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## **The CIO in Rural Massachusetts:**

### **Sprague Electric and North Adams, 1937-1944**

**Maynard Seider**

With the virtual demise of the Knights of Labor by the beginning of the twentieth century, and the collapse of the Industrial Workers of the World after World War I, union-minded industrial workers faced a dismal outlook for the 1920s. The dominant union organization, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), focused on craft workers, and generally ignored the millions of "semi-skilled" and "unskilled" workers who labored in the mass production industries.

Nonetheless, corporate leaders feared a future wave of unionization, and many established employee relation plans, or company unions. Controlled by management, these plans allowed worker representatives to bring complaints and suggestions to management, but without any type of effective power. As Bethlehem Steel's Charles Schwab explained his company's plan, "I will not permit myself to be in a position of having labor dictate to management."<sup>1</sup>

In 1935, the Wagner Act outlawed company unions. Within three years, the Depression-era militancy of the newly organized Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) gave birth to worker-controlled unions with over four million members.<sup>2</sup> In some plants, however, the company union remained in existence, and, with the help of management, held the new CIO challenge at bay.

One such company was Sprague Specialties, located in North Adams, a small, multi-ethnic city in the northwestern hills of Massachusetts. In 1937 a company union emerged, but within a

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1. David Brody, "The CIO after 50 Years," Dissent (Fall, 1985), p. 58.

2. Thomas Brooks, Toil and Trouble (New York, 1971), p. 192.

year the CIO mounted a challenge to it. The new union lost this initial contest, but returned to mount a much more formidable challenge at Sprague during World War II.

An analysis of these struggles, including the reasons for the CIO defeat at Sprague, should help us to understand the dynamics of labor relations in plants like Sprague's, situated in relatively isolated small cities. Most of the research and writing on the CIO has focused on organizing drives and successes in big cities and major factories.<sup>3</sup> An examination of a hotly contested, though unsuccessful, drive in a smaller, more rural environment will help to broaden the scope of research on the social history of the CIO's first decade.

"Electrical Industry Employing 1,000 to Locate Here," boldly proclaimed the front-page headline in 1929.<sup>4</sup> With the aid of local businessmen, R. C. Sprague, the son of a noted inventor with North Adams roots, decided to move his condenser operation from Quincy to an old textile mill in the Berkshire hills. Production of condensers (capacitors) began in early 1930. Young women, most without previous factory experience, made up a majority of the work force, engaging in light manufacturing.

In 1936, the first recorded strike occurred, a one-day walkout, and the next year employees established their first union. Participants differ as to the circumstances of its formation, and even as to the year of its founding,<sup>5</sup> but according to the "facts" presented by a National Labor Relations Board decision in 1940, the idea for the union came from Carleton Shugg, Sprague's vice president and plant manager.<sup>6</sup>

In March of 1937, a wage dispute led to a two-day strike in the can shop. Gerry Steinberg, who began his career in Quincy, and worked at the North Adams plant since 1930, remembered the strike as culminating from a number of grievances "boiling over." While it started with "one small group,"

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3. See, for example, James R. Green, The World of the Workers: Labor in Twentieth-Century America (New York, 1980).

4. North Adams Transcript, October 3, 1929.

5. See Raymond C. Bliss, "A Study of Union History at the Sprague Electric Company in North Adams, Mass., 1929-1970," Williams College Honors Thesis, 1976; and Stewart Burns, "'Like a Family': Women Workers at Sprague Electric, 1930-1980," unpublished report for Shifting Gears, a project of the Massachusetts Foundation for Humanities and Public Policy.

6. N.L.R.B. decision, 1940, case no. c-1040.

within a couple of hours "the entire plant was practically empty." Steinberg recalled that the strike lasted "three or four days."<sup>7</sup> Shugg "settled the strike by calling the strikers and nonstrikers together, and proposing a representation plan, to settle grievances."<sup>8</sup> At that time, the Supreme Court had not yet reached a decision on the constitutionality of the Wagner Act, and that first labor organization came to be called — literally — the "Sprague Company Union."<sup>9</sup> The following week, Shugg ran elections for representatives and officers. The company furnished cards, dittoed the union's constitution and by-laws, and allowed union meetings to be held at the plant. As Shugg himself testified, "I think I definitely took the leadership in the formation of the Sprague Company Union."<sup>10</sup>



Gerry Steinberg. Photo provided by Rhoda Steinberg

Several weeks after the formation of the Sprague Company Union, a representative of an AFL union, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, spoke to a meeting of about 125 Sprague employees. When Steinberg told Shugg that his role in starting the company union would lead to a

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7. George A. Piendak, "The Independent Condenser Workers Union, Local #2: A Study of Local Unionism" (Williams College: unpublished manuscript, 1965), p. 14; Case No. c-1040, p. 4.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Case No. c-1040, p. 4.

