For All White-Collar Workers

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Chapter 1

Foundations, 1934–35

Introduction

Class determined where and how people shopped in New York City during the Great Depression. Wealthy consumers went to the upscale stores on Fifth Avenue, or to the great department stores on 34th Street, making their purchases amidst elegant surroundings. Working-class people had their own less elegant shopping districts, both in the city’s outer boroughs and around Union Square, on Manhattan’s 14th Street. 14th Street featured a number of working-class stores, and two of the most important, Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, were right on the square.

Union Square was a site of radical protest as well as working-class consumption throughout the 1930s. Both local business managers and Communists attempted to claim the square, putting up signs and staging dramatic pageants in order to attract the attention and support of working-class people within the square. These practices became extremely important when workers at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s declared themselves on strike, and set about creating a strike replete with signs and pageantry.

Like Union Square, the stores were contested spaces even before the strikes began. In downscale stores like Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, customers and managers found themselves at odds. Managers attempted to control customers’ behavior very carefully, trying to force customers to behave in an orderly and legal way while making purchases. Customers fiercely resisted managerial control, crowding exits and shoplifting whenever they could. Although store managers tried to prevent this practice, they were unable to do so, and both businesses lost large sums of money to shoplifters each year.

Within these contested spaces, Klein’s and Ohrbach’s workers were highly exploited. Their salaries were some of the lowest offered in the city, and throughout the early years of the Depression, workers at these stores put in longer hours for less pay. Additionally, workers at these stores had no unions,
largely because they were far removed from the concept of organizable workers as defined by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the largest and most powerful union at the time. In 1934, however, these workers found that the Communists organizing protests in the streets outside the stores were willing to lead unions of white-collar women workers. As a result, workers at these stores joined the Communist-led Office Workers Union (OWU).

As part of this union, workers at Klein's and Ohrbach's were able to manipulate the rhetoric of class in order to take advantage of the contested public spaces in which they worked. In particular, workers and union organizers proclaimed the importance of their struggle for white-collar workers, and created a coalition of chemists, doctors, actors, writers, and office workers to support the strike. With the help of these white-collar workers, the strikers successfully challenged managers' control over both the stores and over Union Square, forcing managers to settle the strike and establishing Communists' role as leaders in the struggle to organize New York City's department store unions.

The Contested Square

The Great Depression was a nightmare for working-class people in New York City. “You can't possibly understand it if you didn't live through it,” a working-class Bronx resident named Ruth Papa said in describing the city at the time. Papa's father—a self-educated worker in a shoe factory—had constantly searched for a job during the early years of the Depression, and attempted everything from running a push-cart to shoveling snow, with little success. Papa's mother and two older sisters, as well as Papa herself, took up housework to try to make ends meet, but the family was still barely surviving; eventually, both Papa and her older sister found jobs, and the family's financial crisis eased slightly. Papa remembered a near-constant fear of dispossession throughout the Depression, however, and remembered on more than one occasion having to use candles after not being able to pay the electric bill. Papa's family's experiences of poverty and unemployment were mirrored by many other New Yorkers during the Depression. Throughout New York City, working-class people, many of them immigrants or children of immigrants, struggled with unemployment and near-starvation during these years. Many lost their homes, moving into temporary shelters, but shelter managers had to turn away still more homeless men and women.¹

The homeless victims of the Depression sometimes found shelter within the city parks, among them Union Square Park, an empty space of approxi-
Foundations, 1934–35

mately three square blocks just north of Greenwich Village. One homeless man described sleeping in the park as a grueling experience: “Sleeping in the parks was much less satisfactory [than sleeping in subway cars]. Tired, hungry, and cold, stretched out on the bench... I was awakened by a patrolman who had swung his nightstick sharply against the soles of my feet, sending an indescribable electric pain through my hunger-racked body.” Despite the misery this man associated with sleeping in the parks, homeless people continued to frequent Union Square Park throughout the early years of the Depression.2

While the rise in unemployment led homeless people to set up residence in Union Square, the related revitalization of the city’s radical movement made the square a center of American radicalism. Communists and other radicals filled Union Square during the early years of the Depression, making Union Square what historian and journalist Matthew Josephson described as “New York’s Red Square... the very vortex of revolutionary activities” in New York City. Josephson went on to describe his memories of a visit to Union Square in the early 1930s: “Soapboxers were going on in routine fashion: ‘Garbage! That’s what the bosses give the American workers,’ one of them shouted suddenly. His small audience responded with a roar of laughter, some of them waving placards with slogans such as ‘Jobs—Not Charity.’” While Josephson describes the audience as fairly passive, other observers disagreed. In the late 1930s, Federal Writers Project interviewers writing about these same soapbox speakers claimed that the audience frequently gathered not only to listen to the various speakers, but to argue with other listeners or even with the speakers themselves about the issues being discussed. One WPA worker, writing a few years after Josephson, described the square as the site of long debates, a “diminutive Hyde Park.”3

The lengthy political debates extended to buildings around the square’s border. A few small cafeterias lined Union Square, and one working-class woman who frequented them when she was young remembered that it was in those cafeterias that she had learned about literature and politics, primarily from other people her own age. Young people would sit in the cafeterias for hours, talking about unions, class struggle, and racism, among a variety of other subjects. Like the soapbox speakers in the square, working-class people used the cafeterias as spaces to debate and discuss a wide range of issues.4

Like the soapbox speakers and the cafeterias, political rallies in Union Square also allowed working-class people to express their opinions on political issues. Drawing on a century-long tradition of political protest in Union Square, Communists and other radicals staged rallies in the square nearly every week in the early 1930s, around issues ranging from the wrongful arrest
Figure 1 (a.–d.)
Protest in Union Square, probably in 1934. Outside the Klein’s and Ohrbach’s stores, the protests in the Square were large and militant and occasionally resulted in violence. Thus, any strike at those stores was a potentially serious situation for managers,
especially if, as happened in 1934 and 1935, the union was led by the Communist party, which also led many of the unemployed protests taking place in the Square. (Courtesy of Milstein Division of United States History, Local History & Genealogy, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)
of the Scottsboro Boys to unemployment relief. Any of these protests could end in violence. Albert Halper, a novelist who lived just off Union Square at the time, later remembered that "there were weekly left-wing parades which frequently ended with clubbings by the police. On Saturday mornings, I could see the mounted cops in the side streets, bunched together, resting, healthy faced, chatting cheerfully before the afternoon's action."  

Other working-class people—particularly women—came to the square to shop in the numerous stores that lined its southern border. Here, too, the Depression affected people's presence within Union Square, as women in particular responded to the Depression by being more careful with their spending habits, and by bargain-hunting at the discount stores bordering on the square. As a result, Samuel Klein, the owner and manager of Klein's, one of the most important downscale stores in New York City at the time, was one of the few business owners who actually saw an increase in profits during the Depression. In addition to these indoor establishments, street peddlers selling food and other goods filled the southern end of the square. Combined with the easy access to the square by public transportation, these stores made Union Square "the place where we came to shop," as one working-class woman remembered it.  

People who owned buildings around Union Square were very aware of the crowd's presence, and many attempted to control the crowd's activities by putting up signs. On the southern side of the square, Samuel Klein put huge signs in his store's windows advising customers of the "tremendous values in fur coats" and reminding them that customers had a right to their "money back within five days." Even the water tank, standing up above the rest of the building, carried with it the name of the firm, "Klein's." On the northwest corner of the square stood another building, also covered in signs. These signs, however, called for viewers to "Fight Police Terror, Unemployment, and War Preparations!" They called "for Defense of the Soviet Union!" and for the struggle of "class against class!" This building was the headquarters of the Daily Worker, the official newspaper of the Communist party of the United States (CP). The signs on both buildings illustrate the building owners' determination to gain the support of the people who passed through Union Square Park.  

