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Local 21's Quest for a Moral Economy: Peabody, Massachusetts and its Leather Workers, 1933-1973

Lynne Nelson Manion

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**LOCAL 21'S QUEST FOR A MORAL ECONOMY: PEABODY,
MASSACHUSETTS AND ITS LEATHER
WORKERS, 1933-1973**

By

Lynne Nelson Manion

B.A. Syracuse University, 1988

M.A. University of Maine, 1995

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(in History)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May, 2003

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Thesis Co-Advisors: Dr. Nathan Godfried and Dr. Marli F. Weiner

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The industrial working class began the middle decades of the twentieth century with unlimited hope and possibility but ended them fraught with disillusionment and dismay. This marked a disjointed experience as optimism for the future gave way to disenchantment. With the ratification of the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933 and the National Labor Relations Act in 1935, hundreds of thousands of workers across the United States became union members. The euphoria that this initial burst of unionization created, however, could not be sustained throughout the post-World War II years. The Cold War, McCarthyism and later the onset of de-industrialization ushered in new phases in working class history marked by the gradual ineffectiveness of the working class to shape domestic policy.

In order to provide better insight on the potential, achievements, and disappointments of the industrial working class in the twentieth century, this study examines a community-based leather worker's union—Local 21—in the small New

England city of Peabody, Massachusetts, from 1933 to 1973. Eighteen miles northeast of Boston, Peabody was considered the leather capital of the world in 1919 when it employed 8,600 people in 106 tanneries and produced more leather in a year than anywhere else in the world. Because of their importance in the early and mid-twentieth century, Peabody and its leather workers offer an insightful case study for understanding the working class during a transformative period. Growing out of community unrest during the New Deal era, Local 21 persevered through the darkest days of the national union movement after World War II and remained a community-based union intent on creating a more democratic culture—a culture based on a moral economy stressing the needs of the working class individual over corporate profits. Even though the union's gains did not totally alter the social and industrial landscape of Peabody, for a brief time Peabody leather workers gained a measure of power that allowed them to have a voice in reshaping their workplace and community.

DEDICATION

To Bradie and Dacie: *Though I study the past, you are the future.*

In Memory of Pauline Comora and Eleanor Ryder: *Two women who inspired my sense of curiosity.*

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Every endeavor in life requires the input and help of others. This work was no exception. Many people offered assistance throughout the research and writing process. Dr. Marli F. Weiner provided encouragement and advice early on when I was debating whether I should pursue a Ph.D. in history. Her support at the outset never wavered throughout the next six years. The attention she gave my dissertation in the final months helped me strengthen my arguments, solidify my thinking, and hone my writing. Dr. Nathan Godfried in his role as graduate coordinator and later as co-chair of my dissertation committee exceeded the job requirements for both of these positions. His dedication and commitment to helping me become a better scholar was instrumental in my finishing this project and my degree. His love of history and desire to promote the interests of the working class inspired my thinking and served as a role model for my work.

Dr. Paula Petrik, Dr. William Baker, and Dr. Elizabeth McKillen offered assistance throughout this project. Dr. Petrik instilled in me the necessity of telling a story and making sure the thesis was clearly visible. This advice guided every page of the dissertation. Her belief in my abilities as a historian provided solace at various low points of my graduate career. Dr. William Baker never failed to make me smile whenever things became too stressful. His advice has informed many of the decisions I have made. Prior to joining my committee, Dr. Elizabeth McKillen read earlier drafts of my dissertation and prospectus. The attention she gave to my work was

significant. The comments she made on the earlier drafts were helpful and insightful. Her scholarship provided a model to strive for and measure against.

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On a personal level, my parents, Donald and Dorothy Nelson, have offered encouragement, support, and child-care from the beginning of my graduate career. Their willingness to put their own lives on hold and travel eight hours every few months to help me meet the continuing array of deadlines has been incredible. If my mother had not watched my children off and on for the last six years, I would not have been able to finish this work. Her ability to keep my house clean, laundry washed, and refrigerator stocked also provided me with extra time to research and write.

My daughters, Bradie and Dacie, collectively and individually have aided this project. Bradie literally has been with me every step of the way in my graduate career. I was pregnant with her when I took my first graduate class as a Master's student, and she has never known a time when her mother was not reading, researching, and writing. As I completed this dissertation, she completed her first

large research project—a six-grade, three-month science project. Together we met our deadlines and offered each other support. At times when I wanted to quit, Bradie gave advice and words of wisdom far beyond her eleven years. Dacie was born as I was finishing my Master's degree. She has probably spent more time at Fogler Library than many undergraduates. Dacie's ability to remind me that life exists outside of class assignments and dissertation deadlines has kept me from missing out on the really important things in life: basketball games, flag-football, skiing, walking the dog, and cuddling with a little girl.

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INTRODUCTION:

Peabody and Its Leather History

The history of the working class is the history of people, their problems and their choices, their potential to change social relations, as well as their powerlessness to bring about change. Learning from them does not mean sanctifying an abstraction called the working class, as if it were a totem encapsulating all that is good in the world. Instead, it means taking seriously the limitations and accomplishments of ordinary people as they try to address the gap between who they want to be and the lives they have to lead.¹

The industrial working class began the middle decades of the twentieth century with unlimited hope and possibility but ended them fraught with disillusionment and dismay. This marked a disjointed experience as optimism for the future gave way to disenchantment. With the ratification of the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933 and the National Labor Relations Act in 1935, hundreds of thousands of workers across the United States became union members. The euphoria that this initial burst of unionization created, however, could not be sustained throughout the post-World War II years. The Cold War, McCarthyism and later the onset of de-industrialization ushered in new phases in working class history marked by the gradual ineffectiveness of the working class to shape domestic policy.

In order to provide better insight on the potential, achievements, and disappointments of the industrial working class in the twentieth century, this study examines a community-based leather worker's union—Local 21—in the small New England city of Peabody, Massachusetts, from 1933 to 1973.² Eighteen miles

¹ George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 11.

² The ending date of 1973 was chosen because that is when Local 21's longtime leader, Richard "Mike" O'Keefe, died. Throughout this dissertation the city of Peabody will be referred to as the

northeast of Boston, Peabody was considered the leather capital of the world in 1919 when it employed 8,600 people in 106 tanneries and produced more leather in a year than anywhere else in the world.³ Because of their importance in the early and mid-twentieth century, Peabody and its leather workers offer an insightful case study for understanding the working class during a transformative period. Growing out of community unrest during the New Deal era, Local 21 persevered through the darkest days of the national union movement after World War II and remained a community-based union intent on creating a more democratic culture—a culture based on a moral economy stressing the needs of the working class individual over corporate profits.⁴

This Peabody union of leather workers overcame the rifts among varying ideologies, aspirations, cultures, and national sentiments that created disharmony in other unions during the middle part of the twentieth century and managed to initiate better living and working conditions for its members. Even though the union's gains did not totally alter the social and industrial landscape of Peabody, for a brief time Peabody leather workers enjoyed benefits and a quality of life that previously had been unknown to the industrial worker in this city.⁵ Along with industrial workers across the country, Peabody's union members, like other trade unionists, "made their political grievances—debilitating economic insecurity, the lack of workplace rights,

Leather City, the Tanner City, and the Leather Capital of the World. They are all nicknames for the city of Peabody.

³ "Common Dedicated to Tannery Workers," *Peabody Times*, June 14, 1993.

⁴ Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 3-4. Other historians have voiced similar arguments. Nathan Godfried, *WCFL: Chicago's Voice of Labor, 1926-78* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997).

⁵ Doris Schwerin, *Diary of a Pigeon Watcher: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow, 1976), 146-147, 198.

pervasive class inequality—the central issues” of debate. Just as labor leaders in other industries “were carried away with the notion that labor’s march would sweep all before it and leave in its wake an utterly new society,” Peabody’s union leaders believed in a similar reordering.⁶ As part of the leather workers’ reshaping of America’s capitalist system, they wanted to reconfigure society’s “economic and political relationships to the advantage of the working class.”⁷ Though these feelings of hope and progress could not last indefinitely, before they had faded completely Peabody’s leather activists gained a measure of power that allowed them to have a voice in reshaping their workplace and community. While these leather workers were unable to prevent the ultimate demise of the leather industry in Peabody, they worked tirelessly to slow its migration to other parts of the country and overseas by stabilizing wage rates across the country.

Labor conflict and the growth and contraction of the labor movement cannot be understood without addressing the community and the local factors where labor unrest grows.⁸ The relationship between Local 21 and the community of Peabody is a focal point of this research. Studying this working-class community in the middle part of the twentieth century demonstrates the conditions that gave rise to this resourceful union and the external forces that ultimately diminished its effectiveness. Trade unionism is more than a force intent on consensus and accommodation and concerned merely with bread and butter issues like wage gains; instead, varying ideologies,

⁶ Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 153.

⁷ Roger Horowitz, “*Negro and White, Unite and Fight!*” *A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-90* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 6.

⁸ John Cumbler, *Working-Class Community in Industrial America: Work, Leisure, and Struggle in Two Industrial Cities, 1880-1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 4.

aspirations, and even cultures need to be incorporated into the equation to better understand union activity.⁹

Various scholars—Staughton Lynd, Gary Gerstle, John Borsos, and Elizabeth Faue, to name a few—have looked at the labor movement of the early thirties, prior to the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO—initially called the Committee for Industrial Organization), and characterized what happened in a variety of communities as an alternative unionism, also known as community-based or solidarity unionism. Scholars depict this alternative unionism as “emphasiz[ing] local autonomy and community-level organization.” Highly democratic and politically independent, community-based unionism stressed egalitarian, horizontal networks of rank and filers. These networks “generated a distinctive organizational culture and set of attitudes.” Relying on the “culture of solidarity that developed during protests,” community-based unionism stressed unity and “gave new and collective meaning to formerly individual violence, aggression and struggle.”¹⁰ Solidarity unions were not formed by organizers coming into a community and signing up workers; instead solidarity unions “were generally organized from below, by committees of ordinary workers who teamed up with others in their shops and with other workers in the community where they lived.” Most importantly of all, solidarity unionism “relied on direct action”—the strike, but the decision to strike came from the workers, not a

⁹ Cumbler, *Working-Class Community*, 3-4.

¹⁰ Staughton Lynd, ed., *“We Are All Leaders”*: *The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 2-3 (first quote); 174-175 (second quote). The terms community-based, alternative unionism, and solidarity unionism are interchangeable. This dissertation uses all three terms. See also Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism*; Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991); John Borsos, ““We Make You This Appeal in the Name of Every Union Man and Woman in Barberton’ Solidarity Unionism in Barberton, Ohio, 1933-41” in Lynd, *“We Are All Leaders,”* 238-293.

union official in a distant place.¹¹ In the purest sense, unions that engaged in solidarity unionism did not look to a national organization to mandate their policies and direction; local union members made all the decisions affecting their local.¹² In the formative (pre-World War II) years of the CIO, some of its industrial unions still adhered to aspects of solidarity unionism.¹³ But the guiding structure of the World War II and post-World War CIO industrial unions, also called business unions, was vertical;¹⁴ they were hierarchical organizations with power flowing from the top down:

The international union officers appoint the staff men, the district directors depend on the international union for the share of the dues check-off money, the staff men take over the local union grievances after the first couple of steps, and the grievance committeemen settle grievances without consulting the members who filed the grievance and who, more than any one, are affected by how the grievances are settled.¹⁵

Solidarity unionism differed from industrial unionism in that there was no bureaucratic chain of command in the former. Technical expertise and prescribed union ideology did not have a place in community-based unions. Workers came

¹¹ Staughton Lynd, *Solidarity Unionism: Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Below* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1992), 25.

¹² When U.S. unions used the word “international,” they meant that their unions were national (nation-wide—as well as Canada). These unions were vertical in their chain of command. Local unions turned over a certain amount of their dues to support the international organization, which in turn supported the local in a variety of monetary and organizational endeavors.

¹³For a good discussion of the CIO see “History of the CIO: A Symposium,” *Labor History* 37 (Spring 1996): 157-188.

¹⁴ Chapter Four discusses the transformation of the CIO into a more bureaucratic entity. Historian David Brody concedes that the early CIO did have radical potential—militant rank and file, use of strike activity and mass picketing, political activism, and a developed social position advocating industrial democracy. David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Lynd, *Solidarity Unionism*, 33.

together, especially in times of crisis, and formed an organization based on each other's experiences. "It was organic."¹⁶

This type of unionism did "not stop at the formal lodge meeting. It [saw] the union as a way of life which [involved] the entire community. If the factory was 'the pivot of all organizational effort,' the community was its sustenance."¹⁷ In his work on the Barberton, Ohio mass-production workers in the thirties, historian John Borsos illustrates how solidarity unionism gained momentum in one Ohio manufacturing town. In order to bring the labor movement into people's personal lives—not just their work lives—Barberton labor leaders defined their unions as "social institutions . . . [that] sponsored dances, Christmas dinners, and other social events." In supporting the unionization effort in Barberton, community members found that everybody in the community benefited.¹⁸ Through these formal and informal organizations the working class formed bonds that cut across various ethnic differences.¹⁹

The Barberton labor movement enjoyed "widespread community support" in part because the leaders of the various labor organizations "dictated that an injury to one was indeed an injury to all."²⁰ Everyone in the Barberton community had a stake in the success of the rank and file worker. W. Lloyd Warner and J.O. Low, who in the 1940s wrote about community unionism, saw the social service programs offered by some industrial unions as an indication that these unions wanted to ameliorate barriers of class, race, and ethnicity. This was in sharp contrast to the craft unionism of the

¹⁶ Borsos, "We Make You This Appeal," 245. See also Lynd, *Solidarity Unionism*, 33-34.

¹⁷ Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, 2.

¹⁸ Borsos, "We Make You This Appeal," 244 (quote); 276-277.

¹⁹ Cumbler, *Working-Class Community in Industrial America*, 219.

²⁰ Borsos, "We Make You This Appeal," 274.

American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.) that sought to differentiate workers based on skill level. In characterizing community-based unions' efforts at eliminating social hierarchies, Warner and Low said: "these tendencies are based on the principles and feelings that all workers are alike and are accepting the status of workers who are irrevocably opposed to management."²¹ This ideal of community-based unionism where class, race and ethnic differences are muted and all jobs are considered equal could be found in Peabody throughout the thirties, forties, fifties, and sixties. As former leather worker George Georges recounted, "We all stuck together. Irish, the Greeks, everybody. There was no argument between all of us."²² Local 21 epitomized this ideal of community-based unionism even after joining the CIO and later merging with the International Fur Workers Union (IFWU), which was unusual.²³ The majority of independent unions, as Local 21 had been in the early thirties, gave up their administrative control and practice of solidarity unionism when they joined forces with a nationally federated labor organization like the CIO or AFL and especially when they merged with an international or national labor organization, which were mainly vertically structured.²⁴ Part of the reason for joining these federated labor organizations and national unions, even though doing so meant

²¹ W. Lloyd Warner and J.O. Low, *The Social System of the Modern Factory-The Strike: A Social Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 182.

²² Transcripts from Leather Soul documentary interviews, April 21-23, 1989 and April 27-30, 1989 around the city of Peabody, Tanner Film/Video, 32-15 35th Street, Astoria, New York 11106, Interview with George Georges, 47-48.

²³ Lynd, "We Are All Leaders," 269-277. The rank and file Borsos studied also retained horizontal organizations in the face of national organizations. There are those historians, however, who disagree with Staughton Lynd and John Borsos's articulation of the CIO as being bureaucratic and less radical. See "We Are All Leaders: A Symposium on a Collection of Essays Dealing with Alternative Unionism in the Early 1930s," *Labor History* 38 (Spring/Summer 1997): 165-201.

²⁴ Rick Halpern and Roger Horowitz, *Meatpackers: An Oral History of Black Packinghouse Workers and Their Struggle for Racial and Economic Equality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), 26.

sacrificing a measure of local autonomy, was to utilize an already established bureaucracy that had the monetary and administrative resources available to organize workers, implement programs, and fight for better wages. Local 21, however, did not relinquish its independence. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, the Peabody union retained, to some degree, a horizontal structure of unionization in which each union member was considered as important and influential as every other member. This union of leather workers did not rely solely on its parent organizations to enact change and reform. Various controversies throughout the middle part of the twentieth century tested this egalitarian mode of operation, but in the end the members of Local 21 withstood pressure from both the manufacturers and community leaders and held fast to the position of equality among all leather workers and for all leather workers. Local 21 possessed two qualities that allowed it to remain a vital entity: unity and leadership.

As a solidarity-based union, Local 21 strived throughout its long history to keep its members united. By implementing a host of social programs, Local 21 worked to instill a sense of camaraderie among the rank and file. By including family members in union activities, Local 21 became a focal point in the workers' lives. Representing leather workers from more than fifty different tanneries doing different types of leather work, this union of leather workers was able to achieve a sense of unity in spite of workplace, skill, ethnic and religious differences.

The programs Local 21 initiated in the forties and fifties resulted from the efforts of interested union members and committed leaders. Even though Peabody's leather workers were not able, in the final analysis, to refashion the capitalist society

in which they lived, the leaders of Local 21 had a significant effect on the lives of leather workers in their community and throughout the country. These labor leaders, like the unity they helped to create, were key to Local 21's success.

Without any formal labor union training, certain individuals in the greater Peabody community rose through the ranks of union membership and had a profound influence on other leather workers. Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci characterized this type of individual as an organic intellectual—individuals who without prior training or education “direct the ideas and aspirations of their class.”²⁵ The leaders of Local 21, like long-time business manager Richard “Mike” O’Keefe, were not, according to historian George Lipsitz’s definition of the term organic intellectuals, “troublemakers or loudmouths”; instead they were individuals who were able to “articulate and activate ideas already present in the community.” Organic intellectuals use social contestation as a means to “originate and circulate their ideas.”²⁶ The social programs Local 21 created for its membership and the larger community were a testament to these powerful organic forces inherent in the labor movement of the New Deal era. But unlike many rank and filers in other working-class communities, Peabody leather workers did not relinquish their working-class militancy and grass-roots mobilization when societal and cultural pressures dictated that it was no longer acceptable to be militant.²⁷

²⁵ See Antonio Gramsci, *Letters From Prison*, trans. Ray Rosenthal (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 9.

²⁶ Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle*, 9-11.

²⁷ Elizabeth Faue, “Paths of Unionization” in Lynd, “*We Are All Leaders*,” 189-190. See also Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, 145-146; Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 10.

While community-based unionism was effective in many communities, such as Barberton and Peabody, it did have limitations because of the political conditions of the time. Although the Wagner Act in 1935 secured workers' right to collective bargaining, the recession of 1937 resulted in "hundreds of thousands of newly organized workers" across the country without jobs. During this recession, workers throughout the country attempted to maintain their current contracts "without a cut in pay or erosion of other union conditions." This proved to be difficult as manufacturers fought to hold on to their diminishing profits. As the decade waned and Congress became a "conservative coalition of Republicans and Southern Democrats," further strengthening the manufacturers' hard-line position against unionization, maintaining union gains became increasingly difficult.²⁸ The World War II years, post-World War II years, and the rise of anti-communism exacerbated union hardships. Many independent unions merged with larger, more prosperous unions in the late forties and early fifties just to survive. With the de-industrialization of many of America's key industries in the sixties and seventies, this trend toward amalgamation intensified.²⁹ Community-based unions that wanted to retain local control but prosper and affect change had to assume altered forms.

Peabody provides a case study to observe the changes that were required for a community-based labor group to retain its basis of solidarity unionism throughout a turbulent period in the twentieth century. An analysis of Local 21 does three things: at a minimum it documents the history of one industrial community and its union

²⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁹ Seymour Martin Lipset, ed., *Unions in Transition: Entering the Second Century* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press, 1986), 90-91.

activity, on another level it provides a better understanding of how community-based unionism functioned in the pre- and post-World War II years, and as a basis for debate it argues that a community-based union tried and, to a degree, influenced the U.S. capitalist system by remaining true to its solidarity unionism roots. The members of Local 21 shared a general commitment to create or refashion “whole social structures” in society to the advantage of the working class.³⁰ Although some labor historians define the post-World War II labor movement as a “passive agent in relation to its economic setting—lacking the capacity or even the intention of influencing the technological, political, or economic changes that were determining its strength,” this characterization did not hold true for Local 21.³¹

One reason the post-World War II labor movement has been accused of being a “passive” entity in terms of enacting real social change is that there is a “paucity of community studies” that concentrate on labor in the mid-twentieth century.³²

Historian Mark McCulloch characterizes the work done by historians on labor after World War II as “an afterthought, consisting of sweeping generalizations” that characterize the labor movement as ineffective in effecting any real social, political, economic, or cultural change.³³ Joshua Freeman argues that the failures of the post-war CIO “make it tempting to see the history of industrial unionism as anti-climatic.” This, however, does a disservice to the CIO, he contends. The industrial unionism of

³⁰ Horowitz, “*Negro and White*,” 6.

³¹ Ronald L. Filippelli, “The Historical Context of Postwar Industrial Relations,” in *U.S. Labor Relations 1945-1989: Accommodation and Conflict*, ed. Bruce Nissen (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 141.

³² Borsos, “We Make You This Appeal,” 238.

³³ Mark McCulloch, “The Shop Floor Dimension of Union Rivalry: The Case of Westinghouse in the 1950s,” in Steve Rosswurm, ed., *The CIO’s Left-Led Unions* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 183.

the New Deal era “helped reshape the very fabric of American society” and radically changed the lives of the working class.³⁴ In order to argue that labor had choices in the middle part of the twentieth century and that its fate was not preordained by governmental limitations, specific examples of these choices must be provided. Correcting these deficiencies is essential for providing a more accurate picture of the past. This work on Peabody leather workers offers an alternative vision of what the working class was able to accomplish in the pre- and post-World War II years; in so doing it will begin to correct some of the misconceptions of labor’s potential—or lack of potential—in the middle part of the twentieth century.

Both Nelson Lichtenstein and James B. Atleson argue that the “ultimate character of the new CIO was not foreordained.”³⁵ Using the United Auto Workers Union and the International Association of Machinists as his examples, Lichtenstein describes how prior to World War II, industrial unions exerted a fair amount of pressure on business and government. However, Lichtenstein sees the coming of World War II as the force that solidified “the tendency toward hierarchical control and dependence on the government within the new industrial unions.”³⁶ Atleson attributes this governmental dependence to legal regulations, policies, and pressures. Rather than seeing this subservience to government as being preordained, Atleson

³⁴ Joshua Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City: 1933-1966* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), vi. Max Kampelman also characterizes the CIO as “one of the most significant social, economic, and political events of American history.” Max Kampelman, *The Communist Party vs. The C.I.O.: A Study in Power Politics* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1957), xi-xii.

³⁵ Nelson Lichtenstein, “Defending the No-Strike Pledge: CIO Politics During World War II,” in *Workers’ Struggles, Past and Present: A “Radical America” Reader*, ed. James Green (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 270. There are some historians who argue that the CIO, from its very beginning, was limited in what it could do. See Walter Galenson, “Communists and Trade Union Democracy,” *Industrial Relations* 13, 1 (1974): 228-236.

³⁶ Lichtenstein, “Defending the No-Strike Pledge,” 270-271.

sees it resulting from “conscious decisions . . . made by Washington policy makers that dramatically affected union life after World War II.”³⁷ David Milton concurs with Lichtenstein and Atleson, arguing that while corporate power was not inevitable, the rise of anti-communism after World War II hampered the “advance of class conscious industrial unionism.”³⁸

The corporate power, characterized as Big Business, fueled this anti-communism ideology. The marketplace, however, did not enjoy uncontested supremacy after World War II. Forces were at work in the country that offered the working class a different vision of American life—a vision more concerned with a worker’s quality of life than the factory owner’s bottom line. Historian Elizabeth Fones-Wolf argues that the post-World War II years witnessed a battle between labor and big business to shape worker consciousness and direct the political culture. Each group vied for a dominant role in directing America’s post-war social, political, economic, and cultural life.³⁹ Although big business had more resources available to spread its ideology, some unions succeeded, to a degree, in altering their community’s capitalist overtones by creating a more worker-friendly environment within the larger society. In studying the CIO-affiliated United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), Richard Halpern and Roger Horowitz found that even in post-war America some affiliated unions managed to remain true “democratic

³⁷ James B. Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State: Labor Relations and Law During World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998) ix.

