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Strikers picket during a cold Berkshire winter. Here two picketers illustrate the unity workers demonstrated. The man on the right, a member of IUE #200, the production workers union, carries a sign supporting the machinists (I AM #1794) and the office and technical workers union (AFTE #101). Photo courtesy of the *North Adams Transcript*.

# “Mr. Sprague Did Not Believe the People Would Do It”:

## The Sprague Electric Strike in North Adams, 1970

MAYNARD SEIDER



**Abstract:** *The ten-week strike by Sprague Electric Company workers in 1970 in the small city of North Adams, Massachusetts, marked a turning point in labor-management relations at the capacitor plant. After decades of workplace paternalism, Sprague employees voted down their weak local unions, joined national AFL-CIO unions, and struck for better wages, union security, and greater power on the job. During the strike, the union perspective achieved wide public view as its leaders used handouts, the local press, and access to civic organizations to rebut the company’s public relations offensive. The union push, combined with strong picket line solidarity and local support, enabled the strikers to win some of their key objectives. This study draws on oral histories, union archives, and company records to examine perceptions of the strike during 1970 and afterwards. While the Sprague strike is an important moment in Northeast labor history, its aftermath in North Adams also offers a capsule portrait of larger trends in deindustrialization, attacks on unions, and the rightward shift of the Democratic party. Maynard Seider, a professor emeritus of Sociology at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA), recently completed his first film, Farewell to Factory Towns?, which traces the history of North Adams.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1970 more than 2,000 blue- and white-collar workers in North Adams engaged in a militant ten-week strike against Sprague Electric Company. Sprague had dominated employment in the northern Berkshires since World War II and had never before faced such a significant and lengthy strike. For much of its history in North Adams, the electronic component company held the upper hand in dealing with its weak labor unions, leaving the workforce low-paid and ill-protected on the shop floor. What precipitated the strike? And what created the strong sense of camaraderie among the production, office, and technical workers who came together to challenge the power of the world's largest capacitor company? And what would be the consequences of the mighty upsurge of 1970 to the community's memory, both immediately after the strike and years later?

Tucked in a valley in the northwestern corner of Massachusetts, North Adams possesses an industrial history similar to numerous other New England mill towns, with immigrants from Ireland, Wales, French-Canada, and Italy finding work in the textile and shoe factories that sprang up alongside the Hoosac River in the second half of the nineteenth century. By 1900, the city's population had grown to 24,200, and it surpassed Pittsfield to become the largest community in Berkshire County. In the 1920s, sixteen passenger trains a day moved into and out of North Adams, a city one writer described as "nervous with the energy of twentieth-century America. No city [of its size] in New England has a greater variety of retail establishments: merchants must stock goods for workers of different nationalities and notions, and for a large farming population."<sup>1</sup> With the ups and downs of the textile industry, however, hard times often meant that wages stayed low and, in many households, both adults labored in local factories. With textiles and shoe production still dominant as late as 1940, some 6,600 workers in a city of close to 23,000 worked in nine large mills.<sup>2</sup>

Change came to the city in 1930 when Robert C. Sprague (1900-1991) moved his small capacitor company from Quincy, Massachusetts, to the Beaver Mill in North Adams. Sprague Specialties, as it was called then, had outgrown its manufacturing space in Quincy, and North Adams business owners traded cash for stock to entice the fledgling company to move into the 160,000 square foot abandoned textile mill. Sprague, an Annapolis graduate and naval officer, had invented a lightweight paper capacitor, a crucial component for the growing radio market. A capacitor "is an electrical component, used to store a charge temporarily, consisting of two conducting surfaces separated

by a nonconductor.”<sup>3</sup> Capacitors can be found in all electrical and electronic products, so its markets have great potential.

While orders stagnated during the Great Depression, demand for the variety of capacitors the company manufactured for war-related products skyrocketed during World War II, and Sprague’s mostly female workforce doubled in size from 1,300 in 1940 to 2,600 in August, 1945.<sup>4</sup> That workforce produced the capacitor that detonated the second atomic bomb dropped over Nagasaki, Japan. R.C. Sprague, with his naval officer background and his economic and political interests, became well known in Republican political circles as an expert in national security. In 1953 President Eisenhower offered him the post of assistant secretary of the Air Force, but since Sprague would have to sell his stock in the company to accept the high-ranking post, he decided to turn it down.<sup>5</sup>

Sprague remained very active in trade association activities and kept corporate headquarters in North Adams while the company continued to expand worldwide.<sup>6</sup> He also had a strong interest in labor relations. While strikes were not unheard of at Sprague Electric, labor relations tended to be fairly peaceful. Though nominally “independent,” the unions generally went along with company policies.<sup>7</sup> And the workforce appreciated the vast array of extracurricular activities sponsored by the company, from bowling leagues to a symphony orchestra.<sup>8</sup> But by the mid-1960s, global economic and social changes had come to the Berkshires, and key strategic decisions made by R. C. Sprague reflected those changes. At the same time, a new generation of workers, more knowledgeable and more independent, became Sprague employees.

The company had been doing quite well since 1940, with sales and earnings steadily increasing by an average of 16.5% a year.<sup>9</sup> In 1966 local employment at Sprague reached its highest level, 4,137, an enormous number for a city of less than twenty thousand people. The company maintained its corporate headquarters and a large research and development center in North Adams, along with a variety of production lines at four locations in the city. Its immediate future looked promising, with Vietnam War-fueled increases in defense spending and an expanding demand for electric and electronic products.

Nonetheless, concerns about the movement of jobs out of North Adams could not be avoided. In a well-publicized speech given by R.C. Sprague in 1957, the founder stated that it would be “very unwise” for Sprague to expand in North Adams, as “(t)here is such a thing as being too large in any one community.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, Sprague Electric had already established the company’s first branch plant in Barre, Vermont in 1945. By 1951, the company had added branch plants in Wisconsin, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Two years later,



R.C. Sprague moved capacitor production from Quincy, MA, to North Adams in 1930. The company purchased its Marshall Street plant, formerly a textile mill, in 1942. This photo, taken in the 1980s, shows the factory while it was still in production.

the company expanded south to North Carolina and Puerto Rico, and by 1960 had additional plants in California, Mexico, and Italy. As Japanese corporations increasingly entered the world market of capacitor and electronic component manufacturing, Sprague acted no differently than its US based competitors in scouring the globe in search of lower production costs. By 1970, some 12,000 Sprague employees worked at more than two-dozen worldwide locations.

With the exception of a small workforce in Barre, Vermont, North Adams employees constituted the only unionized group of Sprague workers. While the company had virtually controlled the local unions representing production, office, and technical workers for three decades, in the late 1960s a younger, more savvy, and activist workforce, including many former GIs, voted in new national unions affiliated with the largest US labor organization, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). Up to that point, only the relatively small group of Sprague machinists in North Adams had an AFL-CIO affiliation, with the International Association of Machinists (IAM). Now, Sprague management would face significant antagonists.

## THE COMING OF THE INTERNATIONAL UNIONS

*“We shouldn’t be blind and deaf to the rest of the world.” Walter Wood, president of International Union of Electrical Workers #285, 1966*

In late 1966 production workers voted to align with the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), an affiliate of the AFL-CIO. In doing so, they rejected the relatively weak and ineffective Independent Condenser Workers #2, a union that had been voted in 26 years earlier. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) had dubbed its predecessor, ICW#1, a “company union,” and hence in violation of the Wagner Act, the 1935 act established to help prevent employers from interfering in the organization of autonomous workers’ unions. In fact, ICW#1’s successor, ICW#2 was approved by the NLRB in a split (2-1) decision. Many employees still saw it as management-controlled, a belief affirmed by George Bateman, Sprague’s director of Industrial Relations, who claimed that the union was in the company’s “hip pocket.”<sup>11</sup> Over the years, ICW#2 meekly accepted management’s contract offers and, without a right to arbitration, had no leverage with which to fight grievances. A wide array of company extracurricular activities engendered a layer of employee loyalty, and the company shrewdly offered a \$100 Christmas bonus (a significant amount for employees earning only about \$50 a week during the 1940s and 1950s), but it was only available if the union accepted a pre-Christmas yearly contract.<sup>12</sup>