"bona fide" union entering Sprague, Shugg responded: "that is a fine way to show your appreciation of what I have done for you."<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Shugg also used the carrot in responding to such threats, by accepting a request from the Sprague Company Union for a vacation plan and for time and a half wages for holiday and weekend work.

The paternalistic loyalty assumed by Shugg did permeate the employee culture, but not without a sense of workers' rights. The first generation of Sprague workers at the Beaver Street plant thought highly of Shugg, and while that did not keep them from unionizing or striking, it did lead to seemingly contradictory behaviors. For example, one retiree, Emma Gould, remembered a strike when employees walked a picket line while simultaneously taking up a collection for Shugg, who was ill at the time. Years later, Gould laughed at the incident, shaking her head, and adding, "How stupid we were! How stupid can you get — really!"<sup>12</sup> Kenny Russell, who worked in management for most of his more than forty years at Sprague, recalled his early years on production in the can shop, while Shugg still served as the boss. The two-hundred can shop employees got together and presented a petition to Shugg, asking for a raise. Despite this show of courage, they must have felt intimidated enough to protect the identity of their leaders, so they creatively fashioned their petition into a circle, leaving no single name at the top.<sup>13</sup>

When Emma Gould explained the good feelings that the first wave of Sprague employees held for the plant manager, despite their low wages, she reasoned that their pay wasn't Shugg's fault, as "He didn't own the company."<sup>14</sup> Despite this caveat in Shugg's case, numerous workers nonetheless held very strong and positive feelings for R. C. Sprague himself who, in fact, did "own the company."

In April of 1937, the Supreme Court ruled the Wagner Act constitutional, thereby upholding legislation making company unions illegal. Shugg responded to this change by suggesting to union president Charles Dean that the union simply change its

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11. Ibid.

12. Interview with Emma Gould, 1991.

13. Interview with Kenny Russell, 1991.

14. Interview with Gould.

name and meeting-place. Thus, at the beginning of May, Sprague helped create the Independent Condenser Workers Union (hereafter referred to as ICW). How independent was it? Once again, Sprague management used its stationary and duplicating facilities to print the constitution and bylaws, membership was openly sought on Sprague property, and on company time, and all employees became members. While the union was recognized by management as the exclusive representative, "it never attempted to secure a contract."<sup>15</sup>

Others have different memories of the union beginnings at Sprague. According to one version, in 1937 about one hundred workers met with Shugg and convinced him to recognize the new local.<sup>16</sup> Mabel Lewitt had already worked at Sprague for two years. Along with her husband Leonard, she recalled a key role that she played in starting the union:

I had to walk two miles to work and I couldn't punch in until the work came down my line. Sometimes I wouldn't even work at all and they'd send me back home. Then, I would no more than get back home and they would send for me and I had to go back again . . . . And the foremen's wives were working with them, their aunts, their uncles, their brothers, you name it. So we formed the ICW #1. "The first thing we did was to stop foremen from having members of their family working for them any more. Next, we got four hours of guaranteed work if we reported to work, which was no more than right. And we got rid of "gravy" jobs. Work had to be divided equally, good and bad."<sup>17</sup>

Gerry Steinberg also recalls the ICW's origins as coming from the rank and file. Elected chairman of the Grievance Board, a key position in the union, he remembers that the workers "made reasonable attempts to keep the union dissociated from the

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15. Ibid., p. 5.

16. Burns, "Like a Family," pp. 18-19.

17. Robert Paul Gabrielsky, "The Evolution of the Marshall Street Complex in North Adams," Historical Journal of Massachusetts, XIX (Winter, 1991), p. 33.

company." Nonetheless, Steinberg recognized that because of the paucity of information in employee hands, they were forced "to accept pretty much as gospel" Sprague's arguments in regard to wages, hours, and conditions of work.<sup>18</sup>

Over the next three decades, Sprague skillfully used a blend of economic and political power, along with a well-developed paternalism, and a variety of social and recreational services, to keep a national union out of the city, and generally to maintain control over a relatively low-paid, but dedicated, labor force.<sup>19</sup> A small group of machine shop employees successfully organized a local of the International Association of Machinists in 1949, but nearly two decades would pass from that point before the office, technical, and production workers would belong to national unions.

The ICW maintained its status through the latter years of the Great Depression, during World War II, and until the end of the 1960s. Yet, many other electrical plants, including one just twenty miles away in Pittsfield and another fifty miles away in Schenectady, had been organized by a national CIO union, the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (hereafter referred to as UE). With a reputation of Communist domination and militant action, the union had enrolled thirty thousand workers in seven General Electric plants, including the two giants facilities, in Lynn and Schenectady.<sup>20</sup>

The UE and other national unions had an interest in organizing Sprague, and the fact that they tried and failed served as a point of pride for the supporters of the ICW. They noted that the UE even had one of its own organizers working at Sprague, but they were still stymied. The dominant view seemed to be that the local work force was satisfied with the independent union.