³⁸ David Milton, *The Politics of U.S. Labor: From the Great Depression to the New Deal* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), 122. For a discussion of the CIO during this period see Zieger, *The CIO*; “Robert Zieger’s History of the CIO: A Symposium,” *Labor History* 37 (Spring 1996): 157-188.

³⁹ Fones-Wolf, *Selling-Free Enterprise*. George Lipsitz also discusses this quest for hegemony. See Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 264-265.

organization[s] responsive to [their] members.” Halpern and Horowitz argue that despite a nationwide discriminatory attitude toward African Americans in the post-World War II years, “black packinghouse workers . . . [used] the UPWA to achieve upward mobility and racial equality” in terms of workplace experiences and union positions.⁴⁰ This type of local democracy within a union, despite governmental pressure, existed in other unions as well.

In studying one local of the International Fur and Leather Workers Union (IFLWU) in Gloversville, New York, Gerald Zahavi showed how voting to have “no union” as an election option was an example of workers exerting a specific choice and trying to forge their own future in the face of governmental restrictions like the Taft-Hartley Act, which sought to limit the advances unions had made in the pre-World War II years. Because this Gloversville union had a known communist as its leader, Clarence Carr, it could no longer be represented by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Without the backing of the NLRB, the union would be powerless in the face of manufacturers’ demands. Instead of having to ask their longtime leader to step down, the members of the Gloversville local opted not to be represented by a union at all. In foregoing union representation, Gloversville workers made a clear statement: they preferred no union representation to representation dictated by the government. By so doing these Gloversville leather workers voiced a shared sentiment that they would not allow outside forces—the government or the CIO—to control their destiny.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Halpern and Horowitz, *Meatpackers*, 26.

⁴¹ Gerald Zahavi, “COMMUNISM IS NO BUG-A-BOO”: Communism and Left-Wing Unionism in Fulton County, New York, 1933-1950,” *Labor History* 33 (Spring 1992): 165-189.

As historian Gary Gerstle shows with his study of unionization in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, unionization efforts did confront many competing forces during the World War II years. In addition to the governmental restrictions faced by the Gloversville workers, Gerstle's rank and file faced ethnic and economic conditions that exacerbated their struggles. "The battles that erupted within ethnic communities and radical groups, and the manner of their resolution, profoundly shaped American working class politics and culture."⁴² Like Gerstle, Borsos demonstrates with his workers in Barberton, labor could and did choose alternative paths to unionization besides the framework offered by the federated and national labor organizations. Borsos argues that while "bureaucratic unions are the major story of organized labor in the United States from the 1930s to the present," they are not the only story.⁴³

An examination of Peabody leather workers during the middle years of the twentieth century offers a more detailed analysis of how the competing forces of capitalism and worker rights played themselves out over a forty-year span in one industrially important community. Even though in the end—at the close of the twentieth century—the industrial working class had a precarious hold on the U.S. share of the industrial marketplace, as the Peabody leather workers illustrate, the working class did amass some measure of control during the middle years of a formative century.⁴⁴

⁴² Gerstle, *Working Class Americanism*, 4.

⁴³ Borsos, "We Make You This Appeal," 239.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf argues that "most historians in portraying the fifties emphasize the apparent harmony not only between [labor and organized business] but within society as a whole."

Unlike the leather workers in Gloversville, Peabody leather workers strove to remain unionized. In order to remain part of a union, however, these leather workers had to alter their union throughout its history to accommodate the needs, wants, and desires of its membership and the larger community. Though their passion to struggle for social justice gradually ebbed in the face of external pressure, before the members of Local 21 lost their determination to push for social reform, they, like other “radicals and . . . activists managed in many instances, to set in motion plans for gaining working-class power that would significantly alter their society’s culture, economy, and politics for years to come.”⁴⁵ This reshaping of society by the industrial workforce was evident in Peabody during the middle part of the twentieth century. At this time Peabody leather workers, because of the strength and perseverance of their union, won better working conditions. Peabody’s leather workers, along with industrial workers across America, successfully sought workplace reforms that are now commonplace: vacations with pay, holiday pay, a forty-hour work week, sick days, pensions, health insurance, safety standards, and the like.

Local 21 was not concerned merely with bread and butter issues like wage gains or even with union recognition; it wanted a leveling of society. The desire for equality among all segments of society becomes especially apparent when delving into the history of Local 21’s interactions with the Peabody community, the leather industry as a whole, and the national union—the International Fur and Leather Workers Union (IFLWU). The problems that developed between Local 21 and those

Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 3-4. Other historians have voiced similar arguments. Godfried, *WCFL: Chicago’s Voice of Labor*; Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

entities produced an interesting and unusual union—a union that adjusted and accommodated itself to survive but did not sacrifice its ultimate goal of reforming society.

Although Local 21 did unite with a national in the late thirties, believing as did most other industrial unions at the time that “highly centralized bureaucratic national unions could give locals the stability they needed,” Local 21 never gave up its local control and autonomy.⁴⁶ For five decades—the 1930s to the 1970s—the Peabody leather workers union exhibited what historian Elizabeth Faue defines as a unionism “rooted in the community and directed . . . [at] the reproductive sphere—specifically, consumer concerns, family and community networks, and education.”⁴⁷ Local 21 grew out of the turmoil of the Great Depression and its membership worked to eradicate the capitalist marketplace’s inhumane treatment of the worker by providing specific services and activities for members and their families. Without direct representation in the governing of Peabody on a daily basis, Local 21 officials nevertheless exerted a measure of control over what happened in the city in terms of relief work, social activities, and laws governing the workplace.

Local 21, under the leadership of Joseph Massidda, Charlies Chamouris, and O’Keefe—all former leather workers who advanced to leadership status—never underestimated the potential of its membership base. The union’s militancy and solidarity became evident early in its formation. As Local 21 matured, cultural and political forces tempered its militancy, but it remained a community-based union.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, 12.

Even when faced with expulsion from the CIO and later the IFLWU, Local 21 persevered to maintain an organization that was committed to the needs and desires of its rank and file.⁴⁸

This 4,500-strong union of leather workers in the Northshore area of Boston did not allow the turbulence of the time—the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War and McCarythism—to shape its agenda. Instead, Local 21 made decisions based on its members' needs: adequate housing, food, clothing, consumer goods, medical attention, and social and cultural activities.⁴⁹ An examination of Local 21 offers a microcosm of the labor movement; it illuminates how the “invisibility of labor in the present” is not characteristic of the labor movement's past.

For most of this past century, working people have been a powerful force for democratic change in the United States. At the point of production they have struggled over the purpose, pace, nature and rewards of work. In community life, they have created and sustained institutions designed to provide more democratic access to education, housing, medical care, and recreation.⁵⁰

While these efforts were, at times, fleeting and often blocked by industry, Peabody's working class, through the leather union, created a community of educated workers who took pride in what they did; these rank and file workers tried to create a more equitable society for themselves and their offspring.

⁴⁸ The militancy practiced by Local 21 throughout its history was unusual. A more “episodic” and ephemeral militancy was more often the norm in the thirties and forties. For a more detailed discussion of early union militancy see Nelson Lichtenstein, “The Communist Experience in American Trade Unions,” *Industrial Relations* 19 (Spring 1980): 121.

⁴⁹ The Northshore area consisted of Chelsea, Everett, Saugus, Stoneham, Woburn, Wakefield, Lynn, Marblehead, Salem, Peabody, Beverly, Danvers, Ipswich, Rowley, Newburyport, Salisbury, Amesbury, Haverhill, Georgetown, North Andover, Andover, Lowell, Lawrence, and Methuen. This information comes from E.M. Hoover, *Location Theory and the Shoe and Leather Industries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), 245.

⁵⁰ Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 4.

This fight for workplace rights is the centerpiece of Chapter One, which details the struggle for unionization that ensued between Peabody leather workers and the tannery owners in the early thirties. Undaunted by owners' refusal to recognize their fledgling union, these leather workers held fast to their position and rallied the community's support. United, these Peabodyites proved they were effective in winning wage and labor concessions; as a team they organized to better the plight of all leather workers in the greater Northshore area.

The euphoria over the initial success of organizing a union waned, however. As the Great Depression continued, Local 21 faced increasing hardships, as detailed in Chapter Two. By the late thirties leather workers realized that the fight for a more equitable standard of living would require constant vigilance and the support of a national. The decision to join forces with the International Fur Workers Union (IFWU) and the ramifications of that merger are detailed in this chapter.

Though the early days of Local 21's affiliation with the IFWU were not carefree by any means, in the early forties Peabody leather workers positively changed their living and working situations. Chapter Three reveals how the early years of affiliation with the International Fur and Leather Workers Union (IFLWU) afforded the Peabody leather workers an opportunity to explore a variety of initiatives that gave these rank and filers a quality of life they had never before experienced. Peabody leather workers fashioned for themselves a community—both inside and outside the factory—that went beyond the basics of life. Cultural and social endeavors became a part of the leather workers' experiences. Opportunities for

recreation and social camaraderie became commonplace for both leather workers and their families.

These newfound pleasures, however, did not come without a price. Chapter Four indicates the toll that securing and maintaining benefits would exact on the leather workers. As the industry began to experience more hardships and tannery owners squeezed ever tighter to reap the biggest profit, union members found themselves in a more contentious situation. Feelings of animosity among leather workers, factory owners, and the community intensified as an anti-communist crusade began to dominate the national scene. With the IFLWU's expulsion from the CIO in 1950, Local 21 found itself in a precarious position.

Exacerbating this difficult situation was Local 21's decision in the mid-fifties to distance itself from the IFLWU. Chapter Four also explores the events and ramifications of Local 21's decision to leave the International's fold. Faced with mounting allegations of Communist dealings, Local 21's leadership did what it felt was best for the union. The resiliency of this union under these attacks highlights the strength and support this union had from its membership and the community at large.

The Epilogue briefly explores the dissolution of Peabody's leather industry. As the United States leather market was contracting, the city of Peabody and Local 21 fought to maintain Peabody's niche in the leather trade. With the closing of the A.C. Lawrence Leather factory, the biggest concern in the United States, in 1991, Peabody's status as the leather capital of the world had finally ended. Local 21, however, retained a presence in Peabody even after all the major factories and leather shops closed.

This study of a working-class community relies on local newspapers, labor periodicals, trade publications, church and city records, union documents, oral histories, and personal narratives to describe the conditions that gave rise to a resourceful union and the forces that ultimately stifled its progress. The study challenges the accepted opinion of industry leaders and some community members today that Local 21 hastened the demise of the leather industry. On the contrary, by regulating wages nationally in the leather industry, Local 21 proved instrumental in maintaining Peabody's viability as a leather center well past the industry's prime.

CHAPTER ONE:

The Birth of a Union: The NLWA Rises from the Chaos

All that harms labor is treason to America. No line can be drawn between the two. If any man tells you he loves America, yet he hates labor, he is a liar. If a man tells you he trusts America, yet fears labor, he is a fool.¹

A stranger to Peabody, Massachusetts, during the middle part of the twentieth century would recognize immediately that this small, ethnically diverse city situated eighteen miles northeast of Boston, was an industrial city—a city whose livelihood was based on the manufacture of products. In Peabody's case the product was leather. Smokestacks clouded the skyline and the smell of dead animal skins permeated the air. A minimum of 32 different factory whistles could be heard throughout the day signaling the end of one shift and the beginning of another. "In the morning when they [the whistles] rang, it was like music."² That music, however, rings no longer. With the closing of the last leather factory in 1991 and only a handful of leather concerns left, Peabody is no longer considered an industrial city.³ Former tannery buildings, not slated for demolition or already demolished, boast a new look; they have been turned into upscale condominiums housing a new generation of Peabodyites—those who work in the high-tech industry along the Route 128 beltway around Boston.

¹ Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, *Labor's Untold Story: The Adventure Story of the Battles, Betrayals and Victories of American Working Men and Women* (New York: United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, 1955), 11.

² Leather Soul documentary transcript, Uncut Version, Shoot #2 April 21-23, 1989 and April 27-30, 1989 around the city of Peabody, Tanner Film/Video, 32-15 35th Street, Astoria, New York 11106, Interview with George Katsulous.

³ There are no full service tanneries left. The leather factories that remain do only part of the tanning process.

Considered the leather capital of the world in 1919, Peabody's leather history was long and varied. Tracing the city's leather roots back to the Native Americans who believed the "water in the ponds and streams of Peabody [to be] especially adapted for the manufacture of their leather," many Peabodyites recall the days when leather concerns crowded the downtown.⁴ In 1939 Peabody was home to 21,711 residents and 89 leather concerns (this figure includes both the full-scale tannery where hides were tanned, curried and finished and the small leather shop that only specialized in a particular service).⁵

In the late thirties and early forties, the Peabody-Salem area housed one-fifth of the 450 tanneries scattered throughout the United States, and about half of the 182 tanneries in the state of Massachusetts.⁶ While these 450 tanneries averaged one hundred employees, a typical tannery at this time would employ between 20-50 workers. In 1933 only thirteen U.S. tanneries employed more than 500 employees and only four employed more than a thousand. A.C. Lawrence, in Peabody, was one of

⁴ Fred A. Gannon, *Salem and the North Shore Leather Tercentenary*, July 22 1939, 23. See also "U.S. Leather Manufacturing Industry is 352 Years Young," *Leather-International Journal of the Industry* 177 (August 1975): 26.

⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *16th Census of U.S. Manufacturers, 1939 Reports for States and Outlying Areas*, III (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 421. Similar information can be found in Ruth Mack, *Consumption and Business Fluctuations: A Case Study of the Shoe, Leather, Hide Sequence* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1956), 12. The leather trade was made up of ten major industries: leather—tanned, curried, and finished; leather belting; boot and shoe cut stock (not made in boot and shoe factories); boot and shoe findings (not made in boot and shoe factories); boots and shoes (other than rubber); leather gloves and mittens; whips; trunks, suitcases and bags; leather goods not elsewhere classified. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Biennial Census of Manufacturers* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1935) 688-689.

⁶ "The Trade of the Tanner," *Weekly Bulletin Leather and Shoe News* 52 (December 27, 1947): 18; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Manufacturers 1954: Industry Statistics*, II, Major Groups 29 to 39: 31-1; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Manufacturers: 1947 Volume III Statistics by State: Selected General Statistics for States, Metropolitan Areas, Countries, and Urban Places* 280, 282, 291; Willard Helburn, "Brief Submitted by the Leather Industry," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (August 26, 1933): 7.

those four plants. The majority of leather workers in the middle part of the twentieth century lived in the east (65 percent), with a quarter living in the west and only 10 percent in the south. By the end of the century, the majority would be in the far northeast and south. In 1933, nearly half the tanneries were located in small communities housing fewer than 50,000 people. One quarter of the 450 tanneries found homes in towns with less than 12,000 people, and an eighth of the tanneries situated themselves in villages with populations of less than 2,500.⁷ These statistics reflect Peabody's status as a major leather center in the middle part of the twentieth century. This multitude of factories drew thousands of immigrants to this small New England community.⁸

When the leather industry really started to blossom after the Civil War with the advent of the machine age, Peabody became a cosmopolitan town with many Greek and Turkish immigrants. Mainly male, these immigrants came to Peabody to seek their fortune in the leather industry and return home as soon as possible. While the leather industry provided a somewhat steady income, it did not prove to be an occupation that lent itself to creating fortunes for individuals engaged in it. Thus, many of the immigrants who came to Peabody at the turn of the century, instead of amassing a fortune and leaving, ended up staying and raising families. These immigrants were joined by many others—Irish, Russian, Canadian, French Canadian, Portuguese, Austrian, Polish, and Armenian, to name a few. When Peabody celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary as a city in 1941, it boasted thirty

⁷ Helburn, "Brief Submitted," 7.

⁸ For a discussion of immigration to New England see "Population Changes Indicate Need for Careful Planning in New England," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 52 (September 13, 1947): 60-72.

nationalities.⁹ These immigrant families became entwined with the leather industry. John Stanton, a former Peabodyite, characterized Peabody as “the embodiment of the American factory town. . . . People came together because they could get jobs and the town grew into a city around these people.”¹⁰

Although not much research has been done on Peabody’s leather history, especially in terms of the twentieth century, the information that exists does a major disservice to the men and women who toiled in this labor-intensive industry and lived in this community. The few existing histories of Peabody characterize the twentieth century as a time of declining leather production and labor strife. These sources highlight the slowdown in the leather industry and gloss over the achievements of this community of workers. Even publications trying to attract tourists downplay the ingenuity of the mid-twentieth century Peabodyite. For instance, a National Park Service brochure discussing the industrial revolution represents Peabody’s leather history as dismal and almost defunct by the late thirties.

Peabody tanning and leather production dominated the local economy producing fine leather machinery and new technological processes. The 1920s and 1930s brought foreign imports, the depression, and cheaper labor causing the gradual decline of the shoe and tanning industries.¹¹

⁹ John A. Wells, *The Peabody Story: Events in Peabody’s History 1626-1972* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1972), 386; 441. See also S.M. Smoller, “Turks Were Among the Early Immigrants Filling Jobs,” *The Peabody Extra*, March 18, 2000, p. A5; “History Club Studies Various Eras of Peabody,” *Lynnfield/Peabody Observer*, July 27, 1989, p. 5.

¹⁰ “Celluloid Heroes,” *Salem Evening News*, October 14, 1993, 13.

¹¹ “Industrial Trail Brochure,” National Park Service, 1995, Peabody Library, Main Branch.

The information in this brochure is true. The shoe and tanning industry did decline because of foreign imports, competition from cheaper labor abroad, leather substitutes, environmental regulations, and new machinery, to name a few causes.¹²

In 1931 there were 3,702 leather establishments in the United States compared to 6,798 in 1914. (This number represents the industry as a whole—the full-scale tannery and the small specialty shop.) In just seventeen years, the United States lost 3,096 leather establishments. The industry suffered contraction after World War I, declining from 6,423 leather facilities across the country in 1919 to only 4,827 by 1921. While this drop could be attributed to the end of World War I and a decline in the demand for leather products associated with the war, the numbers remained on a downward spiral.¹³ For instance, from 1947 to 1967 Peabody experienced the loss of more than 30 leather concerns, and approximately 1,000 workers lost their jobs. The leather industry did not just consolidate; it evaporated.

The kid, goat, and calfskin market, all used in shoe leather, experienced the biggest decline in the post-World War II years. Though the decline started in the 1920s, it became obvious after the war that leather substitutes and a lack of raw supply had hurt the shoe leather market. After World War II, the United States, which had long depended on underdeveloped countries (in Asia and Latin America) to supply its raw kid and goatskins, faced exportation restrictions. “It became

¹² “U.S. Leather Manufacturing Industry is 352 Years Young,” *Leather-International Journal of the Industry* 177 (August 1975): 26-27; 30. These factors will be mentioned in greater detail in future chapters. For a discussion on how the leather industry died when the shoe industry left Massachusetts in the 1950s, see “Remembering When Leather Ruled,” *Salem Evening News*, April 18, 2000. For a brief discussion of how the use of leather substitutes hurt the shoe sole and shoe upper market see *Monthly Labor Review* 82 (October 1959): 1114.

¹³ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Biennial Census of Manufacturers* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1935): 688-689.

increasingly common during this period [post World War II] for these poorer countries to restrict the exportation of kid skins in order to have a source of supply to build up their own tanning industries.”¹⁴

The calfskin market, also used for shoe production, suffered a slowdown in the post-World War II years. The fifties, a time of growing affluence in the United States, ushered in a new technique for cattle raising. Economics dictated that farmers raise the cattle for beef instead of killing calves for their hides. This created a lack of available calfskins.¹⁵ The decline in these markets was striking. In 1950 the United States tanned 37,302,000 pounds of kid and goatskins; by 1955 America’s share of this market had dwindled to 26 million pounds; 19 million pounds in 1960; 14.5 million pounds in 1965; and 4 million pounds in 1970.¹⁶ While sixty percent of all shoes manufactured in the United States contained leather soles in 1948, in 1973, only twelve percent of the U.S. shoe market had leather soles.¹⁷

By the end of the twentieth century the leather industry was severely crippled throughout the United States and virtually extinct in the greater Northshore area, which comprises Essex County, including Peabody.¹⁸ In 1945 the leather industry provided jobs for 358,000 individuals throughout the country. By 1991 only 123,700 individuals engaged in a leather-related occupation, and the majority of those jobs

¹⁴ Christina Tree, James Sutton, and John Moynihan, “Leather Through the Ages,” *The Leather Manufacturer* 90 (June 1973): 42-43.

¹⁵ Tree, “Leather Through the Ages,” 43.

¹⁶ Leather customers ordered by weight and type of leather. “Leather Tanning is an Art,” *Salem Evening News*, December 4, 1974, p. 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Essex County consists of Nahant, Saugus, Lynn, Swampscott, Marblehead, Salem, Peabody, Lynnfield, Danvers, Beverly, Middleton, Wenham, Manchester, Gloucester, Rockport, Essex, Hamilton, Topsfield, Ipswich, Rowley, Newbury, Newburyport, Salisbury, Amesbury, Merrimac, West Newbury, Groveland, Georgetown, Haverhill, Boxford, Methuen, Lawrence, and Andover.

were scattered in the south and northern New England. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, only 71,400 individuals in the United States call themselves leather workers.¹⁹ The National Park Service brochure accurately acknowledged the decline in the leather industry, but by condensing Peabody's leather history and highlighting the negative, the brochure obscured the larger story.

The larger story of Peabody encompasses Local 21 and the workers who comprised this union. In order to appreciate the success and longevity of Local 21, one must understand the basics of the leather industry, the types of leather concerns that dominated Peabody, and the earlier attempts at unionization in the Leather City. The term leather industry encompasses "all persons engaged in tanning or finishing leather, for further fabrication or for sale."²⁰ In the late thirties there were roughly 450 leather establishments in the United States; the Census of Manufacturers defines an establishment as "an economic unit that produces goods or services at a single location and is engaged in one type of economic activity."²¹ These leather establishments ranged in size from a handful of employees to more than 600 workers. Regardless of the size of the tannery, the work done was highly skilled, and mechanization was not practical for many parts of the tannery process in the middle part of the twentieth century.²² Unlike some industrial concerns, processing leather

¹⁹ Eva E. Jacobs ed., *Handbook of U.S. Labor Statistics: Employment, Earnings, Prices, Productivity, and other Labor Data*, 5th edition (Lanham, Maryland: Berman Press, 2001), 161-164; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Manufacturers, 1967, Volume III, Area Statistics, Part 1, Alabama-Montana* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971) 22-6; 22-32.

²⁰ "Code of Fair Competition for the Leather Industry," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (September 2, 1933): 5.

²¹ Jacobs, *Handbook of U.S. Labor Statistics*, 159.