The decision to affiliate with a national union did not come without a struggle, but by the mid-1960s, the momentum for change and greater employee power could not be stopped. As one woman stated at a 1966 union meeting, “The people were afraid thirty years ago, but they aren’t now.” Her sentiments seemed to exemplify “the emergence of a more militant labor force at Sprague,” as one local historian put it.<sup>13</sup> The IUE affiliation would provide the production workers with expertise in financial analysis and contract negotiation, as well as legal help and strike support. Walter Wood, president of the local chapter, represented a new generation of Sprague worker, entering the workforce after World War II with more formal education, greater knowledge in the area of labor relations, and a less provincial outlook. Wood had taken courses in labor studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and at Rutgers. He realized that Sprague employees had historically been at a disadvantage in bargaining with management since, without a research staff, they could hardly challenge the company’s economic arguments. So he set up an education committee and asked the University of Massachusetts Amherst Labor Center to help organize programs in labor law, grievances, and labor relations for union members. He also rented a downtown office for the union,

the first permanent office the production workers had ever had; encouraged membership to get involved in civic and political matters; and started a union practice of aiding other local unions in their organizing drives.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the fifties and sixties, pay increases at Sprague Electric failed to keep pace with the cost of living, and as the company grew, it also became more impersonal. Many in the Sprague workforce seemed ready for a change. In 1967, by a vote of 380-233, the rank and file authorized the local's negotiating committee to call a strike, if necessary, when the current contract expired in June. But Walter Wood and the committee realized that only a fraction of the membership of some 2,800 attended that meeting and that there were deep divisions among members. So, in an unprecedented move, two days before the strike deadline, the union held an outdoor meeting at a local baseball field in order to hold a final vote. This time the membership was mobilized and a crowd estimated at anywhere from 1,500 to 2,200 sat in the bleachers while Walter Wood stood on the diamond and, using a microphone, went over the company's contract proposal. He also told the membership of the negotiating committee's concern that the initial strike vote represented only a small number of members. Realizing that opposition to the strike existed among many in the membership as well as in the community, he urged acceptance of the company's meager proposal. According to the *North Adams Transcript's* labor reporter, Gordon Lane, the rank and file "voted overwhelmingly to accept the company proposal." While Wood later admitted that "he had 'to eat a little crow'" in reversing his position, but that would not be the case three years later.<sup>15</sup>

Before talks began for the 1970 contract, the last segment of the workforce, the technical and office workers, joined a national union, the American Federation of Technical Employees (AFTE). Just as production workers had undergone a change leading to a new affiliation, a significant shift occurred among white-collar workers as well. Future AFTE activist Jack Boulger began work at Sprague in 1954 as a member of the weak independent office workers union. He gradually became more and more involved with the union. Recalling that period later, he said:

I saw some things going on that I couldn't believe. So I started doing some reading. And I started reading some of the laws. And I got ahold of some labor papers. And I said 'My God,' you know, you don't really know how bad something is until you find out how it should be, or how it is in other places.<sup>16</sup>



Boulger went on to organize a committee to decertify the independent union and bring in a national union affiliated with the AFL-CIO. In doing so, he worked very closely with Walter Wood.

Other societal changes supported the shift that Boulger represented. According to one local researcher, “By the late 1960s . . . more women remained single, or else were married and chose not to have children, thereby enabling them to complete the necessary educational requirements that had to be met in order to gain a semi-professional lab or professional job.”<sup>17</sup> With greater independence at home and on the job, the women now had more time and energy to attend union meetings and to engage in strategy sessions. With AFTE now established, that union and the IUE joined the machinists, who already had an AFL-CIO tie, having become members of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) back in 1949.

As all three unions prepared for contract talks, they were well aware that General Electric workers had struck at the huge GE plant in Pittsfield, just 18 miles to the south, as part of a national strike. Many strikers lived in North Berkshire and had friends and relatives working at Sprague. When the GE strike ended on January 31, 1970, its employees had won significant wage increases as well as gains in vacation time, pensions, sick pay, and medical benefits. R.C. Sprague had always argued that as a producer of components for the electronics industry—a “middleman” and not one which could pass on costs directly to the consumers—his company couldn’t be compared to General Electric and the giants of the electrical products industry. In 1970, though, that argument didn’t carry much weight at home.

## THE START OF NEGOTIATIONS

During the summer of 1969, Sprague prepared to train hundreds of research and development specialists and other corporate personnel to manufacture capacitors in the event of a strike. Longtime industrial relations specialist George Bateman recalled some of the plans: “As a matter of fact, we had even prepared to live-in for a period of time. So we had food, we had sleeping facilities, we had all these things and they even built a helipad on top of one of the buildings for a helicopter to come in.”<sup>18</sup> The company also leased space at a new office building a block away from its main gate.

Though he had an experienced labor relations staff, R.C. Sprague liked to stay in close contact with the negotiators, asking questions, making suggestions, and enforcing final decisions. He displayed the engineer’s grasp of comparable costs and wages throughout the industry, as well as knowledge of the intricacies of national trade policy and international competition honed by his involvement in

trade association affairs and Republican politics. Sprague also possessed a sizeable ego and a secure sense of the value of his own opinions. Over the years, through company-sponsored athletic events and entertainment, award dinners, a company newspaper, and a radio show, and by his cultivation of an approachable, gracious-yet-stern “captain of the ship” persona, R.C. had benefitted from the paternalism that characterized the company. He was a stubborn “father,” one who didn’t like to be crossed, and one who believed that internal arguments should be kept within the family. Not surprisingly, he strongly opposed arbitration as the final step in the grievance process, since that would cede authority to an outsider. Approaching seventy years of age but still vigorously running the company, R.C.’s spirit and actions dominated the negotiations. He took it all personally, never really believing that *his* workers would strike. Later, when a strike appeared imminent, he proved unable to skillfully craft an acceptable contract.

Formal negotiations began in September with the unions’ proposals. Besides wage and benefit demands, the company faced a call for a union shop and binding arbitration. A union shop would require new workers to join the union, pay a union initiation fee within thirty days of being hired, and pay union dues. Under the current system of voluntary membership, a significant minority of the workforce often joined just before negotiations, and then exited (along with their dues) once the new contract was voted in.

As for arbitration, it would strengthen the grievance process. At that time, the outside mediator who emerged during the final step had no power to enforce a decision. Thus, step-by-step, even through mediation, the final step, the company could simply refuse to accept the grievant’s contentions, weakening the whole negotiation procedure for rank-and-file workers. As one AFTE activist put it, “We were looking for something that would provide a measure of justice swiftly before we forgot what we were looking for.”<sup>19</sup>

Winning the union shop and arbitration would not only bring real political and economic gains to the two new unions, but it would also bring a psychological triumph to them, since the local, “independent” unions had not been able to achieve either goal in their three decades of existence. In December 1969 management presented its set of counter-proposals, which included a separate ten-cent per hour raise for the highest paid blue-collar workers: those in maintenance (represented by IUE) and the machine shop (represented by IAM). The AFTE local considered this an affront to their members. And, as was common during that time period, the union passed out flyers to make its case. Titled “Living Wage. Not Insults,” the AFTE flyer angrily responded to management’s workforce-splitting tactic and went on to criticize the economic power that Sprague had wielded since the 1930s:

THEY ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FACT THAT MOST FAMILIES HAVE TO WORK BOTH HUSBAND AND WIFE IN ORDER TO CARVE OUT AN EXISTENCE IN OUR AREA...THEY ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FACT THAT WE ARE RIDICULOUSLY FAR BEHIND, IN WAGES AND BENEFITS, THAN THOSE OF OUR NEIGHBORS WHO WORK IN NEIGHBORING COMMUNITIES...WE ARE TIRED OF BEING EXPLOITED...

