Rebel Rank and File

Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below in the Long 1970s

Edited by

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I

Overview: The Rebellion from Below, 1965–81

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In October 1973, roving pickets shut down United Parcel Service (UPS) in Western Pennsylvania and Ohio, as part of an eight-week dispute in Pittsburgh. A “well-organized council” of workers directed the pickets. They were protesting the increased use of part-time employees inside UPS shipping centers. This strike, highlighted in historian David Montgomery’s widely read Workers’ Control in America, was just one of many in “a rebellion from below,” a wave of strikes and conflicts that transformed industrial relations in the United States.2

The UPS pickets were wildcat strikers—in Cleveland they were met but not deterred by baseball bat–carrying officials of their union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), Local 407. “Wildcat strike” refers of course to an “unofficial,” often spontaneous strike—one not sanctioned by the union, so often an illegal strike.3 In the late 1960s and early 1970s, wildcat strikes accounted for more than a third of all strikes in the United States. Wildcat strikers were the shock troops of the “rebellions from below,” and their strikes became all but routine elements in contractual disputes and grievance negotiations. These strikes were often repudiations of the union leadership and, implicitly, of the entire postwar system of industrial relations.

1 I would like to gratefully acknowledge the support of Steve Early and Iain Boal, comrades, collaborators, and co-conspirators, as well as my always patient and encouraging son, Matthew Winslow, himself much engaged in this project.


3 A. W. Gouldner, Wildcat Strike: A Study in Worker–Management Relationships (New York: Harper, 1965). This 1954 study of wildcat strikes was, interestingly, reissued in 1965. It points to the “aggressiveness” of wildcat strikes and their “spontaneous” nature. It suggests that wildcat strikes are frequently about issues of “little interest” to “formal trade union leaders” and the “dilatory manner in which their grievances are dealt with, i.e., the ‘runaround,’” pp. 89, 91, 93.
Increasingly, critics noted, wildcat strikes were examples of rank-and-file members taking initiative and responsibility. They indicated not just tests of economic strength but also new forms of protest.

Worker militancy, full-blown, thus returned to center stage in the United States. In these years, "the long seventies," by which we mean roughly the mid-1960s to 1981, there were strikes of all kinds. They included nationally significant conflicts in coal mining, longshore, auto, trucking, teaching, railroad, transit, and construction. In 1971, the strike of West Coast longshoremen threatened the flow of military goods and personnel to Vietnam. Richard Nixon, asserting that the strike undermined the war effort, invoked an anti-strike Taft-Hartley injunction, though this failed to deter longshoremen from conducting the longest waterfront strike in U.S. history.4 The independent truckers' strikes of 1974 generated fears of chaos and anarchy in elected officials, leading Milton Shapp, governor of Pennsylvania, to warn Richard Nixon of the danger of "national economic collapse."5 In the coalfields, between 1974 and 1975, there were nine thousand strikes, 99 percent of them wildcats.6 In the 1978 national coal miners strike, the Carter administration also invoked the Taft-Hartley Act, but it only provoked the anger and defiance of miners ("Taft can mine it, Hartley can haul it, and Carter can shovel it!"). Carter's threat to "seize" the nation's coal mines failed to stop the miners' strike, a conflict that ultimately lasted 110 days.7

In these years, worker militancy was an international phenomenon. This was the decade of the "Paris Spring," the massive 1968 movement and general strike of French students and workers. It was also the time of the Italian autunno caldo (hot autumn), the 1969 season of strikes and factory occupations during which 1.5 million workers struck, including workers at all the major metalworking factories in Italy.8 In 1972, British workers celebrated a "Glorious Summer," the high point in the strike wave of 1969 to 1974, an insurgency that ultimately toppled the Conservative government.9 Richard Hyman, the British industrial relations specialist, called the 1970s in Europe "the decade of the unions."10 In these years, unions in Europe grew dramatically in numbers and influence, advances with major implications in the evolution of national politics.

This was not exactly the case in the United States, where, by and large, the unions resisted change and maintained membership totals only by virtue of the rapid organization of public sector workers.11 The union leaders, when not reactionary, were disinterested in the great social issues of the day: racism, sexism, poverty, unemployment, and the concentration of economic and political power. The trade unions, the domain of these leaders and their bureaucratic cliques, were, most often, institutions far removed from the temper of the times. George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, boasted: "I never went on strike in my life, never ran a strike in my life, never ordered anyone else to run a strike in my life, never had anything to do with a picket line ..."12 The unions saw themselves as partners, perhaps junior partners, with the Democrats, often the hawks, Henry Jackson wing of the party. There existed no left-wing political current to speak of—there was, however, an ill-defined history of syndicalism, better described perhaps as a tradition of "direct action."13

We might, however, call the long 1970s in the United States the decade of the rank and file. These were strike-prone years. The year 1970 itself ranks toward the top of the table of strikes and strikers in any single year: there were 5,716 strikes involving more than 3 million workers. And 1970 was just one high point in a decade of strikes.14 In these years, rank-and-file workers led wildcat strikes, rejected contracts, and forced official strikes; one strike alone, the nationwide wildcat strike of postal workers, involved 200,000 workers.15 This explosion of strikes, lasting throughout the long seventies, coincided with the ending of the long postwar boom but took

11 M. H. Maier, City Unions: Managing Discontent in New York City (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987). "In a sudden and unexpected wave of organizing, public sector union membership jumped from slightly over 1 million in 1960 to over 3 million in 1976, accounting for over 80% of total union growth both public and private during that time period," pp. 8–9.
place in economic conditions that greatly increased workers' confidence, even long after the crisis of 1973–4.16 Combined with an unprecedented challenge to authority within the unions, these strikes make the decade an extraordinary era, one that ranks high indeed in the history of class struggle in the United States.

This workers' rebellion drew on deep working-class traditions. But the strikes of the 1970s were unique in the degree to which they fit in with the broader wave of protest in the period, that is, the degree to which they were a protest movement of the workers that shared much in common with the other protest movements of the 1960s and '70s—the black and women's movements, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the student movement, each of which profoundly influenced the workers' rebellion. These movements were all simultaneously economic and political; they were all, each in its own way, responses to the "precipitous descent of the economy into a long term crisis of profitability."17 The employers' main response to this crisis was a stepped-up attack on working conditions and living standards. Workers responded in self-defense, above all with the strike weapon, but also by challenging their trade union leaders to stand up to the employers' offensive, and defying them with wildcat strikes and rank-and-file movements when they would not.

The postwar years of near full employment and rising real wages had created confidence and combativeziness among American workers. This confidence was fueled by the new politics of the 1960s. The strikes of the long 1970s were about money, working conditions, and the "narrow" issues of trade unionism, in particular in the years when inflation surged. But they were about much more as well. Montgomery called the strike movement a "new unionism."18 The sight, he wrote in 1969, of "school teachers, hospital workers, and garbage men going off to jail for violating injunctions is becoming routine. The teachers are demonstrating that arbitrary authority is as common, and as intolerable, in educational hierarchies as it is in factories."19 The movement was also an expression of the spirit of restlessness, the new militancy, and the rising expectations to be found everywhere. It represented, in New Left language, workers continuing "the march through the institutions," that is, "working against the established institutions while working within them," including the unions and workplaces of the country.20 In the United States, the trade unions, as with so many institutions in those years, were deeply conservative and unresponsive to the demands of the era—hence the predominance of wildcat strikes and unofficial movements. A key element of the seventies revolt was the challenge to business unionism, the form of trade union leadership that thoroughly dominated the U.S. labor movement.21