Both store owners and Communists used pageantry as well as signs to attract the attention of the crowds that filled Union Square. The Communists staged many of the weekly protests which took place in Union Square during this era, as well as what was probably the largest protest in New York City during the Great Depression, the International Unemployment Day protest of March 6, 1930. As a reporter for the Daily Worker described the proceedings,
during this protest 100,000 people gathered in Union Square to hear speeches calling for “immediate relief for the jobless from the funds of the city treasury and from taxes on the wealthy exploiters, for unemployment insurance paid for by the employers and administered by committees of the workers and unemployed, and for the seven-hour day and the five-day week.” The speakers—most of them CP officials—called on the huge crowd to elect a committee to take their demands to City Hall. The crowd roared back at the podium, apparently in agreement, and eventually a number of CP officials volunteered to serve as the Workers’ Committee. However, when the protesters attempted to follow the committee to City Hall, the square became the site of a bloody battle. Police emerged, many with nightsticks, many on horseback. In order to prevent what they perceived as the beginnings of a riotous attack on City Hall, the police began beating those protesters who were attempting to march south. Most of the crowd fled in the confusion; police arrested those who did not escape quickly enough.

International Unemployment Day and the smaller protests that frequently took place in Union Square served several functions. First, these protests allowed workers to express their political views; in this respect they were similar to the soapbox speakers and the cafeterias which lined the square. Second, Communist-led protests generally presented Communists as the leaders of the working class. At the International Unemployment Day protest, the Workers’ Committee, made up of Communists, was supposed to represent the city’s workers, although most workers in New York City would hardly have accepted this representation. Finally, protests in Union Square allowed the Communists an opportunity to lay claim to Union Square as their space, to force Josephson and other observers to acknowledge that it was a “Red Square.”

Like the Communists, business owners and managers operating in the square also found political demonstrations useful tools with which to exert control over Union Square and to challenge Communists’ control over the square. To this end, the city government and local business owners and managers cooperated to organize the Union Square Centennial Celebration on April 23, 1932. Local business owners and managers used this celebration as a lightly veiled challenge to the Communists’ control over Union Square. The celebration began, for instance, with a large and very well-publicized “Americanization meeting,” which featured former governor and Democratic presidential candidate Alfred E. Smith giving a speech on equality. Aware of the significance of Union Square for Communists and others who attacked ruling-class privilege, Smith opened his speech by stating that in America “there is no such thing as a ruling class, though that phrase is often used to arouse passion.”
The celebration organizers powerfully illustrated their claim to Union Square as a public space for anti-communism through the actions of the police on the day of the celebration. As the New York Times described their participation, the police presented an “exhibition drill by a company of the Police Rifle Regiment in riot drill and formation,” which ended in “a bayonet charge into a mythical [rioting] crowd.” This bayonet charge, taking place as it did at the site of so many actual confrontations between police and Communist-led protestors, could hardly be described as anything but a threat to the Communists, and a challenge to their continued presence in Union Square.\textsuperscript{10}

Smith’s casual denial of the existence of class in America and the Police Rifle Regiment's demonstration of crowd-control tactics did nothing to prevent the Communists from using Union Square for May Day only a week later. Despite heavy rain, the thousands of participants in the annual march gathered in the square that year for a brief rally before proceeding along their march to Columbus Circle. If the Centennial Celebration was intended as a threat, the Communists did not respond as the backers of the celebration hoped they would. Local business managers therefore resolved to continue their campaign against communism in their neighborhood. Only a few weeks after that 1932 May Day protest, local business owners and managers formed the Union Square Association, an organization intended to “advance the interest of Union Square as a patriotic center.” Samuel Klein served on the new association's board of directors.\textsuperscript{11}

Store owners and Communists shared two goals in the early 1930s. First, both attempted to control the environment in Union Square through signs and demonstrations, and to use that environment to communicate with working-class people—both potential consumers and potential Communists—in the square. Second, as part of this campaign, store owners and Communists attempted to win the allegiance of the working-class people who frequented Union Square. The Communists wanted working-class people to view them as the legitimate representatives of the working class, and used the dramatic International Unemployment Day protest, before it erupted into violence, to make some of their leaders just such representatives, through the Workers’ Committee which the protestors chose. The store owners used this environment to encourage working-class people to shop in their stores, a task which was all the more important since store owners in Union Square seldom advertised in newspapers and therefore lacked one particularly powerful way to draw in customers.

It is difficult to determine the nature of department store workers’ relationship to these struggles over Union Square. Anne Haicken, who worked in
Ohrbach’s during these years, remembered that the protests seemed far away from her daily existence: “You had to go all the way across 14th Street to the Park” and to enter Union Square and to hear the protesters or soapbox speakers, she remembered. At the same time, Matthew Josephson believed that at least some people may have made the trek across 14th Street. During one visit to Union Square, he claimed that “knots of people who looked like workers from the nearby garment shops were standing about listening to some speakers mounted on little portable platforms.” And, when they did go on strike, department store workers willingly worked alongside the Communists who had previously organized demonstrations in Union Square, often laying claim to the same space.  

Whether or not department store workers paid attention to these struggles, other observers around the state and the country were very aware of the Communists’ presence in Union Square. During a parade sponsored by the right-wing Veterans of Foreign Wars in Union Square just a few weeks after International Unemployment Day, speaker after speaker called for an end to Communist control of Union Square. Later that year, an assistant adjutant general of the New York State National Guard called the square “the frontier of today, right in the heart of your greatest city . . . and it is our duty, as much today as in the early days, to encourage our conservators of the peace and guardians of the frontier” to make sure that the Communists did not gain control over the square.  

Despite the importance of Union Square to the struggles of the early 1930s, it is important to remember that the entire country was in turmoil, not just these three city blocks. The most important of the struggles that characterized this era—the famous Bonus March—ended with the United States Army chasing World War I veterans away from Washington, creating widespread fear that the nation really was crumbling. Meanwhile, unemployed workers attended regular protests in front of city halls in major cities across the country. Particularly in northern cities like New York and Chicago, nearly any eviction could result in a spontaneous rally. The mass unemployment and mass poverty which began in 1929 had, it seemed, stirred the working class into action, and many believed that the country was on the brink of revolution.  

With hindsight, we now know that, in the end, the Communist movement was soundly defeated. We know that American workers did not create a revolution in the 1930s; and that the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 meant that, instead of revolution, workers and their bosses would come to what Roosevelt quite accurately referred to as a “New Deal” over the splitting of profits. We know that Union Square was to become a center of commerce, not
of communism, by century’s end. But in the early and mid-1930s there seemed to be at least a possibility that no solution would be found, that American capitalism was truly doomed to failure. And Communist control of Union Square, at the very least, seemed to many observers a near certainty.15

The conflict in Union Square, a microcosm of these much larger struggles taking place in the country as a whole, set one of the two stages for the strikes at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s. Communists’ active participation in the fierce battle that raged over the square in the years before the strikes was almost certainly one reason that the Communists were drawn into the strikes to begin with. Additionally, the conflict outside the stores gave the strikers one of their most powerful opportunities to challenge managers, by disrupting still further managers’ efforts to control the stores’ exterior environment.

