line for metal coils. And I spent roughly a year and a half on this machine. And then on April 21 of 1982, I had gone to work like any other day, started doing my job like any other day, and about an hour and a half into my normal eight hours I was kind of caught in this roll assembly of the machine, and it just drew my arm in to the point where all I could do was scream for help. Help came and they stopped the machine, but yet I was tied up in this machine to the point where my whole right arm was crushed.

You start talking to people that work in a plant, and you hear stories about things. And I had heard a few stories about some people that got hurt pretty bad. One guy—a couple of people had been killed in the plant.

*Killed. How?*

By machines that had—because of unsafe—being unsafe and literally grabbed them, or at some point they had been caught in them, and it

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John Scunzio, a former factory worker, has been active in the Injured Workers of Rhode Island since 1982, working his way up the ranks to become President of the organization in 1986–87.





*John Scunzio at the State House. Photo by Bill Ruggiero.*

would just eat them up. You know, I mean these things are pretty powerful. And as I heard these stories—I'd say I would hear a story like every month there'd be something happening; and besides hearing stories you would see things happen. I saw more bloodshed in this place than the war in Vietnam sometimes.

I was introduced to Injured Workers of Rhode Island from a good friend of mine that I worked with previous to my accident at the same plant that I was working at. And he told me to go see Duane Clinker and talk to him.

So I went to his office and he told me about Injured Workers and RICOSH [Rhode Island Committee on Occupational Safety and Health], which I had never known about in my entire life. I come over to them—that's when they were on Broadway—and I talked to them, and they said, 'Yeah, we have an organization here that we're trying to get going to help injured workers of Rhode Island, and you're a prime suspect for it.'

So I just kind of like sat in on a few meetings, got to know some people, and I think it's great. It's a great thing to be doing. They should be doing it. With the way things are going now in the state of Rhode Island, it has to be done.

Everybody's in their own little boat, let's say. Most people are—everybody's injured, but they're not injured to—everybody has a degree of injury, a degree of mental injury, a degree of physical injury. We have a lot of people in this organization that they have a lot of problems, but they don't know how to get it out of their system.

And the more they open up, the better it is, the better atmosphere we have. And that's what we need. We need a better atmosphere, and we need a better outlook. Optimism is the only word here. Pessimism is not allowed. We shouldn't be able to let people have that idea about this organization, that we're pessimistic, because we're not; we're not at all. We're here to help people. That's all we're interested in, no matter what field or aspect of life it may be.

We want to find out how hurt you are, how hurt the individual is. We want to find out how hurt they are financially, how hurt they are with utilities, payments on cars, and whatever their problems are; and if we can help them out, we will. It's that simple. We've helped out many people here so far and we are continuing to do it.

I'm at this point where I have this particular problem. [Other people] don't have it, but yet they feel pity for you. And they ask questions about themselves. They reach down deep inside themselves and they bring out these questions that they have never—they never would probably bring out to anybody else; but they'll ask you, because you've—they know you've felt the—you have felt the epitome of pain or the epitome of disgrace or insult to yourself; and that is what makes them ask questions. I have been told that anything like this—I never thought of this word—the doctors have told me and a psychiatrist has told me that this is a major insult to you, this happening to you. You've insulted yourself. You've disgraced yourself.

Everybody has hardships. I've had hardships and everybody has. But I've enjoyed my life. I feel



that my life has not been wasted. And I feel that I'm not going to waste it—at least I'm not going to let it waste me.

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*George Nee reflects this same hopeful attitude, tempered with realism, about labor's future as a true social movement—or no future at all.*

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**George Nee:** I personally don't think we can approach organizing from a fatalistic viewpoint. I think that if you look at the history of the American labor movement it coincides with the history of the American work force, and that, you know, America today is not the same work force as it was fifty years ago or thirty or one hundred or twenty. And it probably won't be the same 150 years from now. I think there was a status quo achieved, and it was comfortable. I mean we were successful for a while. I mean the piece of pie was there on a regular basis. And, you know, whether we got weaker and the employers got stronger, or we got stronger and the employers got weaker, however it happened, it's there now and they're taking advantage of us. And, you know, I know there was a tremendous amount of resistance to public employees organizing within the house of labor to the extent that there was no support, and it was seen as being negative—never mind just even neutral.