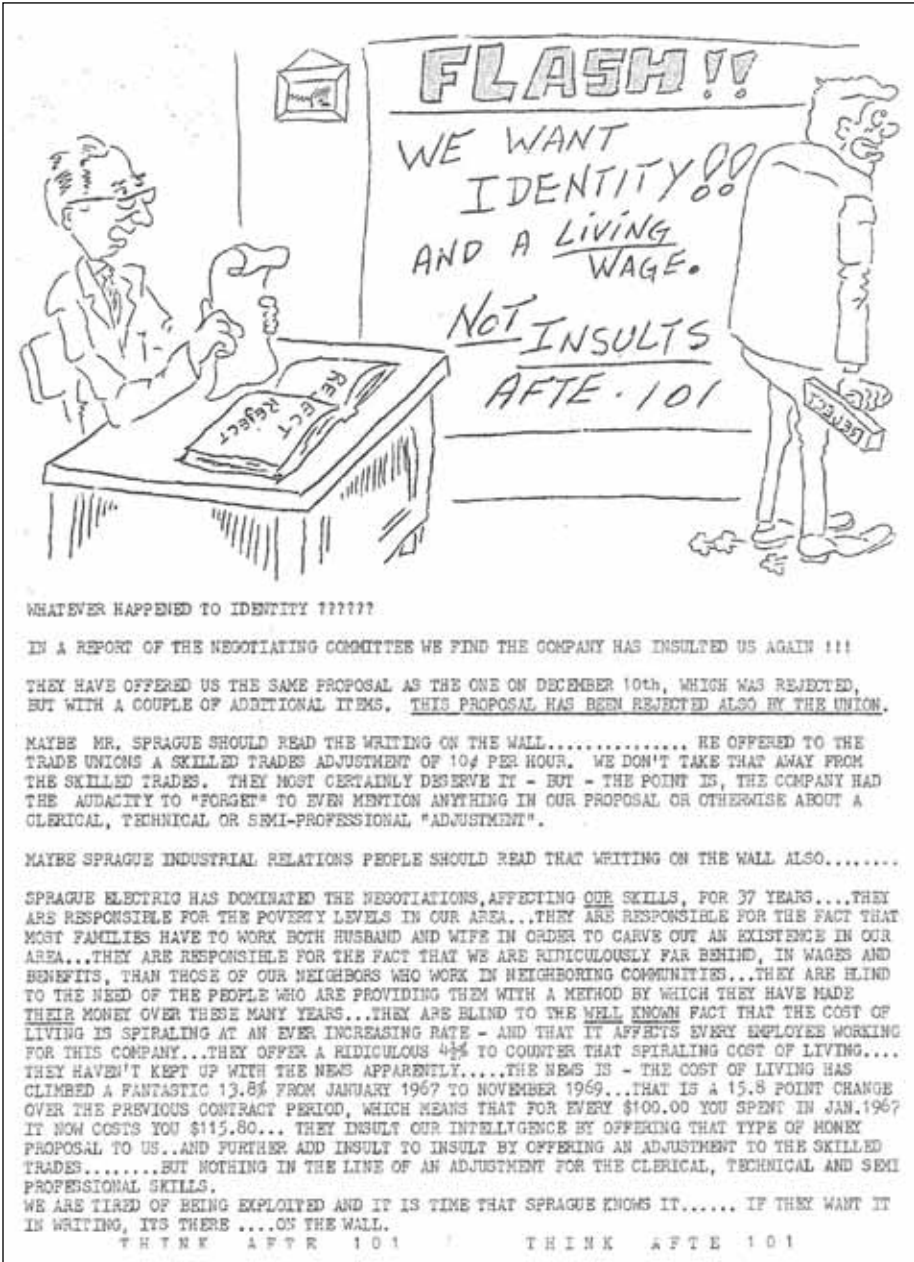
The *Transcript* published a news item about the flyer, headlined “AFTE local says Sprague to blame for area poverty.”<sup>20</sup>

Following AFTE’s lead, IUE used rhetorically charged flyers to communicate with and solidify its membership, particularly on the issue of wages. Arguing that the cost of living had increased by 7.1 percent since their last raise, Local #200 proclaimed in one flyer, “LET’S MOVE FORWARD . . . NOT BACKWARDS ! OUR FIGHT NOW IS FOR MORE THAN SURVIVAL!!!” The union informed its ranks that while the average manufacturing wage nationwide, and in Western Massachusetts, was \$3.12 an hour, Sprague production and maintenance workers received an average of \$2.60 an hour.<sup>21</sup>

As the March 1 strike deadline loomed, negotiations had nearly collapsed. For three decades, R.C. Sprague and his industrial relations staff had used the compliant officers of the local unions to exert control over the North Adams workforce. Three times—in 1937, 1944, and in 1948—the United Electrical Workers Union, one of the founding and most militant unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), had waged spirited campaigns to gain a membership hold but had been defeated.<sup>22</sup> By 1970, Sprague’s paternalism was wearing thin, as exemplified by one of the IUE’s *Bulletins*, which asked, if the company wanted its employees as partners, “why don’t we all share *as partners* in the profits from increased productivity???”<sup>23</sup>

On February 10, the IAM membership unanimously authorized a strike, and six days later, the AFTE membership gave its negotiating committee the O.K. to call a strike on March 1. On the following day, in a special issue of its in-house newspaper, the company warned its employees, “At meetings today and tonight, IUE apparently will move ahead with its announced plan to take a strike action vote. This vote could have the most serious consequences to the Company and its employees.” Despite the threat, the IUE rank and file voted to authorize its committee to call a strike if necessary, thus joining the other two unions in a concerted show of solidarity.<sup>24</sup>

As positions hardened, all sides used the local newspaper, the *Transcript*, to take their case to the community. One letter writer cautioned workers not to



During negotiations, AFTE angrily responded to what the union saw as an attempt by management to split the workforce by offering a bonus to the highest paid blue-collar workers. AFTE members passed out this flyer, a common tactic during negotiations and the strike itself.

strike, raising the possibility of Sprague leaving the area as had the local textile firms. Union leaders were referred to as “Communistic,” and local residents were reminded to “thank God you have a job.” On February 13 and 14, Sprague ran two full-page ads in the paper: one a letter by R.C. himself, and another, a letter from Sprague President Bruce R. Carlson. The two letters constituted a “good cop, bad cop” approach: while Sprague focused on reconciliation, Carlson attacked the IUE for endorsing a strike.<sup>25</sup>

The company rejected a union suggestion that “an impartial fact finding committee” be convened and also turned down requests from the IUE and AFTE for data on employee productivity and corporate finances.<sup>26</sup> Most notable about these requests is not that Sprague turned them down—that was probably expected—but that now, for the first time in more than three decades, union leaders from the production floor and the office adopted a negotiating posture with management in which both sides stood on an equal plane. In the contract negotiations, employee representatives no longer acted intimidated by complex financial and legal arguments. In the late thirties, dissident workers recognized the need for such expertise and mobilized to affiliate with a national union, the United Electrical Workers, which had a legal and research department.<sup>27</sup> Unsuccessful in that and later efforts, the rank and file continued to be represented by weak, local unions that never challenged the company on its financial data and arguments.

With less than two weeks to go before the contract expired, *Transcript* editor James A. Hardman Jr. cautioned the unions about striking: “The community . . . hopes the unions will be realistic in assessing what is possible, and will not embark on a fruitless battle which might cost them more, in the end, than they can gain.”<sup>28</sup> Fifteen years earlier, Hardman and R.C. Sprague had been on opposite sides of a citywide controversy over a new company, Dragon Cement, moving into North Adams. Hardman welcomed the opportunity for the creation of 150 new jobs, while Sprague claimed that the plant’s dust would harm the capacitor company. Sprague threatened to cut production at his North Adams operation—a move that would have cost the city 2,000 jobs—if the cement company’s plans were allowed to proceed. Worried about Sprague’s threat, the city ruled against Dragon Cement’s zoning request. This time around, Hardman spared management from his critical pen and, when the strike ended in May, R.C. Sprague personally thanked the editor for his support.<sup>29</sup>

## THE STRIKE BEGINS

Talks between the remaining union, AFTE, and management reached an impasse on Sunday, March 1 after 40 hours of mediator-assisted negotiations. At a final meeting, the rank and file voted to strike by a nearly 2-1 margin (229-123), and at midnight the first strike at Sprague since 1949 began. Appropriately enough, AFTE's membership contained the most militant members, a new generation of predominantly women clerical workers. As long-time local president Jack Boulger put it, "The young turks . . . [provided] . . . leadership and spoke of injustice."<sup>30</sup>

The strike lasted ten weeks, through the end of a Berkshire winter and the first half of spring. Sprague would never be the same, nor would the community. Years later, both participants in the strike and interested observers would recall the Sprague era as comprising the pre-strike period and the post-strike years. Many would romanticize the earlier days when Sprague was "like a family," when harmony characterized work relationships, and when the company organized a multitude of recreational and social activities off the job.<sup>31</sup> Sprague constantly touched the lives of individuals, families, and generations, and many basked in the warm feelings of those memories.

Others, more hard-nosed and less sentimental, remembered the differences between the pre- and post-strike periods as less clear-cut. If 1970 was a demarcation point, the line was somewhat fuzzy. The earlier years never appeared so glorious, and the beginnings of change could be traced to a time prior to 1970. These people never really recognized R.C. as the "good father," nor the local union as the protector of their interests. They remembered the low wages and the need for members of two-paycheck families to work long hours. They believed that Sprague used its considerable power to keep higher-paying industries out of town. They noted the post-war proliferation of domestic and overseas branch plants in low-wage, non-union settings, and they watched the numbers of the local workforce decline in the three-year period *before* the strike. While a significant minority of Sprague employees undoubtedly fell into this realist camp, and another sizeable group made up the romantic group, most production, office, and machine workers probably shared elements of both.