**The Contested Stores**

As in Union Square, the pre-strike struggles and conflicts inside the stores were critical for the way in which the strikes and the unions developed. Working-class consumers fought to get as many high-quality goods as they could for as little money as possible, while store managers fought to encourage spending and control customers’ often unruly competition over goods within the stores. Like customers, workers and managers struggled even before the Great Depression. Workers, who had no union at either store before the Depression, frequently left their jobs to protest the poor working conditions. In response, managers set up limited benefits programs at both stores, attempting to convince workers to stay longer. These programs, combined with the high unemployment rates of the early Depression, made workers more likely to remain working at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, despite the low pay, long hours, and dismal working conditions.

Managers at both Klein’s and Ohrbach’s used the self-service method of retailing, a rarity among clothing stores at the time. Customers at both stores had direct access to goods, without necessarily going through a salesperson. A reporter doing a profile on Klein and his store in 1934 described the process as “a clothing cafeteria” where “customers pick garments from the racks and shelves and try them on in communal dressing rooms where green baize curtains are the only concession to privacy. Then they take their selections to cashiers, pay for them and have them wrapped.” It was a process far more efficient, inexpensive, and impersonal than the sort managers offered customers in upscale stores. In both Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, managers relied for profits
on low prices, extremely rapid stock turnover, and low overhead (including wages). In Klein’s, the overhead, including both rents and salary, was low indeed, reportedly around 6 or 7 percent of the store’s total profits.16

Due to the low overhead and consequent low prices, as well as the high quality of the merchandise, these stores were very popular place for workers to shop. Working-class people throughout New York City, especially from the immigrant communities of the outer boroughs, would frequently take the subway to Klein’s and Ohrbach’s to do their shopping. Additionally, during the Depression, some women who might ordinarily have spent more money at the upscale department stores instead chose to limit their spending and shop at Union Square. As a result, Samuel Klein was one of the few business owners in New York City to see an increase in profits during the Great Depression, making over a million dollars in profit every year.17

Although profitable, catering primarily to working-class consumers had some disadvantages. Store managers had tremendous difficulty controlling customers, especially during sales. During these sales, working-class consumers sought to stock up on as much clothing as possible. Halper described one sale as rowdy and chaotic. “Greater crowds of women were now storming all the entrances to Klein’s . . . overturning tables stacked with handbags and blouses.” Klein and Ohrbach both employed private security guards in part to deal with these sorts of unruly crowds.18

Customers also engaged in shoplifting, which cost the store owners as much as $100,000 a year. Since, unlike at many more expensive stores in New York City, customers had direct access to merchandise at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, customers frequently practiced shoplifting there. Some customers even took shoplifting a step further, using the stores as a training ground to pass the practice on to the next generation. Anne Haicken, who worked at Ohrbach’s for several years, remembered years later her surprise that she had once caught a mother teaching her children how to shoplift.19

Managers at both stores sought to control this practice as best they could, with little success. While the hundreds of employees at each store could have been extremely useful in helping to catch shoplifters, they were, in many ways, caught between the customers and the store managers. On the one hand, not only were department store workers members of the same class as most of the stores’ customers, but they also shared ethnic and neighborhood ties to the customers. They, like the customers, were primarily Jewish-American and Italian-American women. Many of these workers also lived in the same immigrant communities as did the customers (most of the store workers, at least at Ohrbach’s, were the children of immigrants rather than immigrants
themselves). On the other hand, part of their job was to catch shoplifters, and the extensive network of informants and detectives at both stores ensured that any store workers who did take part in shoplifting, even to the point of allowing customers to get away with it, might well get caught themselves.\textsuperscript{20}

Since most store workers were of limited help in preventing shoplifting, managers turned to other methods. For the most part, they relied heavily on the store security forces to prevent shoplifting. In addition, managers at the Klein’s store hung huge posters on the interior walls of the store, warning that “Dishonesty Means Prison” and that prison meant “disgrace to your family” in five different languages. There is some disagreement, however, about how regularly these threats were carried out. Klein’s supporters claimed that “the few who disregard these formalities and get caught [shoplifting] usually end up in the ‘crying room,’ . . . [where] he listens to their excuses,” and often allowed them to go free. One dissatisfied employee at Klein’s, however, wrote that “it is well known that Mr. Klein prosecutes [shoplifters] to the bitter end,” unlike department store managers who catered to wealthier people.\textsuperscript{21}

If workers were little help in preventing shoplifting, they were more helpful in other aspects of customer control. In particular, store workers reportedly made sure that the boundaries of race were preserved at these stores. Despite the lack of de jure segregation, Klein’s and Ohrbach’s catered strictly to white working-class people, and store workers were responsible for guarding this status quo. A worker at one of these stores told Communist party leader Benjamin Davis that managers at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s encouraged employees to “insult Negro patrons so that they won’t come back again,” and there is no record of workers resisting these instructions.\textsuperscript{22}

Managers at these stores had to balance out these attempts to control customers with attempts to encourage customers (at least white customers) to make purchases in the stores. Here, too, workers played a key role. The profit margins at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s did not allow managers at either store to resort to the sorts of extravagant and ornate methods of creating desire which have dominated department store historiography. In fact, both Klein and Ohrbach expressed tremendous disdain for such tactics. Ohrbach dismissed the fancy displays of the upscale stores as “fanfare and circus methods” of stimulating customer interest, and Klein agreed, joking in one interview that “a customer can’t take a window home with her.” Neither offered extensive services or even advertised in newspapers, relying instead on word of mouth as well as the prominence of their location to attract potential customers. At downscale stores like Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, where low overhead was key to the businesses’ survival, managers simply could not afford to use any more extravagant methods.\textsuperscript{23}
Downscale store managers’ refusal to resort to expensive methods of attracting customers made the workers employed in these stores—matrons and cashiers as well as sales workers—almost the sole means of communication between managers and customers. Their work required few skills, and almost no training, but impeccable appearance and behavior. As a result, in downscale stores, despite the informal and inexpensive settings, managers nonetheless had to carefully control their workforce. In order to do so, managers at these stores carefully selected workers of a particular age, race, ethnicity, and gender; workers were young, almost exclusively white, and mostly female. At both Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, managers also hired mostly Jewish workers, with a few Italian workers as well, perhaps to appeal to the communities they viewed as their most important customers. As in almost all other department stores in New York City at the time, African American workers in these stores held only highly subservient jobs: the only recorded case of an African American worker at either store is at Klein’s, where a matron in the fitting room, Julia Jacobs, was African American.

Managers also had strict rules about other aspects of workers’ appearance. Managers at some stores refused to employ “stout girls,” for instance. Ohrbach took into account such things as “the appearance of nails, neatness of clothing, [and] general good taste shown by grooming,” as well as general physical fitness, when hiring store workers. Store managers also controlled workers’ appearance by carefully regulating the clothing which they allowed workers to wear. A 1929 *Journal of Retailing* study of New York City metropolitan stores found that managers of 19 out of 22 stores allowed workers to wear only dark blue or black clothing, and found that “all stores take for granted that long sleeves must be worn” with only “moderate or inconspicuous” trimmings.