If public employees had not organized to the extent that they did, the labor movement in the United States and in Rhode Island would be below the critical mass point of where it would have any kind of effectiveness. I mean the public employee unions in Rhode Island are probably 40 percent or more of the labor movement right now. And, as it turns out, they are workers. I mean they are militant at times. They have fought for—they have broadened the scope of the labor movement. . . . I think that we as a labor movement have to start responding both to our membership as workers and as consumers, 'cause we have that; we have that power to do that. And, again, the average worker is also a victim at the workplace and also in the marketplace by the forces of the insurance industry and the banking industry, and somebody has to step in and, you know, fight back on that level. And I think that

the labor movement has done that historically and should do more of that.

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*Toward the end of the twentieth century, Rhode Island and Rhode Island working people had lost something very precious: the instinctive sense of collectivity which permeated the old neighborhoods and factories. Sam Raponi reflects upon these changes.*

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**Sam Raponi:** You don't see the cop now. You see him flying by. He's in the police car, and he's flying by on a call, and he's going all day long. He doesn't get a chance to mingle with the people. There is a difference. You've lost your communication. That's why we've had so many riots during those years is because the policeman was taken off the beat, put in cars; there is no more communication.

In other words, the policeman in them days was the center. He was the hub, and the people were all around him. And they communicated. But when they took that policeman, that walking policeman, out of the area, they lost the communication.

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*But Rhode Islanders had not lost the possibility of learning from their own experiences. Could working people articulate a philosophy that would serve the century ahead? Prentice Witherspoon, recently retired president of the United Food and Commercial Workers, comes closest to updating the old philosophy of the Knights of Labor.*

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**Prentice Witherspoon:** I think that the companies and the unions that are going to survive are those that will learn to work with each other something along the lines of the European co-determination bit. It's an area that most labor leaders disagree with. It's an idea that most management disagrees with. Most management would rather see their companies go bankrupt than give up their so-called traditional management rights, and most labor leaders the same way, you know. There's too damn many labor leaders who feel

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Prentice Witherspoon, a retired labor leader, is very happy that he was involved with the labor movement and doesn't regret a minute of it. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 1 March 1985.



that it's the company's job to make the money and our job to get our share of it. Well, that's a crock because I have suffered through too many bankruptcies, seen too many of my members go down the drain because of mismanagement. And just as that old cliché that you can't trust politics to the politicians; you can't trust management to managers. I think it should be a shared concept.

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*Looking back one last time, just what has the labor movement accomplished for Rhode Island? Let Lawrence Spitz, recalling the unionization process of the 1930s, have the final word.*

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**Lawrence Spitz, Jr.:** The most vibrant, strongest instrument of democracy was an industrial union. It gave hope and encouraged thousands that were in despair.

Remember that [the 1930s] were grim times. People were being paid in scrip in many areas. They were required to live in company-owned homes and buy in company stores. It wasn't only in the coal-mining communities that this prevailed, it was in textile, in Albion, in Manville. In Woonsocket, the only place that there was some organization—and it was faint in those days—people had the feeling that they had some dignity.

Who were these people? They were your grandfathers, your grandmothers, your fathers, your mothers. I know, I talked to them in the privacy of their homes. They wanted to make a better life for the generation to come. And they did.

Lawrence Spitz, Jr., delivered these final remarks at a public forum on the fiftieth anniversary of the textile general strike and the Woonsocket "riots," 12 September 1934.



