

Gender, Race and Labor in America

How One Labor Union Confronted Racial and Gender Conflict during the Second World War

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“He may be snubbed, re-sented, even kicked around, but it won’t be like the South. He will not find a carefully worked out technique of suppressions operating against him. His fights will be open and on the surface, and he will not be opposed by the whole white community. He will make friends.”
*(Arna Bontemps
& Jack Conroy)*

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Race and War in America: A Labor Union Confronts Racial Conflict during Wartime

IN APRIL 1935, the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) staged its most important labor action of the 1930s—and, possibly, the most important labor action in America during that period—when it confronted the General Motors Corporation (GM) at its Chevrolet Transmission plant on Central Avenue in Toledo, Ohio. The three-week closure of the factory by the union resulted in a “Memorandum of Negotiations” and marked the first time GM had bargained with an independent labor union. The very ability of a union to conduct a successful labor strike against GM—with an orderly procession of workers carrying protest signs around the factory during the strike—demonstrated the potential power of workers’ demands for collective action. Yet this strength, born of

class solidarity and militancy in the Great Depression of the 1930s, had another side for African-American workers in the next decade, as events during the Second World War would demonstrate.¹

Working-Class Americanism: Ethnicity, Race and Gender from Prosperity to Hardship

ACADEMIC WRITERS have argued that some white workers in America—fearing the changes of modernism of the 1920s—embraced conservative, even racist, organizations such as the infamous Ku Klux Klan. It appears that most working-class, white Americans, however, adopted new habits that embraced modernism, most notably the participation in a nationally oriented consumer culture. For many of these workers, especially those that were immigrants themselves, overt (even racist) calls to “traditional” American values held no value. Thus, a broad form of working-class Americanism remained alive through the 1920s, despite a politically conservative culture. When the prosperity of the 1920s turned into the Great Depression of the 1930s, the basis for this broad coalition of working-class Americans showed its potential power.²

A Case Study: African-Americans and the Labor Movement in an American City, from Depression through War

IN CONTRAST to the waves of European immigration that changed its character in the late nineteenth century, the city of Toledo, in the State of Ohio—arguably, the most “average” city in the nation, then as now—has always had an African-American community. In the first national census of the town in 1840, 54 “free Blacks” lived in the town, about 4.4% of the total population. Like any community, Toledo’s Black population formed its own church parishes, two of which dated from the antebellum period (before the American Civil War of the 1860s). By the time of the American Civil War, about 200 African-Americans lived in the city.³

Although they were free in the northern states of America, other forms of discrimination were imposed on African Americans. In 1850 the Toledo Colored (Black) School Association resulted from the imposed racial segregation in the State of Ohio’s newly created public school system for children. In contrast to other cities in the state, however, Toledo’s public (or common) schools de-

segregated by 1870. Similarly, the state's "Black Laws," designed to segregate by race one's residence and employment and to limit voting rights along racial lines, were ignored in the city.

By 1890 African Americans lived in all nine wards (or neighborhoods) of the city, although their presence was usually concentrated within each ward. Yet there was no racial ghetto; in fact, the African American population in Toledo declined through the First World War to just 1.1% of the total population. As in every other northern American city, the Great Migration of African Americans during and after the First World War changed demographics completely in Toledo. Between 1915 and 1920 about 4,000 African Americans arrived in Toledo, which doubled their presence in the city. The move was largely spurred by economic opportunity and advancement: whereas almost none of the city's African American workers were in skilled occupations in 1910, about 28% held skilled or semi-skilled positions in 1920, according to researchers at the University of Toledo. However, most African-Americans worked as porters, janitors or domestic servants in the city. Despite the demand for labor in the city during the war, few factories would hire African Americans.⁴

The influx of new residents tested the demand for housing and services in the city, and, for the first time, a racial ghetto took shape. In the eastern part of the city, African Americans were warned by newspaper stories to stay away from the area; a formal committee, the Citizens' Realty Plan, publically announced racially restrictive purchasing agreements for homeowners. On a more positive note, the racial tensions that caused unrest, as well as fatal violence, in other northern cities during the First World War did not occur in Toledo. On a negative note, new African American arrivals to Toledo were largely directed to find housing in the Pinewood District, a formerly German neighborhood just southwest of the main downtown area of the city's central business district. They largely had no choice but to take housing there. The racial segregation was still largely informal, but it was nonetheless very real.