Although managers found hiring practices helpful in regulating employee appearance and behavior, they supplemented these practices through heavy employer supervision. In Nathan Ohrbach’s 1935 *Getting Ahead in Retailing*, he described his own system for personally supervising his workers, noting that he spent “a good part of my time walking through the store . . . to hear how our floor people talk to our customers and what they say. Is that salesgirl trying to convince a customer that an obviously poorly fitting dress ‘is simply divine’? Is this salesgirl talking to a fellow worker while a customer is being neglected . . . Is still another salesgirl showing signs of becoming impatient and possibly discourteous?” With this level of supervision, store owners were keenly aware of what their employees were doing, making these stores intimidating and uncomfortable places to work.

While close supervision had always been an unpleasant part of working in
these stores, before the Depression began there were also important advantages to working in department stores. This was particularly true when these jobs were compared to the other jobs open to working-class women in New York City, such as those in the garment factories. The most obvious advantage of retail work was that the work was less physically strenuous and less dangerous. In addition, wages tended to vary less over the course of a year than did most factory jobs open to women, although workers often made less money in the stores than they would make in a factory. Workers also tended to have to work fewer hours in the stores than in factories; especially before the Depression, many retail workers throughout the country worked only eight hours a day, years before the eight-hour day became the standard working day in the rest of the country. And in the 1920s, at another 14th Street department store, Hearn’s, managers found that opening the store a half-hour later and allowing workers to work fewer than eight hours a day actually benefited sales, in that the more contented workers were better at handling customers.

Whatever advantages retailers offered potential employees in the 1920s, however, were severely curtailed by the Great Depression. The Depression meant a sharp decrease in wages. This was especially a problem at stores like Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, where managers had historically offered lower wages and required longer hours than in many of the more upscale stores. Stella Ormsby, a Klein’s worker hired in 1932, wrote a letter to The New Republic in which she claimed that “the girls whom [Klein] had [recently] displaced were receiving ten dollars per week and they were all discharged in favor of the new group who were getting only eight.” According to Ormsby, a still later group of workers made only seven dollars a week. The result of these sorts of cuts was that, in New York City over the course of the first half of the 1930s, most sales workers experienced a 50 percent drop in wages.

Department store workers also worked longer hours during the Depression. While historian Susan Porter Benson suggests a somewhat mixed picture on a national scale, she also observes that, in response to the Depression, many downtown stores stayed open later, increasing working hours. These long hours were a major concern of workers at both Klein’s and Ohrbach’s. At Klein’s, Ormsby wrote, she was expected to work a 57-hour week, from “nine-thirty in the morning until seven in the evening, including Saturday.” While the Ohrbach’s store did not open until 9:45 A.M., workers at both stores worked six days a week throughout the early 1930s, and one of the first strike demands at Ohrbach’s was for the forty-hour week.

In addition to complaints over wages and hours, many workers found the store environment cramped, loud, and unsanitary. Ormsby describes “the
basement,” the heart of Klein’s operation, as “a long, winding, angular affair . . . low-ceilinged and without windows . . . I walk many miles a day in performing my job [adjusting customer’s dresses] and what with . . . the milling crowds, the foul [unventilated] air and the noise and the bawlings out from my supervisors, I find myself at the end of the day in a state of utter exhaustion.” A photograph of Klein’s from the early 1940s backs up at least part of Ormsby’s descriptions; the ceiling hung only a few feet above women’s heads, and huge metal pipes hung down below the ceiling.

Even before they began forming unions, workers had at least one powerful weapon at their disposal to fight these sorts of working conditions: they could quit. Up until the Depression began, the most dissatisfied workers simply left the store. Both Klein and Ohrbach—and, to a lesser extent, managers at higher-priced stores as well—found that store workers had extremely high turnover rates. One study done in 1929 discovered that the average annual turnover rate in New York City retail stores was approximately 137 percent—that is, more workers left the average New York City store in a single year than the total number of store employees. Once the Depression began, however, workers tended to stay longer at their jobs, sharply reducing the turnover numbers; and by 1936 a second study indicated that the rate of turnover had dropped to somewhere closer to 25–35 percent. While this drop is significant, it probably tells us little about turnover at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s. Due to the unusually low pay and poor working conditions at these stores, those few workers at downscale stores who chose to make retailing a career did so primarily in upscale stores, where working conditions, wages, and hours were all somewhat better.

In response to the constant possibility of workers quitting in search of new jobs, managers at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s set up modest benefit programs within the stores. Klein’s managers offered employees yearly bonuses at Christmas time, and discounts on store merchandise, as well as bonuses for weddings (perhaps hoping that workers would not leave the stores after getting married). Managers at Ohrbach’s provided employees with paid vacations, a store nurse’s office, and, beginning in the early 1930s, a profit-sharing program as well.

Many workers later claimed that these perks were much more rhetoric than reality. While on strike, a number of workers claimed that the services were definitely not worth the “fifteen cents and twenty cents taken from their salaries” to pay for these bonuses. One described the nurse’s office at Ohrbach’s: “if they got sick . . . they were given a pass and allowed to go up to a room to lie down. At the end of a half hour the nurse would tell them acidly that the half hour had passed and they should go back to their work.” In addition,
these workers claimed that managers seldom let workers take advantage of Ohrbach's much-touted free vacations. A striker told a columnist for the Daily Worker that “the company, just before vacation time, would lay a girl off. They could then say she had not been working a full two years for them,” and therefore not give her a free vacation.34

With managers struggling to control both workers and customers, Klein's and Ohrbach's were sites of constant struggle during the Great Depression. Dissatisfied workers continued to quit the store, and customers continued to shoplift, and there was little managers could do to prevent either. Like the struggles taking place in the streets outside the stores, the struggles within the stores set the stage for the strikes of 1934–35. In fact, store managers’ attempts to control the actions of store workers led directly into the Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strikes of 1934–35.

The Strikes Begin

Like many of the strikes of 1934, the Klein's-Ohrbach’s were in many ways a response to the New Deal. The explicit support the federal government gave unions under the first New Deal meant that workers increasingly turned to unions as the solution. The workers at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s had a particular challenge here. Besides the extremely corrupt Retail Clerks International Protection Association (RCIPA), no unions affiliated with the AFL had a charter to organize retail workers. And even the RCIPA had never made any serious headway into department stores, where the employees were mostly women; instead the RCIPA restricted its efforts to grocery stores. Those workers who wished to join a union had to settle for a union not affiliated with the AFL, one that would organize white-collar women workers. This led directly to the rise of Communists within the department store unions.

As managers at Klein's and Ohrbach's cut workers’ salaries and extended the number of working hours, the federal government offered unionization as a way to solve workers’ problems with minimum disruption. The groundbreaking National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) of 1933 was primarily intended to bolster the economy by allowing businesses to set up self-regulatory agencies and thereby limit competition and end price wars. At the same time, one of the requirements of these self-regulatory agencies was that they all include a rule that “employees shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively . . . and shall be free from the interference, restraint, or coercion of employers” in forming unions.35
Despite pro-union language like this, many retail executives enthusiastically supported the NIRA, and with good reason. As Business Week described it, the first year of the NIRA meant national “inflation . . . living minimum wages, and . . . trade practice rules,” all of which suggested the possibility for higher prices. Even the possibility that store managers might raise prices as a result of the NIRA meant that customers began to buy more, trying to get their purchases in before prices went up. For store managers, therefore, “industrial recovery looked like a fait accompli” after the passage of the NIRA.36

Like these managers, union organizers greatly benefited from the NIRA. In 1933 and 1934, a national strike wave took place, the first major strike wave since 1919. In the last six months of 1933, in fact, there were more strikes than there had been in any full year since 1921. More amazing than the sheer numbers was the workers’ militancy; many of the larger strikes often developed into violent battles. Throughout the country, from Minneapolis and Toledo to San Francisco and the textile factory towns in the southern states, workers engaged in bitter and often violent fights to demand the right to form unions.37