²² John Cumbler discusses the pride and skill Peabody leatherworkers display in their work and the high degree of craftsmanship that was necessary for this industry. John T. Cumbler, *Working-Class*

was a handicraft; “it uses simple machinery and handles a variable and perishable natural raw material, which requires flexibility of process and constant skilled attention over a period of weeks.”²³ Improperly handled skins resulted in damaged stocks. Skill and training were necessities in the leather industry.²⁴

During Peabody’s heyday as a leather town, its tanneries performed four different operations on a hide: curing and sorting, removing hair, tanning, and drying. When hides arrived at a tannery, they were sorted and stored in a cooled hide house where, if they had been properly cured, they could, if necessary, be kept for several months. But they did not improve with storage, so tannery owners did not want to stockpile hides. (When workers went on strike, hide spoilage was a major concern for the factory owners.) Once the hides had been sorted, hair, fat, and tissue were removed from them. This work was done in the beam house. Hides would be washed briskly to remove salt and dirt and soaked until thoroughly wet. The hair was then removed by soaking for several days in some sort of depilatory (a liquid or cream used to remove unwanted hair), after which the hide was rolled through a dehairing machine that scraped off the loosened hair. The flesh side of the hide was also cleaned until it was a smooth gray color. The final beam house operation, called bating, was more subtle: workers used powerful chemicals—enzymes—to remove further reticular (networked) tissue and condition the hides for the tanning process.

Community in Industrial America: Work, Leisure, and Struggle in Two Industrial Cities, 1880-1930 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 72.

²³ Helburn, “Brief Submitted,” 7. For a discussion of the leather industry see Philip S. Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union: A Story of Dramatic Struggles and Achievements* (Newark: Nordan Press, 1950). The use of more modern equipment, however, did start to change. While the leather industry still necessitates personal attention, a 21st century tannery does use modern machinery to replace many workers.

²⁴ Foner, *Fur and Leather Workers Union*, 528.

The grade of the raw hide determined the tanning process; either leached vegetable materials or mineral chrome salts would be used.

Vegetable tanning is used primarily for sole leather. . . . The hides are subjected to the action of the tanning liquor in a series of rocker vats, where the even and properly graded absorption of the acid is highly important to good-quality tanning. They are then placed in lay-away vats for several months; here they soak, without agitation, in tanning fluids. It is this that makes the process of vegetable tanning so lengthy—from two to four months. Chrome tanning is relatively swift. The hides are briskly agitated in a drum or paddle vat containing salt brine; chromium sulphate is then added gradually—the whole process takes a matter of hours.²⁵

The final step in transforming a hide into a piece of usable leather was the drying process, which gave the leather texture and color. Different types of leather required different drying techniques. For instance, sole leather used in shoe making required the leather to be dried, oiled and rolled. Most leather in the drying process went through an aging and stretching process as well. After that, “further coloring, graining, waxing, soaping, and oiling, can be performed to customers’ specifications after the orders have been received.”²⁶ The manufacture of leather required years of training, experience, and skill; even with the advent of more machines toward the end of the twentieth century, almost every facet of the tanning process required manual skill.²⁷

In the thirties, Peabody housed approximately 113 leather concerns, and roughly ninety of these concerns were full-scale tanneries where this four-step

²⁵ Mack, *Consumption and Business Fluctuation*, 16-17. See also “Earnings in Leather Tanning and Finishing, May 1959,” *Monthly Labor Review* 82 (October 1959): 1115.

²⁶ Mack, *Consumption and Business Fluctuation*, 16.

²⁷ Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers*, 528. See also “Leather Tanning is an Art,” p. 1, 14.

process took place.²⁸ Throughout the middle part of the twentieth century, Peabody claimed approximately 5,000 leather workers.²⁹ Roughly one in every six Peabodyites was a leather worker.³⁰ Many of those not employed in the leather industry worked for the Essex Glue and Gelatine Company, the American Glue Company, or the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Bleachery.³¹ Many of Peabody's leather concerns made light-weight leather for use in shoes, which were manufactured in the neighboring city of Lynn.³² In addition to sending leather to nearby Lynn, Peabody factories shipped leather to Gloversville, New York; France; Germany; Holland; and Belgium.³³

The largest tannery complex in Peabody was the A.C. Lawrence Leather Company owned by the Swift Company, a huge meat-packing firm. A.C. Lawrence claimed three tanneries in Peabody that together employed roughly 1,700 individuals.³⁴ By U.S. leather industry standards the three A.C. Lawrence companies constituted a large plant. Another large concern was the A.B. Clark Company, which produced 72,000 pounds of finished sheepskins a week in the early part of the

²⁸ Information about these various concerns comes from John Wells, *The Peabody Story*; the *Salem Evening News*; *Peabody Enterprise*; *The Peabody Times*; *Leather Soul*; and a variety of leather pamphlets.

²⁹ John Wells, Report on the Leather Industry of Peabody and Salem, Massachusetts and the South Essex Sewerage District for the Salem-Peabody Area Tanners (SPAT) (no date for this report). This figure is for the city of Peabody alone.

³⁰ Wells, *The Peabody Story*, 386.

³¹ Information based on interviews with former leather workers by the author.

³² "Earnings in Leather Tanning and Finishing," *Monthly Labor Review* 82 (October 1959): 1114-1115. For a brief discussion of what Peabody was like before the shoe industry left Massachusetts see "Remembering When Leather Ruled," *Salem Evening News*, April 18, 2000.

³³ Transcripts from *Leather Soul* video interviews, Cut and Categorized Version, Shoot 1 and 1A; March 12, 1988 Strauss Tanning, September 14, 17, 1988 Rex Leather, John Schmidt and Sons Finishers, Flyntan, and Interviews around the city of Peabody, Tanner Film/Video, 32-15 35th Street, Astoria, New York 11106, Interview with Jack Reardon, former Peabody city councilor, 136.

³⁴ This number fluctuated through time. In the late thirties A.C. Lawrence employed approximately 3,700 leather workers.

twentieth century. Industry officials characterized A.B. Clark as the largest individual sheepskin manufacturer in the world. The L.B. Southwick Company, though not as large as A.B. Clark, produced about 1,000 pounds a day with a great variety of finishes and colors. During peak production, this plant employed 500 men.

The family-owned Nathan H. Poor Leather Company was another Peabody industrial landmark. Nathan A. Poor, the founder of the company, “was a pioneer in the application of scientific methods to tanning and finishing sheep and goat skins.”³⁵ Also working in the sheepskin finishing process was the Morrill Leather Company, which finished skins in many colors. Benjamin N. Moore and Sons Company specialized in fancy leathers. This concern made the largest variety of fancy leathers of any U.S. firm in the early part of the twentieth century.³⁶

One of the largest chrome tanneries was A.L. Kraus. This plant processed 3,600 pounds a day. Also working with chrome leather was the Essex Tanning Company employing one hundred men. The Dimond Kid Manufacturing Company averaged 3,500 pounds per day with 242 workers. The C.P. Osborne Leather Company was another tannery employing more than one hundred individuals in the early part of the twentieth century.

The Foan Brothers Leather concern, known throughout the world, produced high-grade leather for shoes and novelties. The E.A. Woelfel Company also specialized in leather novelties by producing embossed leather. This concern

³⁵ Wells, *The Peabody Story*, 406. See also “Nathan Poor Was Pioneer in Leather Manufacturing,” *Peabody Enterprise*, May 3, 1940, p. 1, 3.

³⁶ Wells, *The Peabody Story*, 407. This information is corroborated in various issues of the *Peabody Enterprise*, the *Salem Evening News*, and *The Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News*. Also see “U.S. Leather Trade Exports to World Markets,” *Leather-International Journal of the Industry* 177 (August 1975): 30.

introduced the embossing process in New England and became the largest fancy leather embossing and decorating plant in New England, reproducing animal and reptile hides for fancy shoe leather and pocketbooks.³⁷ The Kirstein Tanning Company made specialty leather in various colors; this leather was used for bookwork.

In the early thirties, the Rankin Leather Company produced six thousand calfskins a day and five hundred individuals were employed. Verza Tanning, another producer of fine calf leather, was ranked among Peabody's finest calfskin tanners. The company's founder, Louis Verza, developed a way to transform coarse grain leather into smooth looking grains.³⁸ Another large Peabody leather concern was the Carr Leather Company employing two hundred workers who specialized in calfskin. The Korn Leather Company had a yearly production of 15 million pounds of leather during the Depression, keeping three hundred men employed. During World War II, Korn Leather was the largest tanner of splits (single thickness hides) in the world with a payroll of \$500,000. The B.E. Cox Leather factory tanned and finished 7,500 pounds of sheep leather daily in the late forties.³⁹ Because of all its building additions, the B.E. Cox factory became known as the "Leaning Tower of Pisa." It was Peabody's only skyscraper tannery.

The James F. Ingraham Tannery was known for its "Bear Brand" morocco leather, which was the strongest sheepskin made. The Richard Barry plant also

³⁷ Wells, *The Peabody Story*, 418. See also "Dimond Kid Manufacturing Company," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* XLIII, #47 (November 19, 1938): 8.

³⁸ "Nathan Poor Was Pioneer in Leather Manufacturing," *Peabody Enterprise*, May 3, 1940, cover and 3.

³⁹ The information for Peabody's leather company history came from Wells, *The Peabody Story*, and the *Shoe and Leather Reporter*, 1949.

specialized in morocco leather. Known for its manufacture of welts (a strip of leather or material stitched into a shoe between the sole and the upper), flexible innersoles, taps (a thin layer of leather applied to a worn-down shoe heel or toe), and smooth linings, the F.P. Osborn Company had a long history in Peabody.⁴⁰ Joining the Osborn Company in the production of leather welts and innersoles were the G.H. Furbash Company and J.S. Crehore Company, which together employed about 150 men.

This abbreviated list of tanneries in Peabody provides a sketch of the industrial concerns dotting the city's landscape. Besides these major leather factories, there were smaller specialty shops and other companies, which used the byproducts from the leather industry or produced products for the leather industry. For instance, the Densten Hair Company utilized the cattle hair waste from the leather industry and manufactured plaster, upholstery cloth, and felting. Employing one hundred workers, Densten had a direct, beneficial relationship with Peabody's leather industry. The Newell and Knowlton Extracting Works Company also had a relationship with the leather factories. This company used the waste material that came from the manufacture and dressing of leather to make grease for soap manufacturers and curriers. In 1930 George Eastman founded the Eastman Gelatine Company in Peabody which uses cattle bones to produce gelatine. This company was still in existence in 2003.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Definitions in parentheses from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* 8th ed. (1979) s.v. "welt," "tap."

⁴¹ Sean Corcoran, "Eastman Gelatine a good neighbor, despite the odor," *Salem Evening News*, February 21, 2003, pp. 1, 11.

Peabody was also home to a number of factories that produced equipment and necessary products for the leather industry. The Morse Blacking Company made the Victor line of blacking finishes and seasonings used during the tanning process; the Turner Tanning Machinery Company produced machinery used in the leather industry; and the Tanners Specialty Company, owned by the Strauss family, sold a liquid dye solution used to color suede leather.⁴²

While most of the leather produced in Peabody was sold to concerns outside the city limits (for instance, Lynn's shoe producers bought Peabody leather), there were also a handful of companies in Peabody that used the leather produced in the city for the manufacture of finished products. The Ryan White Shoe Company, later known as the New England Sportswear Company, employed approximately 100 operatives in the production of boys' shoes and later leather clothing. Industrial companies like this employed Peabody's working-class women. While a handful of women did work in the leather factories—about nine percent of the labor force—most tannery work was considered too heavy and dangerous for females, so they often worked as leather stitchers in factories producing clothing or shoes.⁴³

This overview of Peabody's industrial landscape reveals a working-class community defined by its leather industry in the early thirties. Leather workers lived in the neighborhoods bordering the center of the city—Peabody Square—which housed the majority of the leather concerns. Because most of Peabody's working

⁴² "Nathan Poor," May 3, 1940, p. 3

⁴³ "Earnings in Leather Tanning and Finishing," *Monthly Labor Review* 82 (October 1959): 1116. This percentage of women, however, varied depending on the type of leather tanned in a particular geographical area. The largest number of women would be employed in concerns producing kid uppers for soles.

class did not need or could not afford an automobile, workers walked to work. Ethnic enclaves comprised different neighborhoods within the city.⁴⁴ For instance, the Turks in the early days of the twentieth century congregated on Peabody's east side; this became known as the Barbary coast. The Greeks also lived on the east side; these two ethnic groups lived in tenement and multi-family houses on Walnut, Tremont, Harris, and Paleologos Streets. The Poles and Armenians lived on the north end of the city, congregating around Wilson Square and Warren Street Extension. Multi-family houses dominated this neighborhood. The Irish, also living in multi-family complexes, resided in the neighborhoods surrounding Peabody Square. The majority of native-born Americans lived approximately five miles from the tanneries in South Peabody. Single-family dwellings characterized this part of the Leather City. Many South Peabody residents worked in Lynn's General Electric plant where wages and benefits exceeded those earned in the leather industry. Until the early fifties, West Peabody, as it was called, consisted mainly of farmland.⁴⁵

In spite of these ethnic divisions, which created language and cultural barriers, Peabody leather workers had a history of leather unionization dating back to 1833 when a national trade union was established in Salem, Massachusetts, which encompassed South Danvers—later known as the town of Peabody and then the city of Peabody.⁴⁶ Although this first leather union was ephemeral and ineffective, by the

⁴⁴ Interview with James Sawyer, current business manager of Local 21, Peabody, Massachusetts, February 22, 2001.

⁴⁵ Demographic information compiled from a variety of interviews by the author with Peabody residents and an overview of Peabody city directories.

⁴⁶ Richard B. O'Keefe, "Unionism in the Leather Industry," *Salem Evening News*, March 12, 1957, p. 15. Information also cited in Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union*, 528-536. In the late forties, the IFLWU leadership gave Foner the union's records. For a discussion of ethnic and racial limitations

turn of the century leather workers in the Peabody area became more union conscious and started making gains. Under a charter from the American Federation of Labor, the United Brotherhood of Leather Workers negotiated for six years and eventually won the nine-hour day. The workweek was still six days, and the pay was seven dollars. Even with these small triumphs, however, union gains proved inconsistent because of internal and external disruptions exacerbated by ethnic differences and employer manipulation. These obstacles plagued the reign of the United Brotherhood of Leather Workers. In 1905 when the Amalgamated Leather Workers of America came into existence, the United Brotherhood had to vie for membership. Further muddying the situation was the organization of an Industrial Workers of the World chapter in the Salem district. By 1910, the United Brotherhood of Leather Workers had successfully defeated its competition but could not hold on to its attempts at unionization. Internal strife and manufacturers' machinations limited union gains.⁴⁷

Manufacturers not only used the ethnic divisions among employees to thwart unionization attempts, they tried to keep new immigrants ignorant about organizing activity. In the early days of the twentieth century, the leather manufacturers, with the federal government's support, controlled factory life. Tannery owners objected to unionization, and the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), formed in 1895 "to expand trade possibilities for its business members" revamped its goal by 1903 to be one of "belligerent opposition to union organization."⁴⁸ NAM opposed collective

to unionization see Roger Horowitz, *"Negro and White, Unite and Fight!" A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-90* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 58-73.

⁴⁷ O'Keefe, "Unionism in the Leather Industry," 15; Foner, *Fur and Leather Workers Union*, 528-536.

⁴⁸ Irving Richter, *Labor's Struggles, 1945-1950: A Participant's View* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4. Richter presents a good historiography of NAM.

bargaining, and most of the Peabody leather industrialists subscribed to NAM's philosophy. This intolerance of unions set an industrial atmosphere that prevailed throughout the city and the country.⁴⁹ The Republican regimes of the Progressive era supported this business elitism and further served to thwart the efforts of those "radicals" wanting to disrupt the businessmen's status quo.⁵⁰

Both the government and NAM after World War I used anti-union rhetoric to instill in the minds of the American public that organizing was unpatriotic. Associating trade unionists with Communism, the "legitimate rights and justified grievances of the workers were forgotten in a fearful eagerness to make Bolshevism the cause of all labor unrest."⁵¹ This "invented" red scare made unionization efforts more difficult in Peabody. For instance, on January 2, 1920, under the direction of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and his aide J. Edgar Hoover, federal police raided workers' homes in seventy different U.S. cities, including Boston "where 400 workers were led through the streets manacled and handcuffed, clanking with chains." Nationwide the red scare of the twenties "was a magic formula to break strikes . . . [and] the sure recipe for low wages."⁵² As a locus of first-generation immigrants in the early part of the twentieth century, Peabody housed a population that had fled Europe for political and economic reasons. Many of these individuals were happy to have a job, even if they were at the mercy of the tannery owner. With the government and industry so zealously anti-union, it is no wonder Peabody leather

⁴⁹ Richter, *Labor's Struggles*, 3.

⁵⁰ Ronald L. Filippelli, "The Historical Context of Postwar Industrial Relations," in *U.S. Labor Relations, 1945-1989: Accommodation and Conflict*, ed. Bruce Nissen (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1990), 140.

⁵¹ Dulles, quoted in O. Boyer and Morais, *Labor's Untold Story*, 204

⁵² Boyer, *Labor's Untold Story*, 209; 212.

workers had trouble unionizing and withstood another decade of abuse from factory owners.⁵³

As George Georges, a former tannery worker, remembered, the early unions (prior to 1933) “were worthless.”⁵⁴ Things were tough in those days. Former leather workers recalled that the owners of the tanneries and shoe factories took advantage of their employees in all respects—low pay, deplorable working conditions, unfair employment opportunities, and so on. Ed Freeman, a former leather worker and Local 21 official, said that after the stock market crash in 1929, things went from bad to worse in the leather industry.

The industry started to cut wages. We never had no holidays, vacations, or what have you like that. Now, for instance, I had a job where I used to make \$42 a week. The people in back of me were probably making some \$12, \$18 a week. The next thing I know, I was down to \$37 a week. And then I was down to \$35 a week. Then down to \$32 a week. Down to \$30 a week. Finally get down to \$25.⁵⁵

Moe Maney, another retired leather worker, corroborated these conditions; he remembered that prior to 1933 workers would “come in at sunup and work till sundown.” And the workweek did not end on Friday. “They worked seven hours a day on Saturday” but only “got six bucks a week! They had to bring up a family. Consequently, they struck,” Maney said, but the leather manufacturers fought them “every inch of the way.”⁵⁶ Although he was only seventeen at the time, Ed Hall, a

⁵³ For a discussion of the role of immigrants in the early twentieth century industrial workforce see Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875-1920* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 41; Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union*, 528.

⁵⁴ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with George Georges, 43.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Interview with Ed Freeman at the Union Hall, 72.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Interview with Moe Maney, 2 Union Section.

former leather worker, remembered the difficulties facing the leather workers in the early thirties. “They had nothing. And they’d [the tannery owners] come in and they could lay you off anytime they want. Get rid of ya. Tell you all done.”⁵⁷

These reminiscences realistically portray life in what had become known as the Tanner City in the early thirties. By 1933 leather workers in the Northshore area of Boston (including Peabody) had suffered a ten percent wage cut and an increase in the workweek to ten hours per day, Monday through Friday, and five hours on Saturday. While wages varied in the Massachusetts leather industry, on average unskilled male help received \$14.98 a week, skilled male help \$21 a week, and women and boys 27¼ cents an hour.⁵⁸ Wages throughout the U.S. leather industry were comparable to those being paid in Massachusetts. “Between 1930 and 1932 the vast majority of the employed leather workers [across the country] suffered four wage reductions of 10 percent each. The top wage of a skilled leather worker (if fully employed, which the vast majority were not) was \$23.74 for a fifty-five hour week.”⁵⁹ Thus, a skilled leather worker, if he were lucky and remained employed twelve months a year, might bring home \$1,248 annually in the early thirties. Other industrial and blue-collar male workers saw salaries at slightly higher levels—railroad workers earned roughly \$1,700 annually, wholesale and retail trade workers saw

⁵⁷ Ibid., Interview with Ed Hall, 3 Union Section.

⁵⁸ O’Keefe, “Unionism in the Leather Industry,” 15. The statistics cited in this article differ slightly from Ed Freeman’s testimony on the previous page. The statistics cited in the *Salem Evening News* are corroborated with figures provided in “Wages and Hours in the Tanning Industry,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 43 (February 12, 1938): 21. This source cited average weekly earnings as follows: 1929=\$24.89; 1935=\$21.87; 1936=\$22.50; 1937=\$24.08. These figures are also supported in the *Monthly Labor Review*. This periodical averaged the May 1933 salaries for the leather industry and found the average to be 38.5 cents to 39.5 cents an hour. “Salaries in Leather Industry,” *Monthly Labor Review* 37 (July 1933).

⁵⁹ Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union*, 535.

yearly incomes of \$1,569, and other manufacturing workers in the nondurable goods services (such as leather) received \$1,425 on average with their counterparts in durable goods earning slightly less—\$1,391.⁶⁰ Leather salaries were low, especially considering the risk of sickness and injury resulting from tannery work.⁶¹

The trade publication *Industrial Hygiene* concluded that turn-of-the-century tanneries bred a minimum of forty-two different occupational diseases. Poisoning from chemicals used in the tanning process killed many workers because employees were not given protective rubber gloves, overalls or boots. Most tanneries failed to install proper exhaust systems or provide adequate fresh-air breaks to alleviate the noxious chemical fumes.⁶² A study initiated in 1921 by the U.S. Public Health Service that looked at industrial concerns in the North Central, North Atlantic, and New England states corroborated what Peabody workers already knew: in-plant safety and health care services for industrial workers were almost nonexistent. Only about five percent of the plants studied and twenty percent of the workers had the services of a part or full-time safety director. In most instances, large plants were the only ones to have a safety director and medical or nursing care. While seventeen percent of the workers had a part-time medical supervisor, only fifteen percent had the services of a full-time physician. Full-time nursing services were provided for thirty-four percent of the employees, but part-time service was virtually nonexistent

⁶⁰ Scott Derks, *Working Americans: 1880-1999: Volume 1: The Working Class* (Lakeville, CT: Grey House Publishing, 2000), 234.

⁶¹ The occupational hazards of the leather industry are discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter Three. For a description of the safety hazards of a tannery see Andrew Rowland, "Tanning Leather, Tanning Hides: Health and Safety Struggles in a Leather Factory," in *Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader*, ed. James Green (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 362-378.

⁶² Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union*, 537-538.

in the other plants. “The so-called small plant [of which Peabody had many] was in general found to be lacking in those welfare provisions which are important to any constructive program for industrial hygiene.”⁶³ Because of these dismal working conditions and a lack of proper medical care, two workers in Peabody “died in 1932 after sweating blood from their pores.”⁶⁴ Local papers detailed other such atrocities and deaths on a regular basis.

In the early thirties Peabody had only one company, A.C. Lawrence, that employed a doctor on staff and made regular attempts to educate workers about workplace safety.⁶⁵ For the vast majority of Peabody leather workers employed outside of A.C. Lawrence, the union was their only hope for protecting their welfare and that of their families. As one former leather worker said, “Let’s put it this way, everybody says that you don’t gain by a strike. Well, we weren’t interested in a nickel an hour. With the union we couldn’t a had nothing. So that’s that.”⁶⁶ Workers were ready for a change in the workplace.

This change, however, could not come from just these New England leather workers. One had only to look to the recent past to see the troubles labor had had in organizing any type of industry. As mentioned earlier, prior to the 1930s, “the U.S. labor movement operated in a social and economic environment that was generally unfavorable to the recognition of trade unions. Government and the courts were on

⁶³ “Health and Industrial Hygiene: Sickness Among Male Industrial Employees,” *Monthly Labor Review* 41 (July 1935): 79-80. This information is corroborated in Rowland, “Tanning Leather, Tanning Hides,” 362-378.

⁶⁴ Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union*, 538.

⁶⁵ The history of Local 21 eventually overlaps with A.C. Lawrence in its later years. This history will be covered in other chapters. A.C. Lawrence is an interesting leather company with a rich history. Future research on Peabody’s leather history could focus on its paternalistic character.

