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=1149929
Chapter 3

Stability? 1937–41

Introduction

New York City’s department store unions expanded rapidly throughout the late 1930s, primarily in upscale stores. Between the sit-down strikes of 1937 and the beginning of World War II, managers signed contracts at many of the city’s largest and most famous stores, including both Macy’s and Gimbel’s. These upscale stores would continue to represent the union’s strongest base throughout their history.

The upscale stores presented different challenges from any that union organizers had encountered in their earlier struggles. In the upscale stores on 34th Street, workers with highly diverse educational, racial, ethnic, and geographic backgrounds waited on wealthy white customers. The process of consumption forced workers and customers in these stores into very close and often antagonistic contact; unlike in the downscale stores where customers were at least sometimes quite supportive of unionization efforts, in the upscale stores the union would find customers to be outspoken critics of workers and their unions. Managers, meanwhile, offered workers substantial benefit packages, winning the loyalty of many workers and making organizing a union even more challenging.

If these stores were difficult places to organize, however, they were well worth the effort. The upscale stores were the logical step for a union that now, due to the 1937 sit-downs, had a certain amount of legitimacy. Unlike in the downscale stores where union organizers had been struggling for years against the rapid turnover, many workers in upscale stores viewed their jobs as permanent careers rather than brief stints. These workers tended to stay at their jobs longer, meaning that a union might have a far greater chance of lasting at the upscale stores than at the downscale stores. Additionally, these stores were far better known: managers of Macy’s, for instance, proudly advertised that it was the world’s largest store, and to win a union contract there would be a tremendous demonstration of the union’s power. If the unions could win at these upscale stores, they would have a future.
Additionally, the late 1930s was an ideal time in which to attempt organizing unions in the upscale stores. In these years midtown Manhattan was a tremendously complicated neighborhood. The stores may have dominated a small section of 34th Street, but they were right in the middle of New York’s chaotic garment district; unemployment demonstrations, May Day marches, and strikes all infringed upon the sanctity of the area in the later years of the Depression. These disruptions outside the store made managers’ control over the stores more difficult to maintain, and made their jobs somewhat analogous to the jobs of the managers of the Union Square stores where the union had begun its history. Here, as in Union Square, managers did what they could to insulate the stores against the working-class crowds outside, but union activists were always ready to disrupt these efforts.

Communists again played a key role in the union drive at these stores, and became the leaders of most of the local unions that formed at the upscale department stores. As a result, these unions participated in the Popular Front, as members and organizers alike welcomed Communist authors as guests at union events, sang the spirituals and other folk songs that were sung throughout the Popular Front, and helped raise money for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War.

Non-Communists also took part in the creation of these unions. The local leadership of these unions, though Communists predominated, was politically quite diverse. Additionally, the non-Communists in the national union leadership were critical to the local unions’ successes. Samuel Wolchok, in particular, earned tremendous respect from store managers and other business leaders for his moderate politics and his willingness to compromise with store managers. As war approached, however, this support emboldened Wolchok to seek more control over the affairs of the radical local unions.

Everything that union organizers dealt with between 1937 and 1941—the antagonism between customers and store workers, the cultural and political alliances formed during the Popular Front, and the role of non-Communists like Wolchok in the unions—exploded late in 1941 into a huge strike at Gimbel’s. The largest strike that the unions had led up until this time, the Gimbel’s strike grew out of the conflict between Wolchok and the Communist leaders of the Gimbel’s local. Once the strike began, the Popular Front coalition that had come to be so important to the unions emerged to support them, and workers and customers attacked one another, sometimes literally, in and around the Gimbel’s store.

As the unions extended their power and finally won permanent union contracts at these upscale stores, they demonstrated again the importance of
these unions to American labor history. Again, Communists demonstrated a willingness to work closely with white-collar workers in the retail industry and to encourage these workers, men and women alike, to take the lead in their own struggle. And, again, local union leaders found their power within these unions challenged by store managers and national union leaders alike. The different groups were heading toward a collision, with investigations and charges flying between local leaders, national leaders, store managers, and the government. But before any final confrontation between these different groups could take place, the bombing of Pearl Harbor brought the Depression, and the height of the department store unions’ power, to an end.

The Streets Outside

Union Square had long been a center of radicalism and working-class consumption, but midtown Manhattan, only a mile or so away, was a different neighborhood altogether, and generally a more chaotic and complex one. On West 34th Street, stores designed for wealthy shoppers nestled against garment factories and wholesale merchants, blocks away from the city’s West Side docks. Store managers fought, aided by city officials, to gain some sort of control over the complicated neighborhood outside the stores, but unlike in Union Square, here the battle was not for a public park, but for the behavior of people on streets and sidewalks. Store managers were only a small part of the world of midtown Manhattan, and their control of the streets outside the stores was always tenuous at best. On 34th Street as in Union Square the Communists challenged managerial control of public space before the department store unions entered the picture, raising the constant possibility of a dangerous challenge to managers’ tenuous control of the streets outside.

Along with Fifth Avenue, West 34th Street was one of the prime locations for upscale consumption in New York City. On this one street were Macy’s, Gimbel’s, Oppenheim Collins, McCreery’s, and Saks-34th Street. The sheer size of these stores allowed them to dominate 34th Street to an extent. At the same time, the stores were never isolated. All around the 34th Street shopping district, stretching as far south as 12th Street and as far north as 40th Street, and covering more or less the entire West Side of midtown Manhattan, lay the garment district, where wholesale merchants gathered up both clothing made in the city’s garment factories and clothing that was shipped into New York, and prepared it to be sold to stores all over the country.

Although there were obvious advantages in having wholesale businesses so
close to the stores, there were equally important disadvantages. The garment
district was a far less genteel area than store managers might have wished.
Traffic clogged the streets as trucks stopped anywhere they could to load and
unload goods. Streetcar peddlers, wandering through the neighborhood sell-
ing fruit and other goods, made matters even worse, and at least sometimes
the sidewalks were packed from edge to edge, making movement difficult if
not altogether impossible.¹

Like congestion, labor strife contributed to the disorder that dominated
the garment district in the 1930s. In November 1934, elevator operators and
building service workers in the garment district staged a highly disruptive
strike before forcing landlords there to back down. (The garment district’s

Figure 2
Shoppers on 34th Street, 1936. The chaos of 34th Street in the 1930s is brilliantly cap-
tured by Berenice Abbott in this photograph. Just outside stores that provided a refined
and elegant upscale shopping experience were streets that were crowded, complex,
and largely outside of managers’ control. The chaos in the streets outside greatly aided
workers in their efforts to create unions. (Berenice Abbott, Herald Square, West 34th
Street and Broadway, August 16, 1936. Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York,
Federal Arts Project, “Changing New York”)
labor troubles reached new heights that year shortly after the elevator strike ended, when the guards hired to protect the warehouses during the strike did not get paid promptly and immediately staged a march through the garment district, demanding justice from the detective agency that employed them. If anything, the labor problems in the garment district got worse in succeeding years. In 1935, during a strike of shipping clerks on 38th Street, a Western Union messenger simply going by the picket line was shot, and in 1936 and 1937 strikes of thousands of building service workers once again hit the garment district.

Labor troubles and congestion in the garment district were complemented by industrial accidents and the activities of the Communist party. At least a few factories were located in the garment district, some of them on 34th Street. And like many factories in these years, safety standards here could be dismal. In a single week in early 1941 dozens of workers from two different garment factories had to go to the hospital for carbon monoxide poisoning. To make matters worse still, the May Day protests that began in Union Square went straight through the garment district. At least one day a year, therefore, the neighborhood streets were crowded not only by trucks and pushcarts, but by protestors actively calling for an end to capitalism.

Perhaps most disruptive of all the factors around the 34th Street stores were the actions of unemployed workers. In the late 1930s Communists and other unemployed workers staged repeated protests in front of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) offices a few blocks south of the stores, on West 23rd Street. When the WPA began in 1935, workers initially met the program with great enthusiasm, and willingly stood on line for hours at the WPA’s city offices trying to get jobs. By the spring of 1936 things had changed dramatically. Congress voted to cut much of the WPA funding, and workers met the news of the cutbacks with what historian Barbara Blumberg describes as “tremendous protest and resistance,” with “almost daily picketing of WPA headquarters in the Port Authority Building,” a few blocks south of the stores. In March 1936 the furor reached a boiling point when demonstrators staged a sit-down protest. After police attacked the protesters who were sitting down, and dragged them—through a hostile crowd—to waiting patrol cars, “the demonstrators reverted to mass picketing outside. On many days two thousand to three thousand persons congregated on the street below the central offices, shouting and chanting.” Unemployed workers staged even larger and more militant protests over a year later, in the aftermath of the 1937 sit-down strikes, when Congress announced a new round of cuts. Some workers set up mass picket lines; other workers again staged sit-ins in the WPA offices, only to be removed by police.
again. “Still other protesters attempted to seize and destroy personnel records so that the WPA could not tell how long anyone had been on work relief.” Most dramatic of all, however, and most important for the history of the department store unions, were the protests of the Workers’ Alliance, which led a symbolic “mass job hunt. Wearing white tags that read ‘WPA dismissed worker looking for a job,’ they visited firms” in the surrounding area. “At all the establishments they heard the same thing—no jobs available.”

There is no way to tell at this late date whether the workers conducting this mass job hunt stopped at the great 34th Street department stores. Certainly it is likely—there were many unemployed white-collar workers among unemployed New Yorkers in this era, and, as discussed further below, white-collar workers frequently viewed department store work as a way to tide them over between more prestigious jobs. But whether unemployed workers ever actually entered the stores or not, these actions in the streets outside certainly threatened the pristine and elegant world that department store managers worked so hard to create.

Managers did what they could to control the chaos outside, but they had little success. May Day was a particular concern for them, and store managers even went so far as to sit in on conferences between the police and May Day parade organizers to ask that the parade routes be moved further from the stores. But these negotiations, at which managers’ requests were flatly denied, only served to demonstrate that managers lacked the ability to control the streets outside, and were forced instead to negotiate for control of these streets. On 34th Street managerial control was limited to the store buildings themselves. The palaces of consumption, as other historians have aptly named them, were supposed to be areas where the chaos of the streets was invisible, where class struggle held no sway. Unfortunately for managers, creating such an environment on 34th Street was all but impossible; to get to the stores, customers had to trek through the chaos outside, and managers could do little to change that. In this situation, where control of the stores was all managers had, workers’ efforts to form unions, especially unions that were allied with the Communists who presented such troubles in the streets outside, were even more threatening. If workers began a serious union campaign, or went on strike, they would threaten managers’ already tenuous control still further.

Organizing in Upscale Stores

Upscale department store workers faced some, but not all, of the same chal-
Challenges blue-collar workers faced when trying to form unions. The department stores, unlike the mass-production factories that have dominated the literature on union organizing in this era, were spaces designed for wealthy women’s consumption, greatly complicating the question of control over the workplace that is so central to labor history. At the same time, workers in department stores faced many of the same challenges that blue-collar workers faced when creating unions. In the department stores, as in other fields, organizers had to contend with managers’ efforts to control workers through both benefits packages and close supervision.