Despite this national strike wave, most union organizers refused to organize department store workers, many of whom were women. The AFL, which contained by far the largest and most powerful unions in the country, had several unions with women members, but AFL leaders saw organizing women workers primarily as a way to support men's wages. Labor historian Alice Kessler-Harris notes that “articles [in the AFL press] that began with pleas that women stay out of the work force concluded with equally impassioned pleas to organize those who were already in it.” The key to labor’s success, in the view of AFL organizers, was to maintain the family wage, a wage earned by the male breadwinner. The sole worker of any importance, in the view of AFL organizers, was therefore the head of household, who was invariably assumed to be a man. As a result, while the AFL did not generally oppose women joining unions, many AFL organizers viewed working women as supplemental to working men, rather than workers in their own right.38

For workers in Ohrbach’s and Klein’s the AFL’s gender analysis collapsed on a number of different grounds. Most of these workers were young women, and therefore defined out of the scope of the AFL’s primary interest. At the same time, due to the high unemployment levels of the early Depression, these workers were sometimes the sole wage earners for their families. Within the department stores, it was very often young women, not male patriarchs, who were the earners of the family’s only wage, however inadequate that wage was.39
To a great extent, Communist-led unions shared the AFL’s gender analysis in the early 1930s. In her masterful study *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, historian Elizabeth Faue argues that during the 1930s American Communists were united with other leftists and liberals around a gendered narrative in which this male working class struggled against the weak, fat, and—in Faue’s analysis—less masculine ruling class. There is plenty of evidence for Faue’s claims in the literature produced by the Communist-led Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), which strongly emphasized the masculinity of the targeted membership. Illustrations in TUUL pamphlets, for example, frequently featured large and muscular men as the sole representatives of the working class.40

Communists had a number of different ways available to discuss women’s role in class struggle, many of them relatively conservative. Women served, for instance, as powerful symbols of workers’ poverty and hardship in Communist literature. One contributor to *Working Woman* identified women as the true victims of the Great Depression. “The wife of the unemployed gets the worst of it. She is the one to answer her children’s cry for bread. She has got to face the landlord. All the misery of the shortage, of keeping the family from starvation in time of unemployment falls heaviest on the housewife.” Other contributors to *Working Woman* discussed women in a different light, as helpmates to radical working men. During the Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strikes, for instance, articles in *Working Woman*, the CP women’s newspaper, addressed issues such as how a working woman could dress without spending much money, what sorts of foods would most efficiently feed her family, and the importance of women’s auxiliaries during strikes of male workers. Even this understanding of working-class women as home-based revolutionary helpmates could allow women a degree of agency that the family wage did not. As part of this concept of the revolutionary helpmate, *Working Woman* devoted a number of articles to more overtly political issues centered on the home. The paper’s editors printed a number of articles on the proper methods of birth control, for example. More importantly, the paper repeatedly addressed the food boycotts in New York City during the early 1930s, boycotts which were led by women.41

All of these discussions of women’s role in class struggle were in some ways similar to the role of women in the AFL’s notion of the family wage. All, for instance, depicted the primary duties of working-class women as being within the home, dealing with issues of consumption and reproduction, despite the key role labor played in women’s lives in this era. As a result, many of these articles used women to reaffirm men’s role as the head of Communist households.
The editors of *Working Woman* moved beyond these relatively conservative gender divisions by adding extensive coverage of women's own struggles within the workplace. Contributors constantly discussed women who were involved in the labor movement, and they portrayed women strikers not only as newsworthy and admirable, but also as militant fighters for workers' rights, much like male strikers were. *Working Woman* also included extensive coverage on women strikers, coverage that was mixed in among the recipes and fashion tips and the use of miserable women as symbols for the oppressed. The Communists may have considered women helpmates and victims, but unlike the AFL, Communists also made a point to identify women as fundamental agents in the class struggle. The editors of and contributors to *Working Woman*, and presumably many of the Communists who read it, never successfully resolved this tension. They seem instead to have accepted the contradiction, between victims and actors, symbols and agents, as a fundamental part of their understanding of women.42

Like other Communists, the TUUL emphasized the importance of men's activism while nonetheless recognizing the need to organize women workers. In the organization's mission statement, TUUL leaders reminded their readers that “women workers play an increasingly important role in American industry . . . [they] are subjected to the fierce speed-up of capitalist rationalization, and are super-exploited.” In the same mission statement, the TUUL attacked “the trade union leaders [who] have typically failed to make a fight for the women workers, barring them from the unions and discriminating against them in industry” and promised that the TUUL would fight for the rights of these women workers.43

TUUL leaders therefore set up the Office Workers Union (OWU), the union which initially organized department store workers in New York City. This union was created primarily to organize office workers, another group of white-collar workers largely made up of women. Its commitment to women workers was further signified by the fact that the union included several women in leadership positions. Gertrude Lane, who was the highest-ranking union official, and Clarina Michelson, one of the two full-time OWU organizers, were both women, and both won a great deal of respect from the workers whom they organized. In part, this was because both Lane and Michelson were somewhat older than the other union members and leaders, many of whom were only in their teens. Ruth Pinkson, the nineteen-year-old National Organizer of the OWU at the time, later described Michelson as having a “motherly” relationship with the teenagers whom Michelson helped to organize. The seniority and competence of Michelson and Lane, at least according to
Pinkson, made both men and women in the OWU far more aware of women’s important role in labor struggles.\textsuperscript{44}

The OWU had a strong presence in Union Square in the early 1930s. OWU members often participated in the May Day parades and other protests which, as the OWU press described them, “choked Union Square and all the streets surrounding the Square.” In addition, during these parades, the OWU newspaper claimed, “a continuous chant rose from the ranks, ‘White collar workers join our ranks! White collar workers join our ranks!’”\textsuperscript{45}

In 1934, due either to the OWU’s presence in Union Square or simply to the absence of any alternative, workers at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s went to the OWU for assistance in creating a union. The OWU agreed to provide support, and Clarina Michelson was assigned full-time as an organizer of department store workers. Michelson, an openly Communist member of an upper-class family from Massachusetts, and the wife of fellow TUUL organizer Andrew Overgaard, was in some ways a surprising choice to lead a union of department store workers. Unlike the women working and shopping in Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, Michelson was not from an immigrant community, and—except for her work as a union organizer—she had apparently never held a job. Despite this very different background from the workers she organized, Michelson had some important strengths. She was a highly skilled and experienced organizer by 1934, having been involved in radical politics ever since the campaign to free Sacco and Vanzetti. She also had significant experience organizing unions, having had numerous successes in TUUL campaigns in the southern coal-mining industry. Finally, she had some important connections for the union, among them her participation as the Recording Secretary of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR), a Communist group that helped lead the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign, a movement to get African American workers jobs in stores where they made purchases. Over the next five years, during which she continued to lead New York City’s department store unions, Michelson would prove herself a major asset for the unions.\textsuperscript{46}