The reality, however, appears to be different. As early as 1937, at the height of CIO organizing in the United States, the

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18. Piendak, "The Independent Condenser Workers Union, Local #2," pp. 15-16.

19. Gabrielsky, "The Evolution of the Marshall Street Complex in North Adams," pp. 28-30.

20. James J. Matles and James Higgins, Them and Us: Struggles of a Rank-and-File Union (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974), p. 84.

UE expressed an interest in the North Adams plant.<sup>21</sup> Besides General Electric, UE had already organized radio assembly shops, the prime customer for Sprague's condensers, as well as half a dozen condenser manufacturers in New York.

The local opportunity for the CIO union came early in 1938, when management forced the Sprague employees to take a ten percent pay cut, "on the plea . . . that the company was operating in the red, and [that it was] unable to meet the competition of other manufacturers."<sup>22</sup> Since the independent union had no research staff able to analyze the financial status of Sprague and the industry, it simply accepted the company's conclusions and the ten percent pay cut. This inability to challenge the company on financial research would plague the union for the next three decades. When the ICW finally lost an election to a national union in 1967, its detractors still focussed on the need to bring in a sophisticated research team.

Tom Dwyer, a UE organizer, working the General Electric plant in Pittsfield, made contacts at Sprague, where he received strong support in his proposal to bring in a union speaker to discuss the company's financial position. In fact, Gerry Steinberg remembered Sprague workers initiating the meeting with the union organizer, who presented "information which contradicted" management.<sup>23</sup> In a June 15, 1938, letter, UE's Director of Research-Education William Mitchell claimed:

Sprague is in an excellent position and certainly has no basis for bellyaching . . . . Not only do the assets of Sprague far overshadow the liabilities, but the company has also taken the precaution of socking away over a half million dollars — just in case things get a little dull. When things get dull of course the people at Sprague lose their jobs and

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21. Matles to Dwyer, December 15, 1937, in the United Electrical Workers Union archives, Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh.

22. Dwyer to Research Department, February 3, 1938, in United Electrical Workers Union Archives.

23. Piendak, "The Independent Condenser Workers Union, Local #2," p. 17.



their pay envelopes, but the stock holders . . . continue to draw dividends out of this kitty.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, Sprague reported to the Board that the company was "in a strong liquid position," and George Flood, the Treasurer, announced that the company's strength justified a total dividend payment of \$12,000.<sup>25</sup> During the following year, the company reported a first quarter and a second quarter profit. In August, while the "wage adjustment plan" had already been accepted by the employees, R. C. Sprague told the board about his decision to spend company funds on a new plant newspaper. At a cost of no more than \$300 per issue, the paper would be "a means to develop an improved relationship" with the workers, something management had been wanting to do "for some time."<sup>26</sup>

The next two months at Sprague brought a flurry of activity. At the beginning of March, a group of Sprague employees visited union headquarters in New York City, where they met the national union president (and the CIO vice president), James Carey. They also toured several unionized condenser factories in the metropolitan area. In an article in the *Transcript*, union organizer Thomas Dwyer clarified comparable condenser industry wages, and documented the relatively low wages at Sprague. The *Transcript* reporter also noted that about twenty-five Sprague employees attended a debate at Williams College on the CIO.<sup>27</sup>

On March 18, Carey traveled to North Adams, where he spoke to an audience of about four hundred workers. Carey argued for the benefits of a nationally organized condenser work force, with a standard minimum wage, in effect keeping individual companies from competing with each other, and setting one group of employees against another. After Carey spoke, workers from three New York area unionized condenser firms discussed their own working conditions and wages. This would not be the last time that union activists from New York and New Jersey plants came to Sprague to help organize the workers. They

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24. Letter in the United Electrical Workers Union archives.

25. Sprague Board of Directors meeting, minutes, December 10, 1937.

26. Ibid., August 25, 1938.

27. North Adams Transcript, March 18, 1938.

came from "strong, well-organized tough locals . . . and they were very militant people who really believed in spreading the word. And they understood that they had to organize these places like Sprague . . . ."28 The North Adams workers must have been impressed as they voted, unofficially, to affiliate with the pioneering CIO union.<sup>29</sup>

The momentum continued to grow. The next day the ICW executive board announced that an official affiliation vote would be taken at its March 22nd meeting. By this time, Sprague's management had become actively involved in heading off the possible union affiliation. Sprague Vice President Carleton Shugg called in the ICW leadership, and scolded them about their pro-CIO "organizational activities," warning them that they "were doing harm to the bulk of the workers."<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, the vote that evening favored the union, 51 to 46. Within three days, a charter had been issued to the new local, with Charles Dean serving as president. Dean's willingness to take the presidency must have been a great coup to the union faction, as he left his ICW vice presidency to do so. The new group quickly rented office space in town, and it enrolled twenty members.