By far the biggest complication union organizers faced in the upscale stores was the role of customers. Upscale department store managers had always attempted to allow wealthy customers, particularly women, spaces for consumption which were protected from workers and from class unrest. From their very origins, department stores had therefore been spaces reserved for the bourgeoisie. The department stores’ architecture marked these spaces accordingly. In the mid-nineteenth century, A. T. Stewart’s store, generally considered the first department store in America, was sometimes referred to as the “marble palace” for its extraordinary architecture. Throughout the early twentieth century, store managers became ever more elaborate in their efforts to make the stores pleasant environments for wealthy women. Everything became more ornate and extravagant, as managers replaced wooden floors with marble or stone, and increasingly embellished the walls and floors with mirrors and elaborate ornamentation.

These decorations not only stimulated customer interest in goods; many of them also worked to establish shopping as a form of leisure. Most important among the decorations that served both functions were the window displays. By the late 1930s department store windows had become highly dramatic, with some windows depicting actual events of the social season, like opera openings, flower shows, and Broadway plays. Windows by this era had become “so significant, so lively . . . that stores report regular ‘window fans’ who check each change of display.” The windows were “like movie stars,” Women’s Wear Daily reported; each store window had its particular devotees, who kept track of the changing displays.

Like the luxurious decorations and displays, many of managers’ tactics not only made shopping convenient but also worked to emphasize the connections between shopping and leisure, by making the stores more pleasant places for potential customers to spend time. They also provided customers with a wide range of complementary services, including, in the words of historian Susan Porter Benson, “public telephones, parcel checkrooms, lost and found
services, shopping assistance, free delivery, waiting rooms, gift suggestion departments, mail-order departments, telephone order departments, accommodation bureaus, barber shops, restaurants, post offices, hospitals, radio departments, bus service, and shoe-shining stands.” Some store managers also set up lectures, live musical performances, and services for shoppers’ children including nurseries, children’s theater, and even miniature indoor zoos. All of these services created a space where shopping was accompanied by other pleasant pastimes, where opportunities both for consumption and for leisure were available at the same time, and in the same location.9

Advertisements made this combination of leisure and shopping even more explicit. As a Macy’s advertisement from the 1930s boasted, “Lots of people come to Macy’s [just] for the view. . . . They claim the sprightly tempo does their spirits good. . . . One matron we know of refuses all social engagements for Thursday evenings—says she has a better time seeing life at Macy’s.” Another Macy’s advertisement featured a customer riding an escalator backwards, telling her companion, “I always go up backwards so as not to miss the view.” In these advertisements managers encouraged customers to come to the store to sightsee as much as to make purchases: as with the display windows, advertisements meshed consumption and leisure.10

Perhaps most important of all the cultural programs provided by the store managers were those that were open to all people in New York City rather than just store customers, like the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade. Beginning in 1924, the parade gave store managers a chance to entertain customers and noncustomers alike, with marching bands, circus performers of all sorts, caged wild animals, parade floats, and, in case any onlookers had forgotten about the holiday shopping season, Santa Claus. The planning and costs for the event were enormous, but the Macy’s parade was an excellent opportunity for managers to encourage workers, customers, and community alike to have pride and admiration for the store that every year provided the joyous spectacle. Again, managers worked to connect consumption and leisure, making the two as interchangeable as possible.11

The buildings and free services were only two of many tools at managers’ disposal in their quest to merge consumption and leisure. Store workers served a similar function. Workers’ jobs in these stores were to see to customers’ every need. To some extent, this was a racialized process: well-educated and well-trained white men and women waited on customers to help them make purchases, while in the elevators and the lavatories, uniformed African American workers waited to accede to white customers’ requests. As in many other places in American society of the 1930s, African American workers
functioned in part as a way to allow whites to experience yet again the privileges of whiteness and to make white customers feel pampered and at ease.\textsuperscript{12}

The meshing of leisure and consumption, with its racial overtones, was only one important factor that defined upscale shopping; there were others. Most important, managers fostered a complex relationship between customers, store workers, and merchandise, one far different from the relationships between these factors in downscale stores. Kenneth Collins, who had been a vice-president at both Gimbel’s and Macy’s, described the process of upscale consumption in 1940: “The history of most stores in the past fifty years has included innumerable steps by which customers have been pushed farther and farther away from the temptation to buy freely.” By the beginning of the Depression, Collins wrote, managers increasingly kept “gloves, hosiery, shoes, underwear, neckwear, and similar articles hidden behind fixtures or under counters, so that the customer cannot even see, much less feel, the merchandise.”\textsuperscript{13}

Upscale store managers denied customers direct access to goods for several reasons. For one thing, managers determined that this tactic would decrease customer shoplifting, a serious problem in upscale stores. Separating goods from customers also allowed the managers to surround customers with ornately decorated paneling rather than racks of goods, enhancing the creation of an upper-class environment. Most important, managers could create and control a relationship between customer and salesperson through arranging the stores in this manner. As Collins wrote, “the customer is better served when a clerk is available to meet her promptly, to analyze her needs, and to dig out from a hidden stock the goods the clerk thinks will satisfy.” Through arranging the storage and presentation of goods so that the customer would have to deal directly with a salesperson, store managers at upscale stores forced customers and store workers into close contact.\textsuperscript{14}

Managerial tactics therefore placed great emphasis on the abilities of the salespeople. Even more than in the downscale stores, sales clerks were essential actors in the upscale store managers’ presentation to the customers. To ensure a favorable impression, managers required neat appearance and good manners from salespeople. They also required highly trained and competent salespeople: without the salespeople’s knowledge of the stock on hand and their ability to provide customers with acceptable merchandise, the stores would immediately cease to operate, since customers could not gain access to goods without the intervention of a salesperson. Unlike those in the downscale stores, the workers in the upscale stores were skilled workers, whose expertise and training were highly valued.\textsuperscript{15}
These practices left managers in a paradoxical position. In order to create what they viewed as an ideal environment for upscale consumption, an environment for leisure that was free from the chaos and class struggle that dominated the streets outside, upscale store managers had to employ thousands of workers and place them in close contact with wealthy customers. These workers included not only skilled salespeople, but also workers who were responsible for the stores' numerous other services, some of them far less skilled: elevator operators, gift wrappers, cafeteria workers, and, in the credit and billing departments, office workers. These department store workers, in a sense, were at once both the most vital agents in creating the stores' exclusive culture of service and refinement and also, throughout the stores' existence, the biggest potential threat to that environment should they become dissatisfied.  

The paradox was a dangerous one for managers, particularly due to the often antagonistic relationship between store workers and store customers. Some customers resorted to treating store workers as they would their servants, the only other workers with whom wealthy people might have come into close contact on a daily basis; but in an era when domestic servitude was considered the most degrading job possible, this sort of treatment could easily lead to informal protests on the part of department store workers. Benson found that saleswomen would allow particularly condescending customers to stand in the store for hours before waiting on them, or could escort the difficult customer to a dressing room and then simply abandon them.

There is no record of this sort of conflict between customers and workers in the downscale stores. While it is possible that such conflicts simply went unrecorded, it is more likely that the peculiar situation of workers in upscale stores meant that there was greater potential for conflict between customers and workers. At Klein's, Ohrbach's, and May's, most customers shared class, neighborhood, and ethnic ties with store workers. At the upscale stores, however, while workers lived in a variety of different places, few if any lived in the expensive neighborhoods from where many of the stores' customers came.

Workers in these upscale stores found customers to be a nuisance, an additional grievance for which they were not adequately rewarded, and this conflict drove at least some workers towards the union. When asked why he joined the union, for example, former salesperson and union organizer Irving Fajans launched into a lengthy speech about the various types of customers whom he had to serve. The types included, according to Fajans, “the kind who tells you she knows exactly what she wants, and then takes two hours to make up her mind . . . The ‘match it’ type [who will] come in with a smudge
of lipstick on a piece of paper, for instance, and want you to match it exactly in
the article,” and “the customer who will place a C.O.D. order for a large amount,
sometimes hundreds of dollars, to impress the clerk, and then the merchandise
is returned the next day.” While Fajans’ comments on customers were not all
gender-specific, most of his comments indicated that the customers whom he
disliked the most were female. Other workers went even further in their gen-
dered depictions of the hated customers, with one worker attacking customers
in verse as those “ladies of leisure / who always dally, way after the closing
bell,” which of course meant extra work for the salespeople waiting on these
customers.19

This antagonism between workers and customers greatly complicated the
task of organizing unions. On the one hand, the workers who did find custom-
ers’ behavior intolerable often found common ground with union organizers,
particularly considering the strong rhetorical attacks on wealthy women that
had proved such a powerful weapon during the 1937 sit-down strikes. At the
same time, workers who dared attempt to organize a union at these stores
would find that, at the upscale stores, they could not count on customer sup-
port during conflicts with management.

If customers were one factor that union organizers could count on to drive
workers towards the union, there were others. The various forms of discrimi-
nation that existed within the stores drove some workers to support union-
ization. The workforce at the upscale stores was more heterogeneous than at
stores like Klein’s and Ohrbach’s. While workers at the downscale stores almost
universally lived in the city’s immigrant communities, workers at the upscale
stores tended to live in many different neighborhoods, ranging from these
immigrant communities to the Upper West Side and Harlem. While at the
downscale stores a large majority of the workers were Jewish, in the upscale
stores only around half of the employees were Jewish; Irish, African American,
Italian, and white Protestant workers also worked at these stores.20

Store managers had several means of controlling this complex workforce.
First, they instituted a system of rigid ethnic and racial segregation. As Macy’s
worker and union organizer Charles E. Boyd later wrote,

Hiring was controlled by department heads and some would hire no
Jews while others would hire no Catholics or no Protestants. Some
would hire only Irish; others would hire no Irish. Discrimination was
practiced somewhere in the store . . . against almost any group, but one
general rule was observed throughout the store. Except on passenger
elevators, blacks were not visible.
Additionally, there was significant gender discrimination within the stores. Although stores made public their willingness to promote women from within the stores into managerial positions, women salespeople in the 1930s were generally restricted to relatively low-paying departments, such as women’s garments and notions. The highest-paying jobs, such as those in the furniture department and the toy department (both of which were paid by commission, and considered very lucrative) were reserved for white men.\(^{21}\)

Discrimination may have driven some workers towards the union, but it also served to complicate the task of organizers. The divisions among workers at upscale stores made it even more difficult to organize workers into a single entity, like a union. Certainly there is no evidence that large numbers of white workers objected to the discrimination against African American workers in the stores. And the union itself was hardly a paradigm of anti-racist activism; they continued to ignore the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns going on further uptown, and their actions against job discrimination were minor at best. Despite the unions’ massive gains in the late 1930s and vocal commitment to racial equality, unionization did nothing to challenge the racist hiring practices that existed within the stores.