# Resources for the Study of Rhode Island Labor A Bibliographic Essay

Scott Molloy

Although there is no specific curriculum for teaching the history of industrial Rhode Island in public schools, most students have imbibed the knowledge that Slater Mill was the cradle of the American Industrial Revolution. However, until recently, teachers have lacked the resources to convey a sense of how that event affected the lives of those generations who went to work in the mills created by that revolution. For example, students as well as the general public never learned that the incipient factory system strained traditional ways of village life and led to one of the first mill walkouts in the early Republic in 1824. Furthermore, the strike—or turnout as it was called then—was pioneered almost exclusively by female operatives at the Slater property.

The publication in 1978 of a wide-ranging collection of scholarly articles and interviews devoted to labor history in the state helped reclaim a forgotten past, including the Pawtucket turnout of 1824. Printed as a regular quarterly issue of *Radical History Review* [hereafter cited as *RHR*], "Labor and Community Militance in Rhode Island" boldly redressed a longstanding imbalance in state history before a national audience. The authors' objectives, "to broaden the traditional emphasis on workplace organizing by setting this history in the shaping contexts of family and community" (p. 1) put the volume squarely in the camp of the new labor history where, in the words of David Brody, "the proper

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study of labor history ought to be the worker, and . . . his institutions."<sup>1</sup> In fact, several of the essays in "Labor and Community Militance in Rhode Island" have just been updated in a broader collection edited by Herbert Gutman and Donald Bell, *The New England Working Class and the New Labor History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

American labor history has developed dramatically during the last generation, leaving behind the narrow institutional outlook that practitioners from the Wisconsin School inherited from the old German brand of scholarship and historiography. An ethnic richness and cultural mosaic, derived from E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, now permeates the subject in the United States as well as abroad. Consequently, labor history no longer flirts at the periphery of American education for attention, nor must it strain for acceptance before the history profession. In a population fascinated by "roots," labor history provides a valuable link to the past for the millions of Americans who have been shaped by and benefited from the experience and struggles of previous generations of American working men and women.

Rhode Island was the first urban, industrialized state and possessed an articulate labor reform movement by the 1830s. However, the absence and loss of most primary sources has seriously crippled the quest for a comprehensive analysis of workers' experience. J. Stanley Lemons and George H. Kellner complain justifiably that "the literature of Rhode Island's industrialists and industries is surprisingly thin. In a state so shaped and dominated by major industries and by a powerful business leadership, it is appalling that we do not have a history of that leadership."<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, the literature is paper thin for those who worked in the factories and whose lives depended on the business decisions of these industrialists.

Until a few years ago there were virtually no

1. David Brody, "The Old Labor History and the New: In Search of An American Working Class," *Labor History* 20 (Winter 1979): 111.

2. Roger Parks, ed., *Rhode Island: A Bibliography of Its History*. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983), xx.



formal labor records in any state repositories. Here and there a piece of ephemera—a set of local bylaws, a dance program, or a flyer—graced a collection but, by and large, the shelves were barren of material related to workers and their organizations. While libraries and local historical societies share the blame in this neglect, the labor movement itself is just as culpable, especially in the last century. Edwin C. Brown, Jr., the first secretary-treasurer of the Rhode Island AFL-CIO until his retirement in 1984, issued repeated appeals to union affiliates for minute books, correspondence, and historical memorabilia, only to discover that many of these records have been discarded or lost.

The establishment of a Labor Archives by the Rhode Island Labor History Society, the Rhode Island Historical Society, and the state AFL-CIO in 1982 at the RIHS Library represented the first major attempt to collect and preserve these kinds of records. The process of building the archives produced notable rewards and frustrating disappointments. Some local union presidents and business agents seemed surprised at outside interest while a few expressed outright hostility at sharing any material. In nearby Worcester, Massachusetts, the oldest transit workers local in the country threw away a warehouse of items six months before we got there.