All the behaviors and emotions of a classic, lengthy strike were exhibited in North Adams during those ten weeks in 1970. Many battles were fought in and around the picket line, with some physical violence and destruction of property, but mostly with bruised and angry feelings. Only about five percent of the workers crossed the picket lines to work, so Sprague received little help from experienced line and office workers.<sup>32</sup> With union strike benefits relatively low, strikers, particularly those whose spouses also worked at Sprague and who

therefore had no other source of income, had a tough time economically, and many had their first taste of surplus government food that winter and spring.<sup>33</sup> The strikers managed to hold firm, building solidarity through their determined mission, singing, shouting, and marching—belly-to-backside—on the picket line.<sup>34</sup> Union leadership rose to the occasion, maintaining a disciplined rank and file, publishing numerous strike bulletins, and keeping its membership well informed of developments. In the community itself, both management and labor battled to win the hearts and minds of those outside of the now-estranged “Sprague family.”

Once the final round of negotiations broke down, AFTE spent the hours from 7:30 p.m. March 1 to midnight preparing its membership. Still, “(i)t was very tense,” recalled Boulger. The first shift came on at 7 a.m. One AFTE member vividly recalled the start of that first day, just after midnight:

We made up some signs. We went out that evening. It was cold. Come morning, our people were out there and I was out there . . . and we started our picket line. . . . And the seven o'clock people come in at 6:30—*stopped* on the other side of the street. The word got out. . . . They were respecting (the picket line). There was, Lord knows, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people backed up on the other side of the street. . . . ‘Oh, great.’<sup>35</sup>

En masse, as members of the dense crowd, and as individuals, IUE and IAM unionists overwhelmingly refused to cross the AFTE lines. “We were really surprised that we could stop everybody. . . (We) did really well,” recalled Leo Cyr, one of the strikers.<sup>36</sup> On March 9 the machinists’ union officially went on strike, further legitimizing and broadening the picket lines. On March 19 IUE defeated an intra-union challenge and, four days later, officially joined AFTE and the IAM on strike.

Strikers marched in tight formation, often with two or three concentric circles winding around, making it virtually impossible for anyone to break through easily. These were not symbolic lines, but were meant to keep out scabs, workers and truckers alike. Esther Hartranft, a long-time Sprague loyalist, did cross the picket lines throughout the strike. Hartranft worked as a private secretary, a status making her ineligible for union membership. She later recalled:

It was quite formidable to approach [the picketers]. And they stood shoulder to shoulder. You just had . . . to push your way through, And . . . (t)he first time I did it, I . . . got through and was a bit shook up . . . I was advised to go to the office nurse and just get something



The AFTE union struck first. Its members are seen here picketing in front of the main gate on the first day of the strike. Employees from the other two unions who hadn't yet taken a strike vote refused to cross the picket line and watched the action from across the street. Photo courtesy of the *North Adams Transcript*.

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to quiet me down, because it was, it was traumatic. I shook when I got in there. . . . I was sort of numb when I went through. . . . I'm sure there was a lot of yelling. . . . Of course the women are more vociferous than the men, really.<sup>37</sup>

The police stayed on hand to maintain some sort of peace, and male managers made their presence known at shift changes to help female management personnel and scabs through the lines. Sprague also arranged for picket-line activity to be filmed from a distance, another effort at intimidating the strikers. Evelyn Jones, a union activist and future vice president of IUE said she

picketed and of course I was a big mouth as usual. I could . . . yell "Scab!" from Marshall Street to the corner of Main. They used to be at the corner of Main shaking their fist at me. . . . Of course the company had cameras all over the place taking our pictures. And



they'd say, 'Why, you're one of the ones that was picketing at such and such a place,' you know? You talk about me having a file. We had a file too.<sup>38</sup>

Long-time friends yelled at scabs, "I'll never speak to you for the rest of my life!"<sup>39</sup> AFTE, the most militant of the three unions, actually published the names of scabs in their strike bulletins. Each of the early bulletins featured a verbal attack against a single scab. While IUE didn't appear to print the names of its members who scabbed, the union kept a list of names of those who refused to picket on a big sign in its office.

By the third week of the strike, the company moved equipment from North Adams to its plant in Nashua, New Hampshire, machinery that would mean the loss of one hundred local jobs. That action, and the implied threat of future job cuts, failed to weaken the strikers' resolve. AFTE responded by charging Sprague with an unfair labor practice, and IUE recommended organizing the Nashua plant. A local writer, looking at the strike in historical perspective, began her column with, "The times they are a changing" and concluded, "The father image of Sprague is gone, along with apathetic, one-sided bargaining. Unionism at Sprague is finally catching up with the times."<sup>40</sup>

Two weeks before the strike deadline, the company began boarding up windows and hired a contingent of Pinkerton security police for the duration. On the second day of the strike, the police arrested an AFTE international representative for allegedly blocking a truck at the plant's main gate. Some witnesses stated that the police actually knocked him down in front of the truck. On March 4, soldered spikes were discovered in one of the plant parking lots. On April 1, a truck was torched. The truck's owner was a service station operator who rented trucks to Sprague to move equipment out of the plant. Two days later, fire destroyed the car of a scabbing production worker.<sup>41</sup>

A company action nearly led to even more violence and potential bodily injury. Sprague hired a Troy, New York, trucking firm that specialized in delivering oil to strikebound plants. As George Bateman, Sprague's North Adams director of Industrial Relations, remembers it, the truck was retrofitted with a front-end "battering ram." It looked "like a tank, an armored vehicle," which could push any blocked cars out of the way. "They didn't care. They just rolled those cars right over." At one delivery, Bateman recalls getting to the plant and calling for police intervention just prior to the onset of possible violence; that's when he noticed that the truck drivers also carried rifles.<sup>42</sup>



At the main gate, picketers voice their displeasure and maintain their picket line as they attempt to keep a truck from entering the driveway. Photo courtesy of the *North Adams Transcript*.

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## THE PUBLIC RELATIONS BATTLE

The company presented its side of the story to the community with full-page ads in the *Transcript*. Editorially, the local radio station gave a vigorous defense of Sprague, while it tore into the union leadership for keeping the strike going. The *Transcript* editorials, while more moderate in tone, swung further and further to support the company the longer the strike lasted. R.C. Sprague spoke to local civic groups, presenting the company viewpoint, and even mailed a lengthy copy of one of those speeches to all of “his” employees. An ideological battle raged to see whose actions best served the interests of the somewhat ephemeral ideal called “the community.” The striking unions fought that battle with all of their resources, ceding no ground to the company on the public relations front. They responded in print to management attacks and what they perceived as misinformation. IUE President Walter Wood delivered point-by-point rebuttals to civic groups, specifically responding to arguments advanced by R.C. Sprague.

An AFTE effort complemented the IUE through a letter-writing campaign to local businesspeople that presented the union story and invited strike-fund contributions.

Personally, R.C. Sprague made a concerted effort to stay in touch with both management and hourly personnel, even those on strike. From R.C.'s own notes at the conclusion of the strike: "I made point of remaining in N.A. during strike and went through middle of picket lines at least four times daily. Quite a lot of friendly banter with pickets." Through it all, he made a "(p)rinciple effort . . . (t)o keep emotions under control and lid from blowing off."<sup>43</sup>

But a tougher side of R.C. Sprague would also be revealed during the strike. Early on, he publicly moved one production line out of North Adams in an obvious warning to strikers. Privately, he used his relationship with Jim Hardman, editor of the *Transcript*, to try to control the work of the paper's labor beat reporter, Gordon Lane. And with angry indignation, he fired off lengthy letters to western Massachusetts Congressional Representatives Silvio Conte and Ed Boland for what he alleged to be a false presentation of his company's policies.

As the strike unfolded, the *Transcript* became increasingly supportive of Sprague's negotiating position, and increasingly anti-union in its editorial policy. Although daily newspapers in Springfield and Pittsfield covered North Adams news, the *Transcript* remained the most widely circulated paper in town. Four days into the strike, the paper began with a moderate "Appeal to Reason," asking the participants to keep their emotions down and reach agreement. Still not choosing sides, the next strike-related editorial some two weeks later portrayed both workers and management as victims of price inflation and business recession and reminded everyone that the whole community had a stake in an early settlement.<sup>44</sup>

However, by March 27, the *Transcript* underwent a significant shift toward the company in its editorial policy. Two events had occurred in the interim, likely influencing Editor James Hardman. Four days earlier, the IUE joined the other two Sprague unions on strike, dampening any hope for an early settlement, and on March 26, R.C. Sprague delivered a lengthy speech defending the company's position before the Chamber of Commerce. The *Transcript* editorial not only referred to the substance of Sprague's speech, but also accepted Sprague's arguments as fact. For example, the editorialist mentioned Sprague's long-standing position that, as a manufacturer of components, not end products, the company had little power over pricing and therefore was constrained as far as wages. Rather than critically examining the merits of the argument, the *Transcript* simply repeated it. Similarly, the newspaper uncritically accepted Sprague's argument that competition kept it from offering a higher wage.

