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# Sustaining Labor Politics in Hard Times: Race, Labor, and Coalition Building in Racine, Wisconsin

Naomi R Williams

In June 1976, members of several United Auto Workers (UAW) unions joined the picket lines supporting 250 members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) who were on strike at St. Luke's Hospital in Racine, Wisconsin. Mostly women, many Black or Latina, the low-wage service workers had struck in protest of wages so low that they worked full time and still qualified for public assistance. The mostly male autoworkers had joined the strike after a police officer hit a striking worker, and they marched alongside women carrying signs that read, "Work, Not Welfare." UAW members had signs reading, "All Workers Deserve a Decent Job."<sup>1</sup> This show of solidarity helped these low-wage service workers engage with Racine's robust labor community, politicized SEIU members to become more involved in community issues, and sparked another decade of expanding and reshaping Racine's working-class politics. This cross-sector solidarity displays an oft-missed continuity between the robust labor activism of the postwar period and the long 1970s.<sup>2</sup> It also highlights the ways working-class movements built on the legacies of industrial unionism and the social movements of the 1960s to remain relevant in the hard times of the late twentieth century.

Racine's UAW union members paved the way for service sector workers' growing significance as industrial jobs declined. Ron Thomas embodied the historical legacy of industrial unionism as he went from UAW local 244 president to SEIU business representative in the early 1980s. Thomas took the SEIU job when the tractor warehouse where he worked was closing down. When asked about his experiences organizing low-wage nursing home workers in southeastern Wisconsin, he replied, "SEIU, it needed a lot of work. We had to Racinize them."<sup>3</sup> Thomas was referring to

1. "St. Luke's Workers Seek to Catch Up on Wages," *Racine Labor*, April 12, 1985; "Their Pay Is Something to Protest About," *Racine Labor*, May 21, 1976.

2. For this study, I use Schulman's periodization from 1969 to 1984. See Schulman, *The Seventies*, xvi–xvii.

3. Ron Thomas, interview by author, July 11, 2014, Racine, Wisconsin.

the Racine labor community's deep commitment to a political use of the city's labor history, organizing outside of the industrial sector, and keeping working-class issues at the center of public debates. He and other activists galvanized area SEIU members to shift the direction of the statewide union local and to become more active in Racine.

*Labor community* is the term that Racine labor activists used to describe the broad coalition that developed around working-class politics in the postwar era. These activists included Harvey Kitzman, William "Blue" Jenkins, Loretta Christensen, and Anthony "Tony" Valeo. Kitzman helped start the largest UAW local in Racine, went on to become director of UAW Region 10, and spent his career building, reshaping, and sustaining a sense of class solidarity. Jenkins organized workers at the largest foundry during World War II, led the Racine NAACP, and became the first Black president of the county's labor council. Christensen organized workers across industries, sat on the board of the AFL labor council and of *Racine Labor* in the 1950s, and remained an active member of the county's Democratic Party for forty years. Valeo worked in the community to build solidarity across employment sectors, led UAW Local 180 during a pivotal 1960 strike, served as a UAW international representative, and organized community-labor coalitions throughout his long career.<sup>4</sup> These and other activists shaped a class politics that sought to encompass the whole community through union organizing, civic engagement, worker education and mobilization, and a political use of the labor history in the city.

Many scholars point to the postwar period as the heyday for US workers. Indeed, working people leveraged the power of the labor movement, with support from the federal government, to broaden the social safety net, increase workers' wages and reduce US wealth inequality, and move more families into the middle class.<sup>5</sup> However, studies that point to the ways these real gains for workers did not alleviate economic instability complicate this narrative. Real wage gains and more dignity at work stood beside precarious employment, even in the auto industry, which has stood as the key focus in much of the literature.<sup>6</sup> Yet workers' efforts contributed to a greater wealth distribution across class lines in the postwar period. More working people did manage to carve out middle-class lives.

In their attempt to explain the reasons that workers lost this ability in the hard economic times of the 1970s (and into the twenty-first century), scholars have focused on national economic and political changes and conclude that class lost its meaning for working people, who abandoned unions or organizing more broadly. Nelson Lichtenstein describes a shift wherein the momentum from the civil rights, women's, and gay rights movements caused a decline in the effectiveness of a language

4. Harvey Kitzman, interview by Jack W. Skeels, March 4, 1963, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan; William Jenkins, interview by George H. Roeder, January 3, 29, 1974, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison (hereafter WHS); "Loretta Retires," *Racine Labor*, December 20, 1968, pp. 1, 8; Tom Valeo, interview by author, January 31, 2014, in author's possession, Madison, Wisconsin; "UAW's Anthony Valeo Labor Person of the Year," *Racine Labor*, September 5, 1980, pp. 1, 10.

5. Levinson, *An Extraordinary Time*, 3, 4, 21; Cowie, *The Great Exception*.

6. Clark, *Disruption in Detroit*, 10–11; Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther and State of the Union*.

of working-class solidarity. Instead, a personal focus on identities of race and gender superseded group class identity. Scholars have focused predominantly on the legal apparatus that unions have operated under since workers pushed the passage of the Wagner Act and other worker protections during the New Deal period. While Jefferson Cowie acknowledges the changing dynamics of the working class, his analysis focuses on white working-class men in industrial positions and the ways in which the established leadership of the AFL-CIO failed in its duty to incorporate other elements of labor.<sup>7</sup> I suggest that this focus on a national leadership inclined only to maintain its historical base of white, male industrial workers prompts Cowie to overlook the continued significance of class identity. These national-level declension narratives do not provide the space to contextualize the ways workers shaped their class identification in this period. Too often, histories of labor's decline in the 1970s miss the continued salience of broad-based class identity and rank-and-file mobilizations into and beyond the 1970s.

Lane Windham and others have challenged Lichtenstein's declension narrative and the break that Cowie describes as "the last days of the working class." In her recent study of 1970s worker mobilization in the private sector, Windham describes a diversity of actors including women and racial minorities actively attempting to build a larger union base despite intense employer resistance.<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble describes how in the 1970s women service workers used feminism and race and working-class politics to degender these jobs and garner more power in the workplace.<sup>9</sup> Yet these important works describing a new movement of worker mobilization in the 1970s also obscure the continuity between mid- and late-century working-class organization.

Using four cases from the Racine labor community—social workers and welfare rights activists; school janitors; low-wage hospital service workers; and immigration—this essay demonstrates that these two eras are not as distinct as the literature depicts. In Racine, working-class institutions retained the ability to address economic crises even as workers dealt with social issues of race, gender, immigration, and community politics. Local stories can deepen our understanding of this "pivotal decade" by highlighting workers' agency and solidarity efforts as economic and political shifts impacted communities.<sup>10</sup> They highlight the ways in which the labor movement goes beyond a collection of unions but consists of working people banding together to fight for economic security and social justice. A collective working-class identity remained salient because labor activists and institutions successfully kept economic and social justice issues on the agenda.

7. Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*.

8. Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door*, 2–4, 7. For histories that provide a more nuanced and inclusive view of the postwar labor movement, see Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*; Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*; McKee, *The Problem of Jobs*; W. P. Jones, *The March on Washington*.