On the other hand, the Labor Archives also includes some valuable discoveries and acquisitions. At the headquarters of the International Typographical Union on Fountain Street in Providence we uncovered an old trunk with the complete records of the local from before the Civil War. The union graciously donated the entire lot. The basement of the carpenter's local in Newport yielded the original records of the Newport Central Labor Council in the late 1880s, twilight days of the Knights of Labor. Tucked away with the council records were minute books for the carpenters, painters, and trades council from the same era. Records from other unions followed: the Journeyman Barber's Union from the turn of the century, the Providence Central Labor Council during the 1920s and 1930s, and the United Food and Commercial Workers (the old Meatcutters Union) for the period since the Depres-

sion. The Archives also received extensive accounts and proceedings from the loomfixers, textile workers, electrical workers, painters, streetcar-men, and most recently the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. Larry Spitz, the general-secretary of the Industrial Textile Union of Woonsocket and later an official with the steelworkers, generously deposited his scrapbooks and personal papers with the Historical Society.

In addition to those found locally, manuscript sources for Rhode Island labor also are located in repositories beyond the state. For example, the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University holds some Rhode Island textile records and memorabilia, and the national AFL-CIO has catalogued some stray pieces at its Washington, D.C., headquarters. Similarly, a number of international unions also centered in the nation's capital possess records and correspondence from various Rhode Island affiliates, like the International Union of Operating Engineers, which has the minute books of Providence Local 57 from the late nineteenth century. Reports and articles printed in international journals such as *The Jewelry Workers Monthly Bulletin*, *The Machinist*, and *Motorman and Conductor*, among others, contain fecund data for Rhode Island labor history at various historical junctures. Contracts and agreements between labor and management, which can be often found at local or national union offices, often are saved after other items are discarded, and provide another valuable source for studying Rhode Island labor.

In the absence of formal records, Rhode Island newspapers are especially important for information on labor, despite the lack of indices and the usual animus toward unions by most publishers. Several daily newspapers at various times printed extensive and sympathetic coverage of the labor movement. The Providence *Morning Star*, for example, detailed labor and ethnic issues from the late 1870s culminating in saturation reporting for the watershed years of 1885 and 1886. Similarly, the Providence *Evening Telegram* and the Pawtucket *Evening Times* furnished objective journalism between 1900 and World War I.

Organized labor published several important newspapers of its own. The Knights of Labor is-



sued the weekly *People*, 1885–88, and the Rhode Island Central Labor Union, *Justice*, for a year, 1894–95. The Rhode Island Socialist party published the union oriented *Labor Advocate* on a weekly basis from 1912–15. The *Labor News* and its successor the *Rhode Island Labor News* reported events of the AF of L and later the AFL-CIO between 1927 and 1978. Occasionally, Massachusetts labor journals comment on the Rhode Island scene rewardingly.

Most secondary accounts of labor in Rhode Island begin with the 1820s. Gary Kulik's fine essay, "Pawtucket Village and the Strike of 1824: The Origins of Class Conflict in Rhode Island" [*RHR* 17 (Spring 1978): 5–37], documents early opposition to industrial capitalism, as does John B. McCann, "A Study of the Mill Workers in the Blackstone Valley, 1820–1830," (M. A. thesis, Providence College, 1930). Barbara Tucker's impressive monograph, *Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry, 1790–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984) makes mention of working conditions and industrial discipline.

A number of articles investigate the character and role of Seth Luther and the New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics and Other Workingmen, a radical reform movement from the 1830s, including Louis Hartz, "Seth Luther: The Story of A Working-Class Rebel," *New England Quarterly* 13 (Sept. 1940): 401–18; Carl Gersuny, "Seth Luther: The Road from Chepachet," *RIH* 33 (May 1974): 47–55; and Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1967). These secondary works should be augmented by Luther's original precocious pamphlets: "An Address to the Workingmen of New England, . . ." (Boston, 1832); "An Address on the Rights of Free Suffrage," (Providence, 1833); "An Address in the Origins and Progress of Avarice," (Boston, 1834); and "An Address Delivered before the Mechanics and Workingmen of the City of Brooklyn," (Brooklyn, 1836).

