For All White-Collar Workers

Opler, Daniel J.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Opler, Daniel J.
For All White-Collar Workers: The Possibilities of Radicalism in New York City's Department Store Unions, 1934-1953.
The Ohio State University Press, 2007.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27975.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27975

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1149926
Introduction

1.

When the factories moved away from the industrial centers of the North, American labor unions became mere shadows of the mass organizations they had once been. Unionization rates in America in 2004 were at 12.5 percent, the lowest they have been since the 1920s. According to the U.S. government’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, labor unions have been in decline for at least the past twenty years, and arguably for many years more.¹

This decline was not an inevitable result of deindustrialization. Had the labor movement established a strong base in the retail and service industries, it is possible that labor unions would continue to play a central role in American public life. Yet in the retail and service sectors, unions have been noticeably ineffective. In the retail industry today, unionization rates hover around 3.6 percent, as opposed to approximately 12.9 percent in the remaining manufacturing jobs and 14 percent in the construction industry.²

This study seeks to explain the weakness of the American labor movement by explaining why labor failed to organize service-industry workers, particularly retail workers. As a way to better understand this failure, the study begins during the Great Depression, at the founding of the modern labor movement, when powerful and permanent retail workers’ unions seemed a real possibility. In 1930s New York, organizers seemed to be realizing this possibility, and the managers of the largest and most famous stores in the country recognized the unions. The study then looks at the ways in which economic, social, cultural, and political developments of the 1940s and early 1950s forced retail workers’ unions into decline, and permanently weakened the American labor movement.

In the mid 1930s, even as union organizers began to take seriously the possibilities of mass unions of unskilled workers in the great factory towns of the Midwest, they all but ignored the thousands of workers, skilled and unskilled
alike, in retail stores. There were several reasons for this oversight on the part of 1930s union organizers: most important among them, the retail labor force was largely made up of women, and they simply did not fit 1930s understandings of what a worker was. The very concept of a “white-collar worker,” a worker from outside manufacturing or construction, was a radical concept at the time. Indeed, in New York City radical union organizers, associated with the Communist party, were the ones to realize that white-collar workers represented an important part of the working class and could form successful unions. As a result, union organizers affiliated with the Communist Trade Union Unity League set up unions in the city’s department stores in the mid-1930s.³

There are many reasons that Communists made for such effective union organizers in the retail industry, besides their insight that white-collar workers were, in fact, workers. Perhaps the most important advantage Communists had was their link to a larger radical movement, one that included unemployed people as well as workers in many industries besides retailing. This mass movement was critical for workers in retail stores who wished to form unions. A strike at a New York City department store, when led by Communists, could gain support from Communists throughout the city. In the 1930s and early 1940s communism functioned as a remarkable network which allowed strikers to call upon a large and diverse group of allies in their battles against store managers.

Additionally, Communists were successful partially because they had a broader conception from the beginning of the rise of the retail workers’ unions of what a strike could be. To Communists, strikes could be ways to claim public space, and on more than one occasion in the unions’ history, workers under Communist leadership lay claim to the stores and the streets surrounding the stores. In areas like Union Square, Brooklyn’s Fulton Street, and Manhattan’s garment district, areas which were already difficult for managers to control, Communists’ willingness to challenge that control still further made them formidable opponents indeed.

Finally, Communists were relatively supportive of working-class militancy. By the late 1930s anti-Communist organizers frequently attempted to restrain workers who were willing to strike, but, with the critical exception of the World War II period, Communists were more willing to support workers’ strikes. As late as September of 1941, Communists in the department store unions demonstrated their support for workers’ militancy, despite less radical union leaders’ emphasis on concession and compromise. And in the late 1940s, when Communists found themselves increasingly on the defensive,
they were still able to find support from the workers they led, by emphasizing their belief in workers’ ability to lead the union at the precise moment when non-Communist union leaders were becoming less tolerant of workers taking initiative in their struggles against management.