Meanwhile, at a meeting attended by 145 employees, opponents of the UE established a "new" independent union, which was simply called Independent Condenser Workers Union #2 (hereafter referred to as ICW #2). Dean complained that the anti-CIO group did not publicize the meeting, and that those who came "represented a picked group . . . and included almost all of the supervisors and assistant foremen . . . , salaried workers and members of the laboratory staff." Dean went on to say that "while it would form a splendid basis for a mutual benefit association, it was hardly a good nucleus for a labor union."<sup>31</sup>

A week later UE Local 249 filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board, alleging that Sprague management violated the Wagner Act by helping to organize the ICW #2. On another front, UE supporters initiated a series of meetings with

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28. Interview with Hugh Harley, 1992.

29. North Adams Transcript, March 19, 1938.

30. National Labor Relations Board, case C-1040, p. 7.

31. North Adams Transcript, March 24, 1938.

employees, department by department, in a drive to increase membership.<sup>32</sup> Some meetings were even held outdoors, as "Sprague put pressure" on the owners of local halls to keep the CIO union from meeting in their establishments.<sup>33</sup>

On April 27th, after repeated requests from both unions for recognition, Sprague management designated ICW #2 as the official bargaining unit for production workers, claiming that it had enrolled a majority of the employees. Despite Sprague's recognition of the independent union, UE organizers continued efforts to increase its membership. Local 249 grew in size and influence, and soon began publishing one thousand copies of a bi-weekly newsletter, with local and national labor news, editorials, sports, and a gossip column.

Meanwhile, in an interesting development, James Wall, the owner of the Wall Streeter Shoe Company, and a Sprague stockholder, met with two local union executive board members, to try to convince the union to withdraw its charges to the National Labor Relations Board. The union responded to Wall, whom organizer Adolph Stearns called "the most influential citizen in town."<sup>34</sup>

We wish to inform you that our body is convinced that our course of action in appealing to a federal agency for the purpose of creating an organization for the benefit of the workers in the plant in which we work is correct. The policy of the U.E. is to increase wages, shorten hours, and better working conditions . . . . We as citizens and wage earners of this community fully appreciate your interest in maintaining the good name of the city of North Adams. We believe that our action in forming a local of the U.E . . . will not only aid a great number of family-heads and supporters of families to higher standard of living, but will be an important factor in creating a fuller social and cultural life for our membership and all our friends.

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32. *Ibid.*, March 26, 1938.

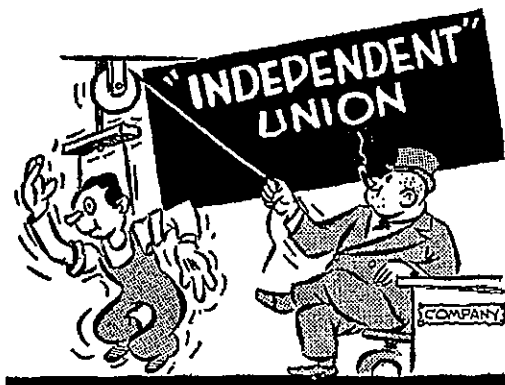
33. Interview with Robert R. R. Brooks, 1991.

34. Stearns to Matles, April 20, 1938, in United Electrical Workers Union archives.

We are ready to seriously consider, at all times, all and any advice which would help us achieve our aims, which are no different, we believe, than the aims of the people of North Adams as a whole. That is, to be better Americans and to make our city an example of prosperity.

While Wall's original letter is not available, it seems evident from the union response that North Adams' leading industrialist made his case based on the greater good for the whole community. The union's rejoinder captured the same ideological ground, fighting for the good of "our city." Throughout these and other internal labor and labor-management battles, both sides regularly portrayed their individual concerns as congruent with the broad community interest.

On February 19, 1940, the Board concluded that ICW #1 was a company union (Sprague's "puppet"), but it held that its successor represented the production workers in an independent fashion, and had not been "dominated" or "aided" by management in its start. Even though one Board member dissented from this conclusion, the majority ruled, and ICW #2 received further legitimacy, as the representative of Sprague's blue-collar workers.<sup>35</sup>



From the August 4, 1944, edition of the UE local newspaper, which referred to the above cartoon as "Sprague's 'Charlie McCarthy' Union ICW No. 2 in Action."

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35. North Adams Transcript, February 20, 1940.

The Independent Condenser Workers may have won the battle, but UE supporters continued to fight the war. The pessimism at UE headquarters in early September of 1941, over securing a beachhead at Sprague, reversed itself after a short but relatively unsuccessful strike there later that month.<sup>36</sup>

The wildcat strike erupted in the middle of September, halfway through the contract year, during a period of economic growth, when Sprague was expanding its work force from 1,300 to 1,800 in one year. Management at first rebuffed demands from a delegation of departmental representatives. The unofficial bargaining group asked for a fifteen percent wage hike, the recovery of lunchroom privileges, additional seniority rights, and no pay penalty for the walk-out.<sup>37</sup> Sprague declared that the demands were "unauthorized," but on the second day of the job action the company met with a four-man strike committee.<sup>38</sup> The company satisfied the group's demands on the lunchroom and on seniority, but not on the key economic issues. Three days later, the official bargaining committee of the ICW joined the strike committee. Five days of additional negotiations brought a settlement.