Miners for Democracy (MFD) was by far the best-known organization in this dramatic revival of rank-and-file movements—the New York Times, reporting its 1972 victory, wrote, "nothing like it had ever happened in the labor movement before."22 The MFD's roots, too, were in the 1950s and 1960s, first of all in the dictatorial regime of John L. Lewis. His betrayal of the miners resulted in the near collapse of the union, as a result of granting the companies a free hand to mechanize the mines—in 1950 there were 416,000 working miners; by 1959, Lewis's last year in office, only 100,000 remained at work in the coalfields.23 MFD's successful challenge followed the ill-fated campaign of Jock Yablonski, an oppositionist assassinated in 1969 by gunmen hired by the union's president, Tony Boyle. In 1972 Arnold Miller, a rank-and-file miner, was elected president. The following year, at the Pittsburgh convention, miners rewrote the union's constitution, guaranteeing rank-and-file rights, increasing district autonomy, and reorganizing the union's dues structure in favor of the districts and the locals and the right to ratify contracts. In an atmosphere of jubilation—worried reporters declared "parliamentary permissiveness"—rank-and-file miners then set out to transform formal democracy into practical democracy, and the coal miners embarked upon a campaign to redo relations in the mines themselves.24

It was quite appropriate, then, for Paul Dietsch, a spokesperson for the Fraternal Association of Steel Haulers (FASH), to suggest that the steel haulers were the "Black Panthers of the Working Class."25 Studs Terkel called the workers' rebellion the "new, new left."26 Auto workers struck to

16 R. Brenner (see chapter 2). D. Lyddon writes: "In the UK, the second half of the 1970s saw an unbowed working class, notwithstanding that its economic power was draining away—hence long strikes." Letter to author.
17 R. Brenner (see chapter 2).
19 Ibid.
25 P. Dietsch, interview with author.
"humanize working conditions"; coal miners fought for an end to chronic poverty in Appalachia; black workers demanded access, integration, and equality; truckers and miners called for union democracy; UPS workers rebelled against "being treated like machines"—millions of workers clearly wanted something better in life. Blacks, Latinos, women, and young workers brought their movements into the workplace. With their demand for democracy in their unions, workers sought to make these institutions their own, recalling the students' demand for self-government—"participatory democracy." They also fought for control on their jobs—and, as their signs so often said, for "dignity," a central demand, of course, of the Southern civil rights movement. Workers turned to direct action. Importantly, they did this in the context of a general challenge to authority, and in the shadow of the great spectacle of radical conflict: the Tet Offensive, the Paris Spring, the Black Panthers, Kent State, Jackson State, Attica.

Workers' demands were most often immediate, partial, and sectional. The workers were "economistic," but that wasn't the end of the story. The radical currents of the times, in the words of Nelson Lichtenstein, gave "a political edge to many shop floor struggles, especially after 1967." Altogether they presented a significant challenge to American capital. The focus was the workplace, as it traditionally has been for American workers, in the absence of significant working-class political parties. The issues, in addition to wages, were, by and large, about control, and protests concerned speedup, work rules, the grievance procedure, the pace of work, job assignments, and health and safety. They challenged institutionalized racism as well as racist foremen, and fought for equal access to jobs and promotion, and the struggle was intense. The fact that this workers' protest movement was industrial and economic, rather than "political," is not evidence that it was less substantial than other movements. On the contrary, direct action has historically been a political trademark of American workers, at least partly because, as David Brody has suggested, "no other working class has stood so exposed to the market forces of modern capitalism; or concomitantly, been so reliant on its own collective efforts for achieving some measure of economic justice."

In these years, new ideas combined with the old, including the all but extinct notion that the very system of capitalism required the suppression of vast parts of the human personality—and that nowhere was this clearer than in industry. There began a renewed search for alternatives, often with great optimism. Everything seemed possible, but, alas, the workers' movement was no more successful than its social counterparts; prescient minorities did not become majorities. Still, there were significant contributions, including the revival within the labor movement of the notion of industrial democracy, of the idea of ownership and control of industry and its democratic management in the interest of all the people, and of Rosa Luxemburg's great exhortation that humanity's "chains must be broken where they are forged."

The rebellion began in the 1960s, peaked in the years 1970–4, and then began to decline, though there were important conflicts, including the creation of rank-and-file institutions, right to the end of the decade. It didn't end until the air traffic controllers' (PATCO) debacle. This movement, the rank-and-file movement of the long 1970s, is, curiously, rarely celebrated, certainly not in the way that the black and women's movements are, and not in the way the "generation of 1968" has canonized itself. This volume is, then, a chapter in the history of an important decade. It is also a rescue mission, a history of the workers' movement in these years—from the bottom up.

The Strike Wave

The long seventies is defined above all by the strike wave; hence the necessity to focus on strikes and related conflict. Strikes, of course, are central to understanding the development of the modern labor movement, key indicators of understanding industrial relations, and important signposts in assessing the balance of forces in the industrial world. They are also windows into the lives, beliefs, and aspirations of workers, especially in the United States, where workers are seen, if at all, as passive victims, obscuring, in the words of the late historian Edward Thompson, "the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed by conscious efforts, to the making of history." Thompson's highly influential writings in the 1960s, above all his The Making of the English Working Class (1963), were themselves expressions of the renewed interest in socialism from below, as well as an engagement with the revival of working-class struggle.

The strike is an expression of the power of workers, a fundamental weapon in their conflict with the employers, a means of defense, and at times a way of forcing concessions. Strikes are basic points of resistance to capital.

27 Watts, "1968 and All That..." p. 181.
At best, strikes are also moments of education and even transformation for workers. Importantly, the strike is a collective activity, and as such is central to the creation of solidarity, working-class organization, and working-class consciousness. Strikes open new vistas for workers, thereby clearing the way for higher forms of organization and consciousness. The outcome of a strike is crucial, even when what is at stake, say a few cents or a work rule, is not so great. Strikes can have symbolic importance—a sign of strength or weakness can swing the initiative to the other side.32

Strikes were common in the fifties: 1952 and 1959 were peak years; in 1952 there were 5,117 strikes.33 The number of strikes then plunged in the early sixties. Strike levels, however, rose as the decade advanced. But, importantly, they rose with a difference. Things were changing: defensiveness was giving way to aggressiveness and optimism. By the mid-1960s, increasingly, observers were reporting that they detected a new mood among American workers, in Stan Weir’s words, “a labor revolt.”34 Weir, a veteran labor radical, wrote in 1967 of “natural on-the-job job” conducting “an insurgency from below,” including “daily guerrilla skirmishes with the employers and often against their official union representatives.” He called attention to several conflicts, including the auto workers at the Mansfield, Ohio parts plant where a wildcat strike all but stopped General Motors (GM), idling 133,000 workers in twenty plants; the coal miners of Moundsville, West Virginia, who led an unauthorized strike that “in one week spread over West Virginia, Ohio and Pennsylvania”; and the five-week strike of airline mechanics in 1966 that grounded an estimated 60 percent of the nation’s passenger service.35

Weir’s account of this unrest went on to include the 1965 wildcat strike of truck drivers who shut down Philadelphia. The mayor, who called the strikers “hoodlums,” held a press conference calling on Jimmy Hoffa, then General Secretary of the IBT, to come in and settle the dispute. As he spoke, “hundreds of striking Teamsters milled around City Hall, in defiance of a judge who threatened them all with jail,” shouting that Hoffa was not wanted. In the course of the strike, the truck drivers patrolled Philadelphia’s streets and stopped all trucking, forcing out-of-town drivers to leave the city. They blocked highways with overturned trailers and fought pitched battles with police in a “guerrilla-type war that continued in the city for several days.”36

Jack Barbash, an academic authority on labor, found evidence of a “new mood” in the multiplying “strikes, especially wildcat strikes . . . the eruption of new union or union-like militancy” and “pressures from below for changes in collective bargaining policies . . . for greater influence in union affairs.” He pointed to the workers’ “feeling of self-power” and the “protest direct action militancy model” of union groups. He singled out public sector workers where the teachers were “the most strike-prone” in 1966. “The vanguard place in union militancy,” he wrote, “goes to the teachers. There were 54 teacher strikes in 1966 involving almost 45,000 teachers.” He cited the comment in 1967 by a new National Education Association (NEA) secretary: “Strikes are illegal, yet teachers are calling them and making gains with them.”37 Philip Taft, Professor of Economics at Brown University, perhaps the best-known mainstream labor historian at the time, compared the “restiveness” of the late sixties to the strike years of 1919 and 1945, and viewed developments with some concern. He pointed to “the higher expectations of the work force, which leaders of unions cannot always moderate.” But he was hopeful that “discontent among workers” would “remain isolated.”38

These observations were well grounded, both the expectations and the fears. In the late sixties, strikes were increasing in the United States, and their character was changing. The New York Times called the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) “a union in terror of its rank and file.”39 In 1968, in keeping with the Times’ observation, East and Gulf Coast longshoremen carried out the first ever membership-initiated, all-union strike in their history; this 116-day work stoppage was the longest in longshore history until it was surpassed by the 123-day strike in 1971–2 on the West Coast.