9. Cobble, "A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm."

10. Stein, *Pivotal Decade*; McCoy, "Bringing the Social Back." For examples of local stories see Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace*; Sacks, *Caring by the Hour*; Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*

As this article will show, local studies of workers' responses to economic and political changes provide a more complex picture of the ways working people understood their collective identity and worked together to fight against attacks on the labor community. Industrial union members created a strong labor community as the city grew. In the postwar period, Black and women workers used the space opened by the civil rights movement to expand and reshape the politics of Racine's labor community. The broad-based working-class vision pursued by the Racine labor community influenced local elections, housing and education, increased the number of workers with the power of unions behind them, and improved Racine's economic and social conditions. By the 1980s, Racine's labor community included not only industrial workers but also members of welfare and immigrants' rights groups, parents of inner-city students, social workers and other white-collar public employees, and local and state politicians willing to support a class-based agenda in the political arena. Because this community and others like it responded to the upheaval of the 1960s social movements by creating a broad and relatively successful concept of worker solidarity that also incorporated racial justice, worker activists were able to maintain and adapt their notion of a broad-based labor community into the late twentieth century.

### **Historical Background: Building a Labor Community**

Racine is typical of the small industrial cities that helped the US economy in the twentieth century but also unique, as it had a diversified economy and robust labor community that managed to leverage its influence in local politics. Racine sits on Lake Michigan between Chicago and Milwaukee. In the nineteenth century, Racine County grew as an agricultural area. Situated at the mouth of the Root River on Lake Michigan, the city of Racine originally provided business and governmental services to the surrounding agricultural areas. However, proximity to Chicago and Milwaukee created an attractive setting for manufacturing industries, and many firms located their operations in Racine in the late nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Racine's labor movement mirrored the city's industrial growth. In the 1880s, the local Knights of Labor membership totaled nearly one thousand. Early unions included cigar workers, bricklayers, masons, plumbers, and brewery workers, all members of the elite American Federation of Labor (AFL), which focused on organizing skilled artisans.

It was industrial unions like the United Auto Workers (UAW), however, that shaped the broad-based labor politics in Racine. In the late 1920s, workers at Racine's largest employer, the J. I. Case Company, organized themselves into the Workers Industrial Union, and after a ninety-one-day strike, the company finally recognized their union.<sup>12</sup> However, it was not until 1936, when the workers at Case affiliated with the UAW as Local 180, that they saw real gains at the workplace. The UAW,

11. Ross, "Two Civilizations," 33; Manogaran, "Geography and Agriculture," 137–38; Kechn, "Industry and Business," 280.

12. J. I. Case, now part of a multinational conglomerate, manufactures tractors and other agricultural machines.

an example of the formation of unions in large industries and not just specific trades, successfully organized other factories during the late 1930s without creating significant conflict with local AFL affiliates. The UAW joined the newly organized Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1935. Like other CIO unions, the UAW in Racine organized workers in industrial settings, and the culture of CIO unions inspired workers to become engaged citizens and demonstrate worker unity within local unions, across industries, and with other unionized and nonunionized workers in the areas where they operated.<sup>13</sup> The largest manufacturer, Case, remained the most intransigent regarding worker rights. The largest union, UAW Local 180, represented the workers at Case and often led by example in regard to labor militancy and the benefits of persistency.<sup>14</sup>

Although smaller and of less influence than industrial unions, private service and public workers also organized early in the twentieth century. Firefighters formed a union in 1931 and affiliated with the AFL.<sup>15</sup> Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU) started organizing private service workers in Wisconsin during the 1930s, and BSEIU Local 152 had several units of janitors in schools, office buildings, and department stores in Racine. Local unions also built community by holding monthly collaborative meetings.<sup>16</sup>

Industrial unions gained important political and economic advantage as local manufacturers accepted defense contracts during World War II. World War II created an unprecedented opportunity for political and social action in the United States by expanding the role of the federal government, facilitating the movement of even more people from rural areas and southern cities to industrial centers, and bringing unprecedented wealth and power to the United States.<sup>17</sup> As Black men and white women entered Racine's workplaces in the postwar period, they actively asserted their place in labor unions and established themselves as vibrant members of the labor community. Most Black women remained in domestic and service positions, as they were most often last hired in industrial workplaces.

In Racine, workers consolidated their postwar gains by demanding more from employers at the bargaining table and backing up their demands with work stoppages and strikes. Worker activists also used their new political power to actively participate in local politics and enter public debates on social and economic conditions affecting the community. Activists elected labor-endorsed candidates to local and statewide offices, demanded seats on the boards of charitable institutions, and lobbied for legislation to protect public sector collective bargaining rights. Although most of the private industrial and many public sector workplaces were organized by the 1950s, work-

13. Kitzman interview; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 2, 355–60.

14. Kitzman interview.

15. "Firefighters at Peak Strength; Department Makes Steady Gains," *Racine Labor*, January 6, 1950, p. 1.

16. Kelly, "Growth of Organized Labor."

17. Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 54–59; Korstad and Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost"; Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*.

ers pushed a class agenda that would benefit all of the city's workers, not just those represented by labor unions. Labor liberals used the postwar growth and prosperity to push for an expansion of economic citizenship rights for a larger portion of society. As Paul Whiteside, an active union organizer in the area from the 1930s through the 1980s, emphasized, "When you got control of a thing, you got the majority in an area, you tend to be more aggressive."<sup>18</sup>

By the 1970s, Racine had a long history of manufacturing, financial, and personal services, including a great diversity of industries such as auto parts, small engines, cooling systems, other industrial and household goods, and financial and healthcare institutions. Although significantly smaller, the diversity of Racine's industrial base was similar to that in larger cities like Chicago and Milwaukee. This diversification allowed it to deal more easily with market fluctuations that devastated one-industry towns, such as Akron, Ohio; Gary, Indiana; and Kenosha, Wisconsin.<sup>19</sup> In 1972, a few years after the height of industrial employment in the late 1960s, Racine's 262 manufacturing firms employed over ten thousand workers. Construction and skilled trade workers, garment industry employees, white-collar office workers, city employees, and low-wage service workers accounted for seventeen thousand union members across fifty union locals, over 26 percent of the city's workforce.<sup>20</sup>

Two main factors set Racine apart and played key roles in the enduring labor militancy and lingering sense of collective identity into the twenty-first century. First, in Racine, a core group of labor activists, like Thomas and Jenkins, held leading positions in union locals, the press, and community programs. These worker activists, and many others like them, led the Racine labor movement by example, pushing the Democratic Party to respond to working-class issues, organizing new workers, and running for local political offices. Second, the work labor activists did to shape a narrative affirming the right of all workers to have economic security and equal opportunities expanded the idea of who belonged in the labor community. Labor unions supported a weekly paper called *Racine Labor*, a radio show, and a local television program. Workers, and the unions that represented them, took advantage of the public arena to shame employers, promote the role of collective bargaining for all workers in the private and public sectors, and lobby for political action around working-class issues. Labor activists gained vast experience negotiating changing economic, political, and social conditions in the postwar period. This political use of the city's labor history led a long line of worker activists to celebrate the history of union activity, both the successes and the hard-fought losses. It also served to remind the larger community of the role the labor movement played in boosting the city's economy and raising the standard of living.