While R.C. Sprague had always held up the possibility of closing up shop in North Adams if conditions warranted it, a few unionists now called his bluff, telling him to meet the strikers' demands or leave the city. The *Transcript* responded by criticizing the "thoughtless and irresponsible words of a small number of union officials and militant strikers" who didn't represent "the general sentiments of 3300 workers or residents." Two weeks later, the *Transcript* reminded the strikers that their weekly losses in wages totaled \$260,000 and advised them to accept the company's offer. Grateful for the paper's support, R.C. Sprague sent a letter of thanks to Editor James Hardman at the strike's conclusion for his editorials, "which were factual and informative."<sup>45</sup>

## THE UNION RESPONDS

As indicated earlier, the unions displayed a well-organized and creative front during negotiations and the strike itself. They maintained that same tenor in their own public relations campaign, reacting to attacks on them by the company and media, as well as proactively reaching out to the North Berkshire community. The AFTE local wrote to local businesspeople toward the beginning of the strike making the case that the beleaguered Sprague employees shared a community of interest with them. In the letter, AFTE President Ron Durant maintained that Sprague workers hadn't been able to stay even with the cost of living. Sprague "may have provided the "economic life-blood for the entire area" as the *Transcript* editorial of March 19 suggested, but the "decent" employment has not "fostered prosperity," he argued:

Should we allow ourselves to be constantly threatened by Sprague Electric—that they will move out of North Adams and, therefore, sell out our self respect for a meager settlement AGAIN, which is less than the rise in Cost-of-Living, and thereby retain a lower standard of living in this area.

The union's struggle with the company for respect as well as for a fair economic package was, Durant wrote, "YOUR struggle as well. It is a struggle FOR OUR community." With higher wages, workers could spend more, and local businesses would do better, he argued. "This strike has become the chance for all of us—Businesses and working men alike—to better ourselves." The union asked each business to support the strikers "both morally and financially," including by making a contribution to the strike fund.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, AFTE leadership had no qualms about taking on R.C. Sprague in their strike bulletin and elsewhere. A week and a half into the strike, an item was



Ron Durant, AFTE president, joined strikers singing traditional labor songs like “Solidarity Forever” and folk songs like “On Top of Old Smokey,” with new lyrics fashioned to the strike against Sprague Electric Company. Photo courtesy of the *North Adams Transcript*.

printed in the strike bulletin that read, “We understand Mr. Sprague toured the plants yesterday, it’s like yelling down a barrel, isn’t it, R.C.? Your news release sez there are 2000 people working. Betcha didn’t find them, did you, R.C? If you are wondering what happened to them. *LOOKOUT YOUR WINDOW!!!!*”<sup>47</sup> Such bulletin items were not the only tactic. Adopting a mixture of sarcasm and humor, AFTE came up with a stunt that brought the strike nationwide publicity. After noting that R.C. had voluntarily taken a cut in salary from \$80,000 a year to \$70,000, the union passed the hat for him, collecting a total of \$40. A Minneapolis newspaper that picked up the wire service story headlined it, “SORRY BOSS, \$40 ALL WE CAN AFFORD.”<sup>48</sup> The article quoted strikers as wanting to contribute more, but stating that, “we’re making the lowest wages of any electrical workers in the state.” R.C. and management kept well aware of this news coverage, and corporate files held reprints of a half dozen or so similar news reports, including one from the *New York Times*.

On March 23, IUE officially joined the strike, and AFTE received lots of picket line help. AFTE activist Jack Boulger recalled, “I want to tell you it was a relief when somebody joined us—like getting a reprieve.” It probably meant



Strikers picketed belly-to-backside, doing their best to keep scabs from walking through. This photo was taken after the largest union, IUE #200, the production workers union, had joined the strike. Photo courtesy of the *North Adams Transcript*.

more than money. AFTE picketers, in fact, received only \$4 weekly from their small local treasury, as the International did not yet have a strike fund. However, the International spread the word of the North Adams strike to its other local affiliates who sent in contributions to the strikers. In particular, the AFTE local at GE in Pittsfield took up a collection every week, “like clockwork” said Boulger.<sup>49</sup>

IUE Local #200 also received help from its affiliated locals, along with resources from its more sizeable treasury and strike fund, bringing each picketer \$20 a week. In addition, other North Berkshire workers provided donuts, coffee, cider, firewood, and moral support. As Boulger recalled, “[t]here was a lot of outside help. There were people that showed up and introduced themselves. The nicest people in the world. You know, you got a problem with that lousy company, we’re going to help you kind of thing.”<sup>50</sup>

Local college students from North Adams State College and Williams College aided the strike effort as well, helping, for example, to compile information for strike newsletters. The times were also changing for these students, as they had mobilized on their respective campuses, just miles apart, to strike against the expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia and the killings of students at Kent State and Jackson State.

While each of the three unions had managed their negotiations separately, once all three officially joined the strike, “we started coordinating and it ended up . . . a completely coordinated operation,” Boulger said.<sup>51</sup> In a major speech to the Lions Club about a week after IUE joined the strike, IUE President Walter Wood reiterated AFTE’s outreach to the local business community: “I feel that many of you as retailers and individual businessmen should also be as interested as we, on this problem of maintaining the economic life of our community.” Wood also went over the union’s negotiating stance and offered a critique of R.C. Sprague’s well-publicized speech to the Chamber of Commerce the week before. Wood explained the battle over the adoption of a new incentive system and his union’s insistence that the company guarantee that workers’ wages not decline under the new bonus system. He presented economic data familiar to many in his audience: the cost of living had increased 7.4% since the last contract while the company’s offer of a 4.5% increase for each year of a two year contract would only mean further “erosion” of the workers’ “purchasing power.”

Wood then turned to R.C. Sprague’s Chamber speech and Sprague’s argument that low-price imports led to American job losses. Wood suggested several causes of the problem, none of which Sprague had touched on. First, Wood reminded his largely middle-class, business audience that the US electronics industry had grown to become the biggest in the world in part because of technological developments “underwritten and nurtured by billions of dollars in government

funds.” In fact, two-thirds of the industry’s research and development money came from the Federal government. And, as Wood argued, those electronics firms that invested overseas did so with technologies developed with American tax dollars and skills developed by American workers. Whereas R.C. Sprague had presented the difficulty as simply a case of low wage rates winning out in a competitive free-market economy, Wood conceptualized the problem quite differently:

This as you can well see is not so much the problem of what might be called foreign competition, but what began as a move by some profit hungry corporations to relocate in extremely low wage areas in an effort to exploit the use of a labor force unaware of their true value and the result: huge profits.<sup>52</sup>

Although Wood offered a very different perspective on the problems of the industry than did his boss, once again the local media simply accepted R.C.’s description of the situation as reality. And so Wood’s opposing arguments got very little traction in the media.

The local radio station and its owner, Donald Thurston, maintained a similar editorial policy toward the strike as the *Transcript*. Thurston castigated “(t)hose irresponsible people who are saying North Adams would be better off without (Sprague). . . (They) should have their heads examined.” As had the *Transcript*, Thurston accepted Sprague’s argument that the unique dilemmas of the electronics components industry kept him from paying his workers a higher wage. Also, echoing the *Transcript* editorials, Thurston focused his attack on the union leadership. He argued that while a high-percentage raise might be good for union leaders, it could lead to a decline in employment. Once again, northern Berkshire might revert to the social decline of the mid-1950s, when the textile industry closed down and workers tried to survive on welfare and part-time jobs.