The UAW, perhaps more than any other union, experienced the entire range of rank-and-file unrest, including wildcat strikes, grievance strikes, contract rejection, and extended local-isues negotiations, plus contested

32 See R. Hyman, Strikes (London: Fontana, 1972), p. 19. Strikes can be manipulated by both management and trade union leaders. The huge 1970 auto strike, according to W. Serrin, “was a political strike, a strike not to win agreement but to win ratification.” That is, it was a strike to cool off the workers. W. Serrin, The Company and the Union: The “Civilized Relationship” of the General Motors Corporation and the United Automobile Workers (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 298. Strikes can also be reactionary; see the 1968 racist New York teachers’ strikes.
local union elections, often initiated by "the restlessness of the younger union member." In 1966, the UAW leader Walter Reuther expressed the view of this from the top: "Organizing the unorganized is less crucial than the task of unionizing the organized, educating these hundreds of thousands of young workers... they don't know where we came from. They don't know where we're going. They don't know what the American labor movement is about." In 1966, one out of every three UAW members employed in the big corporations had less than five years of seniority. The 1972 strike at GM's gigantic new Lordstown, Ohio complex—where young workers, some long-haired and unshaven, fought to slow the world's fastest assembly lines—became emblematic of a youth rebellion in the factories. Gary Bryner, twenty-nine, was the president of Lordstown Local 1112, UAW. "Lordstown," he told Studs Terkel, "was the Woodstock of the working man."

In 1970, the workers' rebellion reached a high point, and New York City, historically the center of the U.S. labor movement, became the "City of Strikes," according to the Economist. Hundreds of thousands of workers participated in this wave of walkouts, becoming part of a movement that would peak the following year when 4.2 million work days would be "lost" in the city. Conflicts ranged from the "drawbridge strike"—when workers shut down bridges connecting the boroughs with Manhattan and walked off their jobs, taking with them electrical parts, handles, fuses, and keys, and leaving the drawbridges up—to the strike at New York Telephone, which, following the union's national contract ratification, continued in New York for another eight months. New York City was the starting point of the 1970 national wildcat strike of postal workers. Beginning at midnight on March 18, letter carriers and clerks walked off their jobs in Manhattan and the Bronx. By morning, strikers had stopped postal service in most of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. This was a massive wildcat strike; it was also in defiance of federal law. By Saturday, the strike had spread to Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Detroit, San Francisco, Boston, Denver, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, and dozens of other cities. Rank-and-file workers organized the strike, and no mail moved in the country's major cities. The strike lasted eight days in New York, despite the deployment of 30,000 national guardsmen. Across the nation, 200,000 workers participated in the largest wildcat strike ever.

A national truckers' wildcat followed in April, originating in a contract dispute in Chicago. The New York Times called the strike "a revolt against the union leadership," as strikers rejected a contract that included a $1.10 an hour pay raise. Roving pickets spread the strike to sixteen cities, notably Los Angeles and Cleveland. Violence was widespread. According to a New York Times reporter in Cleveland:

Strikers have set up a roving patrol system that they say can muster 300 men within an hour to stop any truck moving goods in the area. The strikers are allowing trucks carrying food, drugs and beer to continue, but they have become outraged when they have found food trucks carrying other cargo. There has been rock throwing, windshields have been smashed, tires slashed and air hoses cut.

The United Press reported that 500,000 people were out of work as a result of the strike. The governor of Ohio ordered 4,100 national guardsmen into duty to combat what he called "open warfare" on the state's highways. Among these soldiers were the guardsmen of the 145th Infantry, soon to be redeployed to Kent State University, where students were protesting the escalation of the war in Vietnam and the invasion of Cambodia. The truckers' strike lasted twelve weeks until the employers in Chicago capitulated, granting higher wage increases in a settlement that broke the Nixon administration's national wage guidelines. The truckers' rebellion stood out for what it revealed: the anger and frustration of workers; the ability of workers to spread the strike, despite opposition from both company and union; the violence of both the state and the workers; and the breadth of protest, from campus to workplace.

This wave of strikes marked a major shift in American industrial relations. In the 1950s and 1960s, the consensus of industrial relations specialists in the United States was that there existed a sort of modus vivendi between capital and labor, sometimes called the "New Deal formula of industrial relations." The trade union hierarchy had become a social layer with interests of its own, separate from the rank and file. Politically, the unions were one-party organizations, dominated by the

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41 Quoted in ibid., p. 48.
47 Ibid.
machine." Dave Beck, the 1950s IBT leader, bluntly declared, "Unions are big business." And the business unionists of those years did indeed seek stable collaborative relationships with the employers. But this truce between business and business unionism was always partial and temporary. By the late 1960s, the postwar bargain between labor and capital was in tatters, in part as employers faced falling profitability and in turn transmitted this crisis to the workers. The Vietnam War had fueled economic expansion, but by the end of the 1960s growth was slowing and the escalation of military spending was sending prices soaring, foreshadowing the "stagflation" of the decade to follow. One result was that wage and benefit increases, common in the 1950s, were far harder for the unions to win. The issue that stood out, however, was the "speedup." This was symbolized by the line speed at Lordstown, the stopwatch at UPS, the productivity drive in the coal mines, and the generalized attack on working conditions, all part of an "employers' offensive." Workers resisted, first with straightforward militant trade unionism, rooted in the 1950s and earlier. They also developed what can be called "movements." These strikes and movements reflected their efforts to counter this offensive, but also the depth of the frustration of rank-and-file workers with their unions.

Movements

These movements and the new "restlessness" can also be seen in the actions of those sections of the working class left out of the postwar prosperity—particularly workers of color and women, hitherto excluded and disenfranchised—workers who had not enjoyed the "affluence" of the postwar boom. In 1965 the United Farm Workers (UFW) launched its long campaign—the years of strikes, boycotts, fasts, and demonstrations. It became a social movement in the fields, a trade union and a civil rights movement; millions of ordinary Americans contributed to its cause, most often by boycotting grapes.

Nowhere was the "new mood" of rebellion seen more clearly than in the emergence of a black movement in the workplace. First the fact that Martin Luther King, Jr. was in Memphis in 1968 to support striking sanitation workers is well known. What is less well known is that upon his assassination, workers throughout the country left their jobs. According to one report:

"in addition to work stoppages by meat cutters, retail clerks, East Coast longshoremen and seamen, dozens of auto assembly plants all over the country had to shut down—at least for two shifts immediately following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. because black workers walked off the job. It is also known that in at least several instances the blacks were accompanied by large numbers of whites."

Black auto workers in Detroit left their jobs in the thousands, all but shutting down the city’s auto plants.

The black workers' movement, following the pattern of the black struggle, began in the South and migrated north. According to William H. Harris,

"the actions of working-class blacks ... the sacrifices and sufferings of working-class black people in both rural and urban areas throughout the South, people whose names we will never know, stirred the consciousness of the nation and made it possible for the Civil Rights Movement to succeed."

The Negro American Labor Council provided much of the funding and leadership for the 1963 march on Washington. Major victories were won by Memphis, Tennessee sanitation workers and Charleston, South Carolina hospital workers. By the mid-1970s, according to historian Michael Honey, this spilled over into industry, so that "after decades of painful effort ... black workers in a core of unionized factory jobs had torn down most Jim Crow barriers within their workplaces and unions." According to Harris, "As in other sectors of American life, blacks were no longer willing to bear the brunt of economic oppression and to treat the situation as inevitable."