18. Paul Whiteside, interview by James A. Cavanaugh, August 13, 1981, Kenosha, Wisconsin, tape 3, side 2, Wisconsin Labor Oral History Project, 1981–1982, WHS.

19. High, *Industrial Sunset*, 5–6.

20. "Proposal," Business Records Survey, box 1, folder 11, pp. 6–8, WHS; Kelly, "Growth of Organized Labor"; Keehn, "Industry and Business," 281, 282, 306–7.

Labor leadership's use of the city's history of labor activism, a continued engagement in public debates, and the active engagement by a core group of activists extended the idea of working-class solidarity and kept unions as the best options for workers to gain some sort of economic security. Racine's labor community did not sustain the strength it had at midcentury, but the commitment to building and sustaining a sense of class solidarity across workplaces and communities paid off when the economic and political landscape shifted and unions lost power on the shop floor in the 1970s and 1980s. That sense of solidarity led workers to join unions, to fight together against management resistance, and to support other workers' efforts. The Racine labor community maintained a robust political agenda, adapted their politics to better incorporate issues of race and gender, and strove to build an engaged, inclusive community working together to expand the postwar liberal agenda. Scholars of the 1970s labor movement should continue to incorporate workers' agency into narratives of the shifting US political economy.<sup>21</sup>

The most engaged activists expressed their vision of the city's labor community to include all workers and those who wanted to work. This meant craft workers, industrial laborers, public workers, office staff and technicians, private service workers, and those unemployed or underemployed who relied on social service programs for survival: all stood within the labor community. While a sense of collective identity and class solidarity requires the engagement of rank-and-file workers, Racine's labor leaders and engaged activists provided the motivation, commitment, and direction that kept bringing in new members and inspired others to action. Of course, social issues complicated this vision as Black and Latinx workers struggled to break the hiring barrier into the better-paid, higher-skilled positions. This vision is also complicated by the refusal of the building trade locals in the city to welcome nonwhite workers into apprenticeship positions until the late 1970s. Another complication was the growing divide between the political and economic goals of county residents versus city residents. However, the consensus among the core group of labor activists was to incorporate as many workers as possible into the community, aided by early organizing in the public sector and private service industries and their participation in civil rights, women's rights, and other social justice movements.<sup>22</sup>

While all workers did not always walk in lockstep with the circle of engaged activists, the labor community's ability to garner the support of its members shows the value of labor activists' efforts. Union members and other workers participated in rallies, Labor Day celebrations, sports, and social events; wrote letters to the editor; engaged their political leaders; voted for labor-endorsed candidates; granted interviews with journalists and researchers; signed membership cards; and actively sought unionized jobs. The broad-based working-class vision pursued by the Racine labor community influenced local politics, housing, and education; increased the number

21. For a recent discussion of how national histories of labor's decline have pushed workers to the margins, see McCoy, "Bringing the Social Back."

22. Kelly, "Growth of Organized Labor."



of workers with the power of unions behind them; and improved Racine's economic and social conditions.

### **Civil Rights Activism and Class Politics in the 1960s**

Black activists in Racine pushed the labor community to embrace an antiracism ethos in their class politics during the 1960s. Black and Mexican American migration to Racine increased during and after World War II. These workers used their unions along with other institutions to improve social conditions not only at work but also in the larger community. They fought on the job for promotions and trainings to open different career paths. They also encouraged their white union members to support antiracist agendas in the broader community. It was an ongoing effort.

When the Wisconsin Industrial Commission held statewide hearings on minority hiring in 1964, the nineteen Racine employers who participated stated that minority workers held 904 out of their combined 15,615 jobs. Belle City Malleable (UAW Local 553), where William Jenkins worked, had over four hundred Black and Latinx workers, while most firms only had two or three, all of them recent hires in the days and weeks before the scheduled hearings. As the largest foundry in the city, Belle City Malleable started regularly hiring Black and Latino workers in the 1940s. These jobs were available because the hot, dangerous working conditions made them the least favorable in the diversified economy of Racine. If workers could find other employment, they did. The hearings confirmed earlier claims of Black working-class activists about the discriminatory hiring practices engaged in by local firms. Although several Black members, including Jenkins, served in leadership roles in union locals, there was little concerted effort to bring in and train nonwhite workers across the city's diverse manufacturing industries. A guest speaker at a local NAACP event commented on the city's racist hiring practices a few months after the Racine hearings and exclaimed in shock, "The Negro [is] so severely proscribed in where he can work!"<sup>23</sup> Black labor activists continued to push for changes in Racine.

In 1964 Racine's union members across several industries—foundries, publishing, garment making, and teaching—submitted separate but identical resolutions at the Wisconsin AFL-CIO convention, calling for "the immediate appointment by the Executive Board of a new staff position with sole duties confined to working with the Fair Employment Practices program and problems within the State of Wisconsin."<sup>24</sup> President Roosevelt issued an executive order outlawing discrimination in national defense contracts in 1941, under intense pressure from A. Philip Randolph's plan to bring one hundred thousand Black workers to protest in Washington, DC. He also established a Fair Employment Practices Committee as an enforcement agency. As William P. Jones has detailed, Black workers, through unions and social justice networks, led the way in creating local pressure to enforce the antidiscrimination efforts

23. "Minority Hiring Being Probed," *Racine Labor*, March 6, 1964, pp. 1, 2; "Negro Leader Raps Discrimination Here," *Racine Labor*, May 22, 1964, pp. 1, 14.

24. 1964 Wisconsin State AFL-CIO Resolutions, Kitzman Papers, box 1, folder 3, WHS.

of the Fair Employment Practices Committee. CIO members used this momentum to continue to push for antiracist practices in unions and workplaces. After the AFL and CIO merger, these activists continued to advocate for FEPC committees to educate members and protect minority workers from discrimination.<sup>25</sup> In Racine, local unions' FEPC committees had been active since the 1950s. The push for fair employment, along with organizational support to help enforce federal regulations through union bargaining contracts, continued throughout the 1960s as racial minorities and women demanded equal access to full economic citizenship.