If many white workers accepted discrimination, they objected to other aspects of store work. In one early CIO publication, a Macy’s worker described the feverish pace of store work: “the frantic rush from subway to store—the mad dash to put away your stock—the brusque appearance of the section manager.” Workers spoke also of the overly short “half-hour lunch—the long wait in line at the cafeteria—[and] the attempt to swallow your food with one eye on the clock.” Additionally, working in these stores could be incredibly dehumanizing. Fiction writer Shirley Jackson worked at Macy’s for a short time during this era, and in a story for *The New Republic* she described Macy’s as bureaucracy at its most bewildering, where people were essentially replaced by numbers:

> I enjoyed meeting the time clock, and spent a pleasant half-hour punching various cards . . . I went and found out my locker number, which was 1773, and my time-clock number, which was 712, and my cash-box number, which was 1336, and my cash-register number, which was 253, and my cash-register-drawer number, which was K, and my cash-register-drawer-key number, which was 872, and my department number, which was 13. And that was my first day.\(^{22}\)

However, if working conditions could be strenuous and unpleasant, they
were decidedly better than in the downscale stores. Managers at upscale stores placed great pride and emphasis on their training programs for sales workers, investing extensive time and money into training each worker. Managers at these stores therefore encouraged workers to remain with the store for as many years as possible, despite the various drawbacks of working in these stores. Upscale store managers had all sorts of ways to gain workers' loyalty: they paid workers well, with salaries for sales workers averaging around $15 a week rather than the $7 to $12 a week workers received in the downscale stores. In addition, upscale store managers offered workers numerous benefits and cultural programs. Macy's serves as an excellent example. Macy's managers also provided limited health insurance, through the Macy's Mutual Aid Association (MMAA). Like many other department stores in New York City, Macy's participated in the Greater New York Department Store Baseball League, allowing workers to represent the store where they worked, and encouraging them to identify themselves as part of the store's team. And, while it does not appear to have been a factor at Macy's, other city department stores also offered workers opportunities to perform in plays, setting up dramatic clubs for their employees.23

These tactics worked to gain the loyalty of at least some employees, but caused others to resent the managers' interference in their lives. Jane Spadavecchio remembered the benefits packages (especially the free turkeys) very fondly, proudly stating years after working in the stores that she was still a "firm Macyite." Yet some of these practices were extremely intrusive. Managers took money for the MMAA, for example, directly out of workers' paychecks, even if workers never used the MMAA's services. In addition, the MMAA was responsible for sending the personnel office "a list of all the people employed . . . who have been rated 'poor risks' by the hospital," and managers often fired these people first during the much-feared post-Christmas round of layoffs. Union organizers raised this issue wherever possible, labeling the MMAA "Macy's Public Enemy Number 1," and issuing frequent demands for "information about the administration of the funds collected . . . for its maintenance" in order to remind workers that they were paying for this program. Union supporters also claimed that the funds were being spent "in planning artistic murals" and "in purchasing non-break swivel chairs for the doctors" at the MMAA infirmary rather than in improving workers' health.24

Besides keeping workers satisfied through high pay and good benefits, managers had other means of controlling their workers, most important
among them an elaborate system of supervision. With an extremely wealthy group of customers without direct access to goods, managers at the upscale stores regarded workers rather than customers as the most significant group of potential shoplifters. As managers did at Klein’s and Ohrbach’s, upscale store managers hired large numbers of store detectives. In addition, managers at some of these stores, like Macy’s, required workers to leave all their personal possessions in lockers throughout the day, so that if detectives did find any goods in a worker’s possession, managers could then demonstrate that worker’s guilt. Macy’s managers also attempted to control their employees’ shoplifting by resorting to searches of all workers, a practice which workers strongly disliked. In an OWU publication from the early 1930s, one Macy’s worker wrote indignantly of the intense scrutiny: “Are we prisoners who have to be searched before we go to our departments?” the anonymous worker asked, complaining of the security department’s demands “that we shake out newspapers, packages and books before the eyes of the guards and leave them under surveillance all day.” The ironies of these sorts of security measures were inherent: one article in the union paper pointed out that the “head of the Protection Department at Macy’s is paid $50,000 a year to see that $10,000 worth of merchandise isn’t stolen.”

Despite their dislike of the store security procedures, union organizers did not endorse shoplifting as a legitimate way for workers to supplement their wages. If shoplifting was an important form of personal and informal protest, union organizers held, almost by definition, that formal protests like unionization would be a more powerful way to resist exploitation. On the other hand, contributors to the union papers also avoided condemning shoplifting. One anonymous contributor even offered a mild defense of the practice, suggesting that it was mere “petty theft,” the elimination of which “does not depend upon a prison-like supervision, but on the establishment of a decent standard of wages.” The message of this article was determinedly ambiguous: shoplifting might not be the best way to combat store managers’ exploitation, but the author of this article clearly felt that for many workers shoplifting was a method of self-help, of informal resistance against low wages.

At least some upscale store managers employed security measures that went far beyond simple searches. A detective at one unnamed upscale store in New York City, Alfred Gerrity, claimed that the store employed “information employ[e]es’ in almost every department [who] receive $2 a week extra for reporting anything unusual they observe,” thus combining the jobs of preventing shoplifting and keeping an eye out for anyone prone to union organizing. Gerrity also described the way in which “at night, we turn the lights
off in the elevators and run them from floor to floor, observing the actions of maintenance men, stock clerks, and porters [the lowest-paid workers in most stores] through the little windows.” Store detectives would also attempt to trap employees by “plant[ing] merchandise to tempt employees to steal.”

These sorts of security practices were of special concern to union organizers, since pro-union workers were frequently targets of security sweeps. An anonymous department store worker and union organizer recalled in an interview with WPA interviewer May Swenson, “When I first started there, they were just beginning to try to organize, and everything pertaining to the union had to be on the q.t. If you were caught distributing leaflets, or other union literature around the job you were instantly fired.”

But workers in the upscale stores persisted in organizing unions, despite the efforts of managers to quash such activities. This was especially true of nonsales workers, who were in a decidedly worse position than the salespeople. Since nonsales workers did not have to undergo as lengthy a training process, managers were much less concerned about turnover. As a result, nonsales workers worked for much lower salaries and often worked longer hours. Cashiers at Macy’s, for example, made only $8 a week during the 1930s, comparable to what workers made in downscale stores. Managers also required many of these nonsales workers to work seven days a week, and to do so even on some holidays.

Managers, as already noted, strongly and successfully opposed workers’ efforts to form unions throughout the early 1930s. Despite their need for trained sales workers, managers at the upscale stores fired both nonsales workers and highly skilled sales workers who attempted to join the union in the early 1930s; several of the first leaders of the local unions became full-time organizers after being fired by managers for union organizing.

As a result of this scrutiny, union organizers in the upscale stores, Communists and non-Communists alike, resorted to extremely inventive tactics in order to recruit other workers to the union. Many of these tactics made the perpetrators almost wholly undetectable, no matter how many spies store managers employed. The worker Swenson interviewed remembered,

Sometimes we’d insert the leaflets into the sales ledgers after closing time . . . In the morning every clerk would find a pink sheet saying: “Good Morning, how’s everything . . . and how about coming to Union meeting tonight . . .” . . . we [also] swiped the key to the toilet paper dispensers [in] the washroom, took out the paper and substituted printed slips of just the right [size]! . . . We also used . . . store chutes,
and when sending down a load of merchandise, would toll [sic] down
a bunch of leaflets with it, while the super had his back turned. They’d
all scatter out on the receiving end, and the clerks would pick them up
when they handled the stock. The floorwalker might be coming along
and see those pink sheets all over the place—he’d get sore as hell—but
what could he do?

The workers involved in these sorts of anonymous organizing activities were
able to spread the word about union actions, without making themselves vul-
nerable to managers’ counterattacks. 31

Anonymous or not, the organizing was eventually successful. With
Communists and other activists laying claim to the streets outside, and with
a growing number of their employees lobbying for the right to join the union
that had led the Woolworth sit-down strikes only months before, the manag-
ers of the 34th Street department stores found themselves in desperate need of
greater stability. In the late 1930s Samuel Wolchok and the other national lead-
ers of the CIO’s retail workers union, the UREA, offered those employers who
were willing to sign union contracts the stability that managers so anxiously
sought.

Stability with the CIO, 1937–39

Samuel Wolchok’s greatest achievement in the UREA’s early years was to create
a situation where upscale store managers came to view him as a stable, respon-
sible, and relatively conservative alternative to the increasingly powerful radi-
cals who took over most of the local unions in New York City’s department
stores. In order to secure Wolchok’s support in their struggle against local
leaders and gain the stability that he promised, at least some store managers
signed contracts with the UREA.

When the CIO officially granted the UREA a charter in May 1937, no one
could have imagined that the union would grow as quickly as it actually did.
When it was created, the UREA was an extremely small union of just under
15,000 members, and it was almost entirely confined to ex-RCIPA locals from
New York City. By the end of 1937 the union, now with 40,000 members,
represented a beachhead for the possibility of a labor stronghold in the retail
industry. 32

This numerical growth greatly strengthened the union’s left wing. The larg-
est new sector where the union organized was in wholesale firms, firms which
sold to retailers rather than to the general public. In particular, the UREA recruited a large number of left-wing union leaders in the New York City wholesale trade when these locals joined the union as UREA Local 65. After this, the name of the union was immediately changed to the United Retail and Wholesale Employees Association (URWEA).\(^{33}\)

Another major change also took place between the sit-down strikes and the December 1937 convention: the CIO set up a special organization, the Department Store Organizing Committee (DSOC), to organize department store workers. Wolchok had played a key role in DSOC’s creation, and in so doing had further cemented his place as the leader of the new organizing drive in the retail industry. In September 1937, months before the convention, Wolchok again wrote to John L. Lewis, asking Lewis for help with a new organizing drive. As Wolchok envisioned it, the new drive would be

> a uniform drive throughout the various states, in organizing the Department Store workers. I am firmly convinced that if we could have such a unified drive, placing a given number of organizers in this field, that remarkable progress could be made. . . . Place at our disposal fifty organizers for the next four months—to concentrate a drive in the Department Stores.”\(^{34}\)

Wolchok might have known, even while writing this letter, that no amount of statistics on nonunionized department store workers was likely to convince Lewis to grant his request. The four months’ of organizing that Wolchok proposed would have cost the CIO $40,000 at a time when Lewis had just loaned the UREA $5000 at Wolchok’s request. In addition, Lewis had already assigned twenty CIO organizers to help Wolchok and the UREA. Whatever Wolchok thought would happen as a result of his letter, Lewis provided neither additional funds nor the organizers whom Wolchok had requested.\(^{35}\)

If it was therefore unlikely that Lewis would grant Wolchok’s request, it was nonetheless possible. The two union leaders had apparently been close allies from the beginning of their acquaintance, in the summer of 1937. One of Wolchok’s strongest supporters in the UREA, Vice-President John Cooney, reported that during the first actual meeting between Lewis and Wolchok, “Lewis clearly indicated that he recognized in Brother Wolchok a leader, a man of courage, a man of executive ability.” While Cooney is hardly an objective observer, Lewis himself indicated his strong personal admiration for Wolchok. At one point during the early years of the URWEA, Lewis sent Wolchok a telegram announcing that Wolchok was “personally entitled to great credit”
for the “splendid achievement[s]” of the UREA, and Lewis gave particular reference to Wolchok’s “able handling of negotiations.”

Perhaps because of their mutual respect, Lewis agreed to bring the subject of DSOC up at the national CIO meeting in October 1937, and suggested that Wolchok attend. Wolchok immediately began work on a report of the UREA’s accomplishments, calling their work (quite accurately) “a spring-board for further progress” despite the “meagre funds at our disposal and the limited number of organizers available,” and ending with an appeal to Lewis and the CIO Executive Board to reconsider his request. Wolchok also insisted, at the end of the report, that the retail clerk was actually

the most effective medium of CIO propaganda, contacting as he does thousands of persons in his establishment, his store . . . The SALESMAN of America is the most ARTICULATE type of worker and a CIO button on his lapel means a standing, ever-present symbol of labor unionism to untold populations.