The employees only won about half of the wage increase they had sought. They improved their lunchroom scheduling, and won a bonus payment plan. The proposals met with the approval of the work force, by a three to one margin, although less than five hundred of the seventeen hundred eligible voters cast their ballots.

The relative failure of the strike heightened the optimism of Walter Mugford, the field organizer for the UE, that Sprague employees might be ready to listen again to a CIO union:

There is a strong pro-C.I.O. feeling among the workers, although there is also a very active anti-

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36. Matles to Walter Mugford, September 2, 1941, in United Electrical Workers Union archives.

37. Bliss, "A Study of Union History at the Sprague Electric Company."

38. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

union group. Personally, I feel that the time is now for an active organizational campaign . . . .<sup>39</sup>

In addition, Mugford added that a small group from the Pittsfield General Electric local would help with the organizing.

The national union went along with Mugford's assessment, and agreed to send a full-time organizer, Edith Hammer, to work in North Adams. Union records leave it unclear as to whether Hammer ever carried out that assignment, but it appears that either Hammer or another woman organizer did come to town.<sup>40</sup>

In 1943, the UE hired veteran activist Gerry Steinberg as a full-time organizer for Sprague's 3,000 employees. By far, Steinberg was the dominant and most widely known Sprague militant.<sup>41</sup> Numerous Sprague employees referred to him as a Communist, labels they also attached to the CIO and the UE. The Communist charge certainly intimidated potential union supporters. As Emma Gould remembered, "Anybody that had dealings with Gerry they called them Communist. . . . I got out of his way too." But while she was "scared" about his rumored affiliation, she "liked him as a person," as was the case for most of the other respondents.<sup>42</sup> Opponents also recognized the skill at which Steinberg went about his organizing, whether talking, listening, or buying drinks at a local tavern. One old-timer remembered him as a "pretty fair guy," and as a "real good fighter." While fist-fights broke out during the campaign, Steinberg was never involved, and in fact he publicly opposed violence.

The CIO union strategy included an educational campaign in the shop and the city, on the advantages of the UE, and a goal of burrowing from within, of electing sympathizers to key positions, including stewards.<sup>43</sup> It was a critical time for the union, since, according to its leading organizer, "we have the

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39. Mugford to Matles, October 31, 1941, in United Electrical Workers Union archives.

40. Interview with Rhoda Steinberg, 1993.

41. Piendak, "The Independent Condenser Workers Union, Local #2," p. 14.

42. Interview with Emma Gould, 1991.

43. Harley to Matles, p. 2., in United Electrical Workers Union archives.

Sprague situation upside down with an excellent chance of cracking it wide open."<sup>44</sup>

The educational campaign within the union, and the attempt to gain leadership seats and take over the independent union, proceeded aggressively. As of late August, Steinberg reported that most of the members of the executive council of the ICW #2 had signed on with the UE, and "are now beginning to exercise their power as prescribed by their constitution and holding meetings off company time and property."<sup>45</sup> At the same time, supporters of the UE thwarted the independent union from pushing the company's insufficient wage offer to the employees, and brought in three non-Sprague condenser workers, to inform the membership of the wages and conditions in union shops, an action reminiscent of the 1938 campaign.

As attempts escalated to bring a vote for affiliating with the UE, the action grew heated. The independent union president and his executive council expelled seven UE supporters as "CIO stooges," and distributed a leaflet warning members away from a special union meeting which had been organized for an affiliation vote. Relatively few attended, but the UE won, 124 to 1. Steinberg, perhaps somewhat optimistically, claimed that it "is apparent now, that the rank and file Sprague worker is against the co[mpany] union leadership and will call for their removal shortly."<sup>46</sup>

Money remained the dominant issue, but any broad discussion of wages or union dues had to be viewed within the context of local control, a factor which aided the independent union. The pro-UE faction argued that a national union with a research staff would provide the education and information necessary to negotiate with a wealthy and powerful employer, and would bring Sprague up to par with comparable capacitor workers elsewhere. ICW adherents countered that they had been able to negotiate raises, and that a national affiliation would mean a huge increase in dues, and a loss of local money to well-heeled CIO bureaucrats. One argument, as recalled by a respondent decades later, recognized the lack of power of the ICW, but nonetheless argued that the UE wouldn't do any better: "So we pay 10 cents a

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44. Ibid.