In addition to fighting within the state AFL-CIO, Black union members created an independent network to push their unions and employers toward equal employment. With the aid of activists in Milwaukee and Chicago, local Black union members formed a Racine-Kenosha chapter of the Negro American Labor Council (NALC) in 1965 to address employment discrimination in the city. Formed in 1960 by A. Philip Randolph and other Black union activists, NALC councils sought to push the economic justice issues of racial discrimination within the labor movement, workplaces, and the nation. Randolph had continued to position the fight against employment discrimination as a critical battle in racial justice for most of the twentieth century. Local NALC councils recruited members from labor unions to study problems of nonwhite workers and to look for solutions to those problems.<sup>26</sup> Area members elected Augusta Hill, UAW Local 72 member at American Motors Company in Kenosha, as first president of the council and urged all unions to participate in NALC.<sup>27</sup>

William Jenkins, one of the key labor activists in this period, served as an important bridge between the labor and Black working-class communities in Racine. As president of the Racine NAACP, he had worked closely with the UAW in establishing a UAW Fair Labor Practices Committee in the city in the late 1950s.<sup>28</sup> His ardent criticism of local union leaders' failure to respond adequately to racial discrimination within workplaces and union locals demonstrated his willingness to lead the UAW's antidiscrimination campaign in Racine.<sup>29</sup> As Jenkins moved up the ranks of the labor community leadership, he took the opportunity to merge the local federation's political action and education committees and spearheaded a campaign to increase the participation of Black and women workers in Racine's labor activities through political action at the city and state level as well as within their local unions. Although frustrated with the lack of opportunity for Black union activists to move through the ranks of the UAW, Jenkins continued to push for greater education within the labor movement. He also worked, with limited results, on improving the local trade union members' commitment to civil rights issues. For example, his union, UAW 553, became an institutional member of the Racine NAACP.<sup>30</sup>

25. W. P. Jones, *The March on Washington*, 38–39, 43, 45, 126–28.

26. W. P. Jones, *The March on Washington*, 132–39.

27. "Negro Labor Council Officers Are Installed," *Racine Labor*, September 24, 1965, p. 7.

28. General Correspondence 1959, Racine NAACP, box 1, folder 1, WHS.

29. Jenkins interview.

30. Jenkins interview.

Jenkins also placed heavy demands on the “leadership, if you can call it that” of the Black community. He expected all leaders to work actively to improve the Black and working-class communities in the city.<sup>31</sup> The members of the Racine NAACP worked throughout the decade to pass a city ordinance to strengthen anti-discrimination measures in housing and private clubs by changing Real Estate Commission liquor-licensing requirements. They worked with the Governor’s Commission on Human Rights and the Racine Commission on Civil Rights to produce better legislation to protect against discrimination.<sup>32</sup> The NAACP submitted draft legislation to the mayor in 1963, but it was blocked by the city attorney.<sup>33</sup> On his return from the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Racine NAACP president Sloan Williams II organized a rally to kick off a membership drive and further publicize the call for antidiscrimination legislation in Racine.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout the decade, the NAACP, Urban League, union FEP committees, and other organizations responded to deteriorating conditions within the non-white neighborhoods in Racine. Due to ongoing housing shortages, Black and other racial minorities were trapped in older, poorly maintained rental units, mostly in the Franklin neighborhood area but also in several smaller areas on the city’s northern and southern edges. For those Black residents who could afford to buy homes, few were available. As Jenkins recalled, he and his wife spent several years trying to buy a home for his family. If his wife, who was very light-skinned, went to look at possible homes, she would have success, but when Jenkins showed up, suddenly the real estate agent would be unable to make a deal. He remembered how one of his white friends offered to broker a deal on behalf of his family, but he refused because his “dignity and manhood” would not allow him to accept such aid.<sup>35</sup> Black residents had fought for two decades to improve housing conditions through city and state legislation. The real estate lobby was able to mount a campaign against the housing legislation of the 1950s, which sought to alleviate deteriorating conditions in rental units. In the 1960s, when an antidiscrimination housing code still could not make it past a city council vote, anger about the housing situation merged with frustrations about poor employment opportunities, segregated and inadequate schools, lack of city services, and poverty and mobilized various segments of the labor and civil rights communities.

Black workers efforts from World War II to the late 1960s opened the door for labor activists to connect racial justice with working-class politics in the 1970s. While social discrimination continued to affect nonwhite residents, the labor community pushed an agenda that embraced racial solidarity and full economic citizenship rights

31. Jenkins interview.

32. Letter from Governor’s Commission, October 25, 1960, and letter to Racine Commission, April 26, 1963, Racine NAACP, box 1, folder 1, WHS.

33. Letter to aldermen, July 9, 1963, letter to NAACP national, July 9, 1963, Racine NAACP, box 1, folder 1, WHS; “City Pass Rights Law? Harvey: No; NAACP: Yes,” *Racine Labor*, August 9, 1963, p. 1.

34. “NAACP Rally Told: Equal Rights Fight ‘Just Beginning,’” *Racine Labor*, September 6, 1963, p. 1; letter to Current, August 24, 1963, re: Moss case, Racine NAACP, box 1, folder 1, WHS.

35. Jenkins interview.

for all Racinians. By the 1970s, Racine's labor community was positioned to address economic crises while also dealing with broad social issues in the community.

The 1970s represented hard economic times for the Racine labor community, as the most intense phase of deindustrialization gripped the Midwest. Yet the sense of collective identity as a working-class community persisted through the economic transformation in Racine. Across the country, hundreds of thousands of workers in the steel and auto industries lost their jobs due to plant closings from the late 1970s to the early 1980s during the most brutal phase of deindustrialization. Industrial communities responded to deindustrialization in ways determined by local labor movement strength, community social and cultural heritage, and political involvement. While the effort proved only partially successful for a short time, it did empower workers across industrial North America to fight plant closings more vigorously.<sup>36</sup> As more and more foundries and other industrial factories left Racine, workers held rallies, picketed corporate offices, bargained for extended benefits, lobbied politicians at the state and national level, elected politicians who supported working-class agendas, and brought more workers in the service and public sectors into unions. Like so many others, Racine's worker activists were determined to continue to fight for economic justice and maintain a voice in the local political economy.

Four examples from Racine illustrate the ways in which class solidarity incorporated race and gender identities. First, an examination of a social workers' strike within the Racine County offices, set within a context of racial discrimination and local politics, shows how workers sought to address the concerns and demands of welfare recipients. A look at the 1972 janitors' strike by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU Local 152) shows how public workers gained community support by linking school funding decisions and the closure of an inner-city elementary school. Third, the commitment to spread the gains of the industrial sector to the growing low-wage service industry is highlighted in a 1976 strike by hospital workers and the support these union members, mostly women, received from the labor community. Finally, the commitment of labor leaders to keep a close watch on events beyond the shop floor are seen in the way union leaders sought to expand social services and fight for immigrants' rights in the mid-1980s.