This report illustrates more than Wolchok’s abilities as an organizer, which would later be called into serious question. It also suggests the continuing importance of gender within the CIO leadership. Many of the department store workers whom Wolchok spoke of organizing in this drive were women; yet these workers were conveniently unmentioned in Wolchok’s strongly gendered description of the articulate salesman wearing a CIO button “on his lapel.” Wolchok’s immediate assumption of workers as men was one way in which he reaffirmed his commonalities with Lewis and other CIO leaders. As Elizabeth Faue has demonstrated, gendered assumptions like these bound labor leaders together in the 1930s, giving them even more common ideological ground than they already had.

Wolchok got almost exactly what he requested at the October meeting where he presented his report. On October 17 the CIO Executive Board approved both funding and organizers for DSOC. The Executive Board agreed that Wolchok would serve on the board of DSOC, as would John Cooney. Neither Wolchok nor Cooney, however, was placed in charge of DSOC. That responsibility went to CIO co-founder and Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America President Sidney Hillman. For a few days at least it looked as though Hillman, and not Wolchok, would take charge of organizing the nation’s department store workers. Circumstances intervened, however; Hillman became severely ill almost as soon as DSOC was formed, and Wolchok stepped in to take control of DSOC. By November 1937, barely a month
after the Executive Board had created the organizing committee, Wolchok, not Hillman, was leading the drive to unionize department store workers in America.38

By the URWEA’s first convention, in December 1937, the union was therefore in a very favorable situation for a massive and successful organizing drive. They had a new vehicle for organizing in DSOC, one with additional funding and organizers. They also had a readily identifiable and notorious enemy, since the issues raised by the anti-chain store activists were still fresh in the national imagination. In one reference to the discussions surrounding chain stores, an ally of Wolchok’s named Henry Fruchter reminded the delegates to the 1937 convention that “the corporations in ownership of department and chain stores are the most ruthless in the world. They command tremendous financial resources, they control the reactionary press, they are in league with corrupt politicians, they will stop at nothing to check the onward stride of labor.”39

Perhaps most important, in Samuel Wolchok, the URWEA also had a leader with a growing national reputation among business leaders as a moderate and responsible union organizer. Wolchok’s rise to national prominence in many ways mirrored the URWEA’s own rise. As a result of the successful sit-down strikes and the union’s earliest contracts signed by store managers in New York City and throughout the country, Wolchok became a figure of some importance in the CIO in the late 1930s. In 1938, for instance, Wolchok became the vice-president of the New York State Industrial Union Council, the CIO’s New York State governing organization; he also was invited to speak at an international labor congress that same year.40

Like CIO leaders, business leaders also had a high opinion of Wolchok’s abilities. Louis Broido, the vice-president in charge of personnel relations at Gimbel’s, held Wolchok in such high regard as a union leader (and held such little respect for local leaders) that Broido insisted on negotiating exclusively with Wolchok, much to the annoyance of the local leaders. In addition, an article on retail unionism in Business Week showered praise upon Wolchok, suggesting that Wolchok “had jumped into the Class A rating of union leaders,” and going on to claim that Wolchok was “no longer in the shadow of Lewis and Hillman, but was instead rising to power in his own right.”41

While to employers Wolchok emphasized his willingness to compromise and negotiate, at the union’s convention Wolchok and his allies portrayed the union’s president as a picture of rugged masculinity. As Henry Fruchter put it: “Our leader [Wolchok] is a simple man, with a background of vast labor experience. . . . He is much more at home in a world of strife,—strikes, pickets,
organization. The limelight and glory of a few hours do not go to his head, nor do they arouse an exaggerated sense of superiority. . . . a man of character, of rugged strength, of vast human experience in the battle for labor.”

In the late 1930s Wolchok had at least two contradictory reputations: among managers, he had a reputation as someone willing to compromise, while, among his supporters in the union, he had a reputation as a militant fighter for workers’ rights. Faced with this combination, department store union delegates to the 1937 convention supported Wolchok’s bid for the presidency, declining the right to put up any more-radical candidate for the office. At the same time, the Communist leaders of the department store unions retained some reservations about their own lack of representation in the national leadership. One Local 1250 delegate, for example, sponsored a resolution during the convention calling for a “Vice-President, who shall be drawn from the ranks of those actively organizing in the department store field, and who shall be designated to the task of directing and coordinating the organization of the department store field.” This position was not created, but the resolution itself, particularly with its qualification of someone “drawn from the ranks of those actively organizing,” was enough to suggest that department store union leaders were concerned about how much control they would have over the new organization.

Wolchok’s leadership attracted the support of many retail managers besides Louis Broido. By February 1938 some industry experts in fact were beginning to suggest that capitulation to unionism might be the retailer’s best option. That month, in an article in the Journal of Retailing, M. D. Mosessohn and A. Furman Greene wrote that “the most [employers] can hope for is peace in the ranks of organized labor with the elimination of jurisdictional conflicts.” To secure this peace, the wise employer “dare not, by word or act, intimidate, coerce, or discourage” workers from joining the union, since, due in part to the new labor laws, the employer “must proceed with collective bargaining and must continue to bargain” in order to keep the store running with any semblance of order. Not coincidentally, “peace in the ranks” and “the elimination of jurisdictional conflicts” were goals which Samuel Wolchok offered as his own, so long as store managers signed union contracts.

With local organizers willing—for the moment—to follow Wolchok’s lead, many store managers did sign contracts. The managers at the Hearn’s store, a large downscale store on 14th Street, became the first in New York City to sign a collective bargaining agreement when they signed an open-shop contract with the New Era Committee in April 1937, only a few weeks after the Woolworth-Grand strikes. Local 1250, still led by Clarina Michelson, with
former Ohrbach’s worker Nicholas Carnes as her second-in-command, came to represent the union at Hearn’s as well as several other stores, most important among them Loeser’s, one of the large downscale stores on Fulton Street.\(^{45}\)

Shortly after Wolchok’s emergence as the leader of the URWEA and DSOC, other store managers began to sign contracts as well. In February 1938 Macy’s managers signed a contract with Local 1-S, the local covering all Macy’s workers who worked within the Herald Square store. (Locals 1 and 1-A covered the warehouse and delivery workers respectively.) Local 1-S was extremely unusual among department store unions, in that the local leadership was politically diverse from the union’s very beginnings. The single most important leader of Local 1-S was Samuel Kovenetsky, who began leading the local union as the business manager in the late 1930s, and continued to do so throughout much of the union’s history. Kovenetsky himself, though he worked closely with Communists, was a liberal Democrat rather than a Communist. Among his fellow leaders of Local 1-S, however, were several Communists. Most important among these was Marcella Loring, a white woman from the Midwest who served, on and off, as the union’s vice-president and sometimes even president over the next decade.\(^{46}\)

In March 1938 DSOC won another important success: Gimbel’s Local 2 finally won a contract, after fourteen weeks of negotiating and years of organizing at Gimbel’s. As at Macy’s and Hearn’s, the union’s contract at Gimbel’s guaranteed workers at that store significant wage increases and somewhat shorter hours. Like most of the other locals, Communists led Local 2, most important among them an ex-furniture salesman named William Michelson, who, like Loring, Carnes, and Clarina Michelson, was probably a member of the Communist party, and was at the very least a strong supporter of CP policies. William Michelson, who eventually married Marcella Loring, would, like Samuel Kovenetsky and Nicholas Carnes, remain a major figure in New York City’s department store unions for the next several decades.\(^{47}\)

Many store managers, however, held out somewhat longer. At Bloomingdale’s, at the time a somewhat less upscale store that sat under the Third Avenue elevated train, store managers adamantly refused to negotiate, despite having a majority of their employees support unionization. On October 27, 1938, Bloomingdale’s employees voted to give management a choice: negotiate with the union or face a strike. The workers gave management two days to make up their mind, and the store managers, faced with more than 1500 workers threatening to strike, quickly capitulated. By December 12 not only was the union victorious, but Bloomingdale’s managers had agreed to a closed shop and wage increases which totaled $150,000 a year among the 3000 employees at Bloomingdale’s.\(^{48}\)
Besides the huge success that this contract represented for the union, the Bloomingdale’s negotiations represented a crucial moment in the unions’ history. It was during these negotiations that union leaders first made use of the Labor Relations Board formed by the 1935 Wagner Act. Legislators had originally intended the Wagner Act as a substitute for the NIRA, which the Supreme Court had declared unconstitutional in 1935. The Wagner Act was somewhat more complicated than the NIRA, since it called for the creation of a permanent and extremely powerful National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which would be responsible for handling negotiations between workers and employers. Unlike the NIRA, the Wagner Act was strongly and explicitly pro-union, and offered no real benefits to employers beyond a faint hope that it would stabilize the labor movement. In order to achieve this stability, the Wagner Act established the right of workers to hold fair and federally mediated union elections, once the union received NLRB certification. While the Wagner Act was a tremendous victory for labor, the events at Bloomingdale’s illustrate that the NLRB’s intervention was the beginning, not the end, of workers’ struggles to get a union. Despite the NLRB’s decision in the union’s favor at Bloomingdale’s, it was the workers’ decision to strike, not federal intervention, which forced the Bloomingdale’s management to capitulate.  

Both the Bloomingdale’s local and the local at the 42nd Street Stern’s store, where managers succumbed to unionization in 1939, became additional strongholds of radicalism within the URWEA. The Bloomingdale’s local, Local 3, was led by Lowell Morris, a former cafeteria worker. Morris was at least close to the Communist party, though it is not clear if he was ever actually a member. Radical ex-saleswoman Sadka Brown became the leader of Stern’s Local 5.  