⁶⁶ Transcripts from Leather Soul, Union Section 1.

the side of the employer, and refusals to bargain were common and frequently supported by the full power of the state.”⁶⁷ As historian Gary Gerstle acknowledges, the role of the state cannot be underestimated. At various times throughout U.S. history—most particularly the thirties—the federal government has acted in accordance with popular public sentiment. The state, according to Gerstle, is a malleable entity; it cannot “be regarded as a capitalist tool, nor as a mechanism that invariably reinforces society’s prevailing distribution of power. It should be regarded instead as a political arena in which society’s social conflicts and tensions are themselves fought out.” Historically, groups with money, like the capitalists, usually control what happens, but “in moments when they [capitalists] have been weakened as a result of the economy’s poor performance or as a result of ideological divisions within their own ranks” other groups are able to take control. This is what happened in 1933.⁶⁸ “Popular insurgency and capitalist disarray not only caused the state to pass the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) but also allowed workers . . . to gain the upper hand in the state-supervised industrial relations machinery that was then established.”⁶⁹ Scholar Ronald Filippelli characterizes the period of labor growth

⁶⁷ “A Labor Historian Views Changes in the Trade Union Movement,” *Monthly Labor Review* 92 no. 9 (September 1969): 8.

⁶⁸ Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism*, 332-333.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Other historians have voiced similar sentiments. “A Labor Historian Views Changes in the Trade Union Movement,” *Monthly Labor Review* 92 no. 9 (September 1969): 8; Robert Zieger, *The CIO: 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 374-375; Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 9; Howard Dickman, *Industrial Democracy in America: Ideological Origins of National Labor Relations Policy* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1987); Boyer and Morais, *Labor’s Untold Story*, 1955. David Brody acknowledges the importance of the Section 7 (a) and the Wagner Act in unionization efforts. “Of the contributing political factors [in the right of American workers to organize], first in importance clearly was the development of public protection for the right to organize and engage in collective bargaining, ineffectually at first in Section 7a, then most successfully in the Wagner Act of 1935. Once the Supreme Court validated the act in 1937, unionization really became a matter of free choice for American workers.” David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on*

between 1933 and 1939 as an anomaly because of the “extraordinary domestic crisis” that led the government to reshape the “nation’s political alignment” in a direction more favorable to the working person.⁷⁰

In the midst of the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the NIRA into law on June 16, 1933. This bill passed by the Seventy-third Congress was designed to “rehabilitate industry and relieve unemployment.” Section 7 (a) of the NIRA specifically provided that

employees shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and shall be free from the interference, restraint, or coercion of employers of labor, or their agents, in the designation of such representatives or in self-organization or in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection.

This act further stipulated that “employers shall comply with the maximum hours of labor, minimum rates of pay, and other conditions of employment, approved or prescribed by the President.”⁷¹ While this law lacked specific enforcement language, the symbolism of it was enough to serve as a catalyst to incite the working class to organize.⁷² Even before its passage—as is evidenced in Peabody—the federal law

the Twentieth Century Struggle (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 121. See also Ronald L. Filippelli, “The Historical Context of Postwar Industrial Relations,” in *U.S. Labor Relations, 1945-1989: Accommodation and Conflict*, ed. Bruce Nissen (New York: Garland, 1990), 137-162; Richter, *Labor’s Struggles*. There have been historians on the other side of the debate as well. In Art Preis’s work he says that “the right to organize had been fully sanctioned in the Norris-LaGuardia Anti-Injunction Act of 1932, adopted in Hoover’s administration. . . . Had the workers not been ready and eager for organization, Section 7 (a) affirming their right to organize and bargain collectively and to pick their own union representatives free from employer interference, would have had no effect in any sense. The facts are that the workers were already on the move when Roosevelt took office and Section 7 (a) was a reluctant response to labor pressure.” Art Preis, *Twenty Years of the CIO: Labor’s Giant Step* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), 12-13.

⁷⁰ Filippelli, “The Historical Context,” 141.

⁷¹ “Labor Laws,” *Monthly Labor Review* 37 (July 1933): 74 (first quote); 78 (block quote and third quote).

⁷² James B. Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State: Labor Relations and Law During World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 374-375.

became a springboard from which organized labor could finally gain a foothold in securing a better quality of life. The industrial workers in America were ready for workplace reform and now had a platform from which to negotiate. Surveys and polls taken in the 1930s revealed a trend that “working class Americans were moving to the left Workers were angry, restive, and determined to effect changes.”⁷³ Across the country workers started to realize that gains could only be made if all workers joined together. Aiding this feeling of solidarity among workers was the curtailment of immigration after World War I and the Immigration Acts of the early twenties; ethnic divisions were not longer as divisive a force.⁷⁴ Though Peabody was still ethnically diverse, as in other communities a “shared economic relationship of dependence on wages can induce cooperation among people who otherwise are very different Common class interests have the potential to bring working people together who have little else in common and in fact may not like each other at all.”⁷⁵ This is what started to happen in the Northshore in the spring of 1933. Diverse groups of workers from various towns—Lynn, Salem, Woburn and Winchester—joined together to push for reform.

But the success of the union movement in any particular community was not assured. Since Section 7 (a) of the NIRA was unenforceable, union advancement hinged on the actions and beliefs of the various labor factions within a particular

⁷³ Zieger, *CIO*, 43-44. Alice and Staughton Lynd talk about how “the industrial union organizing drive of the 1930s was a movement for democracy. Talk to the mass production workers who took part in it, and they will tell you that what they wanted more than anything else was dignity. They wanted the freedom from the petty harassment of a foreman who could send a man home at will and reward those who curried his favor with steady work, preferred jobs, and promotion.” Alice and Staughton Lynd, eds., *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) 1.

⁷⁴ Rick Halpern and Roger Horowitz, *Meatpackers: An Oral History of Black Packinghouse Workers and Their Struggle for Racial and Economic Equality*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), 14.

⁷⁵ Horowitz, “*Negro and White Unite and Fight!*” 2.

locale and the reaction to the union on the part of area employers, clergy, politicians, and the community at large.⁷⁶ “Militancy, solidarity, and class-consciousness were not universal among industrial workers. Even in the relatively favorable climate of the early 1930s, joining a union was a risky business.”⁷⁷ Peabody’s leather workers epitomized the challenges facing the union movement in the early thirties.

While their brethren in Lynn and Salem, under the banner of the National Shoe and Leather Workers (NSLW), a division of the National Shoe Workers Association, went on strike on the morning of March 21, 1933 for higher wages and more employment opportunities, Peabody leather workers were undecided about the strike. After a mass meeting of leather workers in Peabody on the night of March 24th, however, employees from three Peabody tanneries—Thayer Foss, Pearse Leather, and Kirstein—joined the Lynn and Salem strikers.⁷⁸

The NSLW fought to “equalize prices so that all factories would be working on the same level in competing with each other.”⁷⁹ In addition, these striking workers wanted better wages, shorter hours, recognition of the union, and more leather workers to be employed; they wanted employers to stop relying on overtime—for

⁷⁶ Gerstle, *Working Class Americanism*, 126. Gordon Clark also discusses the need for community support if a union were going to be successful. Gordon L. Clark, *Unions and Communities Under Siege: American Communities and the Crisis of Organized Labor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁷⁷ Zieger, *CIO*, 43-44. See also Staughton Lynd, ed., “*We Are All Leaders*”: *The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

⁷⁸ *Salem Evening News*, March 25, 1933, 1; Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union*, 539-542. More references to the strike can be found in the weekly *Peabody Enterprise*, which started to cover the strike in early April. Interestingly enough, this local weekly did not devote all that much space to the strike until late May. The trade publication *Weekly Bulletin of Shoes and Leather* also mentioned the strike in its spring 1933 volumes. For instance, see “The Leather Workers’ Strike,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (April 1, 1933): 21.

⁷⁹ *Salem Evening News*, March 25, 1933, 1. Information also cited in “The Leather Workers’ Strike,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (April 1, 1933): 21.

which they were not compensated—and instead hire larger crews.⁸⁰ Former Peabody leather worker Ed Freeman remembered that right after the crash in 1929, he tried to organize a group of workers, but he had no success with his organizing efforts. By 1933 things were different: “there was a resentment all over the city. Everybody was being cut to hell. The good jobs, the real high-class jobs were cut down to nothin.”⁸¹ And the government clearly appeared to be on the workers’ side.⁸²

But rallying support for the March 1933 strike was a slow process. On the surface these striking leather workers looked like a tight coalition fighting against the tannery owners. This united front, however, was not as selfless or as tight as it appeared. Even in regards to their demands, leather workers were not as altruistic as newspaper accounts led one to believe. Published accounts of workers’ demands suggested that the striking laborers wanted to do away with overtime work because they really wanted more leather workers to be employed. This was no doubt true in some cases, but a closer inspection of these newspaper articles illustrates that the majority of workers were not interested in overtime because factory owners had stopped paying overtime workers time and a half. Workers did not get anything extra by working more hours. If they were not going to get time and a half, workers decided they might as well let other laborers do the job.⁸³

⁸⁰ *Salem Evening News*, March 27, 1933, 10. Information also cited in “The Leather Workers’ Strike,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (April 1, 1933): 21. A weekly column in the *Peabody Enterprise* briefly discussed this mounting agitation in a vague manner. Geo R. Nelson, “Leather Notes,” *Peabody Enterprise*, April 26, 1933, p. 1.

⁸¹ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with Ed Freeman at the Union Hall, 72.

⁸² Although the Peabody strike began in March of ’33 and the NIRA had not yet been signed by the President, it was a fait accompli.

⁸³ *Salem Evening News*, March 25, 1933, 1; Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union*, 539-541.

While the NSLW represented the Lynn and Salem workers, Local 1 of the United Leather Workers Union, which formed in 1915 but was only recognized by two Peabody tanneries—Essex Tanning Company and Kirstein Leather Company—represented the striking workers in the Leather City. John J. Griffin, the business agent for Local 1, early on in the strike used the local media to rally support for what would end up being a six-week work stoppage. In cultivating sympathy for the strike, Griffin used language that became the mainstay of the leather union in Peabody; words like cooperation and one hundred percent organization became part of the union’s official lexicon. Griffin cautioned that it was only from one hundred percent organization of the city that workers could initiate “betterments in working conditions and wage matters.”⁸⁴ In an editorial in the local paper, Griffin never used the word strike; instead he concentrated on using words like unite. For the past fifteen years, however, Griffin and his predecessors had not been able to unite more than the two tanneries. But the outcome would be different this time: once the strike began in 1933, the majority of Peabodyites—leather workers and non-leather workers—supported the union movement.

When Griffin asked the community to show its support for the strike by marching in a parade on March 27, 1933, 1,000 community members—including strikers, women and children—paraded through the Peabody leather district. According to the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor, in the winter of 1933 there were

⁸⁴ *Salem Evening News*, March 27, 1933.

4,112 leather workers residing in Peabody.⁸⁵ This parade included a quarter of the leather workers living in the city, a significant show of solidarity for the strikers.

Getting all leather workers involved, however, proved difficult. Because this strike took place at the height of the Depression, some leather workers supported the strike but hesitated to actually walk off their jobs. Reminiscing about the early days of the 1933 strike, Freeman focused on these early setbacks:

My first encounter with the union was I think it was April of '33 when we went out on strike. I went to work one morning and there was a fellow walking up and down outside the shop. It didn't mean nothing to me. But later on during the day, I heard that he was a picket. We heard there was a strike up in Danversport So good. So I got the other three fellas that were working with me. There was four of us working on this, this process. We says, "Tomorrow morning, we're gonna strike this plant." So the next morning, we went around. We talked to people, "When we go out, you follow us." The four of us went in, changed our clothes, went outside. We found out, we were the only ones outside, the four of us. So we says, "Okay, we'll go back into the shop again." We went back into the shop again, went back to work. The next day, we tried the same thing. No success. The third day, we says, "Look, we're going out today. Everybody's gotta come with us. This is our opportunity to get the union." In the meantime, the company had gone to court to get an injunction against the picketers outside. Well, nobody would follow us out. So we went back into the shop, went around pushing buttons, pushing pulleys. We shut down the plant ourselves. And finally everybody come out. That was my introduction to getting the people into the union.⁸⁶

By the end of April, Freeman recalled, enough workers in the city became tired of the manufacturers' practices and decided that maybe this time things could be different. Conditions had been bad in the past and workers had struck before, but this strike was unusual. National sentiment was now behind the working class; Depression conditions served to inspire a nation to remedy the problems in society. "Everybody

⁸⁵ *Salem Evening News*, March 31, 1933, 10. At this point Griffin disappears from the record. His name is never mentioned again.

⁸⁶ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with Ed Freeman at the Union Hall, 72.

was sick and disgusted with getting wage cuts, getting pushed around, you have no seniority. You get laid off and the boss's son comes into work, or the boss's cousin, or whatever."⁸⁷ Emboldened by their perception of support, workers had reached their threshold of tolerance.

Freeman and other former leather workers said the strike of 1933 was a real grass-roots effort. The leather manufacturers, however, insisted that outside agitators "who know nothing of the conditions nor anything about leather making" ran the union and garnered support through means of "intimidation and violence unparalleled in the history of the leather industry in this district."⁸⁸ Peabody's old-timers disagreed. Al Quantros, a former Local 21 organizer, argued that Joseph Massidda, a Lynn fellow in charge of leading the strike in Peabody, "had nothing to do with organizing the leather workers. It was one of these spontaneous things. There was no Al Quantros or Ed Freeman or anybody else going around organizing people. It was a spontaneous thing."⁸⁹

While some newspaper accounts and interviews with other union people support Freeman and Quantros's assertion that the strike of '33 was spontaneous, these recollections are not entirely accurate. According to union records, Massidda did act as an organizer, but the community did not perceive him in this way. Instead,

⁸⁷ Ibid. Gerald Zahavi also discusses the militancy of leather workers. Gerald Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism: The Shoeworkers and Tanners of Endicott Johnson, 1890-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

⁸⁸ "Union Officials Say 'Outsiders' are not in Charge of Strike," *Salem Evening News*, April 7, 1933, p. 7. Similar sentiments were expressed in Geo R. Nelson's column "Leather Notes," *Peabody Enterprise*, April 26, 1933, p. 1.

⁸⁹ Transcripts from Leather Soul, Interview with Al Quantros at the Union Hall, 79.

locals credited Massidda with agitating the masses. Quantros characterized Massidda as a charismatic individual:

He could keep the people stirred up, keep them united, keep them together in case there's anybody who would want to probably get back into the shops or what have you. He was a morale booster, that's what he was. And he was good. They could say anything they want about him, but he had that ability to arouse the people and keep them unified.⁹⁰

In order for Massidda to be successful, former leather workers argue, people had to believe in the ideals he promised, and this desire for positive change in the leather industry was palpable in Peabody during the thirties. People cannot be organized unless they are ready and willing. Massidda capitalized on the local sentiment and became a central figure in the quest for union identity. Because Massidda was a Lynn resident and a former leather worker, Peabody's rank and file could relate to his message.⁹¹ And once the majority of Peabody leather workers dedicated themselves to the strike ideals, they were a strong force, especially when the strikers decided that union recognition was of primary importance.

It was over union recognition that the workers and factory owners found themselves at an impasse. The factory owners were unwilling to recognize the union. The A.C. Lawrence Company, the biggest leather employer in the area, said that it would close its doors before it would acknowledge the union.⁹² The other leather manufacturers in Peabody, Salem, and Lynn said they would not give in to the demands of the strikers because they felt that the union did not represent the sentiments of the workers. In addition, the manufacturers argued that the NSLW did

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ "Strikers Plan Parade in Tribute to Tanners," *Peabody Enterprise*, May 5, 1933, p. 1.

⁹² *Peabody Enterprise*, April 7, 1933, 1.

not actually exist because it had no charter and thus was not incorporated. The manufacturers saw the NSLW as a “voluntary unincorporated association, [and the manufacturers] will not deal with the officers and organizers.”⁹³ Massidda denied these charges and said that the “executive board of the Peabody district local is absolutely in charge of everything that is done in its local . . . and [the] executive board is composed exclusively of striking leather workers of this district.”⁹⁴

While strikers wanted a uniform wage scale for like work in all shops and a 48-hour week with no overtime, union recognition was the most important point.⁹⁵ Union leaders claimed “recognition of the union by all manufacturers” was the only means of assuring workers “protection against any policy which their employers might care to put into effect.”⁹⁶ With union recognition, Freeman explained, “You had the opportunity to be able to sit down with the boss and talk about conditions—working conditions, your wages, and whatever benefits you could get.”⁹⁷ Because strikers wanted all factory owners to recognize their right to form a union, even the tanneries paying good wages were affected by the strike.

By the middle of April, the manufacturers were anxious to get their people back to work. Hides were spoiling and money was being lost. Eighteen Peabody leather shops vowed to open on Monday morning, April 17, and to pay a very liberal

⁹³ “Meet in This City Today in Effort to End Big Strike,” *Salem Evening News*, April 28, 1933, p. 1. See also “Leather Manufacturers Ask for New Conference with Workers,” *Peabody Enterprise*, April 26, 1933, p. 1.

⁹⁴ “Union Officials Says ‘Outsiders’ Are Not in Charge of Strike,” *Salem Evening News*, April 7, 1933.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*; “Round Robin to End Strike—Union’s Hope,” *Peabody Enterprise*, April 7, 1933, p. 1.

⁹⁶ *Salem Evening News*, April 5, 1933.

⁹⁷ Transcripts from Leather Soul, Interview with Ed Freeman at the Union Hall, 74.

minimum wage based on 48 hours of work a week. But these manufacturers held fast to their position that they would not recognize the union.⁹⁸

Because union recognition was so important, union officials said that they would keep the strike deadlocked until “the manufacturers recognize the union” and would leave the matter of wages and working conditions to the state board of conciliation and arbitration, an organization formed with the passage of the NIRA. As a response to those manufacturers determined to pursue their goal of opening leather factories on April 17, the striking workers decided to hold a mass parade on that same morning. The idea, however, was short-lived; the mayor of Peabody, J. Leo Sullivan, “nixed” the idea for the parade.⁹⁹ Striking leather workers felt that the mayor had deprived them of “their rights as free citizens” and considered him a “traitor to the strikers’ cause.”¹⁰⁰

Although they had been denied the right to hold a parade, Massidda told the strikers that they “had won the fight because they did not return to their jobs [on the 17th] when asked to do so . . . by the factory owners.” In trying to bolster the strikers’ morale and deepen the bonds of solidarity, Massidda gave a rousing speech and tried to show the leather workers that they were outwitting the manufacturers.

They thought they were dealing with people without any intelligence, but we outsmarted them today and all their schemes and plots to stop the parade and to incite trouble did not have any effect whatsoever. This is a labor fight and no trickery on their part or on the part of politicians is going to keep us from winning. They can’t lick you for you are fighting a cause of righteousness and justice. We are the

⁹⁸ “The Leather Workers’ Strike,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (April 22, 1933): 9.

⁹⁹ “Leather Strikers to Stage Parade Monday with Wives, Children,” *Salem Evening News*, April 15, 1933.

¹⁰⁰ “Mayor Sullivan Firm in Stand Not to Let Workers Have Parade,” *Salem Evening News*, April 18, 1933, p. 2.

producers of America and will bring about a new era of prosperity that will start from the bottom and with the workers who can do much when they wake up. But this organization is your only protection.¹⁰¹

With these words Massidda espoused a progressive vision for genuine democracy. He did not need to go into the political history of America for these workers; because of their living and working conditions, they knew that in terms of political, social and economic democracy, they were not living the American dream.¹⁰²

Massidda tried to inspire all Peabody leather workers to hold fast to their position. By saying that “we are the producers of America,” he tried to offer hope to those workers who felt they had no ability to alter the course of day-to-day life. Massidda made it clear that nothing would be achieved if all workers did not work together. All leather workers in Peabody had to be committed to this fight.

While these striking leather workers may not have thought of their lives in such eloquent terms, they believed Massidda’s rhetoric; his words struck a common chord within this diverse ethnic community. After listening to his speech, only fifteen percent of the nearly 5,000 leather workers went back to work on the 17th. Freeman, a former leather worker directly involved in the 1933 strike, recalled that Massidda was “a little, short fellow” of Italian extraction. When he spoke, he “could set a fire; he’d get up on that stage, and you could see that crowd stirring up, and if he told them to burn the city of Peabody, they’d have burnt it down.” Standing on a stage waving his fist, “[Massidda] probably was one of the greatest speakers I think I’ve ever heard,”

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Andrew Levison, *The Working-Class Majority* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1977), 290.

Freeman acknowledged.¹⁰³ While Massidda did have a powerful oratorical style, Quantros said his speeches were effective because he said what workers wanted to hear. “First he would castigate the manufacturer,” for abusing workers and depriving them of their rights.

We had no seniority. We had no paid holidays, we had no vacations, we had no protection. Those are the things that he would draw on and those are the things that I was interested in and those are the things that Joe Bloke was interested in.¹⁰⁴

Massidda made the Peabody leather workers feel others cared about their needs. And he did. He lived in their community; he had suffered at the hands of tannery owners; he was, in effect, an organic intellectual. Without any formal training, Massidda was able to educate and rally the masses to demand change in their working and living conditions.

As the strike gained momentum, there were indicators that the community at large also cared about the escalating situation in the leather industry. On the political front, four weeks into the strike Mayor Sullivan formed a Citizens’ Committee, consisting of local Peabodyites, “in an effort to get both sides together and effect a settlement of the leather controversy.”¹⁰⁵ In addition, the Peabody City Council adopted a resolution calling on the manufacturers and the workers to settle the big leather strike. The council asked both the manufacturers and the workers to “forget their animosity towards each other, sit down in conference, come together on common ground realizing that we are all human beings fighting for a cause and try to

¹⁰³ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with Ed Freeman at the Union Hall, 73.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Interview with Al Quantros at the Union Hall, 80.

¹⁰⁵ “Six Taken By Police in Yesterday’s Riot in Peabody Strike,” *Salem Evening News*, April 22, 1933, p. 5.

come to some peaceful settlement.” While the council stated it would “do all in its power to assist in bringing about an early and agreeable settlement to all concerned,” it felt that since it represented 21,000 people, “all of whom are affected,” it would be of most assistance by “assuming an impartial attitude.”¹⁰⁶

Despite official pronouncement, the Peabody City Council did not act as a neutral arbiter. In indirect ways, the city council showed its support for the workers. For instance, at that same April 27th meeting, the council passed a unanimous resolution requesting the chief of police to “inspect all trucks and buses carrying passengers to and from the city of Peabody” and to ascertain “whether or not these trucks have certification from the commission of public utilities” to carry passengers.¹⁰⁷ If these vehicles failed to show proper certification, one counselor asked that they be removed from the highways. After this motion was passed unanimously, it was “met with much applause from the gallery.”¹⁰⁸ This resolution clearly favored the strikers who adamantly complained about the use of scabs who arrived in Peabody from outlying areas. Also at this meeting council members adopted a resolution asking the mayor to request that tanneries not employ strike breakers.¹⁰⁹ The spirit of these resolutions indicated the council’s rejection of a position of neutrality.

Besides political machinations, there were other examples of community support. The local newspaper, the *Peabody Enterprise*, blatantly supported the

¹⁰⁶ Peabody City Council Meeting Minutes, April 27, 1933, Book 4.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ *Salem Evening News*, April 28, 1933.