### **Social Workers Union and Welfare Rights Activism**

In 1969, welfare recipients and unionized social workers rallied together to implement changes in the Racine County welfare office. Momentum started building in the first week of August 1968, when a fight at a party spread into the streets and turned into a neighborhood-wide disturbance in the mostly Black Washington Park area. A few people were seriously injured in fights and one from a gunshot wound. People broke windows in neighborhood businesses, some looted stores, and police

36. For case studies of communities fighting to save plants see Hathaway, *Can Workers Have a Voice?*; Nissen, *Fighting for Jobs*; Brecher, *Banded Together*; Foley, *Front Porch Politics*, 179–260; Cowie and Heathcott, *Beyond the Ruins*.

arrested about thirty people for a range of offenses, including disorderly conduct. City officials labeled it a “riot,” but others rejected that term because it implied residents were acting irrationally rather than out of frustration with the failure to address legitimate grievances. Black and Latinx residents felt left out of the local job market and trapped in deteriorating neighborhoods. In response to the disturbances, a group from the community formed the Concerned Minority Citizens Group and demanded improvements from the mayor’s office. They called on the mayor to move forward on housing code legislation, better policing, and more social services.<sup>37</sup> This came after over two years of organizing and lobbying to improve neighborhood conditions.<sup>38</sup>

The slow response by city officials fueled a labor-community coalition that brought social workers and welfare activists together to effect change. In a stall tactic, city officials authorized yet another study to evaluate area welfare organizations, which delayed immediate action to alleviate issues of discrimination and neighborhood deterioration. The results called for public aid recipients to sit on a community board to make administrative decisions, a consolidation of the county and city public welfare departments, and better training of caseworkers to address recipients’ needs. After months of continued inaction, welfare recipients held a sit-in demanding better treatment and respect from the department. Responding to and agreeing with welfare recipients in the community who called for change, social workers organized around some of these issues and went on strike to have changes implemented in county services in 1969. Signifying the continuity within Racine’s labor community, the International Association of Machinists (IAM), an industrial craft union organized in the late nineteenth century, helped public sector social workers organize and represented them in bargaining with county officials as part of IAM Lodge 437.<sup>39</sup>

A broad labor-community coalition supported the social workers’ strike. Lodge 437 social workers bargained for pay increases, new training and promotion procedures, and the flexibility to deal with clients on a case-by-case basis. Poor working conditions increased turnover in the department and limited caseworkers’ ability to help applicants. Social workers received the support of local residents because the strikers’ demands mirrored some of the changes suggested by the welfare activists. When some politicians argued that county social workers should not go on strike, the welfare activists and labor community members lined up to testify in support of social workers’ organizing and strike efforts.<sup>40</sup> The building trades’ council publicly sup-

37. Loren Norman, “Squibs,” *Racine Labor*, August 9, 1968, pp. 1, 4; “Negroes Hit Inaction as Riot Cause,” *Racine Labor*, August 9, 1968, p. 2; “Says Racine’s Apathy Keeps Minority Down,” *Racine Labor*, August 16, 1968, p. 3.

38. “Race Tension Exists in Franklin District,” *Racine Labor*, September 3, 1965, p. 25; “YWCA Franklin Project Gaining Area Acceptance,” *Racine Labor*, July 15, 1966, pp. 1, 6; “Find Racial Situation Growing Worse in Racine,” *Racine Labor*, June 9, 1967, p. 10; “Race Unity Week to Be Marked by Picnic, Panel Discussions,” *Racine Labor*, June 7, 1968, p. 1.

39. “Criticize Curfew,” *Racine Labor*, May 9, 1969, p. 8; “Shame of Racine: Indecent Housing,” *Racine Labor*, June 6, 1969, p. 1; “Welfare Clients Present 31 Demands,” *Racine Labor*, August 29, 1969, p. 6.

40. “Social Workers Picket,” *Racine Labor*, December 27, 1968, p. 3; “Welfare Workers on Strike,” *Racine Labor*, January 3, 1969, p. 3.

ported the social workers' strike. The executive director of the Racine United Fund (the charitable aid umbrella organization) asked all agency heads and staff members to support the social workers by not crossing the picket lines to get to their offices inside the county building. The Racine-Kenosha chapter of the National Association of Social Workers issued a public statement supporting the aims of the county workers as well.<sup>41</sup>

This community-worker coalition developed as a direct result of labor activists' constantly stressing the relationship among the lack of access to jobs, welfare reform, and neighborhood improvement. After six weeks of negotiations, the county switched bargaining teams and a final settlement was reached granting a new merit system, increase in personnel, wage increases, a new salary schedule, and union dues check-off.<sup>42</sup> This was an important strike for the Racine labor community. While city and county workers had gone on strike several times during the postwar period, this strike by social workers opened new conversations about the rights of teachers, police officers, and hospital workers to use strikes as a tool for gaining their economic and workplace demands. It also highlighted the link between the working poor and labor unions as an avenue for gaining economic security and social capital. Public debate around the strike also emphasized the labor community's continued commitment to the broad-based notion of the postwar liberal idea of economic and social citizenship rights. Activists demonstrated that social justice and economic justice went hand in hand.

In the momentum after the strike, activists formed a coalition of local residents, the NAACP, specific social workers, and other members of the Racine labor community to address the poor housing issues, discontent among young people, and what recipients saw as disrespectful and inadequate services from local welfare departments. This community-worker coalition developed as a direct result of Black activists constantly stressing the relationship between welfare reform, increased access to jobs, and neighborhood improvement. The famous Milwaukee priest, civil rights activist, and NAACP youth branch leader Father James Groppi came to Racine and led a young people's march as part of the campaign. Groppi had developed a national reputation as a civil rights activist and participated in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.<sup>43</sup> This labor-community coalition and the housing march

41. "Should Social Workers Strike," *Racine Labor*, January 24, 1969, pp. 1, 4; "Association of Social Workers OKs Strike Goals," *Racine Labor*, January 31, 1969, p. 3; "Social Workers Strike Spills into Community," *Racine Labor*, January 17, 1969, pp. 1, 7.

42. "Squibs," *Racine Labor*, January 10, 1969, p. 1; "Social Workers Strike" (image), *Racine Labor*, January 10, 1969, p. 1; "Development Hinted in Social Workers Strike," *Racine Labor*, January 24, 1969, p. 1; "New County Team for Strike Talks," *Racine Labor*, February 14, 1969, p. 2; "Social Workers Dispute Ended," *Racine Labor*, February 21, 1969, p. 3; "Lauds Social Workers," *Racine Labor*, February 28, 1969, p. 3.

43. Holmes, "Politics and Government, 1920–1976," 256; Loren Norman, "Squibs," *Racine Labor*, May 9, 1969; "CISSS That's Coalition for an Improved Social Service System," *Racine Labor*, August 29, 1969, part 2, p. 5; "Welfare Crisis Told," *Racine Labor*, September 5, 1969, p. 6; "Groppi Sparks Legal Hassle; He Gets His Publicity, Too," *Racine Labor*, October 10, 1969, pp. 1, 2; Jenkins interview; Dan Day, "From Father Groppi, Priest and Activist to Father Groppi, Father and Bus Driver," *Kingman Daily Miner*, July 3, 1981, p. 4; P. D. Jones, *The Selma of the North*.

added the required political pressure to pass an antidiscrimination housing law through the Common Council.

### **Labor, Community, and Public Education**

In 1972, another strike by public employees created an opportunity for union members and community residents to band together, this time for young schoolchildren. SEIU Local 152, representing the janitors and food service workers for the Racine Unified School District, went on strike in January 1971, mainly over cost-of-living increases. The 270 members felt that the 7 percent cost-of-living adjustment offered by the board was insufficient because other district employees had received 9 percent increases and the operating budget had increased by 11 percent. Although Local 152 members voted to strike over the weekend, union leaders asked members to wait until Tuesday to give the school board an opportunity to reopen negotiations. However, when the board did not offer to restart negotiations, janitors started picketing the school board on Wednesday, January 13, in subzero temperatures. School janitors and other service employees issued a statement aligning themselves with Racine County taxpayers against administrators, who had received 25 percent raises and had recently used state and federal funds to supplement wages for cafeteria workers and some other district personnel when local taxes had been increased.<sup>44</sup> This tactic showed an attempt to get support from the rural areas where residents had been protesting increased taxation while also securing economic benefits for the lowest-paid county workers.