These leaders of the new department store unions—Clarina Michelson and Nicholas Carnes at Local 1250, representing Hearn’s and a few other downscale stores, William Michelson at Gimbel’s Local 2, Samuel Kovenetsky and Marcella Loring at Macy’s Local 1-S, Lowell Morris at Bloomingdale’s Local 3, and Sadka Brown at Stern’s Local 5—quickly formed a solid bloc within the URWEA. While they united primarily around their shared Communist politics (except for Kovenetsky), other factors also served to unite them. The leaders’ youth served as a strong bond between these leaders; except for Clarina Michelson, these men and women were all still in their twenties when the union formed. All of the younger leaders also had learned much of what they knew about organizing from their participation in RCIPA Local 1250 under Clarina Michelson, who was still a major influence within all of the department store union locals. In addition, they had all worked in department stores
themselves, although several of them had been fired from their jobs for union organizing before managers capitulated. Finally, all seem to have been personally very popular with union members, despite the fact that few members shared their leaders’ radical politics.\footnote{Wolchok devised several responses to these local leaders’ presence as an oppositional bloc within his organization, trying both to control and to appease the new coalition of Communists who now led the URWEA’s largest locals. Wolchok’s attempts to control these leaders took several forms. First, he established a rule, similar to that which had driven the unions from the RCIPA, that every local would have one vote on issues of national union policy, regardless of the size of the local. As a result of this rule, the large radical department store unions got the same number of votes as the other locals, many of which were much smaller and much less radical. In addition, Wolchok’s decision to break up the department store union into a separate local at each store, the new leaders of department store union organizers believed, was an attempt to divide and therefore to more easily control their unions.\footnote{Wolchok’s attempt to appease the New York City local leaders eventually created even more trouble for the URWEA’s future. After local union organizers came to the conclusion that the creation of the separate locals was an attempt to control them, they demanded some sort of structure binding the separate locals together. Their most common demand in the late 1930s and early 1940s was the right to form a Joint Board, a formally recognized, united group of locals within the union. This board would allow the local unions a certain amount of autonomy from the national union, and—more importantly perhaps—would allow them to remain formally linked. The establishment of a Joint Board, however, required the national union leaders’ consent, and, while Wolchok repeatedly promised the New York City local leaders that they would receive their Joint Board at some point, he was unwilling to make it a priority, focusing instead on organizing more locals outside of New York City.}\footnote{Department store union organizers responded to this delay by soundly criticizing Wolchok among themselves and at local union meetings. Particularly, by the late 1930s these leaders complained that Wolchok’s conciliatory attitude towards management was a poor strategy to win workers the best contract they could win. William Atkinson, an African American union member at Macy’s who would become a leader of Local 1-S in the 1940s, remembered years later that Wolchok’s attitude when dealing with management “was a begging attitude.” To Atkinson, Wolchok’s efforts simply were not as powerful as the far more confrontational bargaining tactics, including strike threats, which were increasingly favored by the local leaders in these unions.}
The two sides nonetheless maintained an uneasy unity through the rest of the decade, a unity that had extremely positive effects for the union. Wolchok’s so-called “begging attitude” beautifully complemented the local union organizers’ more confrontational style. Where Wolchok could not convince managers to sign a contract through negotiations, as at Bloomingdale’s, the workers, with the support of the local leaders, could scare managers into signing by threatening to strike.

Despite their powerfully complementary strategies, there were certain stores where neither local nor national department store union leaders seemed able to win. Two areas in particular eluded union organizers in the 1930s. First, union organizers made no headway against the upscale stores on Fifth Avenue. Facing none of the disruptions and chaos in the streets with which 34th Street store managers had to contend, the promised stability of unionization was not a particularly pressing issue for Fifth Avenue store managers. Additionally, the unions had relatively few successes in the downscale stores. Most important among their failures in the downscale stores was Alexander’s, the large downscale chain, where union organizers continually tried, and failed, to create unions. While Local 1250 did lead a two-week strike at Alexander’s, they lost an NLRB election there after an extensive anti-union propaganda campaign by store managers. Somewhat ironically, the union also never gained a real foothold at Ohrbach’s and Klein’s, having never gained a written contract at either store. Despite their tremendous successes in the late 1930s, the department store unions were not gaining ground where managers were at their most exploitative, and where the union had initially had its strongest roots. The only downscale stores where the union was able to win—Hearn’s, Loeser’s, and Bloomingdale’s—were the stores where managers gave up before the workers had to go on strike.55

There were several reasons for the URWEA’s weakness in downscale stores. First, the anti-customer rhetoric that worked so well as an organizing tool in the upscale stores had little relevance in the downscale stores. As already noted, customers and workers at downscale stores had much more in common than at upscale stores. Perhaps more importantly, downscale store managers’ employment practices doomed most unionization campaigns to failure at these stores. As we have seen, downscale store managers employed large numbers of unskilled workers for relatively short periods of time. If turnover was a factor in upscale stores, there were people working there who viewed selling as their career; indeed, most of the people who wound up leading local unions at these stores had been working in the upscale stores for several years before they began organizing, a situation which would have been highly unusual.
at the downscale stores. At Alexander’s, Klein’s, Ohrbach’s, May’s, and other downscale stores throughout the city, only a small minority of workers had any intention of making their job in the store a lifelong commitment. Working in these stores was a job to be taken for only a short time before moving on, either to a better job or, for some of the women workers, to marriage. For those workers in downscale stores who were looking for a more permanent position in retailing, there were jobs which offered better wages, with or without unions, in upscale stores. Career salesperson and union activist Irving Fajans, for example, worked in Ohrbach’s, May’s, and several five-and-dime stores before getting a job at Macy’s, where he stayed to help organize the union. Similarly, Jane Spadavecchio, who worked at Macy’s from the age of 19 until she was 35, had already worked in a five-and-dime store before getting her job at Macy’s.  

Despite their inability to establish permanent union locals at most downscale stores and on Fifth Avenue, the years 1937–39 were years of success for union organizers within New York City’s department stores. In these years the uneasy unity between national and local leaders, workers’ willingness to strike if provoked, and the federal government’s support for unions forced managers at New York City’s upscale department stores to sign union contracts. By doing so, they established these stores as centers for the growing white-collar segment of the CIO. But they also realized that if they were to continue winning struggles, they would need to establish alliances. If the struggles at Klein’s, Ohrbach’s, May’s, and the five-and-dime stores had taught these organizers anything, it was that powerful alliances could easily be deciding factors in conflicts with management. In the late 1930s store workers and union organizers turned to the growing network of activists around the Communist party’s Popular Front for support.

Creating the Popular Front

Within the upscale stores, organizers faced two major obstacles to powerful unions. First, many store workers still regarded managers with tremendous respect, due to the extensive benefits programs in place in these stores. Second, without the promised Joint Board, department store union leaders found themselves divided into separate union locals. In the late 1930s department store union leaders attempted to solve both these problems and gain a broad-based coalition of support by establishing a wide-ranging set of cultural programs, many closely connected to the Communist-led Popular Front.
Like store managers, union organizers used sports as a central part of the unions’ cultural programs. Organizers created a number of different sports programs, including a Swim/Gym program, which began as a swimming and basketball program at a local high school. Organizers expanded the basketball activities from the Swim/Gym, originally a Local 1250 program, into part of a city-wide women’s basketball league, with teams from each store's union competing with one another and with other local teams once a week. These events were critical in forming the sorts of attitudes that the union needed if it was to thrive. If store managers could allow workers a chance to play in a store-sponsored baseball team, the unions now offered similar opportunities. In addition, workers who took part in the union sports program would spend their leisure time not only with union members in their own local, but also with workers from other local unions around the city, hopefully forging bonds of class solidarity in the process.  

Organizers put equal effort into other cultural and social activities. Within Gimbel’s Local 2, for example, workers not only set up a local union library but also launched a forum and lecture series where union members were encouraged to engage in what the union newspaper described as “a sparkling exchange of opinion” between various union members. Furniture salesmen at Gimbel’s, who were the highest-paid employees in the store, also set up parties at their homes, to allow workers to temporarily escape to larger and presumably more comfortable homes. Other union organizers followed their examples, setting up “beach parties, boat parties, house parties, and boat rides.” Union organizers were very explicit in their belief that these sorts of activities were designed to do more than offer workers a chance to socialize. To organizers in the department store unions, these activities were “valuable organizing tools;” ways not only to unite workers, but to unite them as union members.

In addition to fostering alliances between workers employed within the same store, these social and cultural activities served to unite members of different department store union locals. Many of these activities, such as the sports league, were established by the department store unions’ Joint Activities Committee, which was in charge of the social and cultural aspects of the various union locals. If the union leaders wished to continue emphasizing the unity of the now-separate locals, the Joint Activities Committee was an excellent way to accomplish this. It was also a way to make sure that workers understood the shared nature of their struggle.

Perhaps even more importantly, these social activities allowed the members of the various department store locals to create alliances outside the stores.
Many of these activities drew upon the culture of the Popular Front, the broad anti-fascist coalition which the Communist party called into creation in the late 1930s. Union members who joined Local 1250’s “Song Shop,” for example, printed booklets of Popular Front standards like “Solidarity Forever” and “We Shall Not Be Moved,” songs which were sung both by department store workers and by participants in other Popular Front struggles around the country. By placing these songs in the union’s songbook, the Song Shop members emphasized the unity between the department store unions and the other struggles going on throughout the country.59

Like the songs in the union songbooks, parties and dances also served to emphasize the unity between department store union members and others involved in left-wing causes. Particularly in the late 1930s union organizers frequently sought to connect dances to the Spanish Civil War, one of the issues attracting the most attention and admiration to the Communist party. For the Allies in the Spanish Civil War, at least according to the Communists, the Popular Front was real: in Spain, leftists of all stripes literally fought against the Fascist threat. And the department store unions worked the Spanish Civil War into many of their activities, by using union parties and dances as fund-raisers for the war effort or for American veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. While there is no record of how large these parties got, organizers did manage to attract some quite famous entertainers, including bandleader and radio star Rudy Vallee.60

Similarly, the union’s Counter Carnival, which took place in April 1939, both brought union members together in a social setting and provided links with important supporters. In addition to fortune tellers, balloons, masks and confetti, and a skit featuring a “mock marriage between capital and labor,” several “Guests of Honor” attended the carnival, among them Popular Front figures like Leane Zugsmith, Ruth McKenney, and Mike Quill. Zugsmith, of course, had long been involved with the department store unions, and by 1939 that involvement had gained her and her work national recognition, including favorable reviews of *A Time to Remember* in the *New York Times*, the *New Republic*, and other major publications around the country. While earlier Zugsmith had supported department store workers as a fellow white-collar worker and, later, as a member of the League of Women Shoppers, now her role changed yet again: she would now be a fellow supporter of the Popular Front.61

For Zugsmith these changes may well have been merely rhetorical, but the other supporters who attended the carnival were new supporters of the unions, and demonstrated in some ways the value of the Popular Front.
Zugsmith's fellow guest of honor, Ruth McKenney, was an excellent example of this. By the time of the carnival McKenney's work on the contemporary labor movement was already very popular in left-wing circles. In 1938 and 1939, for instance, the left-wing American Writers Congress awarded McKenney its annual prize for nonfiction. Like Zugsmith, McKenney was probably a member of the Communist party in the late 1930s, and was a regular contributor to the Communist literary magazine *The New Masses*. But unlike Zugsmith, McKenney had never before associated herself with the department store unions. Now she was part of their coalition. Perhaps most important of all the carnival guests was Mike Quill. Like McKenney, Quill had shown no interest in the department store unions before the establishment of the Popular Front. One of the most prominent figures in the city's labor movement, Quill served on the city council and was a leader of the large, militant, and very progressive Transport Workers Union of America (TWUA), one of the largest left-wing unions in New York City at the time. Like in many such cases, it is not known for sure whether Quill was ever a member of the Communist party, but in the late 1930s he certainly supported many of the CP's policies, the Popular Front among them.62

The Counter Carnival, with these guests of honor, in some ways exemplified the department store unions' cultural programs of the late 1930s. Like other cultural programs in these years, the carnival brought workers from all the different stores together as union members in a recreational setting. In addition, particularly with the guests of honor whom the union chose to invite, the carnival allowed union members and leaders to reinforce the alliances to the city's radical movement that had proved so valuable in their earlier struggles.