These factors made Communists powerful leaders for retail workers in New York City. Communists were virtually unchallenged in their efforts to organize unions in New York City’s department stores, and by the late 1930s most of the major stores in New York City had Communist-led unions: stores such as Gimbel’s, Bloomingdale’s, Stern’s, Loeser’s, and Hearn’s all had unions led by Communists. At Macy’s, Communists played a key but supporting role in a union led primarily by liberal non-Communists.

None of this is to say that Communists were ever ideal union leaders. As other historians have pointed out, communism was, in many respects, a top-down movement. Its leaders could be remarkably racist, sexist, and shortsighted, and Communist union organizers made serious policy mistakes throughout the unions’ history, most important among them their failure to adequately challenge racial hiring practices. But in the 1930s they were the only ones who recognized that these department store workers’ unions needed to be formed. As a result, for all their faults, they played a critical role in these unions’ successes.

This study also addresses anti-communism, one of the most important forces behind the failure of American unions in the retail sector. Anti-Communists in the late 1940s and early 1950s forced organizers in the department store unions to take a far more defensive position at the precise moment that store managers weakened the unions by restructuring the retail industry and cutting thousands of jobs. Eventually, union organizers capitulated entirely to the demands of anti-Communists, distancing themselves greatly from the militant labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s.

In the process of this examination, this study argues that some aspects of anti-communism have been underexplored by historians. In particular, it calls for a reexamination of the Taft-Hartley Act, which among other things required all union leaders to declare themselves non-Communists. I argue that this development not only made it impossible for Communists to lead unions; it also made it impossible for non-Communist and Communist union leaders to work together without acknowledging the political differences between them. In the CIO’s retail union, the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), union leaders were virtually silent on the issue of communism between the union’s founding in 1937 and its disintegration in 1948. This tacit agreement not to use the word “Communist” within the retail
union was critical for the union’s survival, since the national leaders of the union were anti-Communists and the leaders of some of the largest locals were Communists. However, when it was finally apparent that Taft-Hartley would not be overturned, RWDSU leaders could no longer ignore the issue of communism; their attempt to confront this issue split the RWDSU and led to disaster for the future of retail unionism in America.

As other historical studies have done in recent years, this study argues that the history of communism and anti-communism must be placed firmly within a local context. Communist organizers in the department store unions were far more affected by the Great Depression, working conditions in the stores, events in the streets surrounding the stores, the changing role of the federal government, and postwar suburbanization than they were by any policies coming out of the Soviet Union. To say otherwise—to treat American Communists, as some historians have, as mindless drones who took orders directly from the Comintern—is to dilute their politics and to fail to realize the possibilities inherent in the Communist-led union of department store workers.

Adopting a local context for communism requires historians to address the question of how and when Communist party (CP) policies affected activists within local struggles. These policies, I acknowledge, did affect Communists, but far more important than acknowledging the power of CP policies is understanding why Party members or fellow travelers followed these policies. In New York City’s department stores, Communist union organizers sought alliances with non-Communists in the 1930s and early 1940s not because the Comintern called for such policies (at least at some points during these years), but instead because such a policy was a powerful organizing strategy. At the same time, in the late 1940s, as the CP retreated from any sort of united front with liberals, Communist union organizers in New York City’s department stores found themselves isolated primarily because of anti-Communist attacks from the right, not simply because they chose to follow CP policy. Understanding why and how union organizers changed tactics requires far more attention to local conditions than to events or declarations taking place in the USSR.

Adopting a local context for the history of communism also requires historians to determine what constitutes a local context. Here, too, this study makes contributions in addressing the importance of the middle class, contests over public space, and the changing nature of consumption in the history of these unions. Anti-Communists began their most extensive attacks precisely in the years when suburbanization and the rise of the middle class were severely affecting retailing in general and upscale department stores in particular. As historians have long realized, these developments were closely linked to new
patterns of consumption. In this study, I argue that these new patterns of consumption were visible not only in the consumer goods furnishing middle-class suburban homes, but also in a rapidly changing environment within the stores, in part created to better serve middle-class customers. Self-service shopping, which sprung up throughout New York City stores in the early 1950s, allowed managers to increase their control and cut their labor costs, permanently weakening the unions. And the closing of some stores whose managers were unable or unwilling to adjust quickly enough to the new retailing environment left the unions even more vulnerable to anti-Communist attacks.