¹⁰⁹ “Ask Firms Put Ban on Strike Breakers as a Safety Measure,” *Salem Evening News*, April 28, 1933, p. 1.

workers. In a strongly worded editorial, the weekly paper called the tanneries sweat shops and blamed the tannery owners, “who cut help beyond all reason,” for undercutting those owners paying fair wages. The paper went so far as to blame the Peabody manufacturers for the difficult “conditions of the leather market.”¹¹⁰ Joining the *Peabody Enterprise* in supporting the union, various ethnic and civic groups sent monetary donations. The Turkish society gave \$50 to the union to aid the striking workers and the Polish society donated \$25.¹¹¹ American Legion Post 153 issued a check for \$100 and assured the strikers that “more money would follow.”¹¹² In addition to its monetary support, Post 153 adopted a resolution criticizing the use of tear gas by the police to break up crowds of strikers. In this resolution, members of the Peabody American Legion complained about the strike’s financial effect on the city, “protested against the promiscuous use of tear gas bombs where our women and children are congregated,” and admonished that “the money used for tear gas should go toward the poor and destitute within the city.”¹¹³ Concurring with the American Legion, the Polish Mutual Benefit Society and 220 Greek merchants, proprietors and citizens wrote petitions to Mayor Sullivan expressing “public resentment against the importation of strikebreakers and police terror.” These petitions “urged that ‘an immediate stop be put to the most inhumane practice in the civilized world—strikebreaking.’”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ *Peabody Enterprise*, April 28, 1933, p. 4.

¹¹¹ “Peabody Paragraphs,” *Salem Evening News*, April 13, 1933.

¹¹² “Hope Conferences on Leather Strike Will Bring a Settlement,” *Salem Evening News*, April 24, 1933, p. 2.

¹¹³ “Peabody Paragraphs,” *Salem Evening News*, April 25, 1933, p. 5; Peabody City Council Meeting Minutes April 27, 1933, Book 4.

¹¹⁴ Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union*, 540.

Local support manifested itself in various community actions. Although one local newspaper, the *Salem Evening News*, reported that there was “considerable public sentiment against the strike leaders of the National Shoe Workers Association . . . for coming to Peabody and stirring up trouble,” the public, nevertheless, was instrumental in establishing a soup kitchen in the French block of Lowell Street “for the benefit of the strikers.”¹¹⁵ In addition, the union designated a committee to solicit food from local merchants. After only four days in existence, Peabody’s soup kitchen was feeding between 500 and 600 people twice daily and was considered “one of the busiest spots in Peabody.”¹¹⁶ Freeman remembered a small grocery store on Walnut Street that sent over vegetables, bread, coffee, and other food to the soup kitchen to keep it going. Besides the soup kitchen, strikers and their families received food at home from the union.¹¹⁷ “But I don’t think that most of the people of the city were in that position [to give food to the soup kitchen] because they all were associated with the strike,” Freeman said. “Every family in the city was part of the strike because the father was out on strike, or the son or the brother. In some instances maybe the mother.”¹¹⁸ The hardships felt by the community, however, did not go unnoticed by city officials. The Peabody park commission took action to obtain additional land so that 125 local families could have subsistence gardens. In years past, the city had given garden lots to only fifty families.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ *Salem Evening News*, April 1, 1933, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ “Manufacturers Not in Mood to Sign Up with Leather Union,” *Salem Evening News*, April 5, 1933; “Peabody Paragraphs,” *Salem Evening News*, April 13, 1933.

¹¹⁷ “Peabody Paragraphs,” *Salem Evening News*, April 13, 1933.

¹¹⁸ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with Ed Freeman at the Union Hall, 85.

¹¹⁹ “Peabody Paragraphs,” *Salem Evening News*, April 24, 1933, 7.

One could argue that because the whole community had ties to the leather industry, the city could not help but support the strikers. “Every police officer in the city of Peabody, every politician in the city of Peabody, every doctor in Peabody, every priest in Peabody were all former leather workers and they were all sympathetic with the strike,” Freeman said.¹²⁰ In fact, a typical refrain from longtime Peabodyites was that everybody in Peabody worked in the leather industry. Tino Verceloni, who spent most of his life on Peabody’s Dane Street, figured that “99.5 percent of” the people “living in [his] neighborhood worked in the leather industry.”¹²¹ Jack Reardon, a former member of the Peabody City Council, recounted that in 1957 when he was running for mayor of Peabody, the other five candidates were former leather workers, and he was a leather worker at the time of the election. Reardon described the employment situation in Peabody as revolving around the leather industry:

Anybody that grew up in this town worked in a tannery. Either maybe during the summer in high school, or a lot of guys that are maybe lawyers today, will tell you that they didn’t want to go to college, and their fathers got them a job in the beam house . . . and after a summer of that, the kids signed up for college.¹²²

Because so many people in Peabody depended on the leather industry for their livelihood, the 1933 strike unquestionably created a hardship for the city. Not only did people fear escalating violence as the strike dragged on, but all Peabodyites began to feel the monetary effects of an industry closing its doors.¹²³ Five weeks into the

¹²⁰ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with Ed Freeman at the Union Hall, 74. Others in the community concur with this opinion. Author has in her possession interview transcripts that attest to this.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, Interview with Tino Verceloni, 159.

¹²² *Ibid.*, Interview with Jack Reardon, 135.

¹²³ A discussion of the violence that the strike created will be discussed later in this chapter.

strike, city officials estimated the monetary loss to the Northshore district to be a half million dollars.

This includes the immense loss in wages to workers which in turn has a tremendous affect on business; the \$3,500 weekly loss in revenue in Peabody from the use of water and power, the cost to the city of Peabody for added protection and the effect on trade by manufacturers with jobbers, dealers, and tanning supply houses. This does not include the loss suffered by the factory owners, particularly as to new orders. Then there are doctors' bills to be borne by injured parties, the property damage due to violence, etc. with the extent of the effort being practically unlimited since, when industry stops, the losses go all along the line.¹²⁴

In observing the situation, the *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News*, an industry publication, said that no one profited during a strike of this magnitude. "The workers themselves are suffering; the tanners are losing money, and have already had orders cancelled intended for Easter shoes; and the cities and towns in the strike area are suffering not only from stagnation of general business but from overburdened relief roles."¹²⁵

Clergy in the Northshore area were not immune to the dilemma the strike created. A representative of the Boston archdiocese, Cardinal O'Connell, in a radio address prayed for the end of the controversy and asked "that divine guidance be given the representatives of the manufacturers and the union in this very serious trouble."¹²⁶ In his sermonizing about the strike, Cardinal O'Connell adhered to the Catholic creed as stated in the *Quadragesimo Anno* which counseled capital and labor to "work for the common welfare" and called for all workers to organize but

¹²⁴ "Strike Leaders Say He Stretches Truth to 'Pep Up' Strikers," *Salem Evening News*, April 26, 1933, 2.

¹²⁵ *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (April 8, 1933): 21.

¹²⁶ "Leather Shops Formal Agreement Are Back," *Salem Evening News*, May 4, 1933, cover.

cautioned that unions should embrace all workers and “be governed by good sense.”¹²⁷ Because the majority of rank and filers in Peabody were Catholic, the Cardinal’s words must have had a soothing effect on those leather workers unsure of their role in the unfolding drama.¹²⁸ And for the predominantly Jewish factory owners, this use of the airwaves to preach against capitalism could only have served to harden the animosity between the two sides.

In her autobiography *Diary of a Pigeon Watcher*, Doris Schwerin, a former Peabodyite, recalled the tension that permeated Peabody in those days. Her father, Harry Halpern, was a Jewish doctor in Peabody in the early part of the twentieth century. Peabody social etiquette dictated that, as a professional man, Doctor Halpern associate with the rich factory owners. But he did not. According to Schwerin, her “Papa wasn’t doing what he was ‘supposed to do.’” With family members looking on in horror, Schwerin’s father made his own way in pre-World War II Peabody:

[He rejected the] Jewish factory owners and favor[ed] the workers. Unionism and strike were new words. He put his blessing on the new words. He refused to cross picket lines. . . . The upper class of the town were horrified. . . . The factory owners who could have made Papa rich were the aliens. The workers were the Americans. . . . If the “uppers” of the town had wanted to print a calling card for Papa, it would have said “Dr. Halpern, Socialist, renegade,

¹²⁷ “Catholic Statement Points Out Need of Christian Ideals for Sound Social Recovery,” *The Pilot*, 104 (June 17, 1933): 7. The Quadragesimo Anno was Pope Pius XI’s 1931 encyclical which stated the rationale for why the Catholic clergy should be concerned with social issues such as capitalism and communism. For further information on the Quadragesimo Anno see Gerstle, *Working-class Americanism*, 247-248.

¹²⁸ Massachusetts Council of Churches’ Department of Research and Strategy, *Peabody, Its Churches and Community*, 1963. This report estimated that by 1963 there were 15,242 Roman Catholics; 3,350 of the Jewish faith; 2,275 Greek Orthodox, and 15, 274 various Protestant sects. According to John Wells’ research, the Roman Catholics were the largest religious group in Peabody throughout the twentieth century. Wells, *The Peabody Story*, 1972, 477-492. The author based assertions about the religious faith of workers and company owners on Wells research, interviews with community members, newspaper accounts, and various church records found at the George Peabody House Museum.

betrayed.” A professional man shouldn’t behave the way he did. He was a pariah—double—a Jew and a reformer.¹²⁹

While other professionals disagreed with Halpern’s sentiments, the local Catholic clergy supported Halpern’s views on the working individual. The need for labor unions permeated the Boston archdiocese’s Sunday Catholic hour radio addresses during 1933. These addresses did not mention the striking leather workers specifically but framed each sermon in terms of the larger question of organized labor in general. For example, one sermon called unorganized labor a pathology when it flourished in an industrial society. In this broadcast aired over a local Boston station, Reverend Dr. John P. Monaghan admonished that the Catholic church consider unorganized labor a social disease in a capitalist society because the “energy giving organ called Capital has almost a monopoly of the body’s resources.”¹³⁰ In another sermon aired in the early spring of 1933, the Catholic Church offered words that could have only served to verify in a worker’s mind that the struggle for unionization was just. In this particular sermon the Boston archdiocese preached that in spite of the working person’s propensity toward self-reliance and independence,

despite these tendencies and efforts among the great mass of people, the wealth of the nation gradually flowed into the hands of the few. Capitalists and industrialists driven by greed, monopolized the sources of wealth and gained control of the products and profits made possible by the progress of technological science to their own enrichment and to the impoverishment and enslavement of the masses.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Doris Schwerin, *Diary of a Pigeon Watcher: An Autobiographical Journey* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1976), 88.

¹³⁰ “Deplores Lack of Organized Labor in the U.S.,” *The Pilot* 113 (June 17, 1939).

¹³¹ “Catholic Statement Issued on U.S. Economic Conditions,” *The Pilot* 104 (June 10, 1933): 3.

Hearing sermons by their religious leaders that mirrored union rhetoric could only solidify in the workers' minds the fairness of their objectives.¹³²

For some workers pastoral messages about unionization started well before the 1933 strike. In opening remarks to members of the First Baptist Church in Peabody in 1931, the Reverend Ernest H. J. Vincent chose the metaphor of a laborer to be the motto for the upcoming year. "For we are laborers together with God The wonderful thing about this relationship is that while God requires that we be laborers, He joins us, for we are co-workers with God. 'Laborers together with God.'" As Reverend Vincent continued with his address to parishioners, he drew the metaphor of a laborer more directly into their realm of experience.

All of us who are workers in everyday life are quite familiar with all that is entailed in being employed. It makes no difference whether it is with a small or large concern, the relationships between employers and employees are quite definitely marked. To all too many in modern industrial life it means working for a concern so that there is no intimate contact between employer and employed. Each individual is part of the concern, and quickly discovers that the corporation is soulless. Individuality and personality are lost in the grind of machinery, the drive for output and the scramble for profits. That is the danger point in our present system. In our history books we are taught that slavery was abolished in this fair country, the U.S.A. when Abraham Lincoln signed that document that emancipated the Negroes of the South, but slavery still exists in a more pernicious form in modern industry. Only recently, a worker in a big corporation said to me, "It is getting so that we are driven like slaves." In the Kingdom of God it is different, for He works with us. What consternation would reign if the big boss, known only by name, should one afternoon instead of making up a foursome at the club, suddenly appear in overalls and rubber boots down in the cellar, and say, "Come on, boys, let's get into this job; we are co-workers," But that is what God does.¹³³

¹³² One only needs to look at any issue of *The Pilot* during the spring, summer, or fall of 1933 to see how supportive the Boston archdiocese was in regards to unionization. A good example of the clergy's position can be found in "Catholic Statement Points Out Need of Christian Ideals for Sound Social Recover," *The Pilot* 104 (June 17, 1933): 7.

¹³³ Pastoral Message to Friends and Church Members 1931 by Reverend Ernest H.J. Vincent, Box: Peabody Churches, Folder: Baptist Church, George Peabody House Museum, Peabody, Massachusetts.

Although Reverend Vincent did not mention the leather manufacturers by name, his message was clear: The working individuals in Peabody had suffered at the hands of their employers, and the class differentials demarcating the worker and factory owner created inequities in all facets of life. God did not approve of these differences. After this sermon, parishioners most likely had no doubts about Reverend Vincent's allegiance to the working person.

While St. Vasilios Greek Orthodox Church in Peabody did not use the pulpit to discuss secular issues, Father Andrew Demontros, the head of the church in 2001, said that the congregation in the thirties was strictly working class and sentiment for the union ran high. In addition to the working class background of this congregation, the Greek Orthodox Church had specific ties to many of the striking leather workers. After World War I, the Greek Church "was a sponsor of many refugees who came over [to the United States] These people in many cases had speaking problems and limited resources, and they were very happy to take jobs in tanneries."¹³⁴ These same Greek immigrants were out of work in 1933. Feelings of solidarity permeated this parish; pro-union messages did not need to be incorporated into the sermon. All members of St. Vasilios supported the union effort.¹³⁵

But even with so much community support, the situation was grim for the striking leather workers. In many instances, emotions got the best of the strikers and violence became a means of trying to get their demands met. Until May 1933, the police dealt with disturbances by the striking leather workers without resorting to

¹³⁴ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with Al Chalek, a former leather salesman, 2.

¹³⁵ Telephone interview with Father Andrew, Peabody, Massachusetts, December 18, 2001.

physical violence. Instead of using clubs, they used tear gas and diplomacy. Throughout the strike there had been many altercations that called for police intervention. Throwing rocks at the buses bringing the scabs into Peabody was a common occurrence. Women and children even engaged in this behavior. In one incident two men and a woman were arrested in Peabody; the men were charged with throwing rocks at a bus carrying strike breakers to the Dimond-Grynkrout Kid Manufacturing Company, while the woman was apprehended for throwing a large stone through the windshield of a truck bringing strikebreakers to work in front of the B.E. Cox tannery on Hardy Street.¹³⁶

Freeman has vivid recollections of what it was like fighting the scabs.

Our problem was fighting off the scabs that came in from Ipswich and Beverly that had taken our jobs. They came in by bus. First it started in Salem, on Goodhue Street. There was the Flynn Leather Company on Boston Street and the back part of it was on Goodhue Street. Across from Flynn was the Helburn Thompson Leather Company. And they was the two concentrations of what I would call strike activity. They bring 'em in on buses. Put screen all over the windows. And the strikers and their friends, their mothers and fathers, would be on the sidewalk with bricks. And as the bus came through, they'd throw the stones or bricks at the bus. That didn't work. That didn't . . .they weren't too successful. So then they finally started to bring 'em in on the trains. They'd import them up to Beverly, put 'em on a train and then ride them and drive them into Salem. And . . .they had a spur of track and they'd ride them in there. Then another place was a concentration over at Cox Leather Company on the corner of Walnut and Wallis Street, I think they call it. They had a few scabs in there. And the strikers would move all over town, wherever these scabs were gonna be working or employed.¹³⁷

Even with this type of premeditated violence, the police tried to refrain from using physical force against the strikers. The Peabody police opted not to use violence on

¹³⁶ "Ex-Mayor Bakeman in Peabody; Expected to Take Part in Strike," *Peabody Enterprise*, April 21, 1933, p. 1.

¹³⁷ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with Ed Freeman at the Union Hall, 73.

the strikers, in part, because many police officers had ties—familial or social—with the leather workers. And in some instances, police officers commiserated with them.

While at first the police tried to refrain from using violence against strikers, that changed on May 1. At a demonstration at the Helburn Thompson plant, strikers attacked and harmed police officers. In response to the police injuries, Marshal John C. Harkens of the Peabody Police Department said that he would not let his “officers be slaughtered while on strike duty” and, as a result of this incident which illustrated a total “loss of respect for the law. . . [,] sterner methods will be used by the police in handling the mobs.” While the marshal said that police had been lenient until this point in handling strikers, he vowed to now go after strikers “with hammer and tongs.”¹³⁸ Police would not become victims of the leather workers regardless of their relationships outside of work.

In their defense, strikers argued that they got out of control at the Helburn Thompson leather plant because of the tannery’s practice of using scabs. In trying to fool the striking leather workers, the Helburn Thompson plant “instead of sending in trucks or buses. . . hired a locomotive and a baggage car to go in by its spur track and take out the strikebreakers just in time to catch the train for Ipswich at Salem depot.” When workers found out about this secret plan, they “gathered to throw rocks at the baggage car as it emerged from the factory yard. . . . Rocks struck several officers during this barrage” and one officer holding a striker was directly attacked.¹³⁹ A twelve-year-old boy at the time, Quantros remembered going down to Richard

¹³⁸ “Sternier Methods to Be Used By Police,” *Salem Evening News*, May 2, 1933, p. 1.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 5.

Young's, a tannery near the Thompson plant, and throwing rocks at the scabs with a group of other kids. "We joined you know. We were all part of that whole deal."¹⁴⁰

The police, however, were not the only victims of strike violence. A foreman at Flynn and Sons Tanning had a rock thrown through the window of his house. Around the rock was a note that read: "If you value your life, do not go to work tomorrow, and also do not learn the scabs how to work on the machines. . . . We are out for blood. Beware we mean business."¹⁴¹ Although young at the time, Mark Rolfman remembered the violence of the strike in 1933. "A lot of innocent people got hurt. You know, brick throwing. . . all that. And it was really bad, you know what I mean? [People] were really scared. It was terrible."¹⁴²

As the violence escalated, the Citizens' Committee and the mayors from Lynn, Salem, and Peabody got together with leather manufacturers and strikers to see if some progress could be made in settling the strike. In presenting their case to the Citizens' Committee and the manufacturers, the strikers insisted on union recognition which, they felt, would ensure them a better quality of life.

We are not anarchists or Reds, but American citizens. We want a fair wage. This is serious business, gentlemen. We didn't have anything to lose because we had nothing. We are not trying to step on you; we only want protection. Look at it in the light of fair businessmen. We're all human. We are not asking you to be unfair just look at it sensibly.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with Al Quantros at the Union Hall, 85.

¹⁴¹ "Sternier Methods to Be Used By Police," *Salem Evening News*, May 2, 1933, p. 5.

¹⁴² Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with Mark Rolfman, 5 Union Section.

¹⁴³ "Some Progress Made Toward Settlement of Leather Strike," *Salem Evening News*, April 29, 1933, p. 2.

Prefacing their statement to the group with the notion that they were not anarchists or Reds was necessary. Throughout the 1920s big business and the government had successfully managed to stifle the trade union movement by labeling all union members as Communists.¹⁴⁴ Striking Peabody leather workers wanted there to be no doubt about their political allegiance. They were not Reds; they were U.S. citizens who wanted a fair share of the political, social, and economic pie that characterized the American democratic system.

Before this committee of Peabody citizens, leather workers provided graphic details of their past experiences with the manufacturers. A female leather worker, Mrs. Morris, described “working under unbearable conditions eight hours and forty minutes a day for \$7.20 a week, handling heavy skins while breathing acid fumes. ‘I was told if I didn’t like it, there were plenty outside begging jobs for only \$5 a week.’”¹⁴⁵ Lynn’s mayor, J. Fred Manning, added credence to Morris’s tale by relating how two babies had died soon after childbirth because their mothers had toiled in the tanneries in sweatshop conditions until the day they gave birth. Other workers related instances of verbal abuse and greed. Edward Howe described a tannery owner who referred to his workers like animals:

There was a guy in Salem. He was a bad man. He referred to the workers in the shop one time at a negotiations like cattle. He said that they were nothing but steerheads. But they were all good people I lost respect for that man after that. And he lived in Topsfield. He owned a beautiful home. Had a place down in Florida. He made a lot

¹⁴⁴ Boyer, *Labor’s Untold Story*, 212.

¹⁴⁵ “Some Progress Made Toward Settlement of Leather Strike,” *Salem Evening News*, April 29, 1933, p. 2. For similar sentiments see Alice and Staughton Lynd, eds., *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 1.

of money. But he wouldn't want to advance any of that to help some of his people that worked there.¹⁴⁶

In reply to these allegations of inhumane treatment and verbal abuse, the manufacturers argued that they were unaware such conditions existed. Whether the manufacturers knew about such situations or not is unknown, but Manning, a long-time supporter of labor, decided to show his solidarity with the striking workers. Criticizing the manufacturers' for their lack of controlling workplace safety, Manning cited the necessity of union recognition.

The manufacturers have not given us any evidence as to their ability to control the continuance of such evils. . . .What guarantee can they give the workers when they go back? Gentlemen, I don't think you can give this guarantee and until you can show otherwise, what right have you to deny these workers protection through recognition of the union.¹⁴⁷

When city officials take such a strong position on an issue, other important groups usually begin to take sides as well. This was the case with the strike of 1933.

The Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News, a publication that detailed conditions in the leather industry, followed the strike closely. This publication tried to remain neutral in its reporting but agreed that it was an open question as to "whether the welfare of leather workers, to say nothing of the welfare of tanners, can be safely entrusted to the present leaders" of the leather industry.¹⁴⁸ Saying that it did not want to "analyze the rights and wrongs of the situation in Peabody. . .[because a controversy like this] is such an intimate and personal thing between employers and employees that outside opinions frequently fail to grasp important factors of the

¹⁴⁶ Transcripts from Leather Soul, Interview with Ed Hall, 4 Union Section.

¹⁴⁷ "Some Progress Made Toward Settlement of Leather Strike," *Salem Evening News*, April 29, 1933, p. 2.

¹⁴⁸ "The Leather Workers Strike," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (April 1, 1933): 21.

situation,” the *Weekly Bulletin* said that a squabble about wage hikes would have been easier to solve. The volatile issue of union recognition put both sides into a stalemate.¹⁴⁹

This stalemate, however, could not last indefinitely. After the meeting with the Citizens’ Committee and the mayors, the manufacturers realized that the tide had turned against them. What had seemed like “a hopeless entanglement” to most residents of Peabody only days earlier “ended just as suddenly as it started.”¹⁵⁰

Thirty-two leather shops and workers, represented by William B. Mahan, signed a formal agreement on Wednesday, May 3, 1933, almost six weeks after the start of the strike. The signing of this agreement validated a new union in Peabody—the National Leather Workers’ Association.¹⁵¹ Recognized by all Peabody leather factories except the three A.C. Lawrence plants, which had an injunction against the leaders and organizers, this union agreed to eliminate its association with the Lynn shoe workers. Peabody tannery owners felt that the Northshore leather industry would be less volatile if the two groups of workers did not form an alliance. Although the strike was over, some factory owners questioned the “fairness and the intelligence behind a movement that is permitted to hit the manufacturer who had tried to be fair with his crew just as hard as it hit the manufacturer who had exploited his crew.”

¹⁴⁹ “The Eastern Massachusetts Labor Trouble,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (April 29, 1933): 21. See also *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (April 8, 1933): 21.

¹⁵⁰ “The Leather Workers’ Strike Settled,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (May 6, 1933): 50.

¹⁵¹ The National Leather Workers Association is also referred to as the National Leather Workers Union in local publications. In the remainder of this manuscript the NLWA will also be referred to as Local 21.