"Black Power" also migrated north; in industry it represented a tactic to force both the employers and the unions to recognize the rights and demands of black workers. The automobile industry expanded in the boom years in the 1960s. In Detroit, then still the center of the automobile industry, the boom years' expansion continued, even in the aftermath of the 1967 Detroit Rebellion. The companies recruited thousands of new young workers, and a large proportion of these workers, particularly in Detroit, were black. The majority of the new recruits worked in unskilled,
often dangerous jobs, performing the monotonous, nerve-wracking tasks that led to the high turnover and absentee rates for which the industry was notorious. The origins of the black caucus movement are found in these conditions—in the automobile industry, it began in wildcat strikes and the development of a revolutionary union movement spearheaded by DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement) at Chrysler's Dodge Main plant in Detroit. Other black auto workers followed, establishing revolutionary union movements at Eldon Road (ERLUM), Ford's River Rouge plant (FRUM), and Chrysler's Jefferson Avenue assembly plant (JARUM). Workers in other industries also joined in; hospital workers organized HRUM, newspaper workers NEWRUM, and United Parcel workers UPRUM, ultimately leading to the creation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

The revolt of black workers inspired many, including white workers. It did not lead, however, to the black/white unity hoped for, certainly not in the automobile industry. When black auto workers, fighting the speedup, staged sit-in strikes in the summer of 1973 in Detroit at the Jefferson Assembly, Eldon Road, and Mack Avenue plants, they were not, for the most part, supported by whites, a few radicals excepted. This alliance that did not happen, together with the 1974 crash in automobile production, resulted in the end of the rebellion in auto.

Public Workers

The major breakthrough for workers in the postwar system of industrial relations was winning the right to organize by local, state, and federal government workers, and the subsequent organization of millions of these workers into trade unions. "The growth of US public sector unions" in the fifties and sixties was, according to Mark Maier, "analogous to the expansion of private sector unions during the 1930s." Women entered the service and public sector sections of the labor force in the millions; they became the backbone of the new teachers' movements, in particular of the NEA, now transformed into a union. In the 1970s, public employee unions grew four times as fast as total union membership, and women made up a very large proportion of these new members. These union women were joined by office workers, telephone workers, nurses, and healthcare workers. In June 1974, 4,000 northern California nurses struck forty major Bay Area hospitals and clinics, demanding, among other things, increased pay, better pensions, and a guarantee of every other weekend off. In addition, the New York Times reported, many strikers agreed with Gail Dolson of Mount Zion Hospital that the nurses' increasing "feminist consciousness" led them to seek more equal authority with the hospitals' largely male administrative staff.

The Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), founded in 1974 in Chicago, was born in a moment of great enthusiasm and embodied a potential movement to support working women and their struggles. Three thousand trade union women attended the founding convention; nearly a third were reported to be young radicals. These newcomers—trade unionism in the United States was well over a hundred years old—set out quite late to lay the foundations of public sector/service sector unionism. Their movements, developing in the midst of the transition from an industrial working class to one based on the public and service sectors, representing large numbers of women and workers of color, are, of course, of great importance. And their unions continue. These unions represent, according to labor historian David Lyddon, "even now, potentially a rising movement central to unionism in most countries."

We consider here the experience of teachers, where, interestingly, the influence of the black movement was, again, highly influential. Teachers responded to these new conditions, in particular the NEA, which was already a large organization in the 1960s. Historically, it was a professional organization; unlike the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), it had no ties to the organized labor movement. In the 1960s, however, this began to change. "Within the NEA," writes historian Marjorie Murphy, "internal changes had made it clear that the mammoth organization was slowly but

57 Georakas and Surkin, Detroit: I Do Mind Dying, p. 69.
58 The rebellion of black workers, following the long civil rights struggle, inspired various theories of a "black vanguard." In 1969, D. Montgomery, for example, wrote, "Through black caucuses, revolutionary union movements like the one at Dodge, and introduction into collective bargaining of tactics developed on the civil-rights front this influence is already being felt. In such areas as Pittsburgh hospitals, black workers are clearly leading the way for whites to follow. It is safe to say that the more effective black workers are in these new organizing efforts the more the white workers will be tempted to join them rather than oppose them." Montgomery, "What's Happening to the American Worker," p. 22-3.
59 Maier, City Unions, p. 8.
60 "Nurses on Coast Still on Strike," New York Times, June 12, 1974
62 D. Lyddon, conversation with author.
inevitably restructuring itself into a union." In the course of the 1970s, the NEA grew at a rate of nearly 100,000 new members each year, reaching the two million mark in 1980. The AFT grew as well, though not nearly so dramatically. The AFT was organized as a trade union, and its roots were in the cities, above all in New York City; it was affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Membership in the two unions came to nearly match that of the Teamsters Union, the largest of the industrial unions.

Both unions responded to changing conditions in the sixties with strikes and organizing drives. The NEA, however, quickly outpaced its rival. Of the thousands of teachers' strikes in the seventies, perhaps as many as 80 percent were led by NEA teachers; moreover, these teachers' strikes represented a grassroots movement, and the NEA was highly decentralized, certainly in comparison to the AFT. The NEA swept through the new districts, the small towns, the suburbs, and the West.

The NEA had another advantage. In these years of extensive teacher activity, the AFT was embroiled in racial disputes—a legacy, in part, of its racist confrontations with black community activists in the New York teachers' strikes of 1968. There were also conflicts with black parents in Youngstown and Newark, where black activists, including Amiri Baraka, challenged the union, even when led by black teachers. In September 1975, in Boston, 4,950 teachers, 90 percent of the workforce, struck in response to a bargaining impasse—their strike also, however, crippled the District's two-week-old, court-ordered desegregation program. The AFT welcomed the anti-affirmative action Bakke decision (the Supreme Court ruling against racial quotas) and opposed NEA policies that implemented racial and gender quotas in its governing bodies.

In the same years, the NEA, despite its conservative origins in the era of segregated schools—it organized biracial unions in the South—supported integration and affirmative action. In 1964 it ordered that all its affiliates be merged, though in 1974 the Louisiana association remained segregated. In 1967, however, Elizabeth Koontz, an African American classroom teacher from North Carolina, became the NEA's first black president. In 1972, when two black students at Southern University were shot and killed by police, the NEA joined students and black organizations in demanding an official investigation. The NEA denounced a court ruling that would not require school authorities to readjust attendance zones to keep up with racial population shifts. According to an NEA officer, "We are convinced that our Board of Education in Pasadena [California] has the intention of going back to segregated schools in September." When the AFT and the NEA abandoned unity talks in 1974, the reasons were numerous, including simply organizational issues and the problems of professionalism, the latter strongest in the NEA. But when Helen Wise, NEA president, rebutted the charge that the NEA teachers were not trade unionists, she said, fairly, that there "are many liberals within the association who think of the AFL-CIO as too conservative." She continued, "The AFT, while paying lip service to minority involvement, opposed an effective way to assure it. There is no compatibility between the NEA commitment and the AFT laissez-faire attitude on this issue." From the first, the NEA enthusiastically supported the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) for women. In 1974 it won a Supreme Court case striking down mandatory leave for pregnant teachers.

In addition, then, to aggressive organizing, including the use of the strike, the NEA, in Murphy's words, took "bolder, more progressive positions on a range of social issues." The AFT and the AFL-CIO strongly supported the war in Vietnam—they no doubt believed that American workers did as well. This was not the case with teachers, however, and the AFT paid a price. In 1970-1980, the NEA grew by a million members. The majority

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64 On NEA membership and strikes, see AFT President's Collection, Box 55, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Thanks to Dan Golodner for this.
69 Murphy, Blackboard Unions, p. 270.
71 Murphy, Blackboard Unions, pp. 205-6.
75 Murphy, Blackboard Unions, p. 261.
76 Ibid., p. 371.
77 On NEA membership and strikes, see AFT President's Collection, Box 55, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.
of these new members were women, many were black and Latina; tens of thousands attended university in the 1960s. The factors that led to the teachers’ successes were many. Certainly their movement was fueled by inflation, and then the fiscal crisis. The teachers were also, however, the products of their times. According to Murphy, "teachers complained about over-supervision, increasing bureaucratization, inappropriate assignments, and a lack of control over licensing, training, and assignments." Out of these conflicts emerged what was soon to be the nation's largest union—demonstrating that, given the right circumstances and the willingness to act, trade unions, even progressive trade unions, could still grow and succeed.