By focusing on the role of communism in the history of these unions, this study addresses the history of department store workers in America in a very different way than scholars have previously done. Other studies, most importantly Susan Porter Benson's landmark *Counter Cultures*, describe in rich detail the history of worker-management relations in the department stores, although without addressing the unions formed within these stores. In this study, I move beyond the somewhat self-contained department stores that dominated Benson's excellent study, to place these stores within a much larger and more complicated historical framework. This study takes into account processes that affected the stores and unions directly, like suburbanization and the rise of anti-communism. It also looks at the changing nature of the streets outside the stores, streets that were dominated by radical protests and strikes in the 1930s, but rapidly became far less important sites of militant activism in the 1940s and 1950s. Finally, this study looks at larger historical events like the Great Depression and World War II from the vantage point of the stores and the unions.4

While this study moves away from previous studies of department store work and workers in placing greater emphasis on context, it retains the focus on women's history established by many of the scholars on the history of department stores. Women played a number of key roles in the history of New York City's department store unions. They represented, first of all, many of the workers organized within these unions. Second, especially in the early years of the unions' history, some of the most important union leaders were women, largely due to Communists' willingness to recruit women as union organizers. Finally, women played key roles in the unions' history as store customers. Unlike Benson, however, I argue that there was seldom if ever any consciousness of shared femininity between store customers and store workers, especially in the upscale stores where the unions were most successful. Instead, I argue that in the 1930s store workers found themselves in a highly antagonistic relationship with customers. Partially as a result of this antagonistic relationship between department store workers and their wealthy customers, department store workers got
the chance to prove that they shared the negative assumptions about upper-class women that were widespread in this era. During their sit-down strikes at Woolworth’s and, later, during their more conventional strike at Gimbel’s, women working in the department stores proved that they were as hostile to upper-class women as were any of their male counterparts.\(^5\)

Women played key roles in the department store unions throughout the unions’ history, but these roles were less pronounced in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Even in these years, union members continued to hold discussions about gender equality and gender relations at union meetings and in the union newspaper. At the same time, by the late 1940s, union leaders openly began supporting the male breadwinner norm, something that had not been the case a decade earlier. By the 1950s, as the unions shifted towards a more conservative political stance, union leaders also supported a more conservative set of gendered assumptions, whether through cheesecake photographs in the union newspaper or fighting for the rights of “breadwinners and heads of families” to take the best-paying jobs.

Finally, this study uses the history of these unions as a way of addressing the history of white-collar workers in America. Particularly in the 1930s, as organizers in the department store unions made their most important gains, the term “white collar worker” had tremendous importance for the unions’ history. During strikes in these years, department store workers actively employed a rhetoric that identified white-collar workers as members of the working class. This rhetoric allowed department store workers on strike to mobilize allies ranging from low-paid office workers to actors, writers, chemists, and doctors. By the late 1930s, however, as these unions entered the CIO, they ceased discussing the specialized nature of white-collar work and white-collar workers in favor of analyses that placed greater emphasis on the shared concerns of all working-class people. Within just a few years, people who had once called themselves “white-collar workers” began thinking of themselves as members of the middle class, and eschewed the sort of alliances with strikers that once gave the unions such power.