The union also linked the recent closing of Howell Elementary School to their disagreement with the Racine Unified School Board. The closing illustrated the lack of public funding for inner-city schools that served mostly nonwhite students. The school board's failure to budget for and make building renovations led the fire department to close the school right before Christmas break in 1971 due to code violations. The displaced students had to walk up to a mile to attend a new school because the school board refused to provide bus service. As parents struggled to arrange to get students to the new location, the janitors' union and others in the community stepped in to support the families impacted by the closure. SEIU Local 152 members pointed to the school board's refusal to put children's safety first. The strike and rhetoric around it brought the Unified School Board back to the bargaining table. After a week of additional negotiations, the union and school board agreed to wage increases for most of the employees covered by Local 152. The agreement reversed the attempt to downgrade engineers, upgraded some workers in food service, and added three cents to the cost-of-living increase, plus a lump-sum payment to cover another portion of the difference between the rising cost of living and workers' wages.<sup>45</sup> The public debate and strike paid off for Local 152 in a much-improved labor contract.

44. "Service Employees Strike Unified School District," *Racine Labor*, January 15, 1971, pp. 1, 3; "Local 152 Notice to Citizens," *Racine Labor*, January 15, 1971, p. 2.

45. "Service Employees Strike Unified School District," *Racine Labor*, January 15, 1971, pp. 1, 3; "Local 152 Notice to Citizens," *Racine Labor*, January 15, 1971, p. 2; "Heavy Bargaining in School Dispute," *Racine Labor*, January 22, 1971, p. 8; "Schools Normal as Service Strike Ends," *Racine Labor*, January 29, 1971, p. 1.

It also paid off in the community as residents recognized the support of labor activists to help protect minority students. When parents of Howell Elementary students could not sustain the carpool services to get young students to their new school, county unions, including Local 152 members, contributed funds to their fund-raising campaign. Continuing the broad-based support from the postwar period, community and labor allies paid to provide bus service for these students.<sup>46</sup> These allies worked together to bring the free lunch program to Racine, demand that students impacted by the closing of the elementary school receive hot lunches at their new schools, better integrate schools, and hold the school district to its promise to increase the percentage of nonwhite teachers and administrators within the school system.<sup>47</sup> This illustrates some of the ways worker activists sought to use class politics to improve economic and social conditions in Racine.

### **Low-Wage Service Workers and Cross-Sector Solidarity**

The long history of labor and community coalitions and worker activists' ability to keep economic justice on the agenda set the stage for a strike at St. Luke's Hospital. The Racine labor community actively supported the decisions of the 250 hospital workers, mostly Black and Latina women, who decided to take their dispute with St. Luke's Hospital to the public forum in 1976. SEIU Local 150 represented the St. Luke's workers.<sup>48</sup> By the 1970s and 1980s service industry employment overtook manufacturing positions in the United States, as many industries moved production facilities to other countries with more favorable economic incentives. This marked a demographic shift in union membership. White women and minority men and women were disproportionately represented in the service industries because historically they had been barred from the higher-paid industrial positions. The health care industry, one segment of the larger service industry, played a vital role in the nation's economy in the postindustrial society and by the 1980s employed almost 8 million workers. "What happens in health care has been and will continue to be very important for shaping the chances of women and minority men in the work force," Sacks wrote in 1988.<sup>49</sup>

For many years not-for-profit institutions like St. Luke's Hospital in Racine had served as low-wage employers for migrants to northern cities, including Latinx and southern Black workers and new immigrants from other countries. Gender

46. "Howell School Study 1971–1972," Howell School, 1972, Racine Unified School District No. 1: Superintendent's Files, 1923–1985, Racine Series 130, box 21, folder 9, WHS.

47. General Correspondence, November 1972 and February 1973, Racine NAACP, WHS; "Revolutionary Youth Movement Provides Free Breakfast for Kids," *Racine Labor*, February 19, 1971, p. 1; General Correspondence, boxes 3–5, Racine NAACP, WHS; Racine NAACP history, box 6, folder 2, Racine NAACP, WHS; Committee Meetings, box 6, folder 7, Racine NAACP, WHS; General Correspondence, box 4, folder 3, Racine NAACP, WHS; "Minority Teachers Meet to Increase Involvement," *Racine Labor*, February 27, 1981, p. 3; "REA's Black Caucus Gives Scholarship," *Racine Labor*, June 13, 1980, p. 4.

48. "Strike Looming at St. Luke's Hospital," *Racine Labor*, May 7, 1976.

49. Sacks, *Caring by the Hour*, 2, 3, 13.



exaggerated these low wages. For example, the mostly male maintenance department received an average of two dollars more per hour than the female-dominated housekeeping department at St. Luke's.<sup>50</sup> Exempt from provisions of the National Labor Relations Act until 1974—the rights of workers to organize a union of their choice, bargain collectively, strike, boycott, and picket, and the prohibition of employers from intimidating, firing, or blacklisting employees for union activities—these hospitals could keep workers' wages below those in other industries.<sup>51</sup>

Support from UAW members and other local labor activists helped the mostly female Local 150 workers resist the public pressure for calling a strike at a healthcare institution. Service workers at St. Luke's Hospital recognized that their wages fell far below industrial union wages in the county but also understood the possible danger of taking their wage demands to the public arena.<sup>52</sup> Yet UAW workers in the community joined their picket lines in a show of support. As the women held up signs that read, "Work, Not Welfare," the autoworkers held up signs that read, "All Workers Deserve a Decent Job."<sup>53</sup> Both the hospital management and the union bargaining committee moved quickly to declare their positions to the media and demonstrate their unwillingness to compromise. In the local daily newspaper, Personnel Director Herbert Scheible announced that the pay raises and other benefits offered in contract negotiations would be enacted for all employees not involved in the strike. Employers often used this tactic in an effort to break worker solidarity. Chief negotiator Schwartz outlined the union's complaints: St. Luke's was unable to maintain basic housekeeping chores because of understaffing, and the hospital paid part-time employees subunion wages, while many full-time union workers could not support their families on their hospital pay.<sup>54</sup>

Strong support from the labor community allowed these mostly female employees to take their message to this public place in front of the hospital. *Racine Labor* featured the women in news stories, and the local labor board gave them meeting space in the Racine Labor Center. Autoworkers, postal workers, teachers, and other labor activists helped provide financial support and gave them advice when bargaining with hospital management.<sup>55</sup> Surprisingly for Racine, hospital workers faced opposition even from their union leadership. SEIU Local 150 was a statewide

50. "St. Luke's Pact to Expire Tonight," *Journal Times (Racine)*, April 30, 1976.

51. Fink and Greenberg, "Organizing Montefiore," 226–28; Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 36.

52. "St. Luke's Workers Seek to Catch Up on Wages," *Racine Labor*, April 12, 1985.