The changes in the neighborhood, once known as Lenk's Hill, into the Pinewood District were astonishingly rapid. In 1914 the area has just 16 Black families living in it, about a third of the neighborhood's population. By 1920 about two-thirds of Toledo's 5,691 African Americans lived in the wards that included the Pinewood District. Lenk's Hill had been a semi-industrial, partly residential neighborhood through 1900, with many small businesses, saloons, barbershops, groceries and small factories taking their place among the houses in the area. By the First World War, small businesses and factories were the main buildings in the neighborhood, with houses for the owners and workers taking up the rest of the area.

Although the prosperous years of the First World War in America boosted the neighborhood's businesses, the houses in the ward had already deteriorated.

Most of the homes on the eastern side of Lenk's Hill had been built in the early 1880s; in fact, the area had been over-built with smaller, over-crowded homes because of speculation in property during that period. Initial landowners subdivided lots for housing, even as the area became industrialized after 1900. The neighborhood retained some stability, as many self-employed artisans—painters, plasterers, plumbers and shoemakers—worked out of their homes. But these residents moved on as their jobs became industrialized and were located in factories, not homes. The neighborhood soon became Toledo's "Colored Town" after the First World War.

There were other policy changes that shaped the formation of Toledo's racial ghetto in the first decades of the twentieth century; chief among them was the levy of property taxes on the area. Although the residences of Lenk's Hill were clearly less valuable after 1900, property taxes on the land remained high. Because the neighborhood was increasingly one of industry and was adjacent to valuable downtown business parcels, landowners paid relatively high taxes on the land in comparison to newly developed parts of the city. With the real value (in terms of rental income) of residential buildings barely sufficient to justify the upkeep and repair of private dwellings in Lenk's Hill, many fell into neglect. Many property owners thus converted formerly one-family homes into multi-family residences in order to get as much out of their holdings as quickly as possible.

Still, at a rate of almost 28% in 1923, home ownership among Toledo's African American population surpassed that of other northern American cities even as residential segregation increased. The rate of home ownership in Toledo declined a bit to about 20% by 1930, but it still far surpassed the rate in other northern cities such as Chicago (10%) or Buffalo (7%). Although the rate of home ownership among African Americans was relatively high in Toledo, however, it has to be put into perspective.

The economic collapse of the Great Depression in America intensified the formation of a racial ghetto in Toledo. In the city as a whole, unemployment reached almost 50% in 1932. In Pinewood, which was then 87% African American, unemployment reached 80%. The area in the easternmost portion of Lenk's Hill (eventually marked for "slum eradication" as a New Deal measure by the US Government in 1934) had 75% of its buildings graded in "bad" condition, with fewer than 5% in "good" condition. A slum survey showed that 90% of the city's tuberculosis cases were in the Pinewood District and its rate of illegitimate births, at 7% of all births, far outpaced the city's rate of 2.6%. Only the downtown district, with no residential population aside from transients staying in run-down "flop" houses, had higher rates of criminal convictions, juvenile and adult delinquency and mental illnesses.⁵

Labor and Race in Toledo, Ohio

AMONG THE major businesses in Toledo, few employed African-Americans throughout the Depression years of the 1930s in any number whatsoever, in contrast when some had found jobs during the growth of the 1920s. The Willys-Overland Company, with about 2,000 employees on its payroll in 1932, employed only 4 African Americans, as janitors. Among the 1,400 workers of the Libbey-Owens-Ford (LOF) glass-making factory, 12 African Americans worked as janitors, as did 40 of the 1,200 employees of the General Motors Chevrolet Transmission Plant. Ohio Bell (the city's monopoly telephone company), Electric Auto-Lite, and Doehler-Jarvis, among the city's largest employers, hired not a single African American worker. As these companies were among the region's leading employers, African-Americans were excluded from the jobs that had the greatest chance of surviving the Great Depression intact. Even with the federal government's New Deal programs, designed to get jobs and money into the economy, African Americans continued to suffer more during the Depression. By 1937 employment among workers had fallen to about 10% in Toledo in general. For African American workers, the rate was about 33%.⁶