The connections between the history of white-collar workers and the history of the department store unions consists of far more than the history of the term “white collar worker” or the changing nature of the middle class. This study addresses the critical issue of when, how, and why white-collar workers became a minor part of the American labor movement. As already suggested, today such workers represent a tiny minority of union members. Statistics demonstrate that this weakness is rooted in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. According to a study of American union membership between 1939
and 1953, the percentage of unionized workers in the service sector (including retailing) grew only slightly in these years, from 6 percent in 1939 to 9.5 percent in 1953. In the textile industry, the only sector of the manufacturing industry with similarly low rates of unionization in the late 1930s, unions grew tremendously in the same period, moving from 7 percent unionized workers in 1939 to 26.7 percent unionized workers in 1953. The numbers for the entire manufacturing industry are even more striking; in the same time period, from 1939 to 1953, the percentage of unionized workers in the manufacturing industries went from 22.8 percent in 1939 to 42.4 percent, a far larger growth both in actual numbers and in percentages.6

As these figures demonstrate, the growth in retail unions between 1939 and 1953 did not have anywhere near the success of the unionization drives in even the least unionized sectors of the manufacturing industries. By 1953, the year this study ends, the possibilities that had been so evident in New York City in the 1930s had disappeared. Divided around the issue of communism, facing managers’ restructuring, suburbanization, and an extremely hostile government, department store union organizers in New York City were struggling to retain those unions that already existed. Fighting this struggle gave union organizers no chance to match the rapid expansion of retailing in post–World War II America.

2.

In recent decades, historians looking at blue-collar workers have discussed the concept of the radical possibilities of the 1930s at great length. In doing so, they have come to critical realizations about this decade. In particular, they have called for bottom-up histories of both American communism and American unions, trends this study seeks to continue.

In the early 1970s a group of labor historians made the changing nature of unions a central concern of American labor history. Using blue-collar workers and their unions as examples, these labor historians argued that unions began as powerful organizations created and controlled by the working class in the early and mid-1930s. During the mid- and late 1930s, these historians argued, paid CIO organizers and CIO leaders stepped in and took over the grassroots labor movement, and finally stamped out most workers’ dissent in their enforcement of the no-strike pledge during World War II.7

At the very moment that labor historians were reshaping their field, other historians were also examining the history of American communism in a new
light. By the 1970s and especially the 1980s many historians of communism argued that Communists had not been the sinister manipulators of the labor movement that consensus school historians had claimed. Instead, these new historians argued, Communists’ role in the labor movement had been far more complex. Communists had served as among the most dedicated union organizers, who fought tirelessly for workers’ rights, especially in the 1930s.8

Increasingly in the 1980s and early 1990s historians portrayed Communist union organizers as far more dictatorial and separated from the rank and file. By 1982, Nelson Lichtenstein was able to argue in Labor’s War at Home that Communists’ willingness to support the World War II no-strike pledge was tantamount to a betrayal of the working class, very similar to other labor leaders’ betrayal in the same era. By the mid-1990s George Lipsitz, in Rainbow at Midnight, took this argument one step further, arguing that the very concept of the Communist party as the workers’ vanguard was destined to separate them from those militant workers who were not willing to be led by Communists. These historians asserted that Communist union leaders, like non-Communist union leaders, benefited from workers’ willingness to strike and resist in the 1930s, but then stamped out that militancy in the 1940s.9

This study seeks to address the issues raised by these historians, most importantly the subject of the missed opportunities of the 1930s. Staughton Lynd correctly called workers’ successes in the 1930s a demonstration of the possibilities of radicalism, a phrase with echoes in nearly every study of the 1930s published since. This study points to one of these possibilities—the possibility for unions in the retail sector—that was even less realized than the possibilities of unionism in the factories that Lynd and his followers examined. To explain why these possibilities existed in the first place, I draw heavily upon the work of historians who have studied 1930s communism as, in part, a gender system. As these gender historians have argued, many Communists shared similar gendered assumptions: in particular, many strongly emphasized the masculine nature of working-class radicalism. While in the early 1930s, Communists did see important possibilities for women to play key roles in community-based organizing in particular, by the late 1930s, according to historians like Elizabeth Faue and Van Gosse, Communists argued that men were the fundamental agents of the working class.10

As these historians make clear, there was a great deal of complexity in Communists’ understandings of gender. Communists did, as Faue especially has pointed out, associate bourgeois femininity with corruption and workers’ oppression. At the same time, many Communists recognized the important role of working-class women in class struggle. Most importantly, in the early
and mid-1930s Communists supported women workers’ unions in ways that many more conservative union organizers did not. Unlike the far more conservative organizers in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), Communist union organizers were willing to go into department stores to aid women workers in their struggle to form unions.