45. Steinberg report, in United Electrical Workers Union archives.

46. Ibid.

week [in dues], we get 10 cents worth. [If we] pay 60 cents, are we going to get 60 cents worth? No!"<sup>47</sup>

The former employee felt that the economic issues (pay levels) overshadowed the political (Communist) issue. Further, he thought, some may have wanted to stay with the ICW, believing that no union, even a national one, "is gonna dictate to R. C. Sprague. This was the big thing."<sup>48</sup>

Who supported UE? Some felt that younger, lower-paid employees tended to support a CIO affiliation, but evidence also exists that the UE had support among machine-shop workers, among the most skilled and best-paid workers at Sprague. It does appear likely that the union may have been less successful among the women than among the men. In the late 1930s, the local membership of the UE was evenly split between men and women, although women made up about three-quarters of the Sprague work force.<sup>49</sup>

On the national level, women predominated in an electrical work force like Sprague's.<sup>50</sup> While they became union activists less frequently than the men, their on-the-job friendships and gender networks formed the basis for informal work-group leadership and militancy on the shop-floor. Family-like gender-based friendships also typified the Sprague work force over the years.<sup>51</sup>

One hypothesis held that Sprague's women employees were more difficult to unionize than the men, not because of sex or gender *per se*, but because they were typically younger, less experienced, and less committed to maintaining their jobs at Sprague than were the men. With a shorter term outlook toward the job, they feared strikes and seemed more apt to shy away from unions. Their status helped make them more susceptible to

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47. Interview with Sprague worker who did not want to be identified, 1991.

48. Ibid.

49. Sprague's Union Eyes (local UE newsletter), December 15, 1938, p. 2.

50. Ronald Schatz, The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923-60 (Urbana, Illinois, 1983), p. 33.

51. See, for example, Burns, "Like a Family."



anti-UE arguments about outside or Communist control of the national union.<sup>52</sup>

Also, in North Adams, the union added to these difficulties by sending in seven young male organizers for the Sprague campaign. Gossip spread about sexual liaisons between these men and the women workers, increasing division within the work force. It was said that the

women liked the men and the men liked the women and sometimes two or three women would like the same man. Well, then the word would get going around that so and so on the staff is monkeying around with this particular person and then some other women would be jealous of it and they wouldn't like it and it just ended up a goddamn mess. Me included. . . . [T]here was plenty of reality so it was spread among the people and I'm sure the company didn't slow it down. And that's true in any campaign regardless of what the issue is. . . .<sup>53</sup>

The added burden of major child and home care responsibilities faced by the women also made it more difficult for them to become union activists. For many women, the demands of the day simply provided no time available to even go to union meetings. Despite this, however, Hugh Harley did remember two strong female union stalwarts, both from the rank and file, and one a "tough, hard-fighting woman."<sup>54</sup>

During January, Harley reported that "things" were "moving," and that "local talent" had emerged.<sup>55</sup> The UE petitioned the Board for an election to determine representation of the production employees. The union collected over 1,000 signatures calling for an election, out of a certified work force of approximately 2,700 production workers. Both the independent union and the company filed briefs to forestall an election and

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52. Interview with Harley.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Harley Report, January 22, 1944, in Union of Electrical Workers Archives.

maintain the rights of the members of ICW #2, but to no avail. UE organizers continued to build up their forces, initiating a steward's organizational system, with some sixty-six stewards in the union corner.<sup>56</sup>

During May, the membership of UE's local increased by an average of fifty-six a week. The pace of activity accelerated as the August twenty-second voting date approached. And the results looked promising.

In Hugh Harley's own words, the ICW

has a poor organization in the shop and in the past four weeks we have dominated the activity in most of the shop. If this trend continues we will be able to solidify our people. The ICW is not doing much for the people at the present time and there is considerable resentment against it. [But] it has very successfully raised the strike and dues issue and we have only been able to counteract it partially.

We are now six organizers on the job. Each is assigned to one of the weak areas and is doing a large amount of home visiting. This is gradually getting good results. Our people are very confident that they can do a job, which is not necessarily a good sign, although in this case it helps because the [ICW] people are gradually being undermined by the confidence our people show.

Harley, however, did note that "our membership is not necessarily stable. We are not able to get big numbers of our members to wear buttons."<sup>57</sup>

If any adult in North Berkshire still remained unaware of the upcoming election between the two unions, by the time the second half of August rolled around that would change. With just a few days left before the voting, both sides took out huge ads in the *Transcript*, trumpeting their causes and the UE even purchased fifteen minutes of radio time.

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56. Harley to Scribner, May 10, 1944, in United Electrical Workers Union Archives.