53. "Their Pay Is Something to Protest About," *Racine Labor*, May 21, 1976.

54. David Pfankuchen, "Hospital Offer to Take Effect," *Journal Times (Racine)*, May 20, 1976; "Talks Stalled at St. Luke's," *Journal Times (Racine)*, May 7, 1976; "Strike Looming at St. Luke's Hospital," *Racine Labor*, May 7, 1976.

55. "Their Pay Is Something to Protest About," *Racine Labor*, May 21, 1976; Dean Pettit, "Racine Education Association," *Racine Labor*, June 4, 1976; Ivan D. Israel, "UAW Local 180," *Racine Labor*, June 4, 1976; "AFL-CIO Backs Local Strikers," *Racine Labor*, June 4, 1976; "Strike Fund Set Up to Help Picketers at St. Luke's," *Racine Labor*, June 11, 1976; "She'd Get the Soup, I'd Get the Crackers," *Racine Labor*, June 11, 1976; "Bargaining Team Sizes Up Strike," *Racine Labor*, June 25, 1976.

union, based in Milwaukee, representing seven thousand members at the time of the St. Luke's strike. The 250 members at the hospital did not have the support of union president Don Beatty. In fact, Beatty negotiated a contract agreement with St. Luke's management without the knowledge or support of the local bargaining committee. On May 24, 1976, Beatty mailed the members a letter urging them to accept the deal, which offered five cents more than the agreement the workers had rejected on May 13. The members rejected the agreement offered by Beatty by a vote of 140–7. The workers felt empowered by the radicalism of Racine labor activists, which encouraged them to continue to struggle against heavy-handed practices by hospital management and union leadership. Although local workers continued to picket St. Luke's Hospital, on June 24 Beatty and hospital administrators signed the agreement previously rejected by members. Left with few options, the local bargaining committee voted to recall the strikers on July 1, 1976, after hospital management threatened to fire all workers who did not report for duty on July 2, 1976.

This strike did not end in victory for the service workers at St. Luke's. However, the help they received from other union members inspired them to become more involved in their union, organize around other issues in the community, and continue pushing for their workplace demands. This support from the labor community, largely industrial unions, provided members of Local 150 with emotional, physical, and financial relief. It also illustrated the strong sense of worker solidarity across sectors within the Racine labor community that activists cultivated in the post-war period.

By the mid-1980s, members of SEIU Local 150 had achieved many of their earlier goals, including decent pay raises and more direct control of their work environment. Beyond the workplace, these union members joined the community-wide labor board, attended monthly roundtable meetings on working people's issues, joined a political group to address rising utility costs, and raised money to donate to Ethiopia during a famine. The example of the industrial union members and their experiences in the labor community led to greater participation in local politics and showed them how direct action could bring change. When many of these women lost their jobs in the 1990s and fell back into the welfare system, they became leaders within the local welfare rights organization. In interviews, they made direct links to their union activities and continuing struggles for economic security and personal dignity in bad economic times.<sup>56</sup>

### **Labor and Immigrant Workers' Rights**

By the 1980s, labor community membership also extended to immigrant workers despite employer downsizing and a poor industrial job market. The Latinx population started increasing dramatically in the 1970s in the industrial corridor between Chicago and Green Bay. Mexican Americans had arrived early in the twentieth cen-

56. "SEIU Local 150 Co-sponsors Ethiopia Fund-Raiser," *Racine Labor*, December 21, 1984; Collins, *Both Hands Tied*.

tury, but the 1970s and 1980s saw a dramatic increase in new arrivals from the Southwest and migrants from Puerto Rico. This growing population had demanded access to jobs and services since the 1960s. By the 1980s, the city of Racine faced an unprecedented economic crisis. Over the previous two decades, as Black and an increasing number of Latinx workers fought for access to high-paying manufacturing jobs, plants began leaving the city. The local economy moved toward low-wage service sector jobs while industrial and public service jobs declined. Many industrial workers faced long periods of unemployment, with few options to gain new skills.

Racine's worker activists did not focus solely on internal union matters during this period. They remained committed to the broader community and providing services for their members both in their workplaces and throughout the city. UAW Local 553 at Racine Steel Castings (formerly Belle City Malleable and William Jenkins's local) still had the highest numbers of Black and Latino workers in the city. Because the foundry work at Racine Steel Castings was hot and dirty, and native-born workers shunned those jobs, many Black and Latino workers filled the slots in the postwar period and into the 1980s. The foundry was one of the few remaining industrial employers, as many of the household electronics, small engine, and auto parts manufacturers had relocated or closed operations.

The community services division of Local 553 often led the labor community in addressing social and economic justice issues. By the mid-1980s, Local 553 had outpaced Local 180 (from J. I. Case) as the largest, most active UAW local in the city. As layoffs and other economic setbacks took their toll on the city, Local 553 members pushed for the A-Center—a social service agency for alcoholics—to hire Black and Latinx counselors after several employees complained about bias at the facility. Administrators at the center claimed that there were no Black applicants for the social worker positions and that race was not a factor in providing services. However, after continual pressure by the union and community allies, the agency hired two Black counselors and one Latino counselor.<sup>57</sup> Addressing the issues of racial justice and discrimination went a long way toward strengthening workers' commitment to class-based politics and worker solidarity as jobs became even more scarce and those just getting a foothold started to lose ground in their struggles for economic security.

This held true even as local employers used the decline in industrial jobs to weaken unions' power on the shop floor. For example, in June 1984, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) started a series of raids at Racine Steel Castings.<sup>58</sup> Often at the behest of companies, the INS would come into workplaces, round up workers, and detain them until they could provide documentation of their right to work in the country. Over the next several months, INS agents detained nineteen

57. "UAW Local 553 Calls on A-Center to Hire Black," *Racine Labor*, May 2, 1980, pp. 1, 5, 10; "Follow-Up: Up-date on Previous Stories," *Racine Labor*, August 7, 1981, p. 10.

58. INS has been reorganized as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) as part of the Department of Homeland Security.

workers and charged them with being in the country without proper documentation. The INS had completed its investigation into employment at Racine Steel Castings two years earlier, but waited until the summer before elections to initiate the raids.<sup>59</sup>

Immigration and immigration reform were hotly debated in the 1980s, fueled in part by the continuing economic instability in the United States, the rise of cultural conservatism, and nationalist rhetoric that intensified with Reagan's Cold War policies and his 1984 reelection campaign. Although many undocumented workers filled an economic need as more and more industrial jobs became deskilled and paid lower wages, political and popular rhetoric against immigration and integration in the 1980s and 1990s raised fears that there was an increasing threat of undocumented workers.<sup>60</sup> Employers and policymakers used the immigration debate to intensify the attack on undocumented workers through INS raids. In Racine as in other midwestern communities, such as St. Paul and Chicago, union and immigrant rights activists worked together to provide legal aid for the detained workers; the focus of those efforts in Racine was Racine Steel Castings.<sup>61</sup>

Local 553 was ready for the challenge. Union members pushed back against the local media's rhetoric around nonwhite workers stealing jobs and opportunities from more-deserving white workers. They understood the ways Black and Latino industrial workers faced increased economic hardship during deindustrialization: they lost jobs at faster rates than white workers did. Local 553 president Dick Fought worked with local Latinx organizations to help families produce their legal documents and argued for the workers' immediate release from detention centers and right to due process. The local Catholic parish raised funds to provide bond for one worker being held in Chicago, and the community came together to help workers provide the needed paperwork to stay in the country. Fought also refused to endorse the firing of the nineteen workers. The union successfully argued that Racine Steel Castings could not fire the workers until they were actually deported. In fact, Local 553 successfully got seventeen of the nineteen union members reinstated to work. President Fought also held press conferences to challenge the notion that undocumented workers were stealing jobs from the Racine community.<sup>62</sup> These efforts created lasting bonds between Latinx worker organizations and immigration rights groups. Even today, Voces de la Frontera, an immigrants' rights organization, keeps its offices in the Racine Labor Center.