This study also addresses some of the themes that Lichtenstein and Lipsitz address, namely, the relationship between Communist union organizers and workers. Unlike Lichtenstein and Lipsitz, however, both of whom focus on blue-collar workers, there is no evidence in the department store unions’ history that Communists were at odds with the most militant workers in the unions. While in the late 1940s a few workers did form anti-Communist blocs within the unions, the anti-Communists represented a tiny and isolated minority within the department store unions in the 1940s. Most members, as demonstrated by the union elections of the late 1940s, continued to support union leaders’ right to hold political beliefs contrary to the beliefs of most workers, and there is no record of any workers in these unions calling for wildcat strikes or rejecting the no-strike pledge.

Rank-and-file anti-communism in the department store unions was a result not of Communists’ errors but of changing economic circumstances in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As suburbanization and restructuring continued, managers laid off workers; Communist union leaders could not prevent this. The end result was that by 1953 the rank and file was constantly criticizing union leaders’ political views, demanding that union leaders recant their radical politics and concentrate more on the bread-and-butter issues workers had to confront. The union leaders, to their credit, followed suit, but this did nothing to help them combat managers' efforts to restructure the stores, efforts that eventually required fewer workers with fewer skills. The powerful coalitions that had formed around communism during the 1930s would never again reemerge, and the union leaders would find themselves and their membership increasingly isolated and unable to meet the challenge of the structural changes in retailing during the 1950s.

Chapter 1 describes the first major strikes in the department stores of New York City, the Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strikes that took place in New York City’s Union Square in 1934–35. Both Union Square and the stores were highly contested spaces at the time. Communists in the streets of Union Square
repeatedly tried to make the square their own, while police and local business managers (including store managers) worked to contest Communists' efforts. While these parties struggled over the space in and around Union Square, a related struggle took place over the buildings on the square's southern border, the Klein's and Ohrbach's stores. Store managers found themselves constantly struggling to control working-class consumption, to prevent shoplifting and overcrowding. As these struggles raged, workers at the Klein's and Ohrbach's stores, many of them women, went on strike demanding union recognition. With support from Communist organizers in the Trade Union Unity League, the workers at Klein's and Ohrbach's were able to launch a dramatic and militant attack on the owners and managers of these stores in strikes that lasted for almost six months. At the end of these strikes, workers were able to declare a partial victory, after which department store workers throughout New York City began organizing unions within their stores.

Chapter 2 discusses the next three years of the unions' history, from 1935–37. In these years the Communists leading the department store unions sought greater legitimacy by uniting with the AFL's Retail Clerks International Protection Association (RCIPA). They also led two militant although not very successful strikes in 1935 and 1936. During these strikes Communists found themselves increasingly at odds with the corrupt anti-Communist leaders of the RCIPA, who shut down one of these strikes while condemning the settlement in another. In 1937 workers won their first major victories, in the sit-down strikes at Woolworth's and other five-and-dime stores. In these strikes, department store workers firmly established themselves as an integral part of the American labor movement. They adopted the same tactics and made many of the same demands as other workers in the fledgling industrial union movement that would result in the CIO. Late in 1937 the department stores' successful job actions forced CIO leaders to recognize the existence of retail workers, leading to the creation of the CIO's retail workers' union, the United Retail Employees of America.