57. Harley to Emspak, July 23, 1944, in United Electrical Workers Union Archives.

The ICW began the campaign on August 19, with a half-page headline: "HOME RULE — Beware of the C.I.O. Wolves in UE clothing!" The ad castigated the UE supporters as "carpetbaggers," as outsiders "who come to town like the seventeen year locusts to eat off the fat of the land and disappear after the pickings have become lean." Local residents read that a favorable vote would just serve to enrich Sidney Hillman, the vice-president of the CIO, and at that time its most widely known and controversial leader, and to bring him more Florida vacations. Rather than turning the union over to Hillman and "his henchmen," the ICW ad portrayed itself as "fearless, courageous, vigilant, and honest," and with membership dues at only one dollar a year. Just before the ad concluded with a listing of three dozen supporters, a final "headline" blared out: "Vote I.C.W. No. 2 and Send the 'Carpetbaggers' Back to Sidney Hillman."<sup>58</sup>

Two days later, the UE responded with a half-page ad. Headlined "SPRAGUE'S OLD TIMERS SPEAK UP," the message combatted the outsider theme, and included signatures from thirteen "old-timers," each with eight to twelve years of seniority at Sprague. They stressed that the CIO union had not been thrust upon them, but had been solicited by machine-shop workers, "because it is the only real union in the electrical manufacturing industry with a record of getting things done for the members." The writers blamed the ICW for Sprague's low wages as compared with other electrical and machine plants in the North Adams, Greenfield, and Pittsfield areas.<sup>59</sup>

They went on to inform their readers "that any bona-fide national organization (such as the American Legion, the Elks, the Eagles, the Moose) must have money to carry on their work." After accusing ICW officials of "LIES, PROMISES AND A LOT OF HOT AIR," they asked their readers to "VOTE UE — THE AMERICAN WAY."<sup>60</sup> Just as the ideological war included the struggle over local community turf, so did the battle rage over which side better represented America and the American way of life, key issues during a war, particularly for a union which had been accused of being Communist-controlled.

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58. North Adams Transcript, August 19, 1944.

59. *Ibid.*, August 21, 1944.

60. *Ibid.*

In the same issue of the paper, the UE ran another big ad, stressing that the 1,700 members of Local 249 were North Adams residents, and not "The So-called 'Outsiders.'" The ad concluded with a listing of about eighty signatures, listed by work area.<sup>61</sup>

Not to be outdone, the ICW also paid for an advertisement in the newspaper on that same day, attacking "The CIO Rabble-Rousers!!" for costing Sprague workers a raise. It pointed to the "Empty Promises" of the UE and the "CIO Florida Vacationists." And, in a red-baiting thrust, the ad suggested that some new initials referring to a CIO campaign, NAC, "sounds to us like Non-American Communists."<sup>62</sup>

The anti-Communist attack was a common tactic nationwide, and certainly at Sprague. UE's strongest antagonist, William Stackpole, "brought that issue up," claiming to know who was "communist tinged." Stackpole complained that while the union wrapped itself in the American flag, its union newspaper looked very much like the *Daily Worker*, the Communist Party paper. While Stackpole felt that the Communist issue was enough to prevent workers from supporting the UE, Stackpole himself had other problems with the CIO union.

Prior to working at Sprague Electric, Stackpole had been employed at General Electric in Pittsfield, where the UE, a "worthless" union, represented the production workers. The stewards did "nothing," and the union wasn't "policing their [collective bargaining] contract, so Stackpole declared "I wouldn't join" the union "in one hundred years." He even found fault with the way the union's organizers dressed, a "crummy group," standing out from all the other labor unions. Stackpole came to Sprague in the middle of the 1944 campaign, and he jumped right in, producing flyers for the ICW election campaign. The aggressive distribution of such propaganda leaflets was a key tactic in the union battles of the 1930s and 1940s. Two months after coming to Sprague, Stackpole was elected chairman of the independent union's grievance committee, the main seat of power within that organization.<sup>63</sup>

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61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Interview with Stackpole, 1990.

In a prominent two-column election day news story, the *Transcript* called it "the largest labor election ever held in North Adams."<sup>64</sup> Both unions had agreed to stop their campaigning at midnight before the day of the vote, and that truce held up. Yet, despite the best efforts of the UE organizers and supporters, the 911 UE votes fell some four hundred short, and the great CIO drive had come to an end, with the victory of the ICW.

The following day, the *Transcript* noted that the victory margin was "much higher than was generally anticipated. Election observers had freely predicted that only 150 to 200 votes would separate the two unions. . . . Up until a week ago," it was reported, "it was generally conceded that the CIO had a large margin, and observers predicted that the UE union would win easily."<sup>65</sup>

The hard-fought victory for the incumbent union led to an impromptu parade down Main Street. At UE headquarters, participants sang, cheered, and listened to the drum corps play. Following a police patrol car, the celebrants marched through North Adams' shopping district. "It was generally agreed that the election brought out more people and created more interest and enthusiasm on Main Street than any municipal election in many years." Although "CIO organizers said . . . they would keep the union office open and would 'keep up the fight,'" the North Adams local officially disbanded before long.<sup>66</sup> The union, however, did return to contest an election at Sprague in 1948, and successfully organized a branch of Sprague Electric, in Bennington, Vermont, in 1952.