The year 1974 was the twin peak of the rebellion; strike statistics nearly matched those of 1970. Beginning in the winter, the gas crisis severely disrupted the economy. The shortage of fuel, the result of part in war in the Middle East, produced new strikes and new forms of conflict. West Virginia coal miners struck to demand that the state's governor roll back skyrocketing gas prices, citing the rising costs of long commutes to work. Then truckers, the independent operators, who were considered by some an "aristocracy of workers" and by others small businessmen in overall, emerged in an astounding movement to challenge the Nixon administration, the culture, the policies, and the energy policies. The trucker's spontaneous blockades and slowdowns first snarled traffic and then began to shut down industry. Thousands of big tractor-trailers jammed the turnpikes in Ohio and Pennsylvania and choked off the New York-Washington, D.C., corridor at the Delaware Memorial Bridge. Just hours into the first blockades, GM management closed the Lordstown assembly plant, located adjacent to the Ohio Turnpike, fearing a shortage of parts. In Toledo, factory workers left their jobs to join truckers on the interchange of Interstate 75 and the turnpike. The truckers' strikes were met with fierce resistance from the authorities, including the National Guard. Interestingly, interviews with truckers on the Ohio Turnpike in Cleveland invariably turned to Kent State University and the 1970 killings by guardsmen. If these truckers failed to develop a winning strategy, their movements remain a striking example of the capacity of workers to organize—the truckers' blockades were in some ways analogous to the sit-down strikes of an earlier era. They took control of their own workplace: the highways. There have been few more dramatic examples of the power of American workers.

78 Murphy, Blackboard Unions, p. 222.
81 C. Winslow, interviews with truckers, winter 1973-4. In author's possession.

In March, four Service Employees International Union (SEIU) locals, representing hospital, clerical, maintenance, and social workers, rejected a wage offer from San Francisco's Board of Supervisors and struck. They were joined by teachers, who honored picket lines set up at the schools. The Municipal Railway's mostly black motormen and conductors joined in, as did transit drivers. Farm workers joined substitute teachers to shut down school bus barns. Governor Ronald Reagan threatened to send in the National Guard, but the strike continued to spread. Only an early settlement by SEIU leaders prevented a much wider strike. In August 1974, Workers' Power reported, "Everywhere you turn, someone is on strike. Airline mechanics, bus drivers, copper miners, sanitation workers, firemen, hospital workers, painters, scattered Teamsters, auto workers, steelworkers and telephone workers. The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) voted to shut down the state of Ohio."

On November 12, 1974, 120,000 coal miners walked off their jobs, honoring the tradition of "No contract, no work." This strike was the first for the new union administration. The UMWA leaders had quickly disbanded the MFD, the rank-and-file organization of miners, apparently considering it superfluous. They had not, however, established anything in its place. Now, with an executive committee dominated by the old guard still in place, they faced the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA) in a nationwide confrontation. Tony Boyle, John L. Lewis's successor, had exercised dictatorial control over contract negotiations, though with increasing difficulty. In 1964, 1966, and 1971, miners, anticipating gains in a reviving market for coal, responded to his settlements with wildcat strikes. Now the UMWA leaders, in part as the result of their own efforts, were obliged to submit any agreement to the rank and file for ratification. And the rank and file entered the negotiations with very high expectations indeed. In 1974 there were 40,000 new miners in the union, many of them Vietnam War veterans. These miners—led by young militants (they referred to themselves as "radicals")—challenged the companies on all fronts: safety, productivity, job assignments, and the grievance procedure. Spearheaded by the Miners' Right to Strike Committee, they demanded that the right to strike on these issues be written into the contract. They also wanted democratically elected, full-time safety committeemen and the right to strike on safety issues.

In these years of struggle, miners had improved their wages and benefits and lowered productivity: average output of miners per day in underground

84 Nyden (see chapter 6).
mines, which reached almost sixteen tons in 1969, fell to under twelve tons by 1974, and under eight tons by 1979, no small achievement. They took issues of health and safety into their own hands—in each case using their power in the workplace, plus strike action, to do so. They were strengthened by their solidarity, the long tradition in the coalfields of honoring picket lines—a tradition so strong that a single picket, a “stranger picket,” at the mine site was sufficient to close it.

The UMWA leaders and coal operators succeeded in ending the strike, though the result was at best a stalemate. In the new agreement the miners won an improved wage package—10 percent the first year, followed by 4 percent and 3 percent in the remaining two years; they won five sick days, two additional vacation days and a national holiday, a cost-of-living allowance increased to 8 percent, and improved pensions. Still, 44 percent of miners voted to reject the settlement and stay on strike. In Ohio’s District 6, miners denounced Arnold Miller, the new president of the UMWA, burned copies of the contract, and marched through Bellaire, Ohio, chanting, “No right to safety, no work!” Rank-and-file miners had demanded a revamped grievance procedure—they received instead an additional step in an already time-consuming and cumbersome process. They had wanted elected safety committees and the right to walk away from unsafe jobs: “You can’t put production on a miner’s life,” said an angry miner. Most importantly, despite near universal support for the right to strike over local issues—and the thousands of signatures collected by the District 29 (West Virginia) Committee to Defend the Right to Strike—the national union leadership refused in bargaining to even raise the issue. This strike and the settlement exhibited the extraordinary militancy of the coal miners, as well as the impasse in the hierarchy of the union. In a fundamental way, the new leaders of the UMWA considered the 1972 election the end of the story. For significant sections of the rank and file, however, 1972 was just the beginning.

Recession

In 1974–5, the economy was in recession, the most severe since the 1930s. This new recession seemed to signal once and for all that the postwar boom was over. The country entered a new period of slowing expansion and severe cyclical crises. There were long lines at unemployment offices, and free food distribution began in the industrial centers. In the automobile industry, the workforce was reduced by a third. Jack Weinberg, a former leader of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement who had gone into industry as an organizer, was one of the auto workers fired in the aftermath of the 1973 Mack Avenue sit-in. He described the situation this way: “A month ago, under the impact of inflation, it was hard to get by on a forty hour paycheck. Already today, lay-offs make the forty hour paycheck look real sweet. . . . With survival on the mind, it’s sometimes hard to respond to questions of speed-up, health and safety, working conditions.” Weinberg called the situation “a depression . . . A year of two from now we’ll have another boom—and then another depression . . . Economic stability is a thing of the past.”

The economy did recover in 1975, but the decade ended as it had begun—in recession. Moreover, each downturn was sharper than the one that preceded it. Yet, as we know now, this pattern did not continue indefinitely; we also know that these downturns, despite the depth of the 1974–5 recession, followed by the even deeper recession in Reagan’s first years, did not produce a working-class upheaval. Stil, while 1974 marked the high tide of the rank-and-file revolt, the rebellion was far from over. The movement in the automobile industry, however, did not recover; economic recovery resulted not in new conflict, but rather in working-class retreat, then in the 1979 Chrysler concessions crisis. Elsewhere, however, the struggle continued; there were still major—indeed, historic—battles ahead. The number of strikes in 1976, for example, was nearly as high as that in 1970. Concluding this story in 1974, as some do, then, is a mistake; it conflates events and leaves out much that is important; it makes the outcome seem overly determined. It also ignores the significant confrontations to come, above all in the coalfields.