In addition to the resistance of employers to hire African American workers for anything but low-wage work, their segregation in the work force stemmed from their second-class status in the city's labor unions. None of the city's unions had ever taken an interest in including African American workers. Those that joined a labor union found little advancement in the workplace. Referring to the practice of hiring white members of a union over African-American union members for jobs, one academic study concluded that "Such practices and policies lead one to believe that even unions which do admit the Negro do so only for the purpose of controlling him." Emmett Wheaton, Sr., an African American attorney who completed an academic study at the University of Toledo in 1927 indicated that "The trouble with labor and capital is that . . . they have become antagonistic forces for group and race advantage and exploitation. . . . The Negro is confined to the lowest ranks of labor in the mills, shops and factories of industrial establishments. He hardly if ever rises to the rank of foreman and other positions of supervisory capacity, regardless of his ability, and his struggles to enter the class of skilled laborers are far more severe and discouraging than those of the white man."⁷

By the end of the Second World War, however, Emmett Wheaton, Sr.'s son would challenge these very prerogatives as a member of the United Auto Workers Union, an organization that pledged itself to ending racial discrimination in the workplace. It would be a hard battle; not only would workers pit themselves against one another, but the union would be split at times as well.

Labor, Gender, Race and War in UAW Local 14's Chevrolet Transmission Plant (Toledo, Ohio)

A GAINST THE background of an economic depression and the onset of war, consider the first of at least three unauthorized strikes (“wildcat” strikes) by the workers at the Chevrolet Transmission plant, organized by the UAW’s Local 14, between July 1943 and April 1944. It was a time when America’s war production had reached its full potential and unemployment was virtually non-existent. The union had also agreed to a no-strike pledge to the US Government for the duration of the war.

The unauthorized, or “wildcat” strike that began on 13 July 1943 started with a supervisor’s reprimand of employee Russell Eastham, who had received several prior disciplinary warnings for various infractions. This time, Eastham was punished for smoking in one of the factory’s toilets; in response, Eastham alleged that he was being arbitrarily punished for a common offense in the plant. Eastham then went further and stormed into the factory’s personnel office, where he found Claude Cochenour, a general manager in the plant. Eastham—mistakenly, as it turned out—assumed that Cochenour had ordered him to be reprimanded, and then attacked him. So violent was Eastham’s outburst that he carried Cochenour out of the plant and onto the sidewalk during the course of the attack. Eastham was fired on the spot and his co-workers then walked out during their meal break to demand that he be reinstated.

The first union official to respond to the strike was Local 14’s Recording Secretary, James Cook. After he failed to get the strikers to return to their jobs, he contacted the top official of Local 14, Regional Director Richard Gosser. As Cook later described events at the plant, “Gosser came to the shop and talked to the men outside during their lunch period, and by appealing to their patriotism and so forth he urged them to go back to work. This they did when the work signal sounded at 8:30 and there was no further stoppage of work.” While the men went back to work, Eastham was not so fortunate. Although the union tried to get his job back before a labor hearing board, it rejected its appeal.⁸

Eastham’s outburst and subsequent actions by his union showed just how much labor unions had changed the nature of the workplace in the factory. Only a few years before, as one worker remembered, “If you had something to say, for the better or for yourself, well, you wasn’t organized, you was afraid to do it, because you was on your own. You had to be organized to have power to talk to somebody . . . [Workers] had grievances, but they couldn’t come out into the open.”⁹ Now, workers felt confident enough of their power that they violated a national no-strike pledge during wartime to fight one man’s dismissal over what was likely a personal dispute. They may have gone back to work under patriotic

appeals, but only after demonstrating a measure of control over the workplace. Their collective dignity, along with decent wages and job security, were important goals.