The Jacksonian ferment of the 1830s was prologue in Rhode Island for the Dorr War. Although the role of workers in that episode is not always

pinpointed, a series of letters sent by William Tillinghast, a local barber who was a leader of the Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers, an influential reformist organization, is invaluable. These letters, addressed to prominent politicians in and out of the state, complain about suffrage restrictions and provide the antecedents to worker participation in the Dorr struggle. See Marvin E. Gettleman and Noel P. Conlon, "Responses to the Rhode Island Workingmen's Reform Agitation of 1833." *RIH* 28 (Summer 1969): 74–94. Several of the many accounts of the Dorr War place the role of workers in the overall context. For the best framework, consult the definitive history by Patrick T. Conley, *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island's Constitutional Development, 1776–1841* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1977). Working conditions in the state's mill villages immediately after the failed insurrection are contained in the fascinating 1844 diary of labor organizer Seth Hewitt in Philip S. Foner, ed., "Journal of an Early Labor Organizer," *Labor History* 10 (Spring 1969): 205–27.

Several works analyze the history of the Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers and uncover a segment of working-class life. These include Gary John Kornblith, "From Artisans to Businessmen: Master Mechanics in New England: 1789–1850," (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1983); Dorothea Jane Tormey, "The Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers: The First Thirty Years," (M. A. thesis, University of Rhode Island, 1957), and William Shade, "The Rise of the Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers: A Workingmen's Organization, 1799–1850," (M. A. thesis, Brown University, 1962). Shade also is the author of an article on common school progress in the state, "The Working Class and Educational Reform in Early America: The Case of Providence, Rhode Island," *The Historian* 39 (November 1976): 1–23. Other works that provide a broader view of the period without focusing on the Dorr War are James Lawson Conrad, "The Evolution of Industrial Capitalism in Rhode Island, 1790–1830: Almy, the Browns, and the Slaters," (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut,



1973), and Michael B. Zuckerman, "The Political Economy of Industrial Rhode Island, 1790–1860," (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1981).

There are only snippets of material about Rhode Island workers for the generation between 1850 and 1870, although some sparse literature exists for the various ten hour movements. Paul Buhle, the indefatigable Rhode Island labor historian, resumes the story by interpreting the Knights of Labor and strikes during the 1870s and 1880s. "The Knights of Labor in Rhode Island," *RHR* 17 (Spring 1978): 39–73. There are also some other general secondary sources for this period through the end of the century, including William M. Jackson, "The Development of Labor Unions in Providence: 1875–1905," (Undergraduate history paper, Brown University, 1973), and Ellen Wallendorf, "The Labor Problems in the Rhode Island Cotton Textile Mills of the Lippitt Family, 1890–1900," (M. A. thesis, Brown University, 1966). The most up-to-date appraisal of organized labor in the postbellum period appears in the finely tuned book by John S. Gilkeson Jr., *Middle-Class Providence, 1820–1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). Chapter three, "Capital and Labor," contains a useful theoretical framework that places local union development in the context of the national scene. Mary C. Nelson portrays labor and politics in "The Influence of Immigration on Rhode Island Politics, 1865–1910," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1954). Carl Gersuny continued the biographical sketches he began with Seth Luther for other personalities in this era including "Eleanor Marx in Providence," *RIH* 37 (August 1978): 84–87; "John Francis Smith: Heterodox Yankee Printer," *RIH* 38 (August 1979): 87–95; and "Uphill Battle: Lucius F. C. Garvin's Crusade for Political Reform," *RIH* 39 (May 1980): 57–75.