The political-economic context in the United States, however, was changing. The 1970s witnessed the decline of 1960s radicalism in the course of a developing economic crisis. This decline occurred unevenly but steadily. In 1975 the Vietnam War was over at last; the student antiwar movement had vanished. The civil rights movement, the inspiration for so much of the resistance in the sixties and seventies, had come to an end; significantly, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s idea that a

87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
91 Jeremy Brecher, a historian of U.S. strikes, concluded his chapter on this era in his book Strike! this way: “At the end of 1974, the economy entered a sharp recession . . . as in the recession of 1921, sudden mass layoffs took the steam out of the labor insurgency. . . . the result was a period of decline for the labor movement that rivaled that of the 1920’s.” Brecher, Strike! (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1997), p. 270.
poor people's movement might fuse white and black labor had never materialized. By 1975, black nationalism was "splintered, repressed and removed from political discourse."92 In some ways, of course, the black movement seemed a triumph: voting rights were won, Jim Crow was dead, and integration seemed an accomplished fact, in many ways a dazzling success. There were now, for example, black mayors in Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, and Los Angeles. It was, however, another story for black workers. Both black and white workers experienced severe increases in unemployment during the recession of 1974-5, compounding the difficulties of workers who had not recovered from the recession of 1970-1.93 This in turn was exacerbated by the fiscal crisis of the state; in New York, for example, in 1975 the leading financial institutions began refusing to lend the city money, demanding a program of austerity including "a freeze or cutback in the number of city workers, an increase in their productivity, reductions in capital spending, cutbacks in city services, and increased fees and taxes."94 In the upturn in 1975, large numbers of white workers returned to work; large numbers of blacks did not. Between 1975 and 1977, unemployment among blacks actually increased by 700,000. By 1977, black unemployment stood at an all-time postwar high, with 14.5 percent of the black labor force out of work. Black people constituted one third of the nation's poor. William Harris concluded that for blacks this was "a depression."95 This crisis also exposed the new divide between the success of the (small) black elite and the reality of black workers. This was nowhere clearer than in Atlanta. In 1977, black mayor Maynard Jackson fired nine hundred mostly black sanitation workers during a strike for higher pay. These workers, members of AFSCME, had been at the core of his support in his successful electoral campaign for mayor in 1973.96 "Radicalism and militancy were defeated," according to Manning Marable. "Reform had supplanted rebellion."97

The women's movement had far from run its course, yet there were signs that its impact too, certainly on working women, would be limited. In September 1976, 2,500 Seattle nurses were on strike, a strike that lasted sixty-five days, the longest nurses' strike ever at that point, reflecting, according to the New York Times, "the new militancy of registered nurses here and elsewhere." The issues were wages, staffing, and the agency shop. But there was also an "emotional issue" according to one doctor. "It used to be nurses could be yelled at and their opinions ignored . . . Now, they will challenge doctors and sometimes even substitute their judgment for his . . . This is the issue of parity, brought by the smart young nurses who have recently graduated and sparked by the women's movement that is making it so hard to end this strike . . ."98

CLUW, the organization of trade union women, seemed an ideal vehicle for uniting women's liberation with a movement of working-class women. CLUW also spoke to the vast increase in the numbers of working women, virtually all unorganized. Within two years, however, CLUW was essentially dead. The first constitutional convention of CLUW was held in Detroit in December 1975 to formally establish the organization. Yet as Ann Withorn reported in Radical America, this meeting "for all practical purposes, ended the struggle. The bureaucrats have gained solid control of the organization, although in order to gain their victory, they were forced to destroy CLUW as a widely based mass organization within the trade unions."99 Olga Madar, a UAW careerist, was elected president. The radicals contested the election but were easily defeated. Madar, speaking for the majority, according to the New York Times, "expressed the hope that the leftist women might leave the coalition and turn their attention elsewhere."100

There were other troubling signs. In October 1975, pressmen struck the Washington Post in response to the paper's plans to automate production, replace workers, and, in publisher Katharine Graham's words, "eliminate archaic union practices."101 It soon emerged that the Post was prepared to destroy the union and had spent two years planning to do so. It intended to publish without the unions. This was not altogether necessary; the majority of journalists crossed pressmen's picket lines or were flown in by helicopter. In the bitter and highly publicized dispute, the strikers were called criminals and Luddites; they were compared to "Belfast snipers" and "airline highjackers"—the 1975 equivalent of terrorists.102 Fifteen pressmen were charged with felonies, the Post claiming the pressmen were

100 Ibid., p. 187.
102 The use of the term "Luddite" is very interesting, especially in a period of rapid technological innovation. Raymond Williams wrote, "What is now called Luddism, or wildcat militancy, is very often, at root, a fight . . . to use machines rather than be used by them." Quoted in R. Hyman, Strikers, p. 172. "Working Class Defeat," Socialist Worker, May 1977.
Rank-and-File Organization

If everything seemed possible in 1970, what was still possible in 1976? Two movements in the Teamsters illustrate that the rebellion continued. In 1976, Frank Fitzsimmons, IBT president, called an official nationwide strike of truckers in freight, under pressure from the rank and file, including the new organization Teamsters for a Decent Contract (TDC). The following October, TDC became Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU).108 The same spring, the IBT struck UPS in the central states, this time pressured by UPSurge, the organization of the UPS rank and file. The settlement in freight was met with a wildcat strike in Detroit. UPSurge responded to the UPS settlement with wildcat strikes in eight Midwestern cities. In the Teamsters, still the largest union in the country, the “rebellion from below” provided the foundation for building a national rank-and-file movement within the union from the bottom up. In 1976, TDU was founded at Kent State University in Ohio; audaciously, activists set out to challenge the leadership of this corrupt, often brutal union with close ties to organized crime. TDU quickly grew to a movement of thousands; it was active in contract negotiations, promoted solidarity in strikes and among jurisdictions, sponsored by-law reforms, and exposed corruption and criminality. Its greatest achievements came in 1991 when it played a key role in the victory of Ron Carey, the UPS workers’ leader, in his contest for the union’s presidency. This in turn led to a successful challenge to the AFL-CIO old guard leadership in 1995. TDU then was instrumental in the 1997 national strike at UPS—an unparalleled victory and the single most important strike of the last decades of the twentieth century. Carey called the victory a “historic turning point,” saying that “American workers have shown they can stand up to corporate greed.”109

UPSurge, founded in Cleveland, also in 1975, was allied with the TDU but differed in that it was first of all organized to fight the company. Its initial focus was preparation for the 1976 central states contract negotiations. It began in the central states and was built on an informal shop stewards’ network with roots in decades of militant activity. In the sixties and seventies there were continuous conflicts and strikes, official and unofficial, including the traveling Pennsylvania wildcat pickets in 1973.110 In 1970, New York UPS workers struck, demanding that package drivers be allowed to wear American flag badges on their uniforms. The wildcat strike ended with the

responsible for millions of dollars of damage and a riot in the pressroom. In fact, the pressmen had done nothing more than temporarily disable the presses on which they worked, by removing key parts. The Post strike, which never officially ended, only concluded in April 1977 when the pressmen pled guilty to reduced charges.102 This defeat inevitably assumed a larger significance. It took place, after all, just a short walk from the palatial headquarters of the AFL-CIO, minutes from the Capitol—and support was forthcoming from neither place.

In 1976 Jimmy Carter led the Democrats back to power in Washington, but his regime was, perhaps, the worst for labor in the postwar period. “Government,” he declared, in a theme commonplace today, “cannot eliminate poverty, provide a bountiful economy, reduce inflation, save our cities, cure illiteracy, provide energy, or mandate goodness.”104 In the course of his tenure in the White House, Jimmy Carter attempted to impose wage restrictions, challenged the rights of public workers, forced striking railroad workers into a “cooling-off period,” deregulated trucking and airlines, and invoked the Taft-Hartley Act in the miners’ strike. Despite Democratic majorities in both Houses, labor law reform was defeated. While the 1978 Humphrey-Hawkins bill promised full employment, in fact it was designed to produce very little, relying, as Carter favored, overwhelmingly on the private sector.105

Still, by the middle of 1975, employment was nearly back to pre-recession levels, and the workers’ insurgency remained very much alive, above all in the coalfields. In the summers of 1975 and 1976 there were nationwide wildcat strike movements in the coalfields—the first, of 80,000, for the right to strike, and the second, of 120,000 (virtually the entire workforce in the East), against the injunctions imposed on striking miners. This continued into the summer of 1977, when, in anticipation of a national strike, 85,000 miners struck.106 In 1976, the number of major strikes (5,648) nearly matched that of 1970 (5,716), though the number of strikers was not so high.107 In the years 1976–9, there were again strikes everywhere, that is, in every sector and throughout the country. At the same time, new movements emerged.