Male workers in the plant voiced similar demands in their next wildcat strike, but this time in protest against assertions of equality from their own, female colleagues. On 13 March 1944, 35–40 men in the plant’s grinding department stopped work “because of a girl put on a grinder” machine, according to a later statement by one of the strikers. The woman had worked in the department before, but had been removed after the men protested “to get an older [male] employee on the job.” But while the union argued that the men’s actions resulted from being “fed up with practice of supervision in putting new employees on higher-rated jobs when employees with merit, ability, capacity and seniority are available to do a grinder,” no-one denied that the protest was specifically intended to keep women from working in the department.¹⁰

In the aftermath of the strike, the company invoked patriotism to justify its disciplinary action against the men who participated in the strike. “Our young men are giving their lives in the War on foreign lands,” wrote the plant manager in response to the men’s grievances, “And the least we can do here at home is to keep our machines running and thus try to do our part in supporting them in their gigantic task. . . . Every man involved should consider himself censured for stopping war work on such a trivial context.” In response, the union claimed that the strike was a spontaneous action and was therefore no individual man’s fault. The argument was as flimsy as was its defense of Russell Eastham. The strike was blamed entirely on the men who walked out. After the matter had settled down, however, women met with little future resistance in working in various departments around the plant. There were no other recorded labor disruptions there based on claims of gender supremacy during the course of the war.

The next strike, however, brought some of the plant’s men and women together in a test of racial supremacy as some white workers staged a so-called “hate” strike that began on 20 April 1944 and continued through the next day. Initially, the strike involved 7 white women—Jessie Rhoads, Florence Anthony, Helen Cuddebak, Deloris Linkey, Maxine Crowe, Cora Dailey and Opal Jewell—who refused to work with 4 African-American women who were placed on a production line alongside them. Joined by over 100 workers in their department, the women walked out and stopped production in the entire plant.

The next day, workers went back to their jobs pending the reinstatement of the 7 women, who had received 2-week suspensions for their actions. When the women’s appeal was denied, workers left the plant again. Vincent DuBell, later singled out as a leader of the second walkout, described what happened in his subsequent grievance:

When I came out for lunch hour my intentions were to go back to work. I ate at Frank's Restaurant. There was a large crowd there and I don't remember any faces but all had Chevrolet badges on and told me that I shouldn't go back to work, but the crowd decided to go back in the plant. The crowd left the plant all together and went to the union hall as there was an [union] man there to speak to them. The international and local officers told us all to go back to work.

After the international and local officers left the meeting I expressed myself. Quote, "In my judgment we should all go back to work and that the membership should use their own judgment and above all there should be no picket line of any source." I came out Saturday morning to see if the day shift went to work so I could prepare myself to go to work and there was a picket line around the plant. The crowd hollered at me and asked, "What's the matter, Vince, are you afraid to go in?" I then fell in with the crowd. I hung around with the gang for about an hour and then went home and was there all day. I worked around the house and heard over the radio there would be a meeting for all Chevrolet workers Sunday at 1pm at 611 Huron Street. I attended the meeting."¹¹

Another worker, Albert H. Scofield, also protested his discharge from the plant for leading the picket line. Scofield claimed he joined the protest only because "I was told I better get in by someone I didn't know so I got in and walked around a couple of times. Then I left for home and told my wife that they had a picket line at the plant and that the doors were locked." Three other workers, Gerald Smith, Lois Hollinger and Annie Alford, also received 60-day suspensions for "attempting to induce other employees to quit working." The general meeting on Sunday, 23 April, however, ended the walkout, as workers voted to submit all grievances for arbitration and go back to work.¹²

Although workers in the second walkout may have been motivated by several issues—the union's attempt to get the 7 women placed back on the job, after all, was a test of its authority in the plant—the meaning of the strike was clear. Remarkably, just 5 weeks after women themselves had been the target of a strike by men in the grinding department—and less than 9 months after they had first been hired in the Chevrolet plant—women helped to lead a protest with their colleagues to enforce shop-floor racial segregation.

But the women received little support from their union for their actions. As in the previous walkouts over the attack on a supervisor by Russell Eastham and the protests by male grinders against a woman placed in their department, Local 14 officials stated publicly that the racial strike was unsanctioned and took immediate action to get workers back into the plant. On each occasion, workers failed in their overt attempts to shape the union to a particular vision of gender or racial prerogatives.

Asking the union to live up to its ideals in its own daily affairs, however, was another matter. Far more than the strikes of 1943 and 1944, the events that created the most tension within Local 14 and the UAW during the war resulted from the demands of several African-American workers that the union enforce its working-class commitment to racial equality and end less overt, but no less pernicious, discriminatory practices in the factory and the union itself. For Toledo's African-American unionists, the second part of the "Double V for Victory" campaign—victory against fascism abroad and racism at home—could not wait until the war's end.