These workers’ decision to join a union, especially one under Communist leadership, greatly upset their employers. Despite their avowed support for the NIRA, managers at both stores took a strong anti-union stance, and managers at Klein’s went so far as to fire union workers in the winter of 1934, openly defying the NIRA. In an interview with \textit{Newsweek} in December 1934, Samuel Klein professed his bewilderment that anyone would have the right to tell him whom to fire and whom not to fire: “My store’s business always falls off at Christmas time . . . About Dec. 1 each year I have to lay off a few
employees. This year we let only 87 go, against 300 last year and 250 in 1932. Then the other day I got a “summons” from the NRA (National Recovery Administration, the agency which was responsible for seeing that the NIRA codes were followed). 47

The “dimple-cheeked proprietor,” as he is referred to in this article, failed to mention that nearly all of the 87 employees he laid off in 1934 were members of the newly formed Klein’s branch of the Office Workers Union. He also failed to mention that during that same month, December 1934, workers under OWU leadership had already gone on strike against Ohrbach’s, just a few doors away from Klein’s. Ohrbach’s workers, also encouraged by the NIRA’s official support for the rights of labor, were demanding a pay raise, a forty-hour work week, and an end to discrimination for union activity. It did not take any more encouragement than the firings to get Klein’s workers to join Ohrbach’s workers on the picket line. 48

The strike was a very small one—only 200 of the 2600 workers employed at the two stores joined picket lines in 1934–35. With workers struggling to support families on their already meager wages, it was a difficult decision to join the picket line, and to make matters even more discouraging, Ohrbach’s managers obtained an anti-picketing injunction from the state supreme court, which meant that being on the picket line was breaking the law. But despite all the obstacles they faced, the tiny number of strikers were determined to lay claim to the stores and to Union Square, to create a broad coalition of supporters, and to effectively demonstrate that retail workers could force managers to back down. 49

Monkey Business

When Leane Zugsmith described a fictionalized version of the Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strikes in her 1936 novel A Time to Remember, she chose to have the initial call for a strike take place in a fictionalized setting. Aline, a young woman worker who had never been part of a union before, let alone a strike, is about to go onstage during a store-sponsored play performed by store employees. Nervous at performing and even more worried that she and her fellow workers had voted the night before to go on strike, Aline stops just before going onstage, returns to an empty dressing room, retrieves a handful or two of strike leaflets, and then returns to stage “half-smiling, her face feverish beneath a mask of grease paint . . . the leaflets pressed against her breast . . . like a shield.” Aline then proceeds to toss the leaflets out over the audience and
make a speech about the strike which will begin the next day. This section of *A Time to Remember* appears to be entirely fictional; no evidence exists that plays were even performed at either of these two stores.\(^5^0\)

Zugsmith's hijacked theater works well as a metaphor to describe the strikers' use of a set of tactics that union leaders nicknamed "monkey business." Monkey business was an attempt to wrest control of the department store and its surroundings from the store managers. In many ways store employees continued performing as they had while working within the stores; they certainly continued to focus on communication with customers, a factor which had been so important to the stores' daily functioning. Only, as with Aline standing on the employer's stage while distributing strike leaflets, during monkey business actions the Klein's-Ohrbach's strikers no longer worked to communicate with customers for their employer's ends. During the strike, they instead worked to communicate with customers for their own ends, disrupting managerial control over both stores and square alike in the process.\(^5^1\)

If they were to disrupt managers' control over the stores and the square, workers had to find ways to get support from people not directly involved in the strike. By far the most important group of allies the strikers recruited were the people they called upon as "white-collar workers." Again and again in the strike literature, one sees reference to the label of white-collar work and white-collar workers. Ruth Pinkson remembered these strikes as the "first big white-collar strikes in New York City," and suggested that the strikes were seen by many white-collar workers as a test case. In her novel Zugsmith referred to Aline's discovery "that a victory for them would be a victory for workers in all department stores, for all white-collar workers, for the labor movement as a whole." And Arnold Honig, a Klein's striker, suggested that the strikes proved that even white-collar workers could be "good, militant fighters who can dose a backward boss with a good assortment of hell-fire."\(^5^2\)

The category of "white-collar workers," which these workers used so successfully to recruit allies, gave the strikers a broad base of support. Particularly during the 1930s, people who might have thought of themselves as members of the middle class instead defined themselves as white-collar workers. Edward Dahlberg, a writer who joined the Klein's-Ohrbach's picket line, suggested that this new consciousness was a direct result of the Depression:

> The college diploma was the exchange currency in the student's mind . . . for a ritzy law office and a motor car . . . Marriage for the department store girl, being another economic diploma, was thought of in terms of leisure and West End Avenue, and the Holy Grail for the writer was the
boulevards of Paris . . . but with vast unemployment, evictions, empty stomachs, [and] the wholesale slashing of wages these sleepy, moving picture wishes lost for the wishes whatever little reality they once had.

The Depression, in Dahlberg's eyes, had destroyed the privileges which allowed certain workers to think of themselves as anything besides workers. As a result, many who had once thought of themselves as middle class found it “impossible and suicidal . . . to stand aloof,” and instead decided to organize, to begin to think of themselves as part of the working class. By using the term “white collar worker” to describe themselves, department store workers implicitly called upon these workers to support them. In response, office workers, actors, chemists, doctors, and writers all joined the fight in support of the workers at Klein's and Ohrbach's. For a moment, at least, these people rejected the idea of the middle class, instead throwing in their lot with the strikers.53

These white-collar workers who emerged as strike supporters were critical to the tiny strikes on Union Square. Not only did they swell the numbers of strikers; they also played active roles in creating tactics, including monkey business. The monkey business committee, described in the strike records as a “very small, very secret committee to work out stunts,” was not made up of only strikers. Other OWU members and organizers from outside the department store industry were also committee members, Clarina Michelson and Ruth Pinkson (at the time an office worker as well as an OWU organizer) among them.54

In addition, due to the OWU’s close association with the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians (FAECT), another TUUL affiliate, workers had access to technical knowledge and tools that rivaled store managers’ own technical advisers. The strikers’ technical abilities, however, were put to very different ends. At another point, for example, a chemist who was a member of the FAECT provided the employees with a box of white mice. The employees took the box into Klein’s and let the mice run free, thus “frightening women shoppers who entered the store in ignorance of the fact that a strike is in progress there,” as the Daily Worker put it. Other monkey business actions required more technical abilities. At one point, a strike supporter poured a substance into the elevator motor in the Ohrbach’s store which caused an elevator to get stuck between floors. On these occasions, as Pinkson recalled, “people started to get afraid to go into the store, because they didn’t know what [the screaming] was all about.”55

While many monkey business actions were derived from technical abilities, very simple actions could also be extremely effective. Clarina Michelson
recalled one incident when strikers at Ohrbach’s gave children of shoppers entering the store balloons reading “Don’t Buy At Ohrbach’s!” “When the chil-
dren would go into the store, the managers would have to run up and take the
balloons away,” Michelson remembered. The managers frequently caused the
children to get upset, leading to loud and often disruptive arguments between
store managers and the children’s parents.56

Actions like these, which created disruption inside the store, were very
powerful. First, of course, they slowed down purchases, and made customers
uneasy about shopping in the stores. In addition, these actions also made
the managers’ job of controlling customers more difficult. As already
suggested, this control was always somewhat tenuous. By adding mice,
elevator malfunctions, and other disturbances, the workers were able to lessen
this control still further, and thereby give managers an additional reason to
settle the strike.