105 Harris, The Harder We Run, p. 185.
106 Nyden (see chapter 6).
108 D. La Botz (see chapter 7).
ban on flags overturned and twenty fired drivers reinstated. But before it was settled, Ron Carey, the president of the New York local, was forced to add another issue to arbitration—the demand of black drivers to wear black liberation badges. The New York City United Parcel workforce was about 33 percent black at that time. United Parcel led the trucking industry in hiring blacks and minorities, then women. Its workers were younger and more diverse than average in trucking.

In this period, UPS became the largest employer of Teamsters, as well as the largest transportation company in the world. The company was well known, even internationally, for its brown trucks, its military-style uniforms, and its ubiquitous supervisors armed with clipboards and stopwatches. In an industry still dominated by small and mid-sized firms, UPS became an innovator—it specialized in "Taylorism," a form of scientific management that took control of every detail in work, producing, in Harry Braverman's words, "the disassociation of the labor process from the skills of the worker." UPS introduced new technologies, added airfreight, and brought in students and young workers as part-timers. The finding "convention" of UPSurge was held in Indianapolis on January 31, 1976; it was astonishing. Six hundred and fifty UPSers gathered in a Holiday Inn in the western suburbs of the city. The meeting was part business, part protest rally, part celebration—it was certainly unparalleled in UPS history. Workers came from as far as Portland, Oregon, and Boston, Massachusetts, though overwhelmingly they came from the central states. A steering committee was elected, with representatives from eleven cities. Ten contract demands were chosen, which focused on the following areas: part-timers (same pay rates, first bid on openings), appearance standards (uniform but no further restrictions), supervisors working (none), grievance procedure (innocent until proven guilty), overtime (voluntary and at double pay), health, welfare, and maternity leave (length of leave set by doctor, not company), unsafe equipment (right to refuse to operate), sick days (twelve per year), holidays (the day after Thanksgiving), and radios (no restrictions on CBs and personal equipment). UPSurge made no economic demands but endorsed the appeal of Vince Meredith, the Louisville chief steward: "Vote the first [offer] down; the second one is always better."

While UPSurge existed, from 1975 to 1979, it exposed the depth of rank-and-file unrest, this time in a powerful, national, highly profitable company. The UPSurge steering committee was, in essence, a central states' shop stewards' movement, that is, nearly every member was a working, elected, recallable, shop-floor leader. UPSurge joined these leaders into an organization of local activists, representing dozens of workplaces spread across thousands of miles—but independent of the union's leadership—in a remarkable display of workers' democracy. The UPSurge campaign emphasized the inhumanity of the working conditions at UPS and exposed the company's reliance on coercion in its drive for profits.

Steel

The steel industry once dominated U.S. industry; its scale was gigantic. In the Pittsburgh region alone, a dozen great mills lined the banks of the Monongahela River. Nationally, hundreds of thousands worked in basic steel. In 1959, 519,000 steelworkers struck for 116 days, at that point the largest single strike in U.S. history. In the seventies, however, steelworkers were losing jobs; they faced stagnant and declining incomes and witnessed increasing numbers of plant closings. The industry and the union blamed foreign competition, but just as important was overcapacity in an aging, capital-intensive industry. The steel companies used the crisis to combine jobs, intensify "discipline," and increase productivity, at the same time replacing older facilities with new technology. In 1973 the companies and the union agreed to the Experimental Negotiating Agreement (ENA), a national no-strike pledge, that exchanged the right to strike in national bargaining for cash bonuses, cost-of-living adjustments, and widened access to arbitration. Steelworkers retained the right to strike in local issues, and in 1977 there were more than a hundred strike votes, compared to just seven in 1974. All this produced a rebellion within the union, first and foremost in District 31, the United Steelworkers' (USW) largest, based in the Chicago-Gary area. UPSurge, Monthly UPS Workers Paper, #10 (May 1976).


112 H. Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century (New York: Monthly Review, 1974). See introduction, pp. 3-41. On "Job Dissatisfaction in the 1970s," Braverman writes, "The apparent increase in active dissatisfaction has been attributed to a number of causes, some having to do with the characteristics of the workers—younger, more years of schooling, 'infected' by the new-generational restlessness—and others having to do with the changing nature of work itself. One reporter cites the belief that 'American Industry in some instances may have pushed technology too far by taking the last few bits of skill out of jobs, and that a point of human resistance has been reached.'"


114 UPSurge, Monthly UPS Workers Paper, #10 (May 1976).

115 UPSurge, Monthly UPS Workers Paper, #1 (September 1973).


Ed Sadlowski, a local official, defeated the incumbent for the position of district director. In other districts, Youngstown and the Iron Range, reformers won control in important local unions.

The insurgents proposed to end the 1973 ENA, demanded the right to ratify contracts, and sought to elect a new national leadership to mobilize the rank and file. In 1975, dissidents and local militants formed Steelworkers Fight Back, a national network of oppositionists. The decision was made to run Sadlowski for USW president with Fight Back as the campaign organization, even then a controversial decision. Nevertheless, the 1976–7 campaign developed a crusading spirit focusing on issues like the ENA, opposition to a dues increase, and the right to ratify contracts. This spirit was supported by the fact that Sadlowski himself had been outspoken on broader social issues, such as the Vietnam War and civil rights. In the end, Sadlowski lost, though he received 43 percent of the votes, including a majority in the largest locals, which were mostly in basic steel. In defeat, Fight Back soon disappeared; the promising network of oppositionists dissolved. This tragedy for steelworkers, in ways similar to the disbanding of the MFD, left workers with no organizational framework and, in Kim Moody’s words, “with no place to discuss strategy, train new leaders, or recruit in other jurisdictions. The reform movement remained confined to basic steel—and that industry was on the verge of a precipitous decline.”

Domestic steel plummeted sharply following 1979, as steel corporations carried out drastic rationalizations. Two hundred thousand steelworkers lost their jobs. In early 1980, steelworkers in Youngstown, Ohio, occupied the district headquarters of U.S. Steel in a bold but desperate, abortive attempt to stave off shutting down their mill. The sit-in was quickly abandoned on orders from the local union officers and their advisers.

In the late 1970s, strikes continued to be the order of the day. The example of successful UFW strikes and boycotts of grapes and lettuce was followed by strikes and consumer boycotts in clothing and textiles at Farah and J.P. Stevens, as well as at Coors Brewing. These boycotts involved considerable numbers of supporters, other workers, as well as the general public. In September 1976, canny workers near Toledo struck, then occupied the Morgan Packing Company facilities. The strikers erected barricades, held off the authorities, and won, in a crucial early victory for the

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18 Ibid., p. 72.
19 Moody, An Injury to All, p. 226.
23 Reports of these strikes can be found in the New York Times and other national papers.
24 F. Bardacke (see chapter 5).
national strike at the end of 1977. The strike of 160,000 miners lasted 110
days, continuing despite the Taft-Hartley injunction issued by President
Jimmy Carter.125 Twice, rank-and-file miners defied UMW leaders and
rejected concessionary contracts. It was a “classic” strike, the “industrial
equivalent,” Hyman suggests, “of war between nations.”126 The operators
wanted what miners called a “1930’s-style contract” with the right to
fire strikers, big health deductibles, and punitive absentee controls.127
Critics contended that the union called the strike in the worst possible
circumstances; there were months of coal stockpiles on the ground.
Critics also felt the union leadership had no intention of winning the
strike.128 Nevertheless, the rank-and-file miners did, and they fought the
companies—all subsidiaries of giant energy corporations—to a bloody
standstill. They also fought state troopers, national guardsmen in Indiana,
and thousands of company guards and goons. Three miners were shot
and killed on picket lines, hundreds were arrested, and thousands were
fined. There was widespread sympathy for the striking miners, including
solidarity rallies, food collections, and caravans, but no other union took
action in their support. The miners fought alone, nevertheless, and they
defeated the companies on many issues. Only hunger forced them back.
Even then, 40 percent of the miners voting rejected the settlement,
preferring to fight on. The miners were exhausted in 1978, but not
defeated. Neither, however, were they prepared for what was to come—
the wholesale removal of coal mining to the West.129