Chapter 3 discusses the ways in which workers created unions at New York City's upscale 34th Street department stores in the later 1930s. Far more than in the downscale stores, workers' successes in these upscale establishments resulted in the creation of permanent union locals. Workers faced significant challenges in creating these unions. At stores like Macy's, Bloomingdale's, and Gimbel's, workers found themselves in a highly antagonistic relationship with customers, due largely to the system of consumption practiced at these stores. In part seeking protection from customers, workers joined the union, some of them even leaving the store to become permanent and full-time union
organizers. By the late 1930s, 34th Street store managers, seeking a way to gain control of their increasingly restive workforce in a neighborhood constantly beset by street protests and strikes, accepted the union as one possible way to stabilize their situation. But the local leaders had other ideas, as the unions became an integral part of the anti-Fascist Popular Front formed in the late 1930s, gaining numerous powerful allies in the city’s radical movement. By 1941, with these allies’ support, workers at the 34th Street stores won the eight-hour day and the forty-hour week for retail workers throughout New York City.

Chapter 4 addresses the department stores and unions during World War II, when everything that had once guaranteed the union success began to disappear. The radical protests that had once dominated the streets around the stores now disappeared in favor of patriotic parades. Meanwhile, store managers began to use the stores in order to further the war effort, gaining the support of the government and the public in the process. National union leaders also found themselves increasingly in the government’s good graces, winning support for their strike against Montgomery Ward after managers there refused to grant the closed shop. For the Communists in the department store unions, the newfound strength of managers and national union leaders was a constant and unanswerable threat. The threat was made all the more serious by managers’ early efforts at restructuring the stores in an effort to deal with wartime labor shortages. Additionally, Communists’ strong support for the no-strike pledge and their conflict with national leaders led to their condemnation of the government-approved Montgomery Ward strike, damaging their relationship with the national union leaders still further. By the end of World War II, the Communists in the department store unions found themselves isolated, with less power in the national union than ever before.

Chapter 5 addresses the immediate postwar era in the department store unions’ history. In the critical period between 1946 and 1948, local and national union leaders came to an unstated agreement about what their respective roles would be within the union. The local department store union leaders gave up on any control over the national union’s policies, while national union leaders allowed the local leaders greater autonomy in the running of the local unions. This compromise did little to meet the challenges department store workers faced in the postwar era. Managers, continuing their wartime efforts at restructuring the stores, now began laying off workers in record numbers and opening branch stores in the outer boroughs and in the suburbs to appeal to the increasing numbers of suburban residents. As the layoffs mounted, the U.S. government put the Taft-Hartley Act into effect, requiring all union
officials to declare themselves non-Communists, something the local leaders could not do. By 1948 local leaders’ refusal to declare their opposition to communism attracted national attention. The leaders of New York City’s department store unions were called to testify in a set of HUAC hearings on communism in New York City’s retail trade. Shortly after the hearings concluded—and after several of the leaders of these unions pleaded the Fifth Amendment and refused to answer questions about their political beliefs—the national union leaders purged the department store locals from the CIO, establishing dual unions to compete with the Communist-led department store locals.

Chapter 6 looks at union organizers’ efforts to continue to lead and even expand the retail unions at the height of the McCarthy period, from 1948 to 1953. In these years Communist union organizers found themselves struggling with the simple tasks of retaining their leadership of the union while staying out of jail. Meanwhile, in response to the rising numbers of middle-class consumers as well as the rise of national brands and a desire to cut costs, managers began even more radical reconstruction of the stores, instituting self-service retailing, laying off still more workers, and closing some stores. With organizers struggling to stay out of jail and workers losing their jobs by the thousands, union members increasingly demanded that the union leaders move to the right politically. By the spring of 1953 the department store unions had passed resolutions condemning communism as an anti-democratic movement. In condemning communism as a grave danger to American democracy, the union leaders gained a degree of legitimacy, but they also lost the ability to challenge decisions made by the anti-Communist state without being accused of being Communists. This became critically important during the Hearn’s strike of 1953, when workers went on their first strike to challenge managers’ right to restructure the stores. When a court granted Hearn’s managers an anti-strike injunction, strikers and union leaders, still determined to prove their loyalty, strictly abided by the injunction. This decision effectively deprived union organizers of the ability to challenge managers’ restructuring programs, bringing an end to the possibilities represented by the powerful union of department store workers in New York City.