The radio editorial appeared to be the last straw for the union leaders, and the presidents of all three locals angrily responded in the IUE *Bulletin*. They called Thurston “irresponsible” and in a lengthy rejoinder, attacked his argument. They argued that management’s refusal to invest in new technology led to the decline of the local textile industry, rather than wage demands. While Thurston had reasoned that North Adams’ population decline could be traced to the demise of textiles in the mid-1950s, the union presidents pointed out that the population drop-off began in the mid-1940s; and, since a good deal of the populace that left the city had simply moved to nearby communities, no substantial population change had occurred in the region. Union leaders



also criticized Thurston for failing to include the following problems in his list of local woes: the lack of housing, the need for a new school, and the preferential tax treatment some received in North Adams. They complained that neither Thurston nor the *Transcript's* Hardman asked any of the union leaders to discuss the strike issues with them. They reminded Thurston that in 1970, "conditions of employment that have existed for many years, are in some areas, no longer acceptable to employees of plants represented by organized labor." Finally, they claimed to be "considerably disturbed" by Thurston's attempts "to cast suspicion on local union leadership. . . to divide the present unity that exists."<sup>53</sup>

### A SETTLEMENT IS REACHED AND ITS MEANING

In late April, with negotiations going nowhere, all sides agreed to try mediation in Washington, D.C. The head of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, J. Curtis Counts, led the mediation team, an indication of the government's strong desire to end the strike. Counts had been credited with playing an important role in halting the three-and-a-half-month national GE strike, a strike familiar to North Adams residents because of the giant GE plant in nearby Pittsfield.<sup>54</sup> On May 5, after 27 consecutive hours of negotiations, a tentative agreement was announced. It brought with it economic compromises including a 6% increase the first year, and 5% raises the second and third years of the contract. As for non-economic provisions, the unions won the very important right to binding arbitration and an agency shop. On May 8, all three unions approved the contract. For AFTE's Jack Boulger, the resolution brought with it a "whole spectrum of feelings, depending on how you felt to start with. . . I think the attitude was mostly positive. We ended up with a good contract." Historian Raymond C. Bliss wrote that the strikers had won a "struggle for dignity, justice and security."<sup>55</sup>

The *Transcript* took a different view. On May 11, it reported that as many as 500 jobs had been lost during the strike. In an editorial titled "No One Really Wins," the editor wrote that it "appears certain" that there "will be a severe and long term drop" in local Sprague employment. The economic gains that workers won weren't much, the paper added, given the amount of time without a paycheck. Not being able to resist a final anti-union poke, the writer modified his "no victors" thesis by claiming that "the only possible winner seems to be the national treasury" of the IUE, which gained more dues-paying members because of the agency shop provision.

How can one objectively evaluate the impact of the strike itself on the fortunes of Sprague? Even immediately before the strike, the company

experienced mixed bottom lines, losing money in 1968, but turning profitable in 1969.<sup>56</sup> After the strike, the company recorded net earnings losses in 1970 and 1971. However, at the 1971 annual meeting, the company reported that its “industry position has about recovered” and Sprague was “again enjoying its normal share of industry orders.”<sup>57</sup> By 1972, Sprague “got back all . . . [the] sales . . . lost [by the strike]” and claimed significant increased earnings in 1973 and 1974.

As profits continued their upward swing, outside suitors became interested. Sprague had gone public with its stock in the 1950s and secured a place on the New York Stock Exchange in 1966. By 1976 Sprague Electric looked attractive enough to investors that it was bought by General Cable (soon to be GK Technologies), which desired to diversify. While the Sprague family controlled a sizeable chunk of the company, some 16%, it was still a minority share. But according to R.C. Sprague, “If I hadn’t agreed to sell at the price they were offering I would have been vulnerable to a shareholder suit.”<sup>58</sup>

According to Sprague CEO Neal Welch, by 1979, Sprague, while now a subsidiary of GK, had “record profits of \$44 million.” While the company had recovered its sales and even increased its profits, job decline—which had begun even before the strike—continued during the 1970s, except for



The Sprague plant closed its doors in 1986 when the company’s owners, Penn Central Corporation, moved operations out of North Adams.

a small uptick under GK.<sup>59</sup> In 1981, Penn Central Corporation, a holding company notorious for failing to invest in its companies, bought GK and by 1986 had sold off Sprague's lines, effectively closing its gates in North Adams. The 56-year life of the capacitor company in North Adams had come to an end. In this regard, the company's ending fit the nationwide pattern of deindustrialization that ravaged manufacturing centers in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>60</sup>

Given all of this, how would the community, and particularly former Sprague workers, remember the strike and the role of unions as time passed? While numerous ex-Sprague employees were the subjects of interviews in the 1980s and 1990s, no systematic, representative study of that workforce has been carried out, so no clear-cut answer to that question can be ascertained. Nonetheless, a look at the perspectives of some of those interviewees can be revealing. Nearly two decades after the strike, while overseeing an oral history project in which some two-dozen Sprague retirees discussed their working careers, historian Stewart Burns acknowledged that only one interviewee "had wholehearted praise for the strike's success."<sup>61</sup> Burns writes that some who had been part of management thought the strike itself "was 'foolish.'" Others, who supported the strike originally, had come to view its consequences as harmful to the workforce.

Statements like the following collected by Burns characterized a number of the retirees' reactions:

"The gains 'didn't impress me.'"

"[T]he strike was not a victory because 'those companies will do what they want anyway.'"

"I don't think the worker ever wins, really."

Burns quotes June Rock, a member of AFTE and an early striker, who believed the strike "worth it" at the time even though it was ultimately "devastating" in terms of lost jobs and subsequent corporate decisions. Perhaps the most surprising sentiment coming from the interviewees belonged to Mabel Lewitt, a leader in organizing the first union at Sprague in 1937 and, in her sixties, an active striker in 1970. When questioned about the role of unions in the economy of the 1980s, she responded that unions are "no good today."

Lewitt and virtually all of Burns' interviewees had begun working at Sprague in the 1930s and 1940s and had developed strong loyalties to the earlier unions, locals that had generally cooperated with management. A sample of the newer breed of worker, hired in the 1950s and 1960s, and bulwarks of the AFL-CIO-affiliated unions, a group not among the Burns sample, might well have viewed the 1970 strike and unions differently, even as hard times hit the community decades later. Jack Boulger, one of the AFTE strike leaders, for example, still had a very positive view of the strike when he was interviewed in 1989:

[W]e were very happy about . . . the fact that we had framed a contract that . . . applied to almost every problem that we had. . . . I was pretty happy with the fact that we had been able to move a corporate giant like the Sprague Electric Company into listening to us and into achieving some measure of fairness. . . . The more we dealt with them the better off things seemed to get.<sup>62</sup>

In 2011, when asked once again if the strike was successful, Boulger still “responded emphatically: ‘Oh yeah, yes.’”<sup>63</sup>

Even a high-ranking secretary, one exempt from union membership, who crossed the picket line in 1970, expressed positive feelings toward the Sprague unions some eighteen years later: “[W]henver . . . (the unions) made any gain, we gained also . . . which is a bit unfair. . . . They did all of the work and we did reap some of the benefit. . . . I just had a natural, or unnatural you might say, feeling that unions were not good. I take that back now. I feel that they did accomplish a great deal.”<sup>64</sup>

Yet, even if the viewpoints of former Sprague employees are in fact more diverse than the Burns sample leads us to believe, why have some come to blame themselves for the departure of Sprague and thousands of industrial, clerical, and technical jobs from North Berkshire? How do we explain a shift in sentiment from a group of formerly pro-union workers? One tentative answer might emerge from the battle for the hearts and minds of the workers and community members that raged during the negotiations and strike. The unions and their members aggressively presented and supported a pro-worker perspective that not only detailed the economic inequities facing Sprague employees, but also systematically critiqued the company’s perspective and continually maintained the moral certitude of their own position.

Because of its economic and political power, the company’s perspective received more support in the local print and broadcast media, but the strikers made creative and forceful use of their own resources such as strike bulletins and flyers, letters to the community, speeches to community groups, social pressure to prevent strikebreaking, and a strong and militant picket line. Thus, from the time that negotiations started in September 1969, until the strike was settled in May 1970, one could say that a battle of ideologies or viewpoints ensued. Why then had the corporate ideology gathered momentum well after the strike, at least as indicated by Burns’ research?

To try to answer this question, we need to return to the conclusion of the strike and examine developments immediately afterwards. The company couldn’t claim a strike victory for itself, especially since the unions had done well

on wages and had successfully gained arbitration and agency shop provisions. But Sprague could ignore those gains and focus on the wages employees lost during the ten weeks and the number of jobs permanently gone from the North Adams operation. Thus, while the company simply couldn't claim that it won, it could certainly argue that the strikers had lost, and lost big, in terms of wages and job security.