In creating these cultural programs, union leaders were more than mere participants in the Popular Front; they were the creators of one small segment of the Popular Front. The Popular Front, after all, was essentially a network between different American radicals, precisely the sort of network that formed around the unions in these years. As some historians of communism have always claimed, Russian policy actively called for and supported the sorts of alliances which department store union leaders formed in the late 1930s. On the other hand, the decision to abide by this policy or not to abide by it was not made in a vacuum, but was instead made by activists on the ground. The unions' Popular Front policies reflected Communist party policies, but Communist organizers in the department store unions adopted the Popular Front not simply to follow CP policy. They adopted the Popular Front as a valuable tool for making this union an integral part of workers' lives, one that
further solidified union leaders’ connections to the rank and file and that fur-ther solidified the unions’ connections to the city’s radical movement. And, even as the Popular Front policy disintegrated in 1939 with the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the alliances formed through the Front would continue, with important results for New York City’s department store workers.

Making the World of Tomorrow:
Managers on the Attack, 1939–41

If workers were forging alliances in the late 1930s, managers had their own tactics with which to respond to workers’ efforts. In 1939 store managers participated in a massive effort by American businesses to reestablish a favor-able public image at the New York World’s Fair. At the same time, the new Parkchester housing development in the Bronx presented an alternative plan for public space, one that eliminated the sort of contests over that space that dominated 34th Street. Both developments would set the conditions for the unions’ future decline.

As early as 1935 New York City businessmen, including Macy’s manager Percy Straus, and local government officials began plans for a massive World’s Fair in New York. In keeping with the vision of its organizers, when it opened in 1939 the fair was largely a paean to American business. Ford, General Motors, AT&T, RCA, and the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company all set up exhibits at the 1939 World’s Fair, reminding visitors of the tremendous and productive role big business played in American life, and implicitly respond-ing to the massive rhetorical attacks on big business that were so much a part of Popular Front culture. Each exhibit was planned separately, and extolled the virtues of its particular sponsor. Thus the RCA building, built in the shape of a radio tube, educated the public about the glories of broadcasting and elec-tronics, including one of the first public exhibits of television broadcasting. In another of the exhibits, gas corporations joined forces to set up the Gas Exhibit Building, where visitors could learn of the important roles gas power played in modern life.63

Store managers played a particularly central role in the fair’s development, and were featured prominently at the fair. Macy’s managers opened up Macy’s Toyland in the amusement area, a building full of toys for young people to go and observe in wonder. Toy manufacturers paid a hefty sum to lease exhibits within Toyland in order to inform parents of the latest product. Not to be outdone, Gimbel’s opened a building in the amusements area as well, where
children could take a ride and see models of attractions from around the world. And many store managers (especially the managers of the large department stores) cooperated in setting up the Consumers' Building, designed both to display the latest fashions and to encourage customers to visit the various stores supporting the fair’s exhibits.\textsuperscript{64}

Managers also proclaimed their connections to the fair at the stores themselves, further emphasizing the connections between shopping and leisure in the process. In Macy’s windows fair visitors could find examples of appropriate outfits for the city’s numerous attractions, and managers also opened a fair visitor’s bureau within the store. Over at Gimbel’s managers erected scale models of World’s Fair attractions in the display windows, reminding customers not to forget the Gimbel’s exhibits. Even Klein’s, down on Union Square, expected and prepared for greater crowds due to the fair, suggesting that visitors “have heard a great deal about the store” and might wish to “satisfy a curiosity to visit this unique establishment.” In typical downscale fashion, however, Klein refused to put up any special display windows, instead joking with reporters that he might take down all the windows and put up doors instead in preparation for the greater crowds.\textsuperscript{65}

In addition to its links to the city’s retail and business communities, the 1939 World’s Fair held two alternative visions of cities of the future. The first, and the one which attracted the most attention, was Democracity, a huge diorama of a future city. As one observer described it, the “strange, inspiring vision of Democracity” was that of an ordered paradise where people had “triumphed over chaos,” and were free from any struggles to control public space. It was

\begin{quote}
a mighty metropolis, done in model scale. Factories stand in special areas, and around the city itself are rows of garden apartments. The daylight wanes and thousands of lights appear in the city . . . Men of all degrees stride forward in those legions of tomorrow. Miners with lamps, engineers with blueprints, teachers with books, farmers, businessmen—all looking forward to the city waiting to receive them. With arms upraised, faces shining in the blaze of color, the paraders sing the hymn of tomorrow. In matchless precision this great throng advances until at last a circle of heroic figures is formed under the vault of heaven . . . \textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

It was a far cry from areas like the garment district, dominated as they so often were by conflict and struggle.
The second vision of the future was in some ways more important, because it was based not on a vision of the distant future but rather on a plan already in motion. Metropolitan Life's building at the fair came complete with a model of a new housing development, Parkchester. When planning began on Parkchester in 1938, Met Life officials envisioned the new development as a "self-contained city of perhaps 40,000 people." The largest private housing project ever built, it would have not only 51 apartment buildings, but also a theater, churches, a fire house, a police station, public schools, a post office, parks and playgrounds, and retail stores. Its self-contained nature made the Parkchester development relatively unique in the city's history; so too did the amount of control that Met Life would exercise in Parkchester. Like Democracity, Parkchester would represent a public space where no conflict was allowed. The company would exercise tremendous control over tenants' behavior: a private security force issued warnings and fines for everything from walking on the grass to climbing the trees in the community's courtyard. The company would make sure that the families who would move into Parkchester would have control only inside their apartments; all the public space would be under the corporation's domain.

Even more important than the control Met Life exerted at Parkchester was the class and racial identity attached to living in the new development. Observers constantly remarked upon the middle-class nature of the apartment complex. As the development finally opened in 1941, New York Times reporter John Stanton hailed this as one of the most wonderful aspects of the project in his Sunday magazine feature on Parkchester: "there are no extremely rich people in Parkchester to be lived up to, nor extremely poor people to be tucked out of sight . . . In Parkchester . . . they have taken to nodding and saying hello to one another in the elevators, to playing badminton with one another in the parks, to organizing clubs and teams and even symphony orchestras." It was a description that could have been made a decade later about the postwar suburbs: class conflict (and indeed class itself) was all but invisible, and everyone was expected to be friendly and pleasant with one another. Like the postwar suburbs Parkchester was to be, at least in concept, a conflict-free haven, where values of community and civility served as a bulwark against a bewildering and troubled world. And while few observers remarked on it at the time, Parkchester's new community had racial limits as well. Like the department stores themselves, Met Life managers set up Parkchester, as they did some of their later housing developments, for white tenants only.

The vision of the future offered by Parkchester was extremely important
to the unions’ future, for at Parkchester, department store managers would find themselves a new market. In 1939, as the Fair opened, Macy’s managers announced a planned branch store to service the middle-class residents of Parkchester, and in October 1941 the Parkchester branch store opened to great fanfare. Met Life President Frederick Ecker, Bronx Borough President James J. Lyons, and Macy’s President Jack Straus all assembled at the ribbon cutting ceremony. As with Parkchester itself, the new Macy’s branch store was a sign of things to come; Macy’s Parkchester branch, a success virtually from its beginnings, was a forerunner of the explosion of suburban branch stores that would follow World War II, a store within a middle-class community designed to service the residents of that community.\(^{70}\)

If Parkchester and the World’s Fair had the unintentional result of weakening the unions’ position against store managers (there is no evidence to demonstrate that either was an intentional challenge to the unions), Macy’s managers’ other great project in the early months of the 1940s was a far more obvious attack on the power of workers at the upscale stores. Late in 1940 Macy’s managers announced the opening of a branch store in Syracuse, in upstate New York. By expanding into this new market, managers accomplished two goals. First, they created an alternative source for profits, one that they could draw upon in case of strikes at the New York City stores. Far more important, however, managers at Macy’s sought to change the operations of the Syracuse branch store to require fewer workers, changing the store to what they called a “semi-self-service” store. By this, store managers meant that salespeople would be available to assist customers, but only if customers specifically requested assistance. Not only did this mean the elimination of many of the sorts of services which store managers had come to offer their customers over the years, but it meant that the number of workers could be significantly reduced, and that a strike would quite possibly have less serious effects on the store’s day-to-day operations. Managers at Macy’s, in short, envisioned their new branch as something similar to a downscale store, with few services and as few employees as possible. Later, managers would call the store “a laboratory to test the possibilities of limited service units operated in connection with our New York store.” In other words, if self-service could work in Syracuse, it just might work in New York City.\(^{71}\)

The Syracuse experiment was a disaster for Macy’s managers from its very beginnings. Customers simply didn’t seem interested in a downscale version of Macy’s in 1940. With no intention of continuing to fund a losing venture, Macy’s managers wrote the Syracuse experiment off as a failure by the end of 1941, but left the possibility of self-service retailing on the table, insisting
in public statements that the store “is being closed without prejudice,” and announced that “it is possible that with the return of favorable times further experimentation with limited service units will continue.”

Between 1939 and the end of 1941 managers gained the tools to retake control over the city’s streets and the stores alike. The celebration and creation of communities free from class conflict at Parkchester and the World’s Fair, as well as the Syracuse branch store, with its tentative leanings towards self-service at upscale stores, would prove critical in managers’ efforts to destroy unions in the late 1940s and early 1950s. But in the later years of the Depression, these efforts still seemed relatively minor. Not until the late 1940s would workers and union organizers face the new social order that these developments signaled. As managers moved to strengthen their position, in fact, union organizers faced a series of rapidly changing circumstances that would culminate in a massive struggle for the eight-hour day.

**A Matter of Respect:**
The Struggle for the Eight-Hour Day

Nothing demonstrated the newfound power of the leaders of New York City’s department store unions as did the Gimbel’s strike of 1941. In this strike the unions once again assembled a large number of supporters to lay claim not only to 34th Street, but to the store buildings themselves, and forced department store managers and Wolchok alike to recognize the strength in the local unions.

The relationship between local and national leaders got progressively worse between 1939 and 1941. In January 1939 the differences between local and national union leaders became far clearer as the union contract at Macy’s came up for renewal. Wolchok quickly moved to renew the contract, to ensure the stability of the union. Kovenetsky and other Local 1-S organizers opposed renewal, hoping to renegotiate and thereby get more workers into the contract, as well as to gain more favorable agreements concerning wages and hours. Workers voted to authorize a strike and, on March 30, 1939, they formally rejected Wolchok’s proposed settlement. Under pressure from Mike Quill, Mayor LaGuardia stepped in to negotiate a new settlement, and, with LaGuardia now present at negotiations, store managers made a better offer, making concessions on union membership, wages, and hours. Local leaders and workers accepted the new settlement. By making this better offer to the local leaders, Macy’s managers gave local leaders a much stronger position
within the union, since it had been the Local 1-S leaders and not Wolchok or the national leaders who had pressed the issue, and had won important concessions on all fronts: union membership, wages, and hours.\(^{73}\)

Macy’s was not the only example of the local unions’ new and more strident tactics. At Hearn’s, despite the fact that the store operated at a loss of $265,000 in 1938, the union demanded raises and reduced hours for 1939. Here, too, managers backed down, agreeing to arbitration and eventually giving the union most of what negotiators had demanded. Here, too, the union had scored a tremendous success, and here, too, negotiations were carried on by local leaders, not by the national union. The lesson for local leaders was clear: ignore national leaders’ conciliatory tactics, and they could win far better contracts.\(^{74}\)

As the union gradually descended into conflict, national events also worked to shift the balance of power between the unions and store managers. By February 1939 AFL leaders, judges on the Supreme Court, and congressional conservatives (both Democrats and Republicans) launched a full-scale attack on the NLRB and the CIO. Roosevelt quickly retreated to what he thought was a safer position, assigning William Leiserson, a professional mediator with no strong pro-labor sympathies, to head the NLRB. Leiserson’s appointment meant that the board moved to the right, and the critics, feeling strengthened, renewed their attacks, behaving, in the words of historian Melvyn Dubofsky, “like a herd of rogue elephants off on a destructive rampage.” By the summer of 1939 Congress created a committee to investigate the NLRB, and Roosevelt, apparently willing to let it slip away, made no move to defend the board. Without the NLRB’s support for unions, Wolchok’s “begging attitude” would simply not be effective; only strident demands, like those the local leaders were willing to present, would be able to force managers to back down.\(^{75}\)

One more event in 1939 worked to worsen the relationship between local and national union leaders. In October of that year Clarina Michelson retired as the Organizer of Local 1250. While her reasons for leaving are not entirely clear, her departure deprived the other department store union organizers of their longtime mutual mentor and ally, and created an even greater need for a formal structure binding the unions together.\(^{76}\)

It was a dramatic series of events in a relatively short time: Wolchok had now demonstrated he was not strident enough in his demands on management, the department store unions found themselves without a recognized leader, and the government could no longer be relied upon to support workers. More disturbing still, news came from Russia of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. American Communists, having long denied any rumors of an alliance between Hitler and Stalin, now suffered their worst embarrassment ever, losing face with
many of their former Popular Front allies and abandoning the struggle against fascism that had been the centerpiece of the Popular Front.