In this brief account of the rank-and-file rebellion of the long seventies,
I have pointed to the inherent strength of workers, their capacity to
organize, and the potential for democracy in their movements, that is,
of a real “participatory” democracy—in contrast to the passive, formal,
cash democracy of our times. I have emphasized the importance of the
workplace—the heart of corporate capitalism—and the struggle there for
control. The conflicts of the 1970s were widespread and intense. It was in
the 1980s that the annual average of major strikes collapsed to eighty-one

125 Nyden (see chapter 6).
126 Hyman, Strikes, p. 20.
127 Nyden (see chapter 6).
128 Perry, Collective Bargaining and the Decline of the United Mine Workers. See pp. 231–3 for
a critique of the union leadership.
129 An interesting pamphlet published in the late 1970s by David Greene and signed by a
group of local officers, including future UMWP president Cecil Roberts, warned of
the danger of western coal and called for, among other things, “People before profits . . .
a rational, humane development of western coal with the guarantee of protecting our
jobs, our hospital cards and our pensions.” It also called for “nationalization of the energy
Bureau of Labor Statistics reported only strikes of one thousand or more workers.
131 See Moody, US Labor in Trouble and Transition, p. 100. Membership in U.S. unions
reached its high point in 1980 at 20,093,000, though trade union density was rapidly falling,
from a high in 1953 of 32.5 percent to 23 percent in 1980. Today the figures are 12 percent
for all unions, and 7.4 percent in the private sector.
of the employers' offensive. In the major unions, only the miners were successful in overthrowing an established leadership, and even then, just temporarily.

Results and Prospects
What of the larger demands? The demand for "workers' control," the ownership and control of industry and its democratic management by the workers in the interest of all the people—these must now seem utterly utopian. The fight for democratic unions, for unions capable of withstanding the corporate offensive, must also seem utopian. Today there are academics and activists who argue that strikes are obsolete and that democracy just holds unions back. And for some time now, historians, even historians of labor, have been the 1970s not as a decade of great hope, but rather as a time when labor, big labor, was defeated—big labor, one supposes, being better than no labor. The seventies are commonly seen as the beginnings of the backlash and the new majority, of the conservative consensus of the late twentieth century, with workers—in particular, white male workers—as a core constituency of the new right. Of course there is truth in this, but only if one chooses to ignore the very real alternatives posed at the time. In the 1970s, the United States was contested terrain, and the struggle for the allegiance of workers was central. Many turned to the right, and this was a great tragedy—we live with the consequences.

Still, this is not the end of history, and, following Michael Watts, in his reflection on 1968, this volume should "not be read as a hymnal" for the long seventies. He writes that from the struggles of 1968, "the enlargement of the field of the possible... emerged... It is a measure of the conservatism of our era and the capacity to silence the past that such innovations are now seen to be so retrograde as to be almost an embarrassment to articulate in public." What were the "innovations" of these "rebellions from below"? I will just suggest the reinvention of direct action, the assault on racism in the workplace, the smashing down of barriers to women and the demand for dignity ("human rights") on the job, as well as the right of the rank and file to dissent, to challenge the leadership, to organize independently. They include the revival of workers' councils and roving pickets. The shop steward, in the fifties and sixties too often reduced to a policeman on a beat, was redefined as fighter, organizer, and leader. The tradition of popular participation in the most basic of institutions, industry and the unions, was reborn. Also, I might add, the lived experience, however limited, of autonomy, self-government, and the taste of workers' control. Is this of any significance? Were these causes in vain? The world remains on the path of industrialization, corporate power reigns virtually unchecked, and never have the stakes been higher—in this phase the fate of the earth itself is the issue. We must hope that others will find insights in these movements.

Finally, what were the weaknesses of the rank-and-file rebellion? The workers' movements inevitably reflected the unions, the institutions in which they developed. They were not, for the most part, able to transcend the limitations this imposed upon them. The movements reflected the deep racial and gender divides in the United States. American workers never overcame these divides, and class solidarity remained illusory—white racism prevented the fusing of the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the working-class movement.

The strikes and rank-and-file movements overwhelmingly remained confined to single industries and unions, and while there was often intense solidarity within individual industries and unions, it rarely spilled from industry to industry or union to union. Certainly there was widespread sympathy for workers in struggle, but there was no organized way of expressing such support.

The rank-and-file revolt produced no center, no coordinators, and no recognizable leaders. The movement developed no coherent ideology—no conscious, generalized mission. This problem was compounded by the very geography of the country—the great distances between industrial centers, the isolation of important groups, like black workers in the inner cities, coal miners in Appalachia, farmworkers in the California valleys.

While intimately connected to the social movements of the time, the rank-and-file movements developed separately, in time as well as space—in the early seventies the student antiwar movement was a thing of the past, and the radical black movement had been crushed. The rank-and-file rebellion of the 1960s and 1970s had debilitating weaknesses of its own. It replicated the hierarchies of existing industrial structure and union organization—telephone operators were divided from telephone repairmen. Most crucially, militants confined their activity, and even their independent organizations, within the boundaries of bureaucratic business unionism. They often focused on replacing union leaders, and in some locals, including one national union (the UMW), they succeeded. This did not, however, alter the fundamental structural conservatism of the trade unions and their officialdom.

Repression, both by the employers and from the state, played a significant role, and striking workers, in particular in the absence of official union support, were often defenseless in the face of violence. The employers increasingly contemplated a union-free workforce. Individually, they implemented a panoply of strategies that are now legendary, including hiring

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133 Watts, "1968 and All That..." p. 182.
union-busting lawyers, running decertification campaigns, and moving to non-union regions in the South and abroad. The level of violence in the 1970s did not match that of 1919 or the 1930s; nevertheless, workers routinely faced armed guards, police, and national guardsmen, as well as strike-breakers and union goons. When not collaborating, the unions were also enforcers. The IBT was known for its violent repression of dissent, but other unions followed suit, as when the UAW mobilized one thousand armed officials and loyalists to break the 1973 strike at Chrysler's Mack Avenue stamping plant in Detroit. The murder of mine worker leader Jock Yablonski and the beatings of oppositionists in the Teamsters were the most notorious examples of union leaders' violent repression of dissent.

Finally, the strikers of the 1970s never faced up to an essential problem: as Richard Hyman has written, "the only real solution to the strike problem lies in a transformation of the status of labor and the whole structure of control in industry: replacing minority domination and the pursuit of profit by democratic control and the satisfaction of human needs."

In conclusion, the labor movement in the United States, we should repeat, remained at end of this decade a potentially powerful force. The exhaustion of the rank-and-file rebellion was not the defeat of the labor movement. This came—and it was decisive—not in 1974, and not in 1978, but in 1981, when the new president, Ronald Reagan, fired the striking air traffic controllers and decertified their union, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO).

The air traffic controllers represented a small number of workers; their union, in terms of the labor movement, was peripheral. The conflict was, then, symbolic. But in this case, the symbols represented life and death for trade unionism in the United States. Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL-CIO, responded to the new Reagan administration's aggressive anti-union stance by organizing "Solidarity Day" in Washington, D.C.—September 19, 1981. Hundreds of thousands of workers responded, PATCO prominently among them, marching in massive battalions through the Capitol, in a spectacular display of trade union power. This demonstration dramatically symbolized the possibility of stopping Reagan, saving PATCO, and rescuing what remained of trade union strength and organization, all of which was still considerable in 1981.

It was not to happen. Solidarity Day came and went. Support for PATCO was not forthcoming; indeed, the AFL-CIO privately undermined any possibility of practical solidarity, and the air traffic controllers' union was lost. After that there was no coming back; the floodgates of concessions and systematic retreat were opened, and union membership collapsed. The 1980s were a catastrophe for the labor movement. "The chickens came home to roost." The rest of the story is well known.

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135 Hyman, Strikes, p. 171.