59. "UAW 553 Chief Rips Raid on Immigrants," *Racine Labor*, June 29, 1984, p. 1.

60. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 266.

61. Nodín Valdés, *Barrios Nortenos*, 215–16, 245–55; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 265–69; MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough*, 225–61; Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 167–98.

62. "UAW 553 Chief Rips Raid on Immigrants," *Racine Labor*, June 29, 1984, pp. 1, 5; "UAW 553 Rips Press, INS on Raids," *Racine Labor*, July 6, 1984, pp. 1, 4; "Hispanics Angered, Saddened by Raids," *Racine Labor*, July 6, 1984, p. 5; "UAW 553 Rips New Immigrant Raid," *Racine Labor*, July 20, 1984, p. 2; "Labor, Hispanics Decry Raids by INS Agents," *Racine Labor*, July 27, 1984, p. 13; "UAW 553 to Fight for 2 'Aliens' Jobs," *Racine Labor*, September 28, 1984, p. 3; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 267.

## Conclusion

These examples demonstrate the ways worker activists and their allies sustained social justice activism in Racine after the high tide of civil rights activism of the 1960s. Racine's labor community remained not only relevant but also relatively robust. Industrial union locals did not abandon the larger working-class community even as they fought the onslaught of plant closings. Class remained important because of the legacies of the industrial unions and the efforts of Black workers to make racial justice a key component of labor politics. Through their actions and commitment to a broad-based social justice ethos, workers reshaped the local labor community and demanded a voice in public debate. These and similar stories emphasize the importance of looking for "determination" instead of "decline or decay" in urban settings as scholars seek to explain the ways working-class activists forged space to gain social and economic justice.<sup>63</sup>

Ultimately, the Racine labor community lost. So did the broader labor movement. However, as the Racine case demonstrates, working-class politics adapted to the transformations in the postwar period—the empowerment of women and nonwhite men, the shift from manufacturing to service work, the decline of New Deal liberalism, the rise of the conservative political power. Defeat came not because workers failed to adapt or limited their militant activism but due to larger economic and political changes out of their control. The working-class activism and intense employer resistance Lane Windham describes at the national level also shaped politics at the state and local level.<sup>64</sup> This history offers an example of the ways in which a broad-based definition of who belongs in the labor movement, coalition building, and militant resistance to economic and political conservatives can help cultivate and sustain a collective solidarity for holding on to some gains and the political motivation to continue to fight when new opportunities emerge. Historians should center worker agency and emphasize how race and gender shaped class politics in their narratives of late twentieth-century labor history. This approach also allows for a closer look at the continuity between mid- and late twentieth-century labor history.

Racine's history undermines the claim of many scholars and activists that race and class politics were oppositional during this period. Some writers have suggested that the focus on individual rights put the civil rights movement at odds with the labor movement and that liberal policymakers had to choose between constituencies. Nevertheless, a closer look at local community activism complicates such narratives. As engaged labor activists continued to respond to changes and evolve with regard to class politics, new avenues of organizing and politicizing workers emerged. Racial politics in Racine did not undermine notions of class solidarity. In Racine as in Detroit, Las Vegas, Durham, and Oakland, postwar racial politics reshaped class politics in urban settings, and activists in these communities adapted to new circumstances. New demographics will also change the avenues toward producing class soli-

63. Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 8.

64. Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door*.

darity. More and more immigrant workers, women, and contingent workers are joining the workforce due to migration, continued shifts in employment opportunities, and the slow-moving economy. As seen in Racine, new workers bring new ideas and influences into the labor movement.

Workers and the unions that represent them cannot operate on a level playing field without the legal protection offered by an active federal government and an engaged citizenry that recognizes the value of collective action. When the economic crisis of the Great Depression and worker unrest forced government involvement in the economy leading up to World War II, the labor movement amassed the members and resolve necessary to improve the working conditions and economic citizenship for workers both within and outside unions. During the more favorable years of the postwar prosperity, labor activists pushed liberal policymakers to guarantee protections for workers' collective action. The labor-liberal coalition, always an unequal relationship, suffered as postwar liberals shifted focus away from management of the domestic economy to Cold War foreign policy.<sup>65</sup> Labor activists have not stopped calling for government action to restore the social safety net, provide full employment, and protect workers' right to organize. Labor activists remain committed to the broad notions of economic security and full citizenship rights that liberals espoused in the New Deal era.

In today's "Fight for 15" campaigns, domestic workers' call for a Bill of Rights, and Black Lives Matter protests, minority workers, students, and community allies are using institutions in exciting ways and creating fresh alliances to generate debate, call attention to injustice, and demand change. The connected campaigns to raise the minimum wage, provide living wages for more workers, increase worker control over scheduling, and gain equity in workdays and workweeks all demonstrate the value of worker organization, working-class politics, and broad-based community coalitions.<sup>66</sup> The resurgence of left-wing political candidates committed to broad-based economic and social justice issues and their victories in the 2018 midterm primary elections reinforces this point. These collaborative efforts show direct links to the community activism during deindustrialization in Racine and other areas and demonstrate the value of continuous worker organization in the global economy. ■

65. Stein, *Pivotal Decade*; Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s*.

66. David Moberg, "Workers Say the Fight for 15 Isn't Just about Raises—It's a Fight for the Meaning in Their Lives," *In These Times* (blog), April 1, 2015, [http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/17801/workers\\_say\\_the\\_fight\\_for\\_15\\_isnt\\_just\\_about\\_raisesits\\_a\\_fight\\_for\\_meaning](http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/17801/workers_say_the_fight_for_15_isnt_just_about_raisesits_a_fight_for_meaning); Bruce Horowitz and Yamiche Alcindor, "Fast-Food Strikes Widen into Social-Justice Movement," *USA Today*, updated April 15, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2015/04/15/fast-food-strike-fight-for-15-service-employees-international-union/25787045/>; Annelise Orleck, "At Home and Abroad, the Labor Movement Comes Roaring Back," *Talk Poverty*, April 17, 2015, <http://talkpoverty.org/2015/04/17/home-abroad-labor-movement-comes-roaring-back/>.

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