For whichever of these reasons, or indeed for all of them, the younger local leaders of the department store unions decided they needed a stronger alliance. Losing all patience with Wolchok’s repeated promises, these younger leaders created their own Joint Council without Wolchok’s permission. Though it was never officially recognized by the national union, the local leaders regarded the Joint Council as a permanent organization, and even created a newspaper for the new council, the *Department Store Employee*. The *Department Store Employee*, which was written by and distributed to members of New York City’s department store unions, quickly became a major thorn in Wolchok’s side, as contributors to the paper attacked his policies and practices, and called for a more vigorous defense of workers’ rights than Wolchok was willing to present.  

At least initially, Wolchok was unaware of how serious a challenge the Joint Council actually was. Far from being alarmed, in fact, he seemed to be at least somewhat supportive of the organization’s existence. In a 1939 letter Wolchok not only acknowledged the council’s existence but also stated that he and other URWEA leaders had “sat in on their meetings on various occasions.” If the Joint Council was critical of Wolchok’s leadership, he did not seem to respond to this criticism until the end of 1939.  

Wolchok was far more hostile toward the local leaders at the union’s December 1939 convention, the first of many conventions racked by conflict and struggle between the radicals and liberals within the union. At the 1939 convention Wolchok devoted part of his opening statement to a warning to all of his political opponents that “those who have political axes to grind will be compelled to grind them outside of our ranks.” At times during the convention it seemed as if Wolchok was attempting to bait the local leaders into a fight. At one point Wolchok declared that “the big industrialists who own and run the department stores have come to respect our union and to consider it a responsible organization . . . [due to] a great deal of my time and energy,” since local leaders were, in his words, too “immature or inexperienced” to gain this sort of respect. At another point Wolchok found occasion to mention that “although in 1937, Local No. 1250 secured a contract with the F.W. Woolworth Company, when recently the Five and Dime Organizing Committee took over this division, we found that we did not have a single member,” attributing the union’s few successes in the five-and-dime stores solely to his own willingness to work on these issues rather than to the effort put in by Local 1250 organizers or the sit-down strikers.  


Despite Wolchok’s barbed comments, the delegates from the Communist-led department store unions simply refused to respond during the convention. Their reasons for remaining silent are somewhat unclear; they may have been attempting to forestall any future attacks, or perhaps felt they were not yet strong enough to challenge Wolchok. For whatever reason, however, the delegates from the left-wing New York City locals, the department store unions as well as Local 65, seem to have limited their participation in the convention to issues which were relatively free from controversy, including resolutions for national health care, expanded old age insurance, and federal funding for housing.\textsuperscript{80}

Left-wing delegates did raise at least one new issue during the convention, by sponsoring a resolution against the growing war in Europe. As other historians of communism have repeatedly suggested, Communists in the department store unions probably favored peace in 1939 due to the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the Communist party’s subsequent opposition to American war preparations. Even here, however, they were outdone by Wolchok’s supporters. Sidney Hillman, for instance, whom Wolchok invited to speak at the convention, called for peace in far stronger terms than the department store union delegates:

\begin{quote}
What is happening abroad is the tragic culmination of lack of leadership, of failure to find a real solution for the things that troubled mankind over there. . . . we propose to keep out because there is no good that we can possibly do, neither [sic] to ourselves nor to the suffering peoples abroad, by participating in war.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

At the December 1939 convention, despite all the increasingly apparent divisions, department store union organizers still made an effort to avoid outright conflict within the URWEA. In 1940 department store union leaders went so far as to join Wolchok in his request to the CIO Executive Board to disband DSOC and officially place the department store unions back in the URWEA under Wolchok’s leadership. Department store union leaders sent several telegrams to the CIO Executive Board in pursuit of this cause, as did Wolchok; and in 1940 the CIO Executive Board voted to disband DSOC and reunite the department store unions into the URWEA, renamed yet again, this time as the United Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Employees of America (URWDSEA).\textsuperscript{82}

The cooperation which brought about this jurisdictional change was not to survive the merger. In fact, less than a year later, the internal disagreements
which had been brewing for the previous two years finally came out into the open, and the union fell into utter disarray. The Gimbel’s strike of 1941, one of the URWDSEA’s greatest successes, marked the end, at least temporarily, of the alliance between the local leaders of the department store unions and the national URWDSEA leadership.

The Gimbel’s strike was in many ways a surprise to all concerned. The union at Gimbel’s was not particularly strong. Bea Schwartz, a union organizer and office worker at Gimbel’s, remembered that at the time of the strike the union was so weak that it was still just beginning to make inroads into the office division. In addition, the Gimbel’s management was unusually union-friendly. As already mentioned, Louis Broido, vice-president in charge of personnel at Gimbel’s, was one of the strongest supporters of the union among store managers, and he repeatedly emphasized that unionization would bring greater stability to the retail industry. In his search for unionization accompanied by stability, Broido had found a strong ally in Samuel Wolchok. Because of this, Wolchok and Broido had gotten into the habit of negotiating the union’s contract on a one-on-one basis, without rank-and-file participation and, at least in 1941, without direct input from any of the local leaders. 83

In some ways the pro-union sympathies of Louis Broido were a key cause of the strike. On August 8, 1941, Samuel Wolchok went into negotiations with Broido to demand a $2/day wage increase and a 40-hour workweek. While the wage increase was important, it was the 40-hour workweek that department store workers and union leaders regarded as key in 1941. Many American workers had already won the long-demanded 40-hour week in 1938, as a result of the passage of the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). The FLSA did not, however, guarantee the 40-hour workweek to all workers. The FLSA specifically exempted, among others, “any employee engaged in any retail or service establishment the greater part of whose selling or servicing is in intrastate commerce.” Legislators, in other words, specifically exempted many retail workers from the rights which other workers had already won. Because of this clause and its exemptions, both department store workers and retail labor leaders had to fight to make the 40-hour workweek a standard in the retail industry. Workers viewed the 40-hour workweek a matter of “respect,” strike supporter Annette Rubinstein later remembered, since it meant achieving conditions equal to those that other workers had. Even Wolchok, far removed as he was from working in the stores, was aware of the importance of this cause. As late as July 1941, only weeks before entering into negotiations with Broido, Wolchok told a reporter that he was “anxious to extend [the 40-hour, 5-day week] to all eastern department stores.” 84
Despite Wolchok's official support for the 40-hour week, he immediately accepted Broido's offer of a 42-hour workweek accompanied by a raise of $1.50 a day, taking the contract directly back to the workers for their approval. Considering Wolchok's already tenuous relationship with the local union leaders, it was a mistake on his part to give in so easily, and a second mistake not to at least consult with local union organizers before doing so. William Michelson, the leader of Gimbel's Local 2, refused to accept the settlement without the 40-hour week, and instead called for a strike. The workers agreed with Michelson, and on August 25, Local 2 officially voted to strike.85

Despite the fact that the workers had rejected his settlement and declared a strike against his express wishes, Wolchok nonetheless officially moved to support the strike. Broido was astonished, both at Wolchok's support and at the strike itself; to Broido, the strike was evidence that he had miscalculated, that the local leaders could destroy Wolchok's promised stability any time they chose to do so. Broido and the other Gimbel's managers chose the rather dangerous tactic of keeping the store open despite the strike, having managers double as salespeople and using what few scabs there were to try to service any customers brave enough to cross the picket line.86

During the Gimbel's strike, the department store workers found themselves in an unusually favorable position, one far different from the earlier strikes at large stores, such as the Klein's-Ohrbach's, May's, and Ohrbach's strikes. Unlike in these early strikes at downscale stores, during the Gimbel's strike the overwhelming majority of workers were active participants in the strike. Out of the 2100 workers employed in the store, the union had 1500 workers on strike, making it by far the largest single strike in the union's history up to that time.87

There were also new obstacles which the strikers had to face, most important among them the dreaded customers. During the Gimbel's strike, for the first time in the unions' history, there was nearly as much animosity between customers and workers as there was between workers and store management. Out of the thousands of charge customers at Gimbel's, for instance, fewer than 200 were even willing to attend a customer tea hosted by the strike committee. Although several of those who came were supportive (one even gave the strikers enough money to pay for the tea), it was a far different situation from the strike at May's, for example, when members of the League of Women Shoppers became the strikers' strongest allies.88

Gimbel's customers bitterly attacked the strikers in letters to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. One Gimbel's customer named R. T. Harnie who described herself as “a gray-haired woman of seventy” wrote to LaGuardia complaining
vaguely of the “disgraceful treatment” at the hands of the picketers. Another Gimbel's customer, Miss E. T. Newell, had a more constructive suggestion for the mayor; Newell complained that the picketers “march with a constant roar all day. Could not this come under nuisances—city noises—which you have done so much to eliminate?” Still another customer, Miss M. Dun, wrote of her annoyance at the amount of traffic the picketers caused, complaining that “at times it is impossible . . . to walk on the sidewalks along the entrances” to Gimbel's. In the most direct reversal of the role played by the League of Women Shoppers during the May's strike, Dun even went so far as to suggest that because it was an election year, the police—under LaGuardia's orders—were being too lenient when dealing with the strikers.89

The customers had several reasons for their opposition to the Gimbel’s strike. In addition to the adversarial relationship between workers and customers, the strikers directly challenged the customers' understanding of what upscale department stores were meant to be. Managers had designed upscale department stores as spaces reserved for the bourgeoisie, spaces for leisure and relaxation free from the chaos of the streets outside. During the strike, store workers showed no hesitation about invading these spaces, often betraying their own animosity towards customers in the process. On one occasion, striker Helen Jacobson splashed a customer’s clothing with bright red ink, and was immediately arrested for assault. Other strikers were more circumspect in their attacks on customers. As in the Klein's-Ohrbach's strikes, workers again resorted to setting a box of white mice free in the store. In addition, to the great frustration of Gimbel's managers and customers alike, the strikers somehow managed to smuggle a flock of pigeons into the store. And in what was almost certainly the most dangerous moment of the strike, someone even released a swarm of bees into the store, though this seems more likely to have been the act of an agent provocateur rather than a striker, and no union member was ever arrested for it.90