Strike leaders, however, reiterated the necessity of “one hundred percent backing by all leather workers” in all factories.¹⁵²

Because of the concerted effort demonstrated by all workers in Peabody, industry experts characterized the strike as having a revolutionary effect on the leather industry. The tannery owners were still allowed to run open shops and hire and fire workers without union interference, but owners were not allowed to discriminate against union workers and preference was to be given to union members in filling jobs. In regards to pay, workers getting less than the minimum wage schedule filed with the State Board of Arbitration were given the higher salary. In cases where the tanneries had been paying more than these minimum wage schedules, the older, higher rates remained. In any wage disputes, the State Board of Arbitration would be the final arbiter. Owners, workers, and the public agreed that the minimum wage schedule would iron out the injustices of sub-standard shops.¹⁵³

After winning the strike, workers felt a sense of relief. In holding fast until the manufacturers gave them union recognition, workers ensured their viability and security. In terms of union recognition, Local 21 was ahead of the union movement nationally. It was not until 1937 that there were twice as many strikes over union recognition instead of merely wages or hours.¹⁵⁴

Peabody’s radicalism in terms of striking and pushing for union recognition can be attributed to three factors: a shift in national sentiment for the working person; a belief that workers needed to put aside differences for the common good; and strong

¹⁵² “Leather Shops Formal Agreement Are Back,” *Salem Evening News*, May 4, 1933, p. 1.

¹⁵³ “The Leather Workers’ Strike Settled,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (May 6, 1933): 50.

¹⁵⁴ Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State*, 5.

leadership that capitalized on the conditions provided by the Great Depression, New Deal legislation and public sentiment. Peabody leather workers had been silent and unorganized for too long. Years of relying on the manufacturers to treat them fairly in terms of wages and working conditions only to be sorely disappointed had galvanized the working class in this Northshore community. Peabody's leather workers realized they would need to work together to better their working and living conditions. The victory in 1933, coupled with the backing of Section 7 (a) of the NIRA, gave the fledgling union movement in Peabody the impetus it needed to organize all the New England leather workers. After the strike in 1933, Ed Hall, another former leather employee commented, "It seems that we were whippin' them [the manufacturers]. Without hittin' them with our hands. Whippin' 'em. With the idea that we are human. We gotta live."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Transcripts from Leather Soul, Interview with Ed Hall, 4 Union Section.

CHAPTER TWO:

Strength and Unity: The Early Days of Local 21

Every historical moment contains elements of both continuity and change. . . .But there are some time periods so marked by rupture and upheaval that human nature itself can appear to be changing. Traditional ways of loving, playing, or worshipping can seem suddenly outmoded, while familiar sites like the city street, the factory floor, or the motion picture theatre can percolate with an unfamiliar sense of possibility. What might have seemed impossible yesterday became possible today; what might have appeared inevitable and necessary yesterday becomes intolerable and unacceptable today.¹

This quote effectively characterizes life in Peabody, Massachusetts, directly after the strike of 1933 and throughout the thirties. The six-week shutdown of the tannery industry proved to the manufacturers that the leather workers could organize and rally around a common ideal. The strike also proved to the workers that to some degree they could control their work lives.² From this point on, life in the factory and the community would be different for the leather workers of Peabody. The formation of the National Leather Workers Association, however, did not mean that the future would be “rosy and bright” for the tannery workers.³ Recognition of the union provided Peabody’s working class with a place to begin their struggle for a more democratic future. This struggle would assume various forms throughout the next three decades, but it was in those early days after the strike that the foundation for this working class movement solidified.⁴

¹ George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) 19.

² *Ibid.*, 88-89.

³ The National Leather Workers Association was also known as Local 21.

⁴ Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 119.

Historian Elaine Tyler May characterized the thirties “as a time not only of misery, but of tremendous energy and radicalism. Populism, union organizing, and reform movements of all kinds flourished.”⁵ It was a time during which previously held convictions about the ability of labor to organize were shattered.⁶ Unlike the 1920s, which reflected “an unlimited faith in American industry,” the thirties gave the working person hope that workplace and societal reform was possible. “Protection of the right to organize was written into the statutes. . . [and] collective bargaining was declared to be national policy.”⁷ Although workers did not have “absolute job security,” employers had to abide by a national code of fair conduct.⁸

But to be effective in the thirties, a union had to respond to the local, state, and national situation and to adjust to the different circumstances confronting it. Local 21 met the challenges of the thirties with confidence and strength. Because of its perseverance and leadership in its formative years as a solidarity union, this organization of leather workers prepared itself well for the future. Understanding its early history provides a basis to evaluate the choices the union made later.

The NLWA, the leather industry, and the community of Peabody were not immune to the national labor and economic strife of the depression years. Within a year after its formation, Local 21 experienced tannery owner resistance during the

⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988) 38.

⁶ For a critical appraisal of the power of the worker movement in the thirties see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997).

⁷ “The Worker and His Organization,” *Monthly Labor Review* 71 (July 1959): 43. Nelson Lichtenstein argues that the Wagner Act was “pushed through Congress in response to the wave of working class militancy that followed the collapse of Section 7a of the National Recovery Act. The Wagner Act embodied a radical exercise of state power on behalf of union organization.” Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 10. (both quotes)

⁸ “The American Worker and American Industry,” *Monthly Labor Review* 71 (July 1950): 33.

first round of wage negotiations. Manufacturers asserted that they could not afford the union's demand for a twenty-five percent wage increase and a closed shop in thirty-nine Peabody plants. In response 6,000 leather workers in Peabody, Salem, Danvers, Woburn, and Lynn went out on strike for the second time.⁹ NLWA business manager Charles Chamouris, a former Peabody leather worker, "asked that everyone appear on the picket line . . . and be as peaceful as they could, so that they hold up the reputation which the union has attained during the past year." Although not seeking violence, the NLWA wanted its demands met. To show solidarity with the workers, union officials said they would "draw no pay during the duration of the strike."¹⁰ This action on the part of union leadership epitomized the essence of solidarity unionism—horizontal decision-making and egalitarian thinking.

During the early days of the NLWA, hierarchies of power did not exist; or at least, leaders of this leather workers' union tried to alleviate any type of blatant division of people by doing away with a hierarchy dictating that union leaders did not do the same work as both the skilled and unskilled rank and file. This effort got at the heart of solidarity unionism. Of course, hierarchies existed within community-based unions, but they were not as pronounced or obvious as in the business unionism usually associated with affiliates of the AFL or CIO, which functioned as hierarchical bureaucracies.¹¹ In addition, this early strike indicated defiance on the part of the new union as a whole; at this stage in its history, the NLWA's membership knew that it

⁹ "Leather Strike Closes Plants; 60000 Picketing," *Boston Transcript*, May 1, 1934, p. 1, 4; "The Massachusetts Leather Strike," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 39 (May 5, 1934): 4.

¹⁰ "Strike Started of 7500 Workers in Leather Factories," *Salem Evening News*, May 1, 1934, p. 1, 5.

¹¹ Staughton Lynd, *Solidarity Unionism: Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Below* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1992).

could not afford to cower in the face of the manufacturers' aggression. Its decision to hold fast to its position was not mandated by a force outside of Peabody. Instead, it was a locally decided initiative.

While newspapers chose not to cover the community's reaction to the 1934 strike, Peabody City Council records show that the political leaders of Peabody did respond to the labor situation.¹² At its April 1934 meeting, the Peabody City Council voted to "request the Massachusetts Leather Manufacturers Association sign a working agreement with the National Leather Workers Association" to avert further labor trouble.¹³ The Massachusetts Leather Manufacturers Association, which opened its headquarters in Peabody in June 1933, to promote the welfare of its members in all phases of industry, consisted of a voluntary unincorporated association of thirty-five tannery owners located in Peabody, Danvers, Salem, Lynn, and Woburn.¹⁴ The goal of a manufacturers association was to aid businesspeople engaged in a particular industry; traditionally, manufacturers associations were easier to organize than unions:

They are simpler to organize than labor unions because, compared to the workers, the number of individuals functioning in the role of merchant-manufacturer is small. Their specific purpose is to enable the executives thus organized to deal more adequately with the problems involved in relating the factories to the larger world, e.g., problems of vertical extension; and to protect themselves as a group against other horizontal associations organized in the interests of other groups.¹⁵

¹² None of the local newspapers mentioned this 1934 strike.

¹³ Peabody City Council Meeting Minutes, April 26, 1934, Book 4, p. 355.

¹⁴ "Peabody Paragraphs," *Salem Evening News*, June 30, 1933. Future references to the Massachusetts Leather Manufacturers Association will be made using either the Manufacturers Association or just the Association.

¹⁵ W. Lloyd Warner and J.O. Low, *The Social System of the Modern Factory—The Strike: A Social Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 124.

Given that the Manufacturers Association organized itself in less than a month's time after the ending of the six-week strike in 1933, it probably formed with the sole purpose of protecting the Northshore leather manufacturers from the newly formed union. For approximately a hundred years the Massachusetts leather industry operated without an official organization binding it together. Once the workers, with the government's backing, established what looked like a viable organization, the tannery owners took action. The tannery owners knew that the political and social atmosphere had shifted. The government and the larger community—city officials, some business owners, a variety of church officials, and other industrial rank and filers—now supported unions. In order to retain some measure of control, industry leaders realized they would need to be proactive.

The newly formed Manufacturers Association, however, did not prove successful in its first fight against the NLWA. By the first week in May 1934, the tanners gave in to the union grievances and ended the first strike of the fledgling union. Industry publications called it a “decided victory for the union.”¹⁶ The Manufacturers Association did not suffer its first loss well. Throughout the next thirty years, the leather workers' union and the Manufacturers Association would be at loggerheads, and the Association would perpetually vilify and blame the union for every calamity facing the leather industry.¹⁷

Although the NLWA faced an antagonistic industry and a bleak national economic situation, it did not modify its early organizing efforts. The NLWA's

¹⁶ “The Massachusetts Leather Strike,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 39 (May 12, 1934): 21.

¹⁷ “Tanning Industry in Massachusetts Facing a Crisis That May Drive it Out,” *Salem Evening News*, March 23, 1935; “German Leather Sold Cheap Here,” *Boston Herald*, April 16, 1935.

actions in these formative years were characterized not only by a desire to better the plight of all industrial workers in Peabody, but an unwillingness to concede to tannery owners' wishes. Both goals dictated Local 21's actions throughout the thirties. When the 1,500 members—both male and female—of the Independent Sheet Workers' Union went on strike at Pequot Mills, which had plants in both Salem and Peabody, the NLWA was quick to offer its "entire treasury of \$150,000" to aid the strikers in carrying "the strike to a successful conclusion." Joe Massidda, the NLWA organizer, said he would "personally join the sheet workers' picket lines today and lead the fight to tie up all activities at the Pequot plant."¹⁸ Massidda's offer to march on the picket line reinforced a sense of camaraderie and equality among all industrial workers. This was not the only instance of leather workers offering assistance to other industrial workers in the city.

When the Northshore area coal truck drivers went on strike in the summer of 1935, tannery operators felt nervous because "leather workers are disturbed over vehicles operated by strikebreakers delivering fuel to the shops" in Peabody. Tensions were at such a high point that tannery owners feared a sympathy strike at some of the leather plants.¹⁹ The tanneries used coal to operate their plants, and many tannery owners were "fearful of accepting the coal lest the workers there, strongly organized, walked out as they threatened to do if coal was brought to the factory by strikebreakers."²⁰ Because leather workers refused to work in plants that used coal

¹⁸ "Leather Union Offers Big Strike Fund," *Daily Record*, September 10, 1935.

¹⁹ "Call Strike Truce After Wild Riots," *Boston Post*, August 28, 1935; "Fear Tannery Strike With Non-Union Men on Coal Deliveries," *Salem Evening News*, August 26, 1935; and "Coal Strike Settlement Prevents Shut-down of Peabody Tanneries," *Peabody Enterprise*, August 30, 1935.

²⁰ "Call Strike Truce After Wild Riots," *Boston Post*, August 28, 1935.

transported by strikebreakers, four of the major tanneries in Peabody planned to close their factories because they had almost run out of coal; these tannery owners had decided not to test the extent of leather workers' loyalty to the coal truck drivers. Fortunately, the controversy in the coal industry resolved itself before the four Peabody leather plants found it necessary to close their doors and displace roughly 1,200 leather workers.²¹ Knowing that so many jobs were at stake, Peabody leather workers still chose not to allow coal trucks to deliver to their places of employment using scab labor. This show of unity for other industrial workers during an especially weak economic time was emblematic of solidarity unionism. In promising to sacrifice the needs of their own families for the greater good, the newly unionized leather workers demonstrated their commitment to raising the standards of living for all members of the community.

This ideal of community solidarity surfaced repeatedly throughout the middle years of the New Deal decade—even as the economic downturn of the leather industry tested the fledgling union on a multitude of other fronts. Maintaining this intensity, however, became increasingly difficult for the NLWA as the Manufacturers Association worked to further its aims. The strife between the two became especially apparent early in the 1936 wage negotiations.

The 1936 wage negotiations between the union and the Association reflected the intensity of the times. Representatives from the National Leather Workers Association asked for a “cost of living increase in their wages to account for the 30

²¹ “Coal Strike Settlement Prevents Shut-down of Peabody Tanneries,” *Peabody Enterprise*, August 30, 1935.

percent rise in the cost of food during the past two years.” In response to this wage request, the Manufacturers Association said “the tanning industry is in a serious plight in Massachusetts and unrosy for the immediate future.” After determining that in 1934 Massachusetts’ tanneries operated at “a serious net loss,” the Association said “the two sides of the operating question are out of balance, and from the present indications there is little hope that a change in general conditions will help the industry materially.”²² The Manufacturers Association predicted that the situation in the tanning industry was so dire that the demands placed on it by the NLWA could “drive it out of the Commonwealth.”²³

The manufacturers’ statements contained some relevant points. The situation in the leather industry as a whole was discouraging; in fact, national industry leaders questioned whether the leather trade had lost “its capacity to earn legitimate profits on its invested capital.”²⁴ At its annual meeting in 1936, the Tanners’ Council of America concluded that since 1920 the leather industry as a whole had experienced enormous losses on the products it produced. The Council attributed this loss to the cost of modern equipment, rising labor costs, and fluctuating hide prices.²⁵ The higher cost of doing business in the leather industry had resulted in fewer tanneries and leather establishments doing business in the United States: 4,285 establishments in

²² “Massachusetts Tanners Assert Higher Wages Ruinous,” *Hide and Leather*, April 6, 1935. See also “Leather Workers Wage Arbitration,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 40 (April 6, 1935): 7.

²³ “Tanning Industry in Massachusetts Facing a Crisis That May Drive it Out,” *Salem Evening News*, March 23, 1935; “German Leather Sold Cheap Here,” *Boston Herald*, April 16, 1935.

²⁴ Percival E. Foerderer, *Address to the Board of Director's Tanners' Council of America* (White Sulphur Springs, NY: Tanners’ Council of America, May 7th, 1936), 1.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 1-4.

1929 to only 3,249 in 1937.²⁶ Although these numbers do not necessarily reflect a smaller amount of leather being processed, they do indicate that fewer overall leather establishments actually did the work, and that the tannery industry engaged fewer workers. Between 1935 and 1937 the leather industry lost 200 tannery workers; wages increased in the same period by \$5,594,904.²⁷ The average leather worker saw his/her average hourly earnings increase by about nine cents between 1929 and 1937.²⁸ But monetary increases were not enough to keep pace with inflation. Between 1933 and 1934, for example, U.S. consumers experienced a rise in commodity prices as the index of wholesale prices went up 18 percent, and farm prices rose more than 50 percent.²⁹

The New England area experienced the decline in the leather industry more than other regions of the country. In the 1920s New England “dominated the shoe and leather business with ninety percent of the country’s total.” In 1939 New England “makes only thirty-seven percent of the nation’s shoes and a smaller proportion of its leather.” According to the New England Shoe and Leather Association, the decline could be traced to:

A lack of aggression on the part of the New England manufacturers, and the fact that those in other sections have stressed merchandising more than shoemaking. [The Association] also charged that in the past, New England

²⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Manufacturers 1954 Volume II Industry Statistics* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office), 31-1.

²⁷ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Biennial Census of Manufacturers 1937 Part I* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1939), 790.

²⁸ “Wages and Hours in the Tanning Industry,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 43 (February 12, 1938): 21.

²⁹ “Living Costs Continued to Rise in 1934,” *Salem Evening News*, January 15, 1935; “Wholesale Level 63 Percent Up from 1933 Low,” *Peabody Enterprise*, January 1935.

civic authorities and bankers displayed a lukewarm interest in the industry as compared with that received by competing sections.³⁰

Specifically, in the Peabody area fourteen side, calf and split plants, and ten sheepskin tanneries had suffered serious losses in 1934. According to a local accountant, the fourteen side, calf and split plants felt a “net loss of \$368,807.81 resulting in percentage loss of 4.02 For every dollar of sales made during the year, [manufacturers] not only did not make any profit, but impaired the capital of the organization to the extent of four cents for every dollar of sales.”³¹ According to Nat Tanzer, a former Peabody tannery owner, this type of financial situation was not unusual. “For years,” he said, “[the leather industry] went from catastrophe to calamity and back because lots of people flew by the seat of their pants.”³²

Thus, the leather workers and manufacturers felt dissatisfied, and this dissatisfaction emerged during the 1936 wage negotiations. Because the two sides could not work out their differences over a new contract, the controversy went before the State Board of Conciliation and Arbitration. The manufacturers contended the east coast leather market tightened because so much of the shoe business “on which the leather trade leans heavily” had migrated to the west.

It cannot be denied that the domestic raw skin market at the present time is closer to the western tanner thereby creating a savings to him in freight costs and an acceleration in raw stock deliveries which thereby allow prompt shipments of finished product to nearby customers. . . . In the face of existing conditions, with a number of tanneries now operating at a loss, the manufacturers contend that any wage increase would so hamper them as to bring about a serious curtailment of production due to the inability to meet

³⁰ “Plan Campaign to Promote New England Shoes and Leather,” *Hide and Leather and Shoes* 97 (April 1, 1939): 6.

³¹ “Massachusetts Tanners Assert Higher Wages Ruinous,” *Hide and Leather*, April 6, 1935.

³² Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, April 21-23, 1989 and April 27-30, 1989 around the city of Peabody, Interview with Nat Tanzer, 8.

competition from low-wage states, which would be reflected in the loss of employment.³³

Unemployment had already reached the city of Peabody. High numbers of Peabodyites seeking money from the relief rolls in 1935 had severely exhausted the city's welfare funds.³⁴ And by 1938, out of a total of 3500 union members, only 1200 were working in the leather industry; the rest were unemployed.³⁵

Recognizing the difficult circumstances that existed, the Peabody City Council approved a resolution advocating that tanneries should hire from the ranks of Peabody residents first before filling positions with workers from out of town. The City Council acknowledged that "if the tanners favored Peabody men, this city could save \$40,000 in welfare each year, and . . . would reduce the tax rate \$2 per thousand."³⁶ At the February 14, 1935 City Council meeting, Peabody mayor James E. McVann said that Mr. Roberts, secretary of the Leather Manufacturers Association, was ready to cooperate with the council "in placing unemployed men in the leather factories."³⁷

Calling this move by the City Council "a long awaited break," the *Peabody Times*, a local daily newspaper, said that this initiative could assist employees trying to get into the A.C. Lawrence Leather Company, "the most privileged factory in this country." A.C. Lawrence, which hired only about eighteen percent of its employees

³³ "Tanning Industry in Massachusetts Facing a Crisis That May Drive it Out," *Salem Evening News*, March 23, 1935. For more information see "German Leather Sold Cheap Here," *Boston Herald*, April 16, 1935.

³⁴ "500 in Riot at Peabody," *Boston Herald*, August 15, 1935, 2.

³⁵ "Tanners, Union Act to Save Industry," *Lynn Telegram*, July 17, 1938. Unemployed union members still retained their union representation as long as they paid their dues.

³⁶ "Putting Peabody Men to Work," *Salem Evening News*, May 12, 1933.

³⁷ Peabody City Council Meeting Minutes, February 14, 1935, Book 4.

from Peabody, offered its employees benefits found nowhere else in the leather industry—pension plans, on-site medical attention, employee safety contests, good idea bonuses, annual company picnics, etc.³⁸ At the height of the Depression, A.C. Lawrence was the first Peabody plant—and the first large tannery in the whole industry—to give its employees vacation time.³⁹ (Paid vacation, however, was a standard benefit for other industries in the thirties. According to a study conducted in early 1935 by the National Industrial Conference Board, companies that offered paid vacations prior to the Depression, maintained this benefit throughout the Depression.)⁴⁰

In addition to offering paid vacation, A.C. Lawrence also raised wages for hourly employees between eight percent and ten and a half percent in 1937.⁴¹ A.C. Lawrence could offer its employees benefits during the darkest days of the Depression because, in part, it was a national company, with diversified holdings in many different parts of the leather and meat business.⁴² In addition, the A.C. Lawrence Company, from early on in its history, made a commitment to maintain a modern facility. By operating in a more efficient manner the company managed to

³⁸ *Peabody Times*, November 29, 1935. For a full reporting of the unique work environment at A.C. Lawrence see the *Tan-O-Gram*, A.C. Lawrence Leather Company's official monthly employee newsletter. The George Peabody House Museum has a semi-complete collection of the *Tan-O-Gram*. There were at least two other leather companies in Peabody that offered annual employee picnics: Korn Leather and Carr Leather. Repeated references were found in the *Peabody Enterprise* discussing these annual company outings throughout the thirties and forties.

³⁹ "Leatherworkers at A.C.L. Plants to get Vacations," *Peabody Times*, February 5, 1937; "A.C. Lawrence Leather Company Raises Wages," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 42 (March 13, 1937): 21. Beginning in 1937 nearly all of the 2,000 leather workers at A.C. Lawrence were granted a week's vacation with pay. The only stipulation was that employees must have completed four years of continuous service to the company. Employees were able to choose which week they wanted off.

⁴⁰ "Vacations with Pay for Wage Earners," *Monthly Labor Review* 40 (June 1935): 1494.

⁴¹ "A.C. Lawrence Leather Company Raises Wages," *Weekly Bulletin* 42 (March 13, 1937): 21.

⁴² "Vertical Integration Forward by Packing Companies," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 52 (March 8, 1947): 14.

eke out a more favorable existence than the majority of other tanneries. A.C. Lawrence's generous advances also assured the company that its employees and the company union—the A.C. L. Employees' Assembly—were satisfied.⁴³ A.C. Lawrence did not want its workforce to become members of the NLWA; thus, by staying ahead of the demands issued by the NLWA, the major leather concern hoped to prevent internal unrest.⁴⁴

Because the employee benefits provided at A.C. Lawrence were better than any other tannery in Peabody, some community representatives felt that these employee concessions should be the norm rather than the exception. The Boston archdiocese was vocal in its condemnation of employer greed and stressed the need to treat the working person in a more humane manner. In the weekly Sunday radio broadcast aired over an assortment of local stations, various Catholic officials preached about the need to better the economic and social plight of the working class. For instance, the Reverend Jones Corrigan used one Sunday morning radio hour to discuss the necessity of the government to step in, as it did with the NRA, to curb the “fundamental defect of the old order of industry—cut-throat competition leading to demoralizing exploitation” of the worker.⁴⁵ Corrigan believed that by eliminating

⁴³ The A.C. L. Employees' Assembly consisted of representatives of the employees and an equal number of representatives from the management. “Leatherworkers At A.C.L. Plants to Get Vacations,” *Peabody Times*, February 5, 1937.

⁴⁴ From the early days of the NLWA there is no surviving information that details any type of plan or even discussion about organizing the A.C. Lawrence plant, nor is there any record commenting on the benefits A.C. Lawrence employees enjoyed besides one newspaper article. Later on in the NLWA's history—in the late thirties—one begins to see more documentation about the union's feelings toward A.C. Lawrence and its plan to unionize the A.C. Lawrence employees. Unionization of the A.C. Lawrence plant is discussed later in this chapter and in subsequent chapters.