In the battle over key political ideas since 1970, the dominant view presented by the company and the media has been one in which the local workforce made a bad decision by striking, as it led to a direct loss of much-needed jobs. As one former employee put it, the company gave the workers "the impression" that they harmed themselves by striking. "Christ, it'd been in the papers—the thing that killed Sprague's in North Adams was the 1970 strike. . . . That's all they talked about."<sup>65</sup> And then came the devastation of 1986, when Sprague closed up shop for good.

Add to this the dominant political and social messages of the late 1970s and 1980s continually expressed by national political leaders and the media: corporate decision makers could do no wrong and overpaid union leaders and their selfish membership have led to the decline of industrial America. President Reagan successfully fired unionized air traffic control workers in 1981, beginning a period of aggressive corporate attacks on unions, union contracts, and labor in general, that continued throughout that decade.<sup>66</sup>

For old-timers living in North Adams in the mid-1980s, the city seemed semi-deserted. The crowds that had packed Main St. restaurants during the heyday of local manufacturing were gone; unemployment, poverty and homelessness were on the rise. The city's population continued its decline. As many as 5,000 jobs had disappeared in the northern Berkshires in the 1980s, manufacturing jobs in addition to Sprague's as well as jobs at retail outlets and other small businesses. Wages and salaries ranked the second lowest in Massachusetts. Demand for food aid and general relief increased along with a rise in abuse and school dropouts.<sup>67</sup> The northern Berkshires were clearly not part of the "Massachusetts Miracle" that local residents could only read about in the Boston newspapers.

Still, in several instances, local residents tried to improve the bleak post-Sprague environment. Some industry did remain in the north Berkshires and a new generation of industrial union activists, along with education and healthcare workers, organized the Northern Berkshire Labor Coalition. The coalition engaged in educational work connected with the Labor Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, supported a wildcat strike at an electrical cable plant, aided textile workers in gaining lost paychecks from a suspicious bankruptcy, and kept alive the celebration of Labor Day some

one hundred years after its first appearance in the Berkshires.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, a group of health and human service workers coalesced to form an organization that became the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition, which engaged in community outreach, educational support, and research.<sup>69</sup> The state became involved as well, focusing on skills training and planning for the future, including creation of a contemporary arts museum in the former Sprague buildings.<sup>70</sup> But the overriding reality of hard times couldn't be dismissed as former factory workers and retirees tried to make sense of a changing economic landscape.

For residents of North Adams, a progressive labor voice that had been loud and clear leading up to and continuing during the 1970 strike—a countervailing force to Sprague management and the local media—had been diminished. And the national media had become more and more anti-labor as the percentage of union members diminished. At the same time, the national Democratic Party, which had



Today the former site of the Sprague Electric Company houses the Massachusetts Museum of Modern Art's 13-acre complex in downtown North Adams.

found great favor in North Adams since the 1930s, was moving further and further away from championing working-class issues and its traditional labor union base.

In 1970, the residents of North Adams broke away from Sprague corporate ideology, said “no” to workplace paternalism, and fought hard for the economic and workplace rights that had eluded them in the past. They accomplished this with a powerful counter-offensive to the company’s public relations campaign and a disciplined and unified strike effort, all during a national era of strong labor movements and a supportive Democratic party. As unions weakened in the 1970s and 1980s, as deindustrialization became the new normal, and as the Democratic party moved to the right, that ten-week upsurge in 1970 in North Adams stands out more and more as a significant accomplishment, one difficult to replicate absent a major shift in the nation’s economic and political landscape.

HJM

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## Notes

1. Train figures from Barry Werth, “The Father, the Sons, and the Town.” *New England Monthly*, June 1985: 58. Quotation from Federal Writers Project, *The Berkshire Hills*. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1939), 17.
2. Jay Louis Nierenberg, “North Adams: New England Mill Town: A Political, Economic, and Psychological Survey” (Honors thesis, Williams College, 1942), 122.
3. “Capacitor.” *Encarta World English Dictionary*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).
4. *Berkshire Eagle*, October 8, 1984.
5. Soon after turning down the Air Force position, Sprague served as chief consultant on a Senate subcommittee examining continental defense, and in 1957 President Eisenhower appointed him to a similar committee. On that latter committee, Sprague reportedly challenged General Curtis LeMay, head of the Strategic Air Command, on the command’s vulnerability to a Soviet attack (Richard Rhodes, “The General and World War III.” *The New Yorker*, June 19, 1995, 55). Eisenhower praised him for

his work on the committee (letter dated November 8, 1957, carton FF29, Sprague archives). In a letter dated September 14, 1961 (carton K-240, Sprague archives), Sprague wrote to President Kennedy urging him to “not give in to the Russians any longer” and to build shelters “to save the majority of our people” in the event of a nuclear war. Sprague maintained a friendship with former Vice President Nixon, and in a letter dated April 18, 1962 (carton N160, Sprague archives), in which he addresses Nixon by his first name, he wrote, “I congratulate you on your decision to seek the Governorship of California. Particularly at this time we need men of your experience, energy and integrity in public life.” Author’s Note: In references to the Sprague archives, I am referring to the company records that were indexed, boxed, and stored in a nearby warehouse when the company moved out of its buildings. I was given permission to examine them in the mid-1990s, but today the “archive” is not available to the public and its future is uncertain.

6. Sprague served as president of the Associated Industries of Massachusetts (1951-1953), president of the Radio-Electronics-TV Manufacturers Association (1956-1961), and long-time director of the Electronic Industries Association. He also served as a director of the First National Bank of Boston and the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (John A. Adams, *North Adams Transcript*, September 28, 1991, 1-2).

7. To head off genuine employee-led unionization campaigns, many corporations in the 1920s and 1930s established so-called independent unions or company unions. While these unions might give the appearance of worker power, they were controlled by management, which had the final word on any complaints or suggestions regarding wages and working conditions. In 1935, the Wagner Act outlawed company unions, but it wasn’t until April 1937 that the Supreme Court ruled the new law constitutional. A month earlier, while settling a two-day strike, Sprague Plant Manager Carleton Shugg proposed a new labor organization to be called, literally, “Sprague Company Union.” When the Supreme Court decision came down in April, Shugg simply recommended that the union be renamed the Independent Condenser Workers Union (ICW). In March 1938, in response to an organizing drive by the United Electrical Workers union (UE), a CIO union, backers of ICW renamed themselves ICW #2. UE filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board arguing that Sprague management violated the Wagner Act by starting another company union. Nearly two years later, the Board concluded that while ICW #1 was indeed a company union, ICW #2 was not. Nonetheless, over the years, many Sprague workers characterized ICW #2 as being management-controlled despite the “Independent” in its title. See Raymond C. Bliss, “A Study of Union History at the Sprague Electric Company in North Adams, Massachusetts.” Thesis, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1976 and Maynard Seider, “The CIO in Rural Massachusetts: Sprague Electric and North Adams, 1937-1944,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* (Winter 1994) Vol. 23 (1).

8. See Robert Paul Gabrielsky, “The Evolution of the Marshall Street Complex in North Adams.” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* (Winter 1991): 24-42, for a discussion of “welfare capitalism” at the Sprague plant.



9. Maynard Seider, "Contested Beliefs and Rebellion in a New England Mill Town: Sprague Electric Workers in North Adams." *The Mind's Eye* (Fall 1997): 39-60, for data on Sprague.
10. *Berkshire Eagle*, March 29, 1957, 6.
11. George Bateman. Interview by author. March 15, 1993.
12. See Gabrielsky, "The Evolution of the Marshall Street Complex," Note 7.
13. Woman's statement from ICW-IUE Archives, Box 4, 107, November 15, 1966, University of Massachusetts Amherst. Historian's quote from Raymond C. Bliss, "A Study of Union History at the Sprague Electric Company in North Adams, Massachusetts." Thesis, Williams College, 1976), 117.
14. Bliss, "A Study of Union History"; Walter Wood. Interview. "Shifting Gears, Oral History Project." Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell.
15. Qtd. in Bliss, "A Study of Union History," 116. Gordon Lane, *North Adams Transcript*, June 16 and June 17, 1967.
16. Jack Boulger. Interview. "Shifting Gears, Oral History Project." Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell: 13
17. Bliss, "A Study of Union History," 120.
18. George Bateman. Interview by author. March 15, 1993. Research and development scientists, who worked in a facility across from the main gate, and were "asked" to do production work during the strike, initially bent over and walked through a four foot high tunnel under the street, thereby avoiding the pickets. However, when the strikers found out, they picketed the R and D parking lot at the end of the day, leading to a two- to three-hour time period for the scientists to ultimately exit. After that, the scientists skipped the tunnel and took their chances going through the main gate picketers ("*Memoirs of a Salaried Scab*," anonymous. Unpublished.).
19. John Boulger. Interview. "Shifting Gears, Oral History Project." Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell.
20. AFTE 101 flyer, "Unions: AFTE 1968-70" folder, F-246 carton, Sprague archives. *North Adams Transcript*, January 8, 1970, 11.
21. IUE – Local 200 flyer, "Unions-IUE-1968-70" folder, F-246 carton, Sprague archives.
22. Maynard Seider, "Contested Beliefs and Rebellion in a New England Mill Town: Sprague Electric Workers in North Adams." *The Mind's Eye* (Fall 1997): 39-60.
23. "Unions-IUE-1968-70" folder, F-246 carton, Sprague archives.
24. Bliss, "A Study of Union History," 137. On the chronology, and quotation from *The Sprague Log*, North Adams, Massachusetts, Sprague Electric Company, February 17, 1970, accessed through Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts Archives, <http://www.mcla.edu/library/sprague/>
25. "thank God..." letter to the editor by Doris M. Richards in *North Adams Transcript*, February 14, 1970; comments on Sprague/Carlson letters from Bliss, "A Study of Union History," 131-136.
26. Bliss, "A Study of Union History," 137-138.