Strikers were also able to take advantage of the struggles outside the store,
the struggles in Union Square. Since signs visible from Union Square were a
central part of managers’ efforts to attract customers, the strikers made Union
Square an essential part of the strike, beginning with attacks on the exteriors of
the store buildings, which were important tools for store owners to communi-
cate with the public. Ruth Pinkson remembered one such incident, which, like
many of the actions within the stores, required the aid of FAECT members to
make it work:

We cut out a sign from cardboard, saying “STRIKE—DON’T ENTER!”
. . . We had a base, some kind of metal base, and we poured in a chemi-
cal and cut out the words, but we had to put that up against the window.
. . . We had to work quickly . . . so one of the young men in the union
and myself were standing by the window, and we were hugging and
kissing, and I pressed it against the window. A cop walked by, but . . . he
just saw a young couple kissing, so he didn’t bother [us]. . . .

It didn’t cut through immediately. But the next morning . . . it was
etched in, the chemical had etched [the slogan] into the window. [Store
managers] were panicked. . . . A couple of us had gotten there early, to
see what effect it would have, and [managers] didn’t know what to do,
so they got cardboard [and covered the sign], but it kept people out.
People coming out of the subway were confronted with the sign.

If managers at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s could use signs to make the exterior of
the building serve their purposes, so could the strikers. With the help of their
white-collar allies, the strikers here transformed a store building itself into a strike weapon.  

Strikers also combated managers’ billboards by literally going into the square. They did so first by staging weekly rallies. Every Saturday—the busiest shopping day at the stores—became an occasion for a mass strike rally in Union Square, and each rally had a particular theme. The strikers held Catholic Day, Jewish Day, Writers’ Day, Theatrical Day, and a number of other different theme protests, when a different community was supposed to come to the square in support of the strikers. Radical novelists like James T. Farrell, the author of the Studs Lonigan trilogy, and Nathanael West, author of *Day of the Locust* and *Miss Lonelyhearts*, joined Leane Zugsmith and Edward Dahlberg on the picket line for Writer’s Day, and all were arrested for breaking the anti-picketing injunction.

The strikers also made use of the importance of Union Square to other protests. Participants in unemployment demonstrations, for instance, mixed freely with the strikers, often joining the picket line after their own demonstrations. As a result, Pinkson claimed that at least five young women on the picket line met their future husbands during the strike, because so many men came over to offer their support to the strikers. Picketers responded to this support by taking part in other left-wing activities centered on Union Square, at one point carrying signs in celebration of the eleventh anniversary of the *Daily Worker*.

Store managers deployed police as a response to these sorts of rallies. Police frequently arrested strikers and their supporters, often forcefully. However, unlike in most strikes, here police violence had strong negative effects on employers’ businesses. Zugsmith, who had been on the picket line on at least one day when police had made arrests, described the fighting which took place on the picket line: “The policemen had driven their horses into the swarm of pickets and passers-by on the sidewalk. Fanny’s leg had been broken. But . . . patrons, sickened by the sight of blood, thrown into panic by the plunging horses and swinging nightsticks, had not made their purchases . . . that day.” Police violence might terrify the strikers; it might make the strike into a bloody and very one-sided battle; but it also scared away customers. This violence was therefore a two-edged sword in the battle for control over Union Square and the potential customers within the square.

Perhaps the most pointed attempt on the strikers’ part to control Union Square was their use of the statues. At the time there were two major statues in Union Square, one of Lafayette and one of Washington. The statue of Washington stood near the stores, on horseback, with its arm outstretched.
Early one morning the strikers took one of their strike posters, reading “Don’t Buy At Ohrbach’s,” and placed it on the Washington statue’s outstretched arm. By doing so, the strikers made Washington, the symbol of freedom and of Americanism, a representative for the strike, at least until the sign was removed later that day.61

For the five months of the strike, from December 1934 through April 1935, the Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strikers became an intrinsic part of daily life in Union Square. The mass protests of the strike became so much a part of Union Square’s atmosphere that at least one painter trying to capture the essence of life in Union Square included in the background picketers in front of the stores.62

The strikes also had effects far beyond Union Square and the stores; indeed, they were felt throughout New York City. For one thing, the numerous protests in Union Square—and the repeated and brutal reaction by police to the protests—resulted in the regular disruption of traffic throughout the area. The strikes also led to the temporary cancellation of the off-Broadway play, the Shores of Cattaro. Actors were also included in the strikers’ call for support from white-collar workers, and the cast of The Shores of Cattaro was strongly supportive of the strikers. One day, the entire cast came down to the picket line, only to be immediately arrested for breaking the anti-picketing injunction. According to one source, when the announcement was made at the theater that night that the play was canceled because the entire cast was in jail for breaking the injunction, the audience burst into applause.63

Allies played a critical role in the strikers’ campaign to make the strike a city-wide issue. At one meeting held at a high school near the stores, both playwright Lillian Hellman and strip-dancer Gypsy Rose Lee addressed the striking workers. The strikers rather optimistically believed that the more celebrities they could attract, the more press coverage they would receive. As it turned out, the press—hardly anxious to offend an advertising bloc as important as the retail industry—all but ignored these two strikes, and frequently belittled the strikers when it did cover their actions.64

The strikers also determined to win press coverage, disrupt managerial control, and make the strike a city-wide event by challenging Ohrbach and Klein directly when the store owners were away from the stores and the square. At one point, for example, “Mr. Ohrbach, escorting a young lady into the Astor Hotel at about 11:30 at night, was met by a parade of strikers and sympathizers over 200 strong that was marching down Broadway.” Zugsmith also reports in her fictionalized account that picketers went to one of the retailers’ homes, though there is no evidence to support this claim.65
The most powerful action taken during the strike, one of the few that did win extensive press coverage, was another attack against Nathan Ohrbach’s non-business life, particularly against his charity activities. At the time of the strike, Ohrbach, who had given a great deal of money to Brooklyn Hospital, was on the hospital’s board of trustees. As a trustee, he was required to attend certain charity events, including a large banquet in the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, to which New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia was also invited. Some of the senior doctors for whom the dinner was being thrown considered themselves white-collar workers and, as such, strongly sympathized with the strikers. These doctors offered to get tickets to the event for a number of strikers. The strikers, knowing both that the mayor would be there and that the entire event would be broadcast on live radio, gladly accepted the offer.

In the strikers’ decision to confront Ohrbach at the Waldorf-Astoria that night, we therefore have Zugsmith’s theatrical metaphor played out for high stakes. Ohrbach had a forum with a large audience of radio listeners, and had helped to create a drama to demonstrate, among other things, his role as a great philanthropist in supporting the hospital. And strikers and their supporters were ready to steal the forum, to instead send their own message, that Ohrbach was an exploiter of workers.

On the night of the banquet, dressed in their finest evening clothes, strikers surreptitiously entered the Waldorf-Astoria ballroom. And, as LaGuardia began to speak of the important work done by Ohrbach and by the doctors themselves, one of the strikers spoke up from the balcony. “I want to introduce myself. I am an Ohrbach striker,” she said. By the time hotel security guards realized that she was chained to the balcony, another woman striker spoke up, also from the balcony: “Nathan Ohrbach may give thousands to charity, but he doesn’t pay his workers a living wage.” Security guards rushed over, only to find out that she, too, had chained herself to the balcony. The security guards immediately sent for hacksaws. As the audience struggled to make sense of the disruption, another striker, also in the balcony, took handfuls of flyers about the strike and tossed them out over the audience, to the amazement of all concerned. According to the Times, LaGuardia continued to speak, although without much success in being heard, since both workers also continued speaking.