Several other important sources round out the material for the latter part of the nineteenth century. *Printers and Printing in Rhode Island, 1762–1907* was published by a fiftieth anniversary committee of Local 33, International Typographical Union. This erudite union, the oldest in continuous service in the state, compiled more than a mere chronicle of the local. The volume in-

corporates histories of the local printing industry, the labor movement, and biographical information. It is a rare find. Two other unusual publications by the Rhode Island Central Trades Labor Union, the predecessor to the state AF of L appeared at the turn of the century: *The Illustrated History of the Rhode Island Central Trades and Labor Union and Affiliated Unions* (Providence 1899) and *20th Century Illustrated History of Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Central Trades and Labor Union and Its Affiliated Organizations* (Providence 1901). These volumes contain short descriptions of each union in the local federation with photographs of the principal officers. Another profitable compilation is a list of factory laws in the state contained in John Ker Towles, *Factory Legislation of Rhode Island* (Princeton: American Economic Association, 1908). The monograph is divided into categories such as child labor, safety inspections, and hours of labor, an arrangement that saves the researcher untold amounts of time.

A treasure trove of rich, undigested facts and figures are included in the annual publications of the state of Rhode Island, *Factory Reports* (1894–1921) and *Industrial Statistics* (1887–1919). These reports, especially the latter, include employment figures, industrial accidents, strike information, and occasional analysis. Expanded bibliographical material for the labor scene also appeared at the turn of the century.

A contemporary account of Providence labor appears in William Kirk, ed., *A Modern City: Providence, Rhode Island and Its Activities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909). Chapter five, "Labor," written by the editor, examines ethnicity, occupational status, and union representation in a sophisticated manner for the times. Other period material includes the various publications of the Rhode Island Consumers League, which are particularly useful in the area of home labor for women and children. For an account of this organization see Stephen Victor, "Lewis Hine's Photographs and Reform in Rhode Island," *RIH* (May 1982): 35–49.

Secondary sources covering the pre-World War I era include my own *Division 618: Streetcar Employees Fight for a Union in Rhode Island*, (Provi-



dence: Amalgamated Transit Union, 1977), and "Rhode Island Communities and the 1902 Carmen's Strike," *RHR* 17 (Spring 1978): 75-98. For the socialist-labor orbit, see the suggestive article by Paul Buhle, "Italian-American Radicals and the Labor Movement, 1905-1930," *RHR* 17 (Spring 1978): 121-51, and Richard P. Clarke's fascinating account of the only Socialist ever elected to the Rhode Island legislature, "The Struggle, Victory and Defeat of James P. Reid: A Socialist in Rhode Island, 1883-1912," (M. A. thesis. Rhode Island College, 1975).

Expository material on the 1920s outside of the Annual *Reports of the Rhode Island Commissioner of Labor* (1916-1934) is scarce except for information on the 1922 textile strike. For a primary account of that important strike consult "An Interview with Luigi Nardella," *RHR* 17 (Spring 1978): 152-60. Susan Jaffee's "Ethnic Working Class Protest: The Textile Strike of 1922 in Rhode Island," (Honors thesis, Brown University, 1974), covers that watershed dispute, a dress rehearsal for the national textile strike a dozen years later. The generic background of organizing in this era is covered in an esoteric work, Harold A. Phelps, "Social and Economic Factors Influencing the Organizability of Labor: A Comparative Study of Unionism in Rhode Island and Minnesota," (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1925).

James Findlay investigated the 1934 textile walkout by setting the strike in the firmament of local and national politics in "The Great Textile Strike of 1934: Illuminating Rhode Island History in the Thirties," *RIH* 42 (Feb. 1983): 17-29. Findlay's work blends nicely with the short, photographic community study by Kate Dunnigan and Richard Quinney, "Work and Community in Saylesville," *RHR* 17 (Spring 1978): 173-80. Gary Gerstle excerpted an article from his doctoral thesis which dissected a unique form of syndicalism in northern Rhode Island, "The Mobilization of the Working Class Community: The Independent Textile Union in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 1931-1941," *RHR* 17 (Spring 1978): 161-72. (For his complete study see "The Rise of Industrial Unionism: Class, Ethnicity and Labor Organization in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 1931-

1941," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1982).