27. Maynard Seider, "The CIO in Rural Massachusetts: Sprague Electric and North Adams, 1937- 1944," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* (Winter 1994).
28. Bliss, "A Study of Union History," 142.
29. Sprague to Hardman letter, May 12, 1970, in "Unions-general 1969-70" folder, F-246 carton, Sprague archives.
30. Bliss, "A Study of Union History," 149-150.
31. Stewart Burns, "Capacitors and Community: Women Workers at Sprague Electric, 1930-1980." *The Public Historian* 11, No. 4 (Fall, 1989).
32. "STRIKE 1970," from notes of R.C. Sprague, "Union Neg. Apr-Jul 1970" folder, E-379 carton.
33. Gordon Lane, "Welfare eases lot of strikers," *North Adams Transcript*, March 28, 1970, 10.
34. Creatively changing and adding verses to such favorites as "Solidarity Forever," "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad," and "On Top of Old Smokey," the strikers sang while the picketing continued. George Bateman remembers instances of picketers marching in three lines, each line moving in another direction, making it virtually impossible for scabs to get through (Interview by author. March 15, 1993).
35. "tense" quote from Jack Boulger and second quote from Leo Cyr, author's interviews.
36. Leo Cyr interview by Maynard Seider, June 23, 1993.
37. Esther Hartranft. Interview. "Shifting Gears, Oral History Project." Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell.
38. Evelyn Jones. Interview. "Shifting Gears, Oral History Project." Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell.
39. Burns, "Capacitors and Community," 21.
40. Anne L. Millet, "They're Big Boys Now." *Berkshire Eagle*, March 21, 1970, 13.
41. Bliss, "A Study of Union History," 145-158.
42. George Bateman. Interview by author. March 15, 1993.
43. "STRIKE 1970," Sprague archives.
44. *North Adams Transcript*, March 5 and March 19, 1970
45. *North Adams Transcript* quotations from April 10 and April 24, 1970; letter to Hardman, May 12, 1970, in "Union Neg., April-June, 1970" folder, E-379, Sprague archives.
46. AFTE letter to businesspeople, March 20, 1970, "Union Negot. Jan.-March, 1970" folder, E-379 carton, Sprague archives.
47. "AFTE Strike Bulletin," March 10, 1970, Sprague archives.
48. April 2, 1970, Sprague archives.
49. Boulger interview.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. "Walter Wood talk to Lions' Club," April 1, 1970, "Union Negot. April-July 1970" folder, E-379 carton, Sprague archives.

53. *IUE #200 Bulletin*, April 30, 1970, "Union Negot. April-July, 1970" folder, E-379 carton, Sprague archives.
54. "Sprague-Union Talks Moving to Washington." *Berkshire Eagle*, April 25, 1970.
55. Boulger interview. As one researcher phrased it, "By 1970, the workers had had enough. To put a dollar sign on a struggle for dignity, justice and security is not easy" but "[t]he unions did obtain their 6% hike, cost of living adjustments, and union security and binding arbitration clauses." (Bliss, "A Study of Union History," 165-166)
56. Bliss, "A Study of Union History," 163-164.
57. "Minutes," Board of Directors, 1971, Sprague archives.
58. Qtd. in Lauren R. Stevens, "Sprague Electric, and the man who started it all," *The Advocate*, March 30, 1988, 1, 6.
59. In 1966, four years prior to the strike, Sprague employment in North Adams reached its height at 4,137. As the company shifted production elsewhere, employment dropped to 3,054 in 1969 and to 2,022 the year of the strike. The year of the sale to General Cable, 1976, employment was listed at 1,664. Under General Cable (GK Technologies), employment increased and in 1981, with the sale to Penn Central, 1,720 employees remained in North Adams. *Berkshire Eagle*, October 8, 1984.
60. Historical evidence certainly suggests that decisions of manufacturing companies to downsize and/or move offshore would have occurred regardless of whether their workforce unionized or engaged in contentious labor relations—e.g. strikes—as the push for cheaper labor and lower regulation proved to be the dominant motivations. For an overview of the beginnings of the national wave of deindustrialization, see Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982). The following sources cover the beginnings of deindustrialization in specific industries and/or specific geographical areas. For a focus on the steel industry, see Jack Metzgar, *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), and for the auto industry, see Kathryn Marie Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994). For a study of New England and globalization, see Aviva Chomsky, *Linked Labor Histories: New England, Colombia, and the Making of a Global Working Class* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). For the story closer to North Adams, in western Massachusetts, see Robert Farrant, *Metal Fatigue: American Bosch and the Demise of Metalworking in the Connecticut River Valley* (Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company, 2009), and for a focus on Sprague, see Scott L. Malcomson, "High Tech's Low Blow: Out of Work in Computer Country," *Village Voice*, June 4, 1985, 16, 18-19.
61. Burns, "Capacitors and Community," 75. Somewhat similar sentiments are expressed in a report on conversations among fifteen women at a 1997 Sprague Retirees Club monthly meeting in Joe Manning, *Steeple: Sketches of North Adams* 3rd Ed. (Flatiron Press, Florence, Massachusetts.), 155-169.

62. Boulger. Interviewed by Robert Gabrielsky. February 2, 1989. "Shifting Gears, Oral History Project." Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell: 26.
63. Alison Pincus, "The Mark of Reliability: From Sprague Electric to MASS MoCA in North Adams, MA" (Thesis, Williams College, 2012), 42.
64. Esther Hartranft. Interview. "Shifting Gears, Oral History Project." Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell: 46-47
65. Norman Chenail. Interview by author. September 23, 1992. John Sprague, the founder's son and last CEO of the company, wrote that "The strike did more than cost North Adams jobs. It almost destroyed Sprague Electric." Yet, while Sprague admits that the company did eventually "recover" from the strike-related losses, he tends to blame the national unions for pushing up wages and benefits so much that the firm became uncompetitive, resulting in the loss of jobs. Thus it would seem that former Sprague employees have only themselves to blame for voting out their old "independent" unions, affiliating with IUE and AFTE and striking for 10 weeks back in 1970. And, writes Sprague, "[a]s the former North Adams employees are now learning painfully, service-type jobs . . . offer neither the same level of pay or benefits as the industrial sector—if those service jobs ever materialize!" These remarks were published in a front page story in the *North Adams Transcript* (May 27, 1993), culled from Sprague's book, *Revitalizing U.S. Electronics: Lessons From Japan* (Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1993).
66. Bennett Harrison and Harry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).
67. Alan Bashevkin, "Social Costs of Economic Decline: Northern Berkshire Region 1980-1990," Northern Berkshire Health and Human Services Coalition, January 23, 1991.
68. Holly A. Taylor, "N. Berkshire workers form labor coalition," *Berkshire Eagle*, October 29, 1984, 18; Julie Sell, "They wouldn't go quietly," *Berkshire Eagle*, August 3, 1985, 7.
69. www.NBCcoalition.org
70. "The Task Force Report," The Governor's Task Force on Economic Development for Northern Berkshire, assisted by Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning University of Massachusetts at Amherst in Conjunction with LANDUSE INC., Hadley, Massachusetts, March, 1986; Susan C. Phillips, "Museum would generate jobs, dollars, report says," *Berkshire Eagle*, June 2, 1987, 1.



“Tree Logic” (1999), six inverted sugar maples, by Natalie Jeremijenko, in the MASS MOCA courtyard.