In the Waldorf that night, the strikers made their message heard. They also successfully disrupted Ohrbach’s drama on live radio. The action was a stunning success, in some ways an even greater success than workers had hoped. At the time, workers thought that the two strikers inside the hall would receive
up to six months in jail for their actions; it was not until later that night that
the rather bewildered hotel managers, apparently not knowing exactly what
else to do with them, freed both strikers after giving them a warning never to
return to the Waldorf-Astoria again. In a slightly ironic twist, the lawyer who
had arranged for the anti-picketing injunction at Ohrbach’s gave the two work-
ers cab fare to get home, perhaps acting out of paternalistic motives.70

The end result of the actions at the Waldorf-Astoria was an outpouring of
press coverage the next day. Not all or even most of the coverage was favorable;
the New York Times, for example, described the workers as “hecklers” who had
maliciously disrupted a charitable event. Perhaps not surprisingly, only the
Daily Worker portrayed the strikers in a positive light, as “comely pickets” who
had made their exploitation known to the entire city through radio.71

Despite its tone, the press coverage which resulted from this event turned
the tide of the strike. Klein and Ohrbach, now acutely aware that their busi-
ness and personal lives would be disrupted until they agreed to settle, finally
backed down. Managers at both stores agreed to hire back the strikers in late
February and early March 1935, much to the strikers’ delight. As Zugsmith
described strike headquarters on the day of the announcement, in noticeably
gendered terms:

The floor quakes under their stamping feet. The ear drums recoil at the
roar of rejoicing. Peck Hirschberg rushes outside to tell the pickets and
call them off. Duke prances like a bear on his hind legs, forcing May
Lundstrom to curvet with him. Mrs. Bauer’s stumpy frame is shaken by
shuddering sobs and her little girl, hanging onto her skirt, looks up with
a puckered face, ready to cry with her mother. With a kind of ferocity,
Manny Lorch and Muriel Cline hug each other, their eyes glazed with
joy.72

As some were quick to point out when Zugsmith’s novel appeared in print,
the workers’ victory was far more limited than Zugsmith acknowledged in
A Time to Remember. At Klein’s, workers got back pay and reinstatement; at
Ohrbach’s, strikers did not receive the raise they had demanded, although they
did receive a verbal contract guaranteeing a decrease in hours. Neither Klein
nor Ohrbach agreed to recognize the Office Workers Union as the workers’
bargaining agent.73

Store managers proved unwilling to live up to even those demands to
which they had agreed. As early as April 1935, at a leaflet distribution
in Klein’s, union organizers encountered what they called “the old pre-
strike difficulties.” As organizers attempted to distribute leaflets outside the employees’ exit, store executives positioned themselves in front of the exit, and, as the OWU paper described it, “suggestively ‘eyed’ the outgoing workers” to see if any of them accepted flyers. Policemen were also present, ostensibly to make sure that no littering took place. In addition, managers at both stores began steadily laying off workers who had participated in the strike. The workers at Klein’s, without a strike fund, having survived for five months with no income during some of the worst years of the Great Depression, decided not to return to the picket line, instead choosing to look for work elsewhere. Most workers at Ohrbach’s followed their example, except for about twenty workers, who returned to the picket line again in 1936. As discussed in the next chapter, they eventually achieved a controversial and somewhat unsatisfactory settlement.74

If in many respects the Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strikes were defeats for workers at both stores, the strikes were nonetheless important victories for the union. During these strikes, the strikers had forced two major retailers to submit to negotiations, even if managers in the end got the best of the negotiations. As a result of this victory, RCIPA organizers were finally forced to acknowledge that department store workers could be organized, and in 1935, just after the strikes, RCIPA and OWU organizers met for the first time. That year the OWU joined forces with the leaders of the RCIPA. By the end of 1935 the victories at Ohrbach’s and Klein’s, fleeting though they were for many strike participants, had made it possible for New York City’s department store union, consisting primarily of workers at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, with only a handful of members in other stores around the city, to become Local 1250 of the RCIPA.75

In merging with the RCIPA, the OWU leaders took a serious risk. The East Coast branch of the RCIPA was under the leadership of a man named Roy Denise, who had a long-standing practice of giving RCIPA charters to company unions. Perhaps not coincidentally, Denise was paid on a commission basis, receiving a bonus for every new member of the union as well as every charter.76 With corrupt practices like these commonplace in the RCIPA, some OWU organizers were worried about the merger from the very beginning. “They were crooks. And we knew that they were,” one OWU organizer said some years later. Still, at least for the moment, the OWU leaders agreed to the alliance. Michelson later stated that, at the very least, she believed that being affiliated with the AFL would bring them some sort of legitimacy within the labor movement and the city at large, and perhaps make department store managers more willing to sign contracts. In this belief, Michelson was gravely mistaken.77
Chapter 1

Conclusion

The Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strikes demonstrate the role Communists played in American labor history. The Communist party never contained more than a tiny minority of the working-class people who presumably were its target membership. Yet Communist union organizers, who embraced a more complex notion of women’s role in the labor movement than did the AFL, had a critical role to play during the Great Depression. Without them, the Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strikes would never have taken place, and the union never would have won its first victories, however negligible those victories were for the workers themselves. It is quite possible that the 1930s labor movement would not have so centrally included workers in the retail industry without the radical influence of the Communists in 1934–35.

This does not mean that Communists controlled these strikes, in the sense that some historians of communism argue that Communist party policy was the controlling factor in the unions in which Communists participated. What Communists did, as seen quite vividly during the strikes, was to provide tools for workers to struggle against managers. Communists no doubt played a role in giving the workers the ability to etch signs into the side of the store buildings, and getting workers tickets to the banquet at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. But the Communist party did not force workers to etch a sign into the store window, or control what workers said once they entered the banquet hall.

On the contrary, far from confirming the top-down analysis of Communists’ role in the labor movement, these strikes demonstrate the necessity to examine both American radicalism and American labor in their local contexts. Neither the strikes nor the Communists who led them can be separated from the daily struggles taking place in Union Square, or in the stores. To attempt to perform this separation, to write about communism or the labor movement as though local developments did not play a critical role in the creation of these movements, is in the end an impossible task.

Besides complicating historians’ understanding of communism, the strikers had also demonstrated something else—something more important for their immediate future. Not only could strikes, like those at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, take advantage of larger movements; they could also become part of larger movements. On their own, the Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strikes were minuscule—two hundred workers are easily ignored amidst the far larger strikes of 1934. But the Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strikes did not exist in isolation. Instead, they were part of a larger campaign, led by Communists and their supporters, to reimagine class and reclaim public space. The Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strike became,
for those few weeks in 1934 and 1935, an occasion for yet another challenge to Union Square, and an occasion for creating a vision of the working class that included white-collar workers, ranging from doctors and actors to the low-paid clerks at Klein's and Ohrbach's. As such, it was an important victory for the Communists in more ways than one.

At the same time as the Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strikes represented an important victory for the Communist leaders of New York City’s department store unions, they also exposed a number of weaknesses that union organizers attempted to correct during the next few years. For all the creativity that the strikers had shown, only a small minority of the workers in the two stores had honored the picket lines. Additionally, managers, while they had finally agreed to negotiate, had nonetheless refused to recognize the union. In the end, as we have seen, the strikes were a defeat for the workers in the two stores, and resulted in mass firings in the strikes’ aftermath. Organizers believed their weaknesses stemmed from a lack of legitimacy, which, they felt, allowed store managers, workers, and the press to dismiss the union as nothing more than a radical fringe group. Union leaders attempted to correct this weakness over the next few years, during their disastrous alliance with the RCIPA.