⁴⁵ “Economic State Topic in Boston Radio Address,” *The Pilot* 104 (September 30, 1933): 6.

unjust working conditions—sweatshop labor and unfair wages—industry, as a whole, would be stabilized and competition would be controlled.⁴⁶

The leather union shared Corrigan's sentiments. At its fifth convention in 1938, the NLWA went on record in favor of establishing a Uniform National Contract, which would standardize wages and conditions throughout the U.S. leather industry.⁴⁷ Some of the Peabody leather manufacturers agreed with this proposal. Two leather concerns on Foster Street confessed that "without this union [NLWA] operating they would have folded up their tents in 1933, but now that the union has stabilized factory conditions they can get decent prices for their leather, make a fair profit, thereby having a reason to continue in business."⁴⁸ By paying leather workers a uniform union wage throughout the Northshore, no one tannery could undercut another tannery. The New England Regional Planning Commission, composed of the heads of the six New England Planning Boards, recognized in a 1939 report that labor in New England "has brought about better working conditions in the country as a whole, [and] reflects the intelligent organization of skilled workmen under good leadership."⁴⁹ Unfortunately, most leather concerns in the community blamed the union for the troubles in the industry.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Fifth NLWA Convention, 1938, International Fur and Leather Workers Union Manuscript Collection 5676, Box 31, Folder 12, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M.P. Catherwood Library, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University. Hereafter, this collection is referred to as IFLWU 5676.

⁴⁸ "Leather Union Weekly Column," *Peabody Times*, November 29, 1935.

⁴⁹ "Prosperity of New England in the Future Depends on Planning Now," *Salem Evening News*, May 15, 1939.

Church leaders in the Boston archdiocese, however, had a response to the critical comments of factory owners. Using the airwaves church officials claimed the Depression resulted from the greed of the businessperson:

Is not the present depression a retribution for the violation of law? Does not the industrialist find his factory temporarily closed? . . . Retribution is here, and how long it will remain depends on how soon the irreligion of greed and exploitation can be replaced by the religion of justice and charity.⁵⁰

On a national level, the Methodist Church represented by the Methodist Federation for Social Service advocated labor's right to organize. In supporting the Wagner Act, the Methodist Church criticized the "open-shop forces that fought the enactment [of the Wagner Act] and tried desperately to block appropriations for its enforcement."⁵¹ Church leaders were not the only ones blaming tannery leaders for having a narrow, short-sighted view of labor.

In the industry publication, *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News*, manufacturers found a variety of viewpoints about labor and what should be done about labor turmoil. In the late thirties many of the articles discussed treating labor in a more humane manner.⁵² In one such editorial a tannery owner spoke to his colleagues about the drastic changes taking place on the labor front.

The standard of living has reached its present level as the result of the evolution of thought, the result of experience and the result of competition and compromises of conflicting forces based upon the inherent and innate quality of selfishness in human nature. [This leather manufacturer championed the] evolution of the far-sighted business executives, who know the economics of business life, who realize and know that their income will be more stable and their accumulated wealth more secure by a just division of and an ever

⁵⁰ *The Pilot* 104 (September 9, 1933): 1; 6.

⁵¹ "Methodist Church Group Defends Act," *CIO News* 2 (March 6, 1939): 5.

⁵² The issues included in the 1938 and 1939 volumes of *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* covered employee relations extensively. For instance, see "Early to Work-Early to Play," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 44 (June 3, 1939): 36.

increasing percentage of profits with their employees, which thereby creates and insures a wider, better, and sounder market for their products alleviating violent fluctuations and depression and at the same time increases and makes more secure the standard of living of the masses by their increased mass purchasing power.⁵³

In reminiscing about life as a tannery owner back in the thirties, a Fulton County, New York tannery owner commented that many leather factory owners were ill equipped to be good employers when dealing with labor issues. He described mid-twentieth century leather leaders as ignorant of management skills:

These tanners basically were fellows with very little backgrounds, educationally and otherwise. Anybody running a tannery of—let's say—fifty people, was probably somebody who came up through the tannery someplace. And here this whole labor relations thing was a new problem that came up during his lifetime. They weren't very well suited to deal with a lot of these things.⁵⁴

Some tannery owners certainly were greedy and cared little about the conditions of working people; many others were inexperienced managers. But leaders in the leather industry knew that if the industry were going to survive and thrive in the future, it needed to start recognizing the needs of the workforce.

The majority of Peabody tannery owners did not exhibit the virtues of enlightened businessleaders. According to editorials in the *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* and radio sermons sponsored by the Boston archdiocese, enlightened owners and operators would provide a livable family wage and protection against sickness, unemployment, infirmity, and old age.⁵⁵ Many Peabody leather manufacturers, however, said that industry conditions did not allow for higher wages

⁵³ "A Tanner Spoke to his Community as Follows," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 43 (April 30, 1938): 22.

⁵⁴ Gerald Zahavi, "'Communism is No Bug-A-Boo': Communism and Left-Wing Unionism in Fulton County, New York, 1933-1950," *Labor History* 33: 180.

⁵⁵ "Radio Address on Church and Laborer Given," *The Pilot* 104 (September 9, 1933): 6.

or any type of employee benefits, such as vacation pay. The archdiocese countered this argument by saying that if employers and employees worked together all individuals would benefit.⁵⁶

The union recognized that it would prosper not simply by berating the manufacturers about low wages, but by aiding in the prosperity of the leather industry as a whole. The leaders of Peabody understood this as well. Inherent in the leather business was its history “of uneven, spotty profits.” These spotty profits were the result of a four-fold risk facing every tanner: hide and skin market fluctuations, a time lag between purchase of raw material and sale of finished leather, variation in demand from users of finished leather, and credit risks.⁵⁷ While the leather union and Peabody’s leadership could not fix all that was wrong with the leather business, they could make inroads in specific areas.

One industry-wide problem that labor and community leaders addressed was the importation of foreign skins. These skins were being sold on the market at “seven cents a foot less than the Massachusetts tannery can afford to sell [them].”⁵⁸ The Peabody City Council officially favored the exclusion of foreign made goods and the consumption of only U.S.-made products. The Council, with community support, explained that “there is much agitation for backing up New England industries in their fight against foreign competition” and initiated a Buy American campaign. Throughout Northshore communities, leaders of the campaign formed committees to orchestrate their activities. To assist with this endeavor, the National Leather Workers

⁵⁶ “Recovery of the National the Subject of Boston Radio Talk Last Sunday,” *The Pilot* 104 (October 21, 1933): 6.

⁵⁷ “Profits in Leather,” *Weekly Bulletin Leather and Shoe News* 40 (August 10, 1935): 4.

⁵⁸ “German Leather Sold Cheap Here,” *Boston Herald*, April 16, 1935.

Association organized other labor and civic organizations “in a drive to keep cheap foreign made goods from this country.” Principally aimed at the invasion of inexpensive Japanese goods, the leather workers also stressed the need to be concerned with the importation of German-made leather.⁵⁹

The Buy American campaign experienced in Peabody was neither a local nor regional phenomenon, nor a modern one. Such actions had their roots in colonial times. As historian Dana Frank found, this movement “has been inextricably interwoven with fears of alleged economic infiltration” by various other nationalities and has been a means of individuals exercising “democratic control of their nation and their economic lives.”⁶⁰ This democratic initiative received presidential support when President Herbert C. Hoover signed the Buy American Act of 1933 right before he left office.⁶¹ For Peabodyites, participating in the Buy American campaign accomplished two goals: By supporting a nationalistic movement like this, individual community members felt that they were doing something to help their community and the larger country. At the same time, business leaders had a legitimate answer as to whom they could blame for the economic woes and the problems in the leather industry—foreigners.⁶² Local 21 supported the Buy American campaign and urged its members to only buy union-made goods, as well.

In response to the Buy American campaign, a group of state representatives, mayors of various Northshore communities, businesspeople, and Chamber of

⁵⁹ “Boyle Opens Battle Against Foreign Made Goods,” *Peabody Times*, April 12, 1935.

⁶⁰ Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), x, xii.

⁶¹ Frank, *Buy American*, 57.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Commerce representatives founded the North Shore Industries Protective Association. “Developed to protect Northshore industries from overseas imports, . . . this organization is protesting the [government imposed] processing tax on textiles and urging greater protection of Massachusetts industries against all foreign importations.”⁶³ Although Local 21 was not represented, it supported the objective of the Protective Association: saving the industrial base of the community.

Understanding that Peabody was a one-industry city and that this industry was highly volatile, a committee of businesspeople and Peabody Chamber of Commerce representatives joined together in 1935 to attract new industries into the area. While the Buy American campaign and the North Shore Industries Protective Association were designed to aid industry, the objective of this new initiative was to provide work for Peabodyites and increase the revenue of the city by attracting new businesses. The first meeting of this new group, however, proved that attracting new business endeavors to the Leather City would be an uphill battle. Not only did Peabody have a high tax rate, but the majority of the vacant and operational factory buildings waiting for new owners were in poor condition. In many cases manufacturers failed to make repairs because they either feared their tax evaluations would increase or they were leery about local economic conditions.⁶⁴ The committee also found that various cities and towns in northern and southern states offered much better incentives—ten years of free taxes, cheap water and electric rates, and no unions—to attract manufacturers

⁶³ “To Frame Resolutions Sunday in Peabody on ‘Buy American’ Drive,” *Salem Evening News*, April 15, 1935.

⁶⁴ “Businessmen Concerned,” *Salem Evening News*, October 25, 1935.

and other businesses.⁶⁵ The committee agreed that the labor controversy did not help attract new business; committee members feared that the Northshore area had developed a reputation outside of New England as a “hot-bed for labor troubles.”⁶⁶

It is difficult to assess to what degree the leather union turmoil affected the overall health of Peabody’s industrial sector. It is also challenging to determine how industrial problems affected the flight of tanneries out of Peabody. Discordant relations between labor and management did negatively affect tannery prospects. Manufacturers used the contentious relationship with labor to further their objectives of trying to squelch the union movement. In an editorial that appeared in the local newspaper in 1936 one person, who characterized himself as an average citizen, taxpayer, and merchant, said that “the present labor disorder in Peabody is just one more barrier to prevent manufacturers and industrialists from coming to Peabody and operating a factory giving employment to our unfortunate jobless.” Citing the situation in Lynn “where industrial turmoil forced over 100 manufacturers to leave the city and re-locate their factories elsewhere,” this community member warned that if labor and management could not come to a peaceful resolution, Peabody would become another industrial ghost town. Echoing the tannery owners’ sentiments, the writer also acknowledged that the yearly labor strife had already harmed the city’s industrial potential.

In Peabody, it is beginning to pinch. At a recent leather show when a prospective manufacturer talked of locating here, immediately he is confronted with a brief of our industrial history. Yearly riots, strikes and disorders kill his ambition to come to the once World’s Largest Leather City,

⁶⁵ “Peabody Mentioned in West as Being Near State Control,” *Peabody Enterprise*, September 8, 1939, p. 1.

⁶⁶ “Businessmen Concerned,” *Salem Evening News*, October 25, 1935.

and all of Peabody takes a defeat. Those manufacturers who have cooperated with the local union are now beginning to feel the sentiments. They are not getting the orders as in former years because of the fact that the retail buyers doubt the ability of Peabody firms to fill large orders without interference or delays. On the same token, large financial institutions will hesitate when issuing letters of credit to Peabody firms because our industrial history holds a threatening cloud over us. . . . In the name of every leather worker, citizen, taxpayer, merchant, and manufacturer, let industrial peace be restored so that the nation at large will reverse their judgment about our city and help bring prosperity back to our people.⁶⁷

Whether this community member was a tannery operator is unknown. But what is clear is that by the middle part of the 1930s wage negotiations were creating tensions among manufacturers, workers, and community leaders.

For instance, wage negotiations for 1936 started in the spring of 1935 and concluded only in January of 1936. While a strike was averted, the community viewed the months-long talks with trepidation. In the end neither labor nor the manufacturers achieved all their demands. Both sides made concessions. Instead of a twenty percent wage increase, workers received “a wage increase of seven and a half percent for day employees and five percent for piece workers, in addition to seniority with competency.” Workers did not win the closed shop concession; instead, the manufacturers agreed to continue the three-week union clause already in existence.⁶⁸ While Local 21 did not have the closed shop provision, since 1933, manufacturers had supported an arrangement that every leather worker had to become a union member after three weeks of employment. “This virtually means a closed shop insofar as new employees are concerned.” The problem with this arrangement was that the “workers who were employed at the time the provisions was agreed to were

⁶⁷ “Labor Strife Forecasts Future For Peabody People,” *Peabody Enterprise*, April 17, 1936.

⁶⁸ “Both Sides Win and Peace Again Reigns in Leather Industry,” *Salem Evening News*, January 7, 1936; *Boston Post*, January 5, 1936.

not required to become union members, but could, however, join the union on their own volition.” This clause meant that Local 21 did not have full union membership.⁶⁹ Local 21 also suffered because the 1933 agreement put unemployed leather workers at a disadvantage when employment opportunities opened at a tannery. “The manufacturers are frequently prejudiced to workers who have membership in the unions and for that reason total strangers to the leather trade are hired, while loyal union members with long years of experience in making leather are forced to walk the streets.”⁷⁰

As if both sides wanted to show that they would not be intimidated by the 1936 wage controversy, the 1937 wage negotiations were filled with even more acrimony. When the union requested a twenty percent wage increase, observers assumed the manufacturers would endorse “a slight wage increase and a strictly closed shop plan. . . . Hope along this line soon faded, however, when owners of the various tanneries involved decided they could not agree to the closed shop and that conditions would not warrant any more than a five percent increase.”⁷¹ In addition, manufacturers argued that the members of the NLWA had “greater rights and powers than are granted to a union in any other industry in the United States.”⁷²

⁶⁹ “Owners of Tanneries Flatly Refuse Union Closed Shop Demands,” *Salem Evening News*, December 14, 1936.

⁷⁰ “Shop Owners Should Hire Workers Out of Lists of Unemployed,” *Salem Evening News*, December 17, 1936.

⁷¹ “Hopeless Deadlock in Leather Groups Means Strike Soon,” *Salem Evening News*, December 3, 1936. Similar information found in “Tanneries Offer Increase but Ban ‘Closed Shop,’” *Lynn Daily Item*, November 11, 1936; *Peabody Times*, November 5, 1936; *Peabody Enterprise*, November 5, 1936; *Lynn Daily Evening Item*, October 30, 1936; *Lynn Telegram News*, October 30, 1936; *Salem Evening News*, October 30, 1936.

⁷² “Owners of Tanneries Flatly Refuse Union Closed Shop Demands,” *Salem Evening News*, December 14, 1936.

Unlike some of the other wage negotiations, the 1937 contract discussion took place in the public eye. Previous labor disputes garnered brief news stories and editorials, but this labor discussion featured paid advertising by each side—manufacturers and union. It is not clear why the union and the manufacturers decided at this point to use large testimonial-type advertisements to get their message out to the public. It could be that the union did not have enough funds during prior labor negotiations to purchase advertising space or maybe they did not feel there was a need to convince the larger community about their position. Whatever the rationale, paid advertising became a common feature of the 1937 wage discussion. Both sides took out advertisements detailing their positions. During the arbitration, the manufacturers tried to convey to the community the obstacles confronting the leather industry. To garner the widest audience, the Manufacturers Association took out an advertisement in all the local papers—*Peabody Enterprise*, *Peabody Times*, *Salem Evening News*, and the *Lynn Telegram News*—that said it was just putting forward the facts for the leather workers. After listing all the overhead costs confronting the leather manufacturer—machinery, a building, raw stock and other material, taxes, and wages—the advertisement said that the tannery owner could not offer any more than a five percent increase for day workers. The advertisement threatened “Closed tanneries pay no wages!”⁷³

By the end of December the situation in Peabody had reached a volatile stage. In addition to advertisements, the Manufacturers Association sponsored a number of

⁷³ The advertisement appeared in all the local papers. For instance, see the *Lynn Telegram*, December 17, 1936.

news stories detailing the plight of the local leather industry. These news stories discussed the manufacturers' version of the overall condition of various tanneries in the city. One article stated how "two large employers of tannery labor within the past few days have acquired tanneries outside of Massachusetts and may cease all operations within the commonwealth. This fact, together with the stoppage of business by ten other manufacturers within the past four years indicates the seriousness of the situation."⁷⁴

The manufacturers also contended that because of the controversy they "have been losing orders steadily as they have not been in a position to assure their customers of uninterrupted production. This lack of assurance is throttling the industry, means loss of employment and threatens to close factories." Besides focusing on the lack of orders, the Manufacturers Association also attacked the union and tried to convince the community that the NLWA was not "working in the interests of the workers in this present emergency." Saying that the NLWA leadership "misinformed and misled" those who looked to it for leadership and guidance, the manufacturers warned that the "short-sightedness of the union leaders at this time in their desire to control the industry is gradually ruining that industry in this state, and will eventually destroy the union itself when there are no more workers to pay dues into its treasury."⁷⁵ The manufacturers assured the public that this was not just idle talk and said that in the last four years, Peabody had lost ten tanneries.

⁷⁴ "Owners of Tanneries Flatly Refuse Union Closed Shop Demands," *Salem Evening News*, December 14, 1936. The two tanneries that left were discussed in greater detail in an article two years later:

"Want Industry Saved," *Lynn Telegram*, February 13, 1938.

⁷⁵ "Climax in Leather Controversy," *Salem Evening News*, December 28, 1936.

One of the last tanneries to leave was the L. M. Hamel Leather Company. In this particular case it appears that the union was unreasonable with its requests. Soon after the company opened in Peabody, the NLWA called a strike because the hides in the Hamel leather concern in Peabody came from the Hamel Company's Haverhill tannery, which ran an open shop. The Haverhill shop had a devastating flood, and the owners did not want to lose all their hides. They transported the hides to a leased Peabody plant, which did employ union labor, to have the skins tanned before they spoiled. But the NLWA opposed working on the hides because the "Hamel concern runs an open shop in Haverhill."⁷⁶ In refusing to work on the hides, the NLWA left the company "with a large amount of perishable raw stock on its hands." To get the union to agree to break the strike, the "company was forced into a closed shop agreement—or accept disastrous loss. But, as soon as the raw stock was finished, the company closed its plant, never again to reopen in Peabody—and the [300] workers were out on the street."⁷⁷

Editorials and letters to the editor in the local newspaper conveyed community concern that the union had handled the Hamel Company situation poorly. In one such letter Peabody resident, Samuel B. Jones, wrote:

One of our neighbors, a leading leather manufacturer, employing several hundred men, paying good wages to satisfied help suddenly finds himself the victim of a great disaster and calls on our city for help, which we were glad to give only to find that when our good offices had brought his stock to a critical stage, an element in our city suddenly leaped at our throat and as in an attempt to stop our work and reclaiming his damaged stock and if necessary cause him a loss of thousands of dollars. . . . It not only reflects to the shame of those who have been guilty of such savagery, but it brings down disgrace on the name of

⁷⁶ "Lynn Union Blocks Peace in Strike," *Boston Herald*, April 10, 1936.

⁷⁷ "Climax in Leather Controversy," *Salem Evening News*, December 28, 1936.

Peabody as a city. . . .Are we to understand that this is the thing known as organized labor at work? . . . If so, one can but wonder how long the decent and orderly people of our communities will tolerate insults, assaults, and property damage. . . .One wonders if some of these trouble-makers, misleaders, and agitators who infest our industrial centers would not make good subjects to recommend to the federal government as candidates for deportation as undesirable citizens.⁷⁸

It is difficult to assess how widespread Jones's feelings were in Peabody. There were other taxpayers who felt as he did, but still others agreed the union was justified in its stance toward Hamel Leather.

Regardless of public sentiment, the State Board of Arbitration and Conciliation stepped in to settle the dispute. The agreement worked out between the two sides stipulated that the Hamel concern would employ union members at union wages; the union agreed under these conditions to have its members work on the non-union hides.⁷⁹ Although the leather union won its stance against working on the non-union hides produced by the Hamel Company, its stubborn actions in this controversy created animosity with business leaders and merchants. This ill will created in the community in 1936 may have led to the NLWA's decision to keep the public informed of its position—through paid advertising—during the 1937 wage negotiations.

Whatever triggered the leather union's decision to publicize its situation in 1937, it seemed to help. Early in January 1937 the NLWA and the Manufacturers Association sealed an agreement providing a modest wage increase for workers and recognition of seniority when it was accompanied by competency. While the union

⁷⁸ "Deplores Situation," *Salem Evening News*, April 10, 1936.

⁷⁹ "Terms Agreed Upon by Union and Hamel Co. Presented Tonight," *Salem Evening News*, April 14, 1936.

originally requested a twenty percent pay raise, closed shop and a strict seniority clause, the final agreement still represented a step forward for the union.⁸⁰ The concessions, however, did not prove to be enough. By August 1937 leather workers asked for another pay raise of ten percent and two weeks vacation.

Between January and August 1937, however, the NLWA became affiliated with the CIO. Members of the NLWA, hoping to strengthen their ranks by organizing more of the unorganized workers, voted for CIO affiliation at their fourth annual convention in July.⁸¹ At this time the NLWA, which originated in Peabody, had spread to include six independent locals: Local 20 in Lynn, Local 21 in Peabody, Local 22 in Woburn, Local 26 in Norwood, Massachusetts; Local 27 in Newark, New Jersey; and Local 29 in Girard, Ohio.⁸² In addition to affiliating with the CIO, the NLWA adopted the *People's Press*, a national labor weekly which sponsored two pages of NLWA activity in every issue, as its official news organization and agreed to “launch an extensive drive to organize leather workers in factories all over the country.”⁸³ Although no union documentation exists to explain fully why the NLWA decided to affiliate with John Lewis's CIO, one can assume it was to give Local 21 and the other independent locals more leverage in winning concessions from manufacturers and in organizing more leather workers. In addition, Lewis's vision—of creating a more equitable society for all social classes—that guided the CIO policy must have appealed to Peabody's rank and file. Lewis saw the CIO and the labor

⁸⁰ “Agreement with Leather Workers in Sight,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 42 (January 9, 1937): 25.

⁸¹ “N.L.W. Election,” *Salem Evening News*, March 27, 1937; Philip S. Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union* (Newark: Nordan Press, 1950), 548.

⁸² Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union*, 545-546.

⁸³ *Salem Evening News*, May 3, 1937; *Peabody Times*, April 30, 1937; *Boston Herald*, May 3, 1937.

movement in general “as the only effective means of stopping the reactionary tide of unchecked industrial and economic development.”⁸⁴ In its formative years prior to World War II, the CIO represented a unionism that was similar in its basic characteristics to the community-based unionism of the NLWA. (It was not until the World War II years and after that the CIO exhibited more of a conservative, business unionism stance.)⁸⁵ In those early years, the CIO promised revolutionary changes:

[The CIO] helped cement the idea that all workers had certain rights and entitlements both on and off the job, regardless of their ethnic origin, skill level, or income. Unionization [to the CIO] meant higher pay, shorter hours, pensions, vacations, health insurance, grievance procedures, seniority systems, and greater job security.⁸⁶

The newly organized CIO shared the NLWA’s philosophy about the potential and rights of the working person. It also offered the NLWA much needed monetary and organizational resources. With the backing of this national organization, the NLWA hoped to reach more unorganized leather workers and intimidate the manufacturers into complying with union demands. The manufacturers, however, were unimpressed with the NLWA’s new affiliation.

In response to the 1937 summer wage increase request by the NLWA, the Manufacturers Association reminded the leather workers they had been granted pay increases at the beginning of the year and were working under a twelve-month agreement in which they had promised “to make no new demands . . . and not to

⁸⁴ Zieger, *The CIO*, 25.