Why did the CIO union fail to win the Sprague membership in the late 1930s and again in the mid-1940s? A major reason, perhaps the most important one, must center on the power of the corporation, along with an allied company union already in place. Sprague's electrical workers recognized the need for a partisan voice, but split over the necessity of it being a national union, which was from the "outside." The company union provided the formal bargaining and grievance structure of a union, kept dues low, and spoke to a strong "localist" ideology —

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64. North Adams Transcript, August 22, 1944.

65. *Ibid.*, August 23, 1944.

66. *Ibid.*, August 22, 1944.

one which supported an emphasis on self-sufficiency and distrust of outsiders, not surprising considering the historical isolation of the northern Berkshires.

R. C. Sprague played his cards well. He stayed out of the fray on the shop floor and at the bargaining table, and he presented an image of the concerned father, worried about the well-being of his work force. Familiar with national corporate plans of paternalism, or welfare capitalism, he helped to found a company union, as well as a panoply of training programs, sports, music, and other leisure activities for "his" employees. He presented himself as a neutral bystander, while urging his employees to exercise their "democratic" rights in the bitterly contested election of 1944. A company newspaper, as well as generally friendly personnel staff, also aided in producing an informal, family-like atmosphere in the plant.

When the "iron fist" was called for, Sprague's plant manager enforced the ten percent wage cut, and "hung tough" on other contract and strike issues. Opportunities for work did not abound in North Adams, and local residents had already learned that the red brick mills along the Hoosac River did not guarantee life-time employment in shoe production or textiles. This new manufacturer of condensers "provided" work in a relatively hospitable environment, and the founder and his company did seem to care. Yet, despite all of this, Sprague's workers did rebel, from time to time, even against R. C. Sprague and the "independent union." Perhaps the initial question should not be why did the CIO drive fail, but rather how did it come so close to winning.

Years later, Stackpole expressed no surprise that over 900 Sprague employees had voted for the UE, even with the strong campaign mounted by its opponents. The UE, after all, had been "around so long," and it had been organizing "for a long time." Also, there were "always groups that were dissatisfied," and the UE "always had a hard core."<sup>67</sup>

Workers across the country organized by the millions in the late 1930s, and the CIO upsurge brought new unions to nearby Pittsfield, Greenfield, and Schenectady. The new electrical union projected energy, thoroughness, and honesty, qualities well appreciated by the local workers. Paternalism, as an ideology, assumes an obligation by the "father" to care for the obedient

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67. Interview with Stackpole, 1990.

"children." When the "father" reneges on that social contract, when a ten percent wage cut does not seem to be warranted, the "children" may rebel. In E. P. Thompson's phrase, the "moral economy" had been violated.<sup>68</sup> During such periods of time, elements of the status quo, such as a company union, may well be overturned.

As the national economy fluctuates, and as political structures shift, opportunities for social change emerge. A group of relationships that may be stereotyped as "immutable" during one era may be quite "mutable" during another. Gary Gerstle has skillfully demonstrated the process by which Woonsocket, Rhode Island, French-Canadians developed the most militant textile local in New England, during the 1930s, while coming from an ethnic background that historians and union officials had traditionally stereotyped as culturally conservative.<sup>69</sup> Similar ethnic "shifts" may be detected in the history of Sprague Electric and North Adams. In fact, Stewart Burns, one historian of labor in North Adams, seems too quick to accept a strong Catholic background as a major explanation for his respondents' "apparent conservatism."<sup>70</sup>

Despite its size and isolation, North Adams felt the winds of Depression-era change and New Deal ideas. The workplace changed, not only in relations between employees and managers, but also through conflicts between groups of workers. As Gerstle suggests, "union development should be analyzed in terms of the struggle of competing rank-and-file groups for power and influence."<sup>71</sup> This kind of competition did in fact exist during Sprague's first fifteen years of operation.

Further investigation of this type, along with analysis of worker culture outside of the mill or office, will aid us in developing an even fuller understanding of the early CIO era. In North Adams and elsewhere, we "know little about the interior worlds of industrial workers of the 1930s and 1940s."<sup>72</sup> More, as

68. E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York, 1963).

69. Gary Gerstle, Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960 (Cambridge, 1989).

70. Burns, "Like a Family," p. 27.

71. Gerstle, Working-Class Americanism, p. 126.

72. Robert H. Zieger, "Toward the History of the CIO: A Bibliographical Report," Labor History, XXVIII (Fall, 1985), p. 509.

well, needs to be known about the consciousness of workplace activists, of people like Gerry Steinberg, to understand where their "resentment of injustice" springs from, and how it becomes activated.<sup>73</sup>

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73. Peter Friedlander, in Brody, "The CIO after 50 Years," p. 468.