As they had done in earlier strikes, workers also assembled a number of powerful allies, many as a result of the union's participation in the Popular Front. Annette Rubinstein, at the time a high school principal and local political activist, was greatly intrigued at the news of the strike, because she had recently read Leane Zugsmith's *A Time to Remember* and viewed this strike as a chance to see the activists Zugsmith wrote about in action. It was Rubinstein's suggestion to call together the charge customers who supported the strike. Other contacts organizers made in the 1930s played equally important roles during the strike. Representatives from Mike Quill's Transportation Workers Union came and marched with the strikers, and along with the strikers, they
took the picket line inside Gimbel’s, completely shutting down the store’s business for a day. In another throwback to the Klein’s-Ohrbach’s strike, actors also supported the strike at Gimbel’s; they helped to pay for the strike’s soup kitchen, which was literally the only way some strikers had to get food, since the local union had no money for a strike fund.91

The combination of this wide range of allies and the workers’ willingness to use militant strike tactics resulted in a terrifying situation for Broido and other department store managers. The carefully ordered world inside the store was now under attack, and instead of the promised order, unionization had brought, in Broido’s eyes, nothing less than class warfare. As he later described the Gimbel’s strike before a state legislative committee, the strikers “did everything possible . . . to make the employer understand that they expected to use the forces of . . . mass movement to gain their end. . . . The line between that mass demonstration . . . and civil commotion, the line between that mass demonstration and revolutionary mass action, is so fine that nobody can say where one starts and the other stops.” Broido no doubt exaggerated his own fears of working-class revolution somewhat for the committee’s benefit. At the same time, his comments indicate that the workers were causing enough disruption in and around Gimbel’s to throw Broido and the other Gimbel’s managers into a panic.92

As a result of the amount of disruption they caused, the strikers emerged victorious. Broido, aware now of the strength of the vast array of forces brought to bear against him, re-opened negotiations only a month after the strike had begun. With local representatives now present at the negotiations, Broido granted the workers the 40-hour week and a small salary increase for nearly all full-time employees.93

Department store workers throughout New York City shared the benefits of the victory. Within days of the end of the strike, managers of the nonunionized A&S store announced that workers there would work the 40-hour week. Managers at Lord and Taylor’s and at McCrery’s, a nonunionized 34th Street store, also instituted the 40-hour week in the strike’s aftermath. Those stores which did not immediately offer workers the 40-hour week in the aftermath of the strike announced that they would do so within a few months. None of these managers acknowledged the importance of the Gimbel’s strike in making the eight-hour day standard, but there can be little doubt, considering the timing of managers’ decisions to institute the 40-hour week, that these changes were results of managers’ desire to avoid a repeat of the Gimbel’s strike.94

The strike was also a major victory for the department store union leaders. It showed that the local unions were strong enough to win a strike called
against the advice of the international leaders. The strike also demonstrated that the allies with whom the local union leaders had joined forces during the Popular Front era were strong enough to gain the workers a victory even against store managers as powerful as those at Gimbel's. Finally, the strike demonstrated that militant and disruptive tactics were in some ways even more effective against upscale stores than they had been against the downscale stores.

Samuel Wolchok took a different lesson from the strikes: the local leaders were too powerful. Early in October 1941, in union hearings, he charged William Michelson with “conduct unbecoming a union leader.” In particular, Wolchok charged that Michelson was associated with an unauthorized subdivision of the union, the Joint Council. Wolchok’s decision to attack Michelson as a representative of the Joint Council rather than for picketers’ actions during the Gimbel's strike is in some ways difficult to explain. Certainly, considering Wolchok’s earlier favorable statements on the Joint Council, he could hardly have been shocked at the organization’s existence in late 1941. And, equally certainly, the timing of the charges and the decision to use Michelson as the target for these attacks both indicate that Wolchok’s attack on Michelson was a response to the Gimbel's strike. Yet there are at least two key reasons that Wolchok would have found it difficult to attack Michelson for the strikers’ often-illegal actions at Gimbel’s. First, Wolchok had no evidence that Michelson was involved in or even aware of the strike tactics. Second, these tactics had led the Gimbel's workers to a victory which had eluded Wolchok: the 40-hour work week at Gimbel’s. It was a victory that Wolchok saw no need to publicize further.

Wolchok used more devious means of attack against the department store union leaders as well. When the Local 1-S contract with Macy’s came up for negotiation again in October 1941, Wolchok offered the Local 1-S Executive Board a bargain. He would put his support behind a contract covering the entire store rather than just the portions of the store that Local 1-S had already organized, on two conditions. “The price for his aid in securing such a contract would be the expulsion of Miss Loring as organizer” as well as the payment of union dues directly to the international. Loring, upon hearing of Wolchok’s condition, willingly offered her resignation, but, instead of accepting it, the Executive Board created a committee “to go and see Mr. Wolchok to show him that Ms. Loring is a valuable asset to the organization and to discuss his specific reasons for not desiring Miss Loring to remain in our employ.” Wolchok, the committee reported upon returning from their meeting, was unable to give any “other reason for wishing us to discharge Miss Loring except 'her
connections,” namely (though no one said so outright), her connections to the Communist leaders of New York City’s other department store unions.96

As Wolchok staged careful and somewhat veiled attacks on the Communist-led department store unions, Broido and other store managers launched a more strident campaign against these same unions. On December 5, at the urging of store managers, conservative New York State Assemblyman Irving Ives began hearings on picketing tactics in New York City. Though the hearings were ostensibly focused on cross-picketing (one union’s picketing of a business in order to oppose another union, a common and much-criticized result of dual unionism), the hearings quickly turned into a discussion on the tactics employed by department store union members and leaders in New York City. Broido, as well as speakers from Macy’s management and even a representative from the Downtown Brooklyn Association who spoke on behalf of the management of May’s, all attended to give testimony.

Together, these managers complained of the tactics employed by the department store union leaders. Broido, the star witness, went into great detail on the various tactics used during the Gimbel’s strike, declaring not only that the department store unions practiced cross-picketing (a charge for which he offered no evidence), but also that these unions practiced “other kinds of picketing and activities hitherto unknown in New York.”97

Despite the vague relationship between Broido’s testimony and the ostensible subject of the hearings, Ives responded to Broido’s complaints with great enthusiasm. By the time the hearings ended, Ives openly voiced his opposition to the sort of tactics that the union leaders allowed. Ives concluded the hearings by suggesting that this was the sort of disruptive activity that led Fascists to demand state power:

We are seeing something today which we might expect to see in Nazi Germany, or might have seen in Germany before it was Nazified, in the late 20’s, in the very early 30’s, before Hitler took power in 1933. You have something here which perhaps might have taken place in Russia at one time or other. . . . I would like to know a little bit more definitely how much of this business originated from sources outside the United States. . . . If you want to bring about the kind of conditions you have in Europe, the kind you have in Nazi Germany, for instance, at the present time, that is the way to do it.

With these brief but incredibly prescient comments, Ives captured many of the most common themes of anti-communism of the 1940s and 1950s. Not only
did he emphasize (without even suggesting that any evidence for the claim existed) the supposedly foreign origins of the unions’ policy and tactics, but he also brought Nazi Germany and Russia together as being in some sense equivalent.  

All of these attacks, the ones by Wolchok as well as those by Broido and Ives, came to a sudden halt, primarily due to the rapidly changing international situation. The cross-picketing hearing took place on December 5, 1941. Japanese pilots bombed Pearl Harbor two days later, on December 7. As a result, the disciplinary hearings scheduled for William Michelson, along with any plans Ives had for the department store unions’ future, were immediately canceled. America’s entrance into World War II delayed, for a time at least, the attacks on the department store unions.  

Conclusion

In May 1941, only a few weeks before the Gimbel’s strike, Republic Studios released *The Devil and Miss Jones*, a film about a labor dispute in a New York City department store. Based in part on the labor struggles at the five-and-dime stores years earlier, *The Devil and Miss Jones* is a remarkable treatment of these department store workers. The tale of a store owner who goes undercover as a store worker to spy on labor agitators, it portrays the department store unions as a noble enterprise, one that even the store owner comes to support. In the process, it allows glimpses of many relatively realistic aspects of both the stores and the unions (including one scene where a worker chains himself to a pole and makes a speech). One of only a small handful of mainstream films to celebrate industrial unionism, *The Devil and Miss Jones* is a remarkable historical document, one that suggests just how successful the department store unions seemed in the late 1930s. Today, setting a film about labor unions in a department store would be an odd choice at best, but at the end of the Great Depression, with the Woolworth sit-downs still in recent memory and retail workers’ unions still on the ascendant, it seemed as though the entire country would be able to understand and sympathize with the plight of the department store workers.  

Of course, *The Devil and Miss Jones* is a Hollywood film, and not a particularly accurate one. In particular, communism goes entirely unmentioned in this film. The labor organizers in the department stores are fine upstanding young men and women, who are radicalized purely by their experiences in the stores. There is no hint that the radicalism within the stores was in any way
connected to any larger movement, nor any suggestion that the streets outside the stores were a factor in the unions’ formation.

These flaws are important. Without understanding the struggles going on outside the stores, and without understanding particularly the role of communism as a way to link the union to these conflicts over public space, we get only a very partial picture of the development of New York City’s department store unions. The department store unions would not have been anywhere near as successful as they were had it not been for the remarkable struggles going on in the streets outside, or had it not been for the allies they were able to recruit through the Popular Front. The result of the Gimbel’s strike—the eight-hour day for retail workers in New York City—is directly attributable to these causes.

Despite their incredible successes, in some ways *The Devil and Miss Jones* was quite an accurate depiction of the unions. Like the film, the unions avoided race whenever possible; and, like the film, the unions increasingly avoided the subject of women’s rights or the need for women leaders. Despite their tremendous power during the later years of the Depression, in fact, there is no evidence that the unions considered launching a sustained struggle against racial hiring practices in the stores. As happened in other unions in this era, department store union leaders and members alike seem to have ignored the racial hiring practices, focusing instead on issues that affected workers already employed, like pay raises and the eight-hour day. Additionally, with Clarina Michelson’s departure, the period where the unions were led by women came to an end, at least for a time. But Michelson’s achievements—her emphasis on recruiting workers into leadership, her ability to forge alliances, and her willingness to resort to imaginative and dramatic tactics—were nonetheless important legacies that came to fruition during the Gimbel’s strike.¹⁰¹

The last years of the Great Depression were remarkable ones for American labor. Finally having established a foothold both in the retail industry and in the great assembly-line factories of the Midwest, the labor movement was on the rise, and seemed nearly unstoppable on the eve of World War II. As the nation entered the war, the Communist leaders of the department store unions had reason for hope, but there was also reason for caution. The anti-Communist alliance between national union leaders, the government, and store managers that had emerged in the aftermath of the Gimbel’s strike would reemerge with a vengeance after the war. And managers’ attempts to restructure the stores and expand their markets would continue throughout World War II, making these years some of the most challenging in the unions’ history.