The day-long hearing of the UAW's Fair Practices Committee in Toledo on 30 April 1945 resulted from a complaint filed by 9 African-American union members (all of whom lived in the Pinewood District) from various plants in the region. Under the leadership of Emmett Wheaton, Jr. (who also chaired a group known as the Toledo Fact-Finding Committee to raise awareness of union activities in Toledo's African-American community), the group alleged a series of discriminatory practices tolerated by the union. In Local 14, these practices included passing over long-time Black employees for promotion in favor of newly hired White workers, both male and female. The group claimed that although some of the Black workers had over 20 years of seniority at the Chevrolet plant, they remained classified as janitors, even if they now operated machines or performed other duties unrelated to their job classification. The complaint also alleged that under the union's discretion, Blacks had been denied a pay raise granted by General Motors in 1940 to all workers in the plant.

The list of infractions by the group also stated that union officials in the region refused to process the grievances of Black workers and that these workers were then denied promotions at work because of their race. In UAW Local 12's Champion Spark Plug factory, one worker, Clarence Dale, had been taken off of a new job when 20 White workers in his department refused to work with him. According to testimony during the subsequent hearing, the union failed to discipline the wildcat workers or give the company an assurance that workers would stay on the job. This lack of action by the union forced Dale and another Black worker waiting a promotion at the factory back to their previous jobs in the plant.

Dale's complaint also charged that the union failed to pursue allegations that several area companies refused to hire Black workers and engaged in other racially discriminatory practices. In Willys-Overland's Local 12 unit, these allegations were made even more damning by claiming that union leader Richard Gosser himself controlled hiring in the plant and that he had arranged to have Emmett Wheaton, Jr. fired from his position as an assistant supervisor with the company in retribution for his activism.¹³

The union's internal correspondence shows just how outraged Gosser was by the group's charges. Firing off a letter to George Addes, chairman of the national union's Fair Practices Committee, Gosser admitted problems in promotional practices at the Chevrolet factory. However, he argued that Wheaton's group had ignored proper union procedures in issuing its public complaints. "These fellows did not tell me one damned thing I did not know. . . . Furthermore, these people are not a representative group of anyone, and . . . I refuse to meet with chosen individuals who set themselves up as a representative group of any group of people." Gosser also attacked Wheaton's challenge to his authority in the union's own newspaper, *The Toledo Union-Journal*. Although Gosser reiterated his support of the union's commitment "that there shall be no discrimination because of race, color or creed," an editorial in the paper against the "efforts of a self-appointed leader of the Negro workers in Toledo to stir up dissension and discontent" criticized Wheaton's absence at a union meeting in support of a Fair Employment Practices Act then under consideration by the State of Ohio.¹⁴

In the end, the Fair Practices Committee of the UAW dismissed most of the 12 allegations that it heard from lack of evidence. The charges it upheld, however, demonstrated a determined effort by the union to end the discriminatory practices that it agreed "are perpetuated there by mutual agreement between the plant's management and certain unnamed committeemen of the Chevrolet Unit of Local 14." The Committee condemned the management of Local 14's willingness to agree to the racial prejudices of White workers in the plant by failing to support promotions for Black workers and ordered Director Gosser to negotiate with Chevrolet management to end such practices. Further, the Committee stated that it would review the subsequent agreement and take the matter out of the local union's jurisdiction if Gosser failed to eliminate racial discrimination in Local 14.¹⁵

The Committee was even more forceful in ordering UAW Local 12's Clarence Dale and Fred Clark to get their promotions at the Champion Spark Plug factory, which was the basis for the entire protest. Its recommendation gave the local union just 30 days to resolve the matter and stated that the union would refuse to hear any grievances related to disciplinary actions from a racial "hate strike" by their fellow workers. These terms were unambiguous in condemning racial hatred within the factory by its workers. The Committee refused, however, to recommend the reinstatement of Emmett Wheaton, Jr. Although it admitted into evidence that Gosser had threatened to have Wheaton fired for his prior meeting with George Addes, the Committee found that the union did not have jurisdiction over Wheaton's position as an assistant foreman, which was not covered by the union's collective bargaining agreement with the company. However, Wheaton later regained employment at the Willys-Overland factory.¹⁶