Other works that provide a description of the 1930s but cover earlier ground as well include Rev. Edmund J. Brock, *The Background and Recent Status of Collective Bargaining in the Cotton Industry in Rhode Island* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1942); Editha Hadcock, "Labor Problems in Rhode Island Cotton Mills, 1790-1940," (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1945); and Robert Harry Ferguson, "Textile Unions in Rhode Island," (M. A. thesis, Brown University, 1940).

Richard F. Irving chronicles class prejudice in Rhode Island labor unions and the successful efforts of the local Urban League to dismantle that institutional discrimination in *Toward Equal Opportunity: The Story of the Providence Urban League in the 1940's*, (Providence: Urban League, 1974). Judith Smith expanded her article, "Our Own Kind: Family and Community Networks in Providence," *RHR* 17 (Spring 1978): 99-120, into a doctoral dissertation entitled "Remaking Their Lives: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Family, Work, and Community in Providence, Rhode Island from 1900 to 1940," (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1980). Smith's work was published recently as *Family Connections: A History of Italian and Jewish Immigrant Lives in Providence, Rhode Island, 1900-1940*, (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1985). Although primarily not a labor tract, *Family Connections* considers the labor-immigrant issue at key junctures. Richard Kelly's *Nine Lives for Labor* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1956), presents biographies of nine pioneers in the textile union and many of the personalities and chapters crisscross in and out of Rhode Island. For an examination of Rhode Island textile unions specifically, see Bruce H. Turner, "The Textile Industry and Organized Labor in Rhode Island, 1920-1940," (M.A. thesis. University of Rhode Island, 1959).

The post-World War II era can be examined in several general and specialized studies. Vincent Lombardi has investigated the merger of the AFL and the CIO in the state in "The State Federation and State Industrial Union Council Merger in Rhode Island," (M. A. thesis, University of Rhode Island, 1981). Jay S. Goodman has analyzed the



relationship between the Democratic party and organized labor in Rhode Island through a remarkable series of interviews in his *The Democrats and Labor in Rhode Island, 1952-1962: Changes in the Old Alliance*, (Providence: Brown University Press, 1967). Edwin C. Brown, Jr., longtime secretary-treasurer of the Rhode Island AFL-CIO, has completed several mimeographed chronologies of dates, names, and important vignettes in local labor history entitled "Working in Early Rhode Island," and "Rhode Island Labor History," (Providence: Rhode Island AFL-CIO, 1975). Paul Buhle, Scott Molloy, and Gail Sansbury edited and contributed to a volume of short, popularized articles and original sources augmented by a cornucopia of graphics and photographs in *A History of Rhode Island Working People*, (Providence: Rhode Island AFL-CIO, 1983). A valuable personal interview with Al Sisti, textile and steelworker activist, provides first-hand information on this period: "An Interview with Al Sisti." *RHR* 17 (Spring 1978): 181-90. For more specific subjects, see Franklin J. Watson, "A Report on the Providence School Strike of 1952," (M.A. thesis, Brown University, 1953), and Duane Clinker's photographic essay on the bitter machinist strike at Brown & Sharpe in 1981, *Standing Together: Union Busting at Brown & Sharpe*, (Providence: Duane Clinker, 1982).

Women and labor have, in recent years, received unusual attention. Excerpts from several interviews in the important Rhode Island Working Women Oral History Project, now housed at the Rhode Island Historical Society, have been included in *WORKING LIVES*. Kate Dunnigan, Helen Kababian, Laura M. Roberts, and Maureen Taylor combined photographs with analytical text in "Working Women in Rhode Island, 1900-1940." *RIH* 39 (May 1980), 43-56. Two contemporary accounts of women in the clerical field and jewelry industry are Gail Gregory Sansbury, "'Now, What's the Matter with You Girls?': Clerical Workers Organize" *Radical America*, 14 (Nov.-Dec. 1980): 67-75, and Nina Shapiro-Perl, "The Piece Rate: Class Struggle on the Shop Floor. Evidence from the Costume Jewelry Industry in Providence, Rhode Island," in Andrew Zimbalist, ed., *Case Studies in the Labor Pro-*

*cess*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 277-98.