Race and Labor's Hegemony in Toledo after the Second World War

DESPITE THE personal costs and amidst conflicting claims over the union's authority and mission, Wheaton's group forced the UAW to take its anti-discrimination pledge very seriously by the end of the Second World War. Of course, the changes it demanded took years to implement in the union. In 1948, similar charges of discriminatory hiring at the Electric Auto-Lite factory and again at the Willys-Overland plant led to another report to the UAW's Fair Practices Department. But the significance of the group's wartime actions to subsequent events cannot be discounted.

Even before the Fair Practices Committee had met in April 1945, Chevrolet workers voted to support the UAW's anti-discrimination policies as well as the union's plans to bring the issue into collective bargaining negotiations with GM's management. By April 1946, soon after the war's end, Reuben Harper, an African-American worker from Toledo's American Aviation plant (represented by the UAW), served as a representative of the UAW in the factory, one of the first persons of color to hold that position in the entire national union. And in 1945, James B. Simmons, Jr., who had assisted the union's Black workers as an organizer of the Mass Movement League in Toledo, won election to the City of Toledo's City Council, the first African-American to win such an office.

When Emmett Wheaton, Jr. joined the staff of the newly formed "Toledo Sepia City Press" as the newspaper's labor editor in 1948, he claimed that "[Walter] Reuther [the head of the entire UAW] and Gosser . . . are not just TALKING Negro leadership—they are really BRINGING it forward." In one congratulatory column that followed, Wheaton noted that "Gosser and Regional Director Ballard are doing all they can to bring forth and develop safe and sane Negro leadership within the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations]. They are proving, by deeds rather than words, just where they stand on the Negro question." Other articles praised Gosser's efforts to run the racially integrated UAW Children's Summer Camp as well as his opposition to potential communist rivals within the labor movement, a force that Wheaton viewed with "utter contempt." When Gosser faced his greatest challenges during his attempt to get Toledo's employer to agree to an area pension plan in the 1950s, Wheaton was one of his biggest supporters.¹⁷

The wartime tensions in UAW Local 14 showed the conflicting claims that workers put on their union during the Second World War. White, male workers asserted traditional racial and gender prerogatives to determine who their co-workers would be. White, female workers quickly learned to defend the "color

line” and led efforts to force the union to enforce it in Local 14 through their “hate strikes.” But even while their fellow workers struck over demands of an all-male or all-White work place, Black workers felt confident enough to pursue their demands through formal, official complaints through their union. Using their union to reshape their workplace, union and even local government at a time when such actions led to outright violence in many American cities—including Detroit, a city only 50 miles away which was marked by racial riots in 1943—the changes demanded by African-American unionists in Toledo are particularly remarkable.

Labor’s hegemony had become powerful enough by the end of the Second World War to bridge one of the most significant divisions of American life at a time when many other institutions failed in this respect. The UAW’s record on racial relations in the Toledo area was not ideal, but it did it did set the standard for coalition building that later empowered the modern Civil Rights Movement in America in the 1950s and 1960s. It also showed that the labor movement was strong enough to survive internal divisions over gender and race and emerge ever more vital.¹⁸



Notes

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Abstract

Gender, Race and Labor in America: How One Labor Union Confronted Racial and Gender Conflict during the Second World War

This study of race relations within one labor union in America addresses the concept of working-class Americanism and its journey from the economic hardship of the 1930s through the Second World War. As the study shows, the impact of working-class consciousness, gender and patriotism were almost as important as the sometimes overt fact of racism in shaping the labor union's actions as it both controlled and defended its members. The actions of this labor union would be repeated in later years during the Civil Rights movement in America during the 1960s, when working-class institutions again negotiated in favor of racial equality, sometimes enduring the opposition of their own members. In this study, African-American workers prevailed in achieving a measure of equality at a time when some of their fellow workers demanded exclusionary racial employment. Although informal racial discrimination continued, African-American workers in this instance forced its union to commit itself to fighting racial discrimination, both publicly and within its own ranks.

Keywords

race, gender, unions, patriotism, Americanism, Second World War, United Auto Workers Union, civil rights, feminism