For two older reviews of female labor, consult the anonymous "Women in Rhode Island Industry: A Study of Hours, Wages and Working Conditions," *Washington Bulletin* 21 (U.S. Women's Bureau, 1922), and Henry F. Anderson, "Legislation in Rhode Island Regarding Child Labor and the Protection of Women in Industry to about the Year 1900," (Workers Service Project, W.P.A., n.d.).

A decade ago, Professor William G. McLoughlin, an academic sensitive to the world of labor, could cite only a handful of labor references, mostly older works, for the bibliography of his bicentennial history of Rhode Island.<sup>3</sup> Though the portrait of Rhode Island workers and unions is clearer than it was at that time, our knowledge remains sketchy. Ample opportunity remains for scholars, graduate students searching for important dissertation topics, and amateur historians who have often played important roles in recovering the important stories of Rhode Island labor.

We need full-length biographies of labor sympathizers like Lucius Garvin and complete sketches of local labor figures who went on to lead national unions, leaders like Tom McMahon, William Johnston, and Anne Burlak (who is presently writing her memoirs). We require a representation of workers in different fields from the colonial period to the present. Where there are no extant sources, we ought to employ statistical groupings extracted from whatever records exist. If only some local demographers and Cliometricians, our modern historical ventriliquists, would turn their attention to this task. Without this collective filler, the names, dates, and places in Rhode Island labor's past seem disjointed—an historical non sequitur. The subject matter is there and waiting.

3. William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).



In my mind the mills will always run  
My best friend could hear the knitting machines  
From her still bed. The hiss and sough  
Of the bobbins like an inland sea would lull her to sleep.

At night the red glow from Lebanon Mill  
Lit up the banks of the Seekonk River like a giant campfire.  
When we biked by we could see the men standing  
Their gleaming, sweaty torsos leaning out the windows,  
Smoking cigarettes and sucking the little breeze  
That always came at night off the sour water.  
"Can I have a ride?" they would shout as we lined up  
For that last careen, no-hands, high squeals, down the long hill  
Toward the rosy shore before the low light was gone.

Sometimes thunderstorms that we heard rumbling off  
Would break overhead, leading us to shelter  
Under beech trees in the backlots, glad of the soaking rain,  
Worrying not at all about the crackling high tension lines  
Above. We always walked our bikes that last bit back  
To Englewood Ave. Every porch held the murmurs  
Of a tired family, "Goodnight, Goodnight,"  
Softly from their dim interior a chorus of watchers  
Chanted us safely home.

Home. Home was a second floor tenement and porch,  
No trees nearby, but the pigeons under the eaves  
Filled the thick hours of dusk with their intimate coos.  
Sitting, breathless, sipping pitchers of lemonade,  
We refused to move to the airless rooms inside.  
Waiting out the whole night sometimes  
Until the light and the fresh breeze that would let us sleep.  
Even I would be allowed to stay up, lolling back  
On an old orange couch and listening.

Listening to Jacko, home drunk and serenading  
The woman downstairs, "Lovely, lovely," he would say,  
"The lovely Mrs. Doherty."  
Then "My Wild Irish Rose," or "The Snow-Breasted Pearl"  
Lilting through the night air  
Lifting us, sitting there grinning in the dark at each other.  
Jacko would sing until someone (Mr. Doherty?)  
Told him to shut up. Then he would offer to fight  
Or subside into sobs.

Sobs as he walked past the rows of burning geraniums  
In the white urns at his sister's gate.  
We would hear one phrase fading, fading,  
Lovely, "The lovely, lovely Mrs. Doherty."