⁸⁵ Many scholars have debated the transformation of the CIO. For more detail on the CIO business unionism debate see Bruce Nissen, ed., *U.S. Labor Relations, 1945-1989: Accommodation and Conflict* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990); Robert Zieger, “History of the CIO: A Symposium,” *Labor History* 37 (Spring 1996): 157-188.

⁸⁶ Joshua B. Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), v.

strike.” Reiterating the argument they made in 1936, the manufacturers reminded leather workers that they had the “highest wages in the industry, and best working conditions. To raise pay and give vacations in view of competitive conditions would be to make operation impossible.”⁸⁷ Citing that their ability to grant increases depended partly upon general conditions in the industry, the manufacturers explained that market conditions were still unfavorable to the tanners:

Over the past ten years the tanning industry has suffered severe financial losses, and a recent report by the Federal Trade Commission shows that the financial losses incurred by a group of tanning companies in any one of several years were greater than the combined loss suffered by all other groups of related industries in six years.⁸⁸

And the future did not offer any brighter prospects for the leather manufacturers in terms of leather demand, volume or price.

Local 21 did not accept the manufacturers’ excuses of hardship. By mutual agreement, both sides asked the State Board of Conciliation and Arbitration to mediate. After characterizing the situation affecting nearly 10,000 workers in Peabody, Salem, Lynn, Woburn, Danvers, and other municipalities in the district as grave, the State Board deemed the union demands as unjustified. The Board said that “in the midst of the present recession, with slack leather production and with concessions in pay being voluntarily granted by unions in shoe manufacturing

⁸⁷ “Leather Manufacturers Refuse Pay Increase Demands,” *Danvers Herald*, August 5, 1937, p. 1, 3; “Letter in Reply to Wage Demand of National Leather Workers Union,” *Woburn Daily Times*, August 4, 1937, p. 1, 6; “Union Seeks New Parley Next Week,” *Peabody Enterprise*, August 6, 1937, p. 1, 8.

⁸⁸ “Leather Manufacturers Refuse Pay Increase Demands,” *Danvers Herald*, August 5, 1937, p. 1, 3.

centers, the terms offered by the tanners of a renewal of last year's agreement are generally considered to have been very liberal."⁸⁹

This wage controversy in the summer of 1937 revealed that Local 21's affiliation with the CIO did not guarantee success or good relations with the manufacturers. On the contrary, after ending the wage controversy, acrimony quickly surfaced again when "members of Local 21 were forbidden, in two shops . . . to read the *People's Press*." Because tannery owners did not "like the *People's Press*, and [did not] want workers reading it," anger flared on both sides. Disregarding the manufacturers' opinion, the union continued to distribute the *People's Press* to workers in the leather shops.⁹⁰

All of this controversy began to erode Local 21's support in the community. This became evident when the NLWA failed to organize the 3,500 workers at the A.C. Lawrence Leather Company in 1937. Organizing A.C. Lawrence Leather Company, the only large leather plant in the city without a union agreement (A.C. Lawrence did have an in-house union called an Employees' Assembly), would have been a significant achievement for Local 21.⁹¹ In trying to attract these A.C. Lawrence employees, the NLWA distributed handbills to people going into and leaving the plant and used a sound wagon to broadcast their unionization objectives all over Peabody. The NLWA even appealed to the Peabody City Council for aid in educating A.C. Lawrence employees about the benefits of its union. Arguing before the City Council, the NLWA charged that the leather company, through the ruse of a

⁸⁹ "Massachusetts Leather Workers," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 43 (January 15, 1938): 29.

⁹⁰ "Free Press?" *Lynn Telegram News*, October 5, 1937. See also *Lynn Telegram*, May 8, 1938.

⁹¹ "Seek to Unionize 3,500 in Peabody," *Boston Herald*, April 26, 1937.

construction project, was denying the union access to workers in the plant. The NLWA requested that Webster Street once again be opened to the public. In its petition the union said:

As members of the National Leather Workers Association, we know that the reason why the A.C. Lawrence Leather Company's calfskin plant has shut off Webster Street is that they do not want the C.I.O. organizers to pass through Webster Street advertising and enlightening the people as to the oppression and the drudgery that they undergo under the A.C. Lawrence Company governed union.⁹²

The Peabody City Council found the charge credible and ratified the NLWA's request. Even with this support from the City Council, however, workers at the A.C. Lawrence plant voted to have their own independent union, called the Independent Leather Workers Association of Peabody (an outgrowth of the Employees' Assembly), instead of joining the NLWA. "Of the 1,942 workers voting, 1,574 favored the independent union, 351 were opposed and 17 cast blanks."⁹³ The outpouring of support A.C. Lawrence employees gave to their in-house union indicates that the NLWA failed in its organizing attempts at this major tannery. A.C. Lawrence leather workers most likely did not support the NLWA because they already had more benefits than these unionized leather workers. By supporting the NLWA they could have lost some of the benefits they enjoyed as A.C. Lawrence employees. In addition, A.C. Lawrence workers probably wanted to avoid the ongoing battles between Local 21 and the leather manufacturers.

By 1938 conditions still had not improved for Local 21 or for the Leather City. "With tanneries continuing to close and those running doing so at less than 50

⁹² City Council Meeting Minutes, October 14, 1937, Book 4, Page 569.

⁹³ "Peabody Workers to Have Own Union," *Boston Herald*, April 30, 1937; "ACL Employees Vote Today on Question of New Independent Leather Union," *Peabody Times*, April 30, 1937.

percent capacity, the great majority of Peabody leather workers” remained unemployed.⁹⁴ When the National Leather Workers Association asked for another pay increase, manufacturers responded that because of business conditions they could not afford a ten percent pay increase or two-weeks vacation with pay.⁹⁵ The leather manufacturers said they wanted “peace and harmony with their workers but they cannot accept terms which will seriously interfere with the operation of their tanneries or will drive them out of business.” Characterizing the last year and a half as a “period of hand to mouth existence for most tanneries,” the manufacturers said it had been difficult not to cut wages.⁹⁶ Manufacturers were not exaggerating the situation. A report issued by the New England Regional Planning Commission, which was composed of the heads of six New England State Planning Boards, concluded that New England was already beginning to experience loss in a few key industries: boots, shoes, leather, paper, and textiles.⁹⁷ It is unclear why the union kept requesting more money when it knew the industry as a whole was suffering, but two of the most likely explanations are a rising cost of living and an unwillingness to concede to management.

Even though the leather industry continued to have trouble nationwide, the cost of living for its workers still increased. As a fledgling union, the NLWA might have believed that it could not afford to concede to the manufacturers. While leather

⁹⁴ *Lynn Telegram News*, July 6, 1938.

⁹⁵ “Union Accepts Old Agreement to Restore Industrial Peace,” *Peabody Times*, January 15, 1938; *Peabody Enterprise*, January 7, 1938.

⁹⁶ “No Agreement Reached in Local Labor Trouble; Manufacturers Have Made Their Last Move,” *Peabody Enterprise*, December 23, 1938, p. 1, 5.

⁹⁷ “Prosperity of New England in the Future Depends on Planning Now,” *Salem Evening News*, May 5, 1939.

manufacturers had been unsuccessful in lowering wages since the NLWA formed, this action was always a possibility. Local 21 wanted to make it clear that “workers will not consider going back to a \$15 a week scale.”⁹⁸ The union also wanted the leaders of Peabody to realize that wages were only one part of the operating cost for a leather concern. And even if business was poor, workers still needed to be paid a livable wage and be treated decently. For Mary Lavato, a former Peabody leather worker, the union was a worker’s only recourse. “If we had a gripe or if we’d think we weren’t getting enough money, we could tell the [shop] steward. . . . You had to have a union.”⁹⁹ Although Local 21 was now affiliated with the CIO, it did not push for higher wages because of a CIO-initiated mandate. Instead, Local 21 practiced the same type of solidarity unionism it had adopted back in 1933. The union would not give up its objectives of bettering the quality of life for the leather worker and his/her family.

In practicing solidarity unionism, however, Local 21 knew it needed to address the problems leather manufacturers faced in the Peabody community. The leadership of the NLWA requested the manufacturers and the leaders of Peabody to come together and explore as a group the problems facing the local and national leather industry. One Peabody city councilor, Daniel J. Boyle, who was also the national executive secretary of the NLWA, said that the community needed to find

⁹⁸ “Tanners, Union Act to Save Industry,” *Lynn Telegram*, July 17, 1938; “Boyle Tells Council That Labor Unions Seek Co-operation,” *Peabody Enterprise*, July 15, 1938.

⁹⁹ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with Mary Lavato, 2 Union Section.

new work for those unemployed leather workers.¹⁰⁰ Civic leaders understood the depths of the situation:

Fearful that other leather factories might liquidate and leave more workers unemployed due to uncertain working conditions, civic leaders . . . declared that some group should unite to bring in new industries and equally as important do all within their power to keep industries here.¹⁰¹

The business community rallied behind this idea. Starting in November 1938 a series of editorials entitled “Go Forward With Peabody,” sponsored by various Peabody businesses, merchants, civic organizations, and leather manufacturers appeared on a weekly basis in the local press; the aim of this series was to build community spirit and pride. These editorials started at the same time another round of contract negotiations began between Local 21 and the Manufacturers Association. In all probability this was not a coincidence. Since the Supreme Court’s decision to uphold the validity of the NLRA in 1935, animosity between manufacturers and labor had increased across the nation. According to a Peabody attorney hired by the NLWA to represent it in labor disputes, “manufacturers have adopted the practice of contesting organizations through legal weapons” and that the number of cases pending before the labor board was “voluminous.”¹⁰²

The “Go Forward With Peabody” editorials aimed to “better inform the general citizenry of the need for complete cooperation in our industrial and civic responsibilities.” Hoping to elevate Peabody back to its 1919 status as the World’s Largest Leather City, these editorials tried to instigate a sense of camaraderie among

¹⁰⁰ “Boyle Tells Council That Labor Unions Seek Co-operation,” *Peabody Enterprise*, July 15, 1938.

¹⁰¹ “Korn Leather Company Strike Soon to End; May Start Work Tuesday,” *Peabody Enterprise*, July 7, 1938.

¹⁰² Fifth NLWA Convention 1938, IFLWU 5676, Box 31, Folder 12,

Peabodyites. “It is the sincere and unmitigated desire of every citizen, be he a leather worker, doctor, banker, or merchant, that Peabody factories shall be busy with good orders, and that the key to security in our community—the weekly pay envelopes—shall remain uppermost as our chief object for continued protection.”¹⁰³

Even without seeing the advertisements framing these editorials, it was obvious that the Peabody business community sponsored this series. The editorials’ language stressed a spirit of cooperation but constantly harangued labor to remember its responsibility to the rest of the community:

We have just emerged from a period of uncertainty with our labor situation which cost the wage-earners several thousands of dollars in pay envelopes. The pay envelope certainly adds to the spirit of any man’s mind, for where there is want and suffering, disappointment and doubt, there is little chance of creating a civic spirit.¹⁰⁴

These editorials ignored the possible selfishness and greed of the manufacturer and portrayed the tanner as a victim.

Agitators who are paid to stir up trouble—to throw men out of work, and who preach a gospel that even they themselves can’t understand, must take heed that Peabody people refuse to countenance any of their activity in this city again. These fanatical spell binders, who have only a voice and vocabulary, but no character, principles, or sincerity in their make-up, would have you believe that every boss should be shot at sunrise. But the intelligent worker knows that no boss, means no job.¹⁰⁵

Area clergymen mirrored, to some degree, these sentiments and beseeched workers not to take more than was their fair share.¹⁰⁶ Through *The Pilot* the Boston Archdiocese urged working people to push for a livable wage but be reasonable in their request. The “Go Forward With Peabody” newspaper spots were more emphatic

¹⁰³ “Go Forward With Peabody” series, *Peabody Enterprise*, February 3, 1939, p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *The Pilot* 110 (April 30, 1938): 3.

with their requests: these editorials stressed that Peabody would only prosper if everybody worked together:

Peabody will prosper, we all will prosper, if we work for the group and do not try to take more than our share, nor try to play highwayman and hold up business for our own selfish ends. Any temporary success by over-reaching is soon more than balanced by the stigma, loss of confidence and bad reputation that the person is sure to grieve who selfishly tries to get more than to which he is justly entitled. Not to obstruct but to assist in making business go smoothly is the part that we can play with the full knowledge that this is the only thing which will, in turn, benefit ourselves. If we try to go against the basic principles of square-dealing, we hinder ourselves and those about us.¹⁰⁷

These editorials and subsequent responses printed in *The Pilot* suggested that Peabody's business and spiritual leaders felt that the manufacturers had already given a fair share to the worker; they implied that it was time for the Peabody leather worker to make some concessions. This illustrated a reversal for some in Peabody's religious community; the clergy had been solidly behind the union in 1933. This shift in sentiment most likely represented the change in both the economic and political climate. The leather industry was suffering and war concerns began to undercut national sentiment toward unions.

In Peabody, to counteract union progress, scare tactics became a ploy to provoke the rank and file to give in to the manufacturers' demands. One editorial tried to convince leather workers that signing the newest manufacturers' contract would be the best thing for the community:

If you are a leather worker, one of the 4,000 members of the local union, will you come out to the next meeting of the union, listen to the arguments presented [about] why the leather workers' union officials should sign the new agreement with the manufacturers so that labor peace may be preserved, and

¹⁰⁷ "Go Forward With Peabody, The Well Being of All Residents" series, *Peabody Enterprise*, December 2, 1938, p. 3.

that orders for the tanning of leather—which provide jobs for our people—may come again into Peabody?

In trying to rally more of the union membership to take a stand on the wage negotiations, these editorials implied that the leadership of Local 21 dictated what the rank and file would do. The “Go Forward With Peabody” series beseeched the workers not to let the less than “ten percent [threaten] to convert this tranquil city into a turmoil of strikes, of hunger, and want again.”¹⁰⁸ Not hesitating to resort to intimidation to change the opinion of Peabodyites, these editorials said the disharmony between workers and manufacturers could cause leather buyers to lose confidence in Peabody’s ability to produce leather.

By the late thirties, labor had once again become a convenient scapegoat for the manufacturers. While manufacturers and some community leaders put the onus for leather industry withdrawal from Peabody squarely on the shoulders of the leather workers, some community members tried to counteract the anti-union propaganda. The Second Congregational Church in South Peabody hosted an open labor forum in October 1938 to discuss labor getting a square deal, avoiding labor controversies, the government’s role in labor issues, and the importance of national labor unions.¹⁰⁹ Although the exact format of this forum is lost to the historical record, presumably the purpose of the discussion was to better educate the citizenry on what labor unions were really doing. This forum, most likely, tried to dispel some of the myths surrounding unionization. How successful each side—pro-labor and anti-labor—was

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ “Dr. John F. Jordan to Preside at Church Labor Forum Sunday Eve,” *Peabody Enterprise*, October 28, 1938, p. 3.

in putting forth its viewpoint is unclear, but the role of labor and Peabody's place as an industrial city were becoming major issues for the community.

While one of the goals for Peabody's leaders was to attract new businesses to the area, Peabodyites had mixed feelings on just what kinds of businesses they wanted to attract. Early in 1937 when the Peabody City Council sent Mayor James McVann a zoning ordinance needing his signature, he sent it back with a memo that said he would not approve the ordinance.

The city is interested in keeping all its present industries and also in bringing new business into the city. I have been informed that when new concerns are looking for a new location, the first matter of interest is whether or not there are restrictions against doing business. I feel that Section 9 of this ordinance by expressly prohibiting forty-one different kinds of business, many of which are closely allied with the leather industry, will be the direct means of preventing just what we are hoping for: namely the bringing of new business to our city. I would suggest that this section of the ordinance be eliminated entirely.¹¹⁰

Peabody's mayor was not alone in his views about Peabody being an industrial city. A Salem district court judge ruled in 1941 that a Peabody woman's claims that a local tannery, Regis Leather Company, was producing noxious fumes that were detrimental to her health was unfounded. The fumes resulted from the lacquer process used in most types of leather finishing. "An adverse ruling [by the court] would have ended the lacquer process in Peabody and would probably have forced many firms to either go out of business or move their plants to another community."¹¹¹ Thus, the ruling favored the tannery owner and showed a willingness by the judicial system to support Peabody's leather industry. The mayor's zoning decision and this court ruling,

¹¹⁰ Peabody City Council Meeting Minutes, February 25, 1937, Book 4.

¹¹¹ "Decision of Master Allows Lacquer Use in Leather Tanning," *Peabody Enterprise*, February 21, 1941, p. 1.

however, did not do much to relieve tension between the leather industry and the community. And some Peabodyites believed that before the Leather City could once again prosper, cooperation between industry and the larger community—including workers and other citizens—had to become a reality.

While Local 21 shared this vision of cooperation among manufacturers, workers and city leaders, it saw the problem as much larger than merely the city of Peabody and its labor force. In a stirring city council address, Councilor Daniel Boyle, who served as secretary treasurer of the National Leather Workers Association, “made a public plea for a ‘showdown’ with the manufacturers to find out what is wrong with the leather business in the United States.” Boyle rejected the notion that the union was responsible for the “migration of tanneries from this city.” Commenting on the migration of the most recent twenty-six factories, Boyle said that “17 had shut their doors before there was a union in existence.” He said that the leather workers were “against wage cuts [,] there is no leather worker overpaid,” and Local 21 would not be the scapegoat for the slowdown in the tanning business. “This recession is not restricted to the tanning business,” Boyle said. “The leather industry throughout the United States is in a terrible condition. It is not restricted to Peabody.”¹¹²

Boyle was right about the leather industry. Tanners throughout the country felt the stagnation of the industry. At a meeting of the Tanners Council of America in 1938, leather manufacturers acknowledged “the industry as a whole has reached

¹¹² “Boyle Tells Council that Labor Union Seeks Cooperation,” *Peabody Enterprise*, July 15, 1938, pp. 1, 5. See also “Peabody Paragraphs,” *Salem Evening News*, July 15, 1938.

practical stability and is unlikely to expand much faster than the normal population increase.” Facing a market saturated by substitute material, tanners understood that the market had limited growth potential.

We all know that additional raw stock is not available and that a radical increase in demand would raise prices to a level that would invite the use of substitutes. We also know that over-capacity is likely to continue in spite of the fact that practically no new tanneries have been built in the last twenty years. Plants are continually being modernized, and it is a simple matter, with the improved machinery available, to increase the capacity of any tannery almost at will. . . . With further expansion cut off by the limitations of both our potential market and the supply of raw stock available, there is little hope of satisfactory profits without universal recognition of these circumstances and adequate leadership within the industry.¹¹³

Local 21 business manager Charles Chamouris responded to this plea by arguing for cooperation among all concerned parties.

A business manager since the inception of the NLWA, Chamouris had demonstrated his ability to serve the rank and file. (He was the union leader who suggested that officials draw no pay during the strike of 1934.) According to local newspaper reports, Chamouris was well liked by the workers because he “never [had] broken faith with them. He is an American citizen, a prominent member of the Elks Lodge, homeowner, and father.” Not one to keep his opinions to himself, Chamouris urged “the officials of Local 21 to work with the leather manufacturers and officials of the city of Peabody, [so that] Peabody does not become another Lynn.”¹¹⁴

Referring to the present exodus of industry from Peabody, Chamouris harkened back to 1934 when he warned his fellow officers that manufacturers would leave Peabody

¹¹³ “Industry Problems,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 43 (October 22, 1938): 13-17; “Campaign Against Leather Substitutes,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 39 (December 1, 1934): 25.

¹¹⁴ With this remark Chamouris was referring to the loss of hundreds of manufacturing concerns in Lynn. “Futher Plan For Building Up Lynn,” *Peabody Enterprise*, March 1, 1935.

if the stalemate between the union and manufacturers were not resolved. "I was laughed at by my brother officials and by the membership of the association, but now they believe that I was right. The only way that this moving of our principal industry can be stopped is by cooperation of the union with the manufacturers."¹¹⁵ Fellow union members, however, did not appreciate this castigation of other union officers in the local newspaper. Local 21 members reprimanded him. In speaking his mind, Chamouris appeared to embrace the democratic procedures and freedoms inherent in solidarity unionism. Other Local 21 officials did not see it in this manner. The union believed Chamouris breached union etiquette by criticizing the NLWA publicly.

After his rebuke, Chamouris said he "was sick and tired of taking abuse; it's not worth it" and offered to resign his \$2,964 position, "one of the highest paying positions in union circles in the state." His resignation, however, was not accepted by the membership. Instead union members asked Chamouris to stay on in the position but forbid him to "make statements to the press." For an organization intent on maintaining unity and solidarity, Local 21 felt that Chamouris' statement to the press advocating closer cooperation between the union and the manufacturers was detrimental to its cause. "In the new set-up, Agent Chamouris will not be allowed to discuss such subjects with the newspapers."¹¹⁶ Throughout this whole controversy and in past action, Chamouris exhibited qualities inherent in an organic intellectual; he did what he felt was right. He went through no formal training but assumed a leadership position because of his innate abilities. In speaking freely, Chamouris

¹¹⁵ *Salem Evening News*, August 31, 1938.

¹¹⁶ *Lynn Telegram News*, September 7, 1938; *Salem Evening News*, September 8, 1938.

demonstrated that he would not be a lackey of Local 21. However, by accepting the union position that he no longer speak to the press, Chamouris conformed to union pressure; although he was still an organic intellectual, he tempered his rhetoric to conform to Local 21's wishes. As a member of a community-based union, Chamouris realized that the wishes of the majority outweighed the opinions of one individual.

The Chamouris controversy marked a shift in Local 21's development and philosophy. This NLWA local still exhibited characteristics of solidarity unionism, but it began to conform to the business unionism associated with the post-World War II CIO, where not all members agree with or understand the union position but abide by it anyway. This shift to a more bureaucratic chain of command became more evident after World War II and will be explored in later chapters.

Although Local 21 settled this internal, yet public, controversy, upheaval again rocked the membership in 1939. If anything, 1939 was marked by even more internal and external controversy and conspiracy. The strife began with the election of new officers. This election became the "most important general election of the union" since its formation because of one issue: amalgamating the local union with the International Fur Workers Union (IFWU) of New York, which had card-carrying members of the Communist Party among its ranks. The local newspapers played up the election saying that an "overwhelming majority of the leather workers are for home rule, and if the conservative worker comes out and votes next Friday, the Fur Workers cause will be badly beaten." According to newspaper reports, all of Peabody became involved in this election:

City officials, merchants, and even members of the clergy have appealed to the workers during the past two weeks for a heavy vote so that the outcome can be a true indication of the sentiments held by the workers. Members of the clergy have assailed the communistic agitators from New York [the Fur Workers] who are using every fake promise at their command to dupe workers into joining an outside union.¹¹⁷

The Peabody media and clergy opposed any communist presence and wanted those opposed to the merger to be victorious in the upcoming election. "All eyes will be on the returns of the latter contest for the conservatives and American workers are waging a great fight to elect only delegates who will insist on home rule for Local 21 of the NLWA."¹¹⁸ There was also a faction in the community and among the leather workers who feared incorporating with the fur workers would end the community-based rule that Local 21 enjoyed.

When the vote was taken on March 31, Local 21 overwhelmingly voted for home rule. But union members barely had time to savor their victory. Twenty days later, stunning the NLWA membership with a reversal of policy, the executive board of the local Peabody NLWA ordered another vote on the merger with the International Fur Workers' Union. Workers were not even given 24-hours notice of this new election. "The first knowledge of the proposed vote came . . . when for the first time, posters were placed on factory billboards by union officials giving notice of the referendum."¹¹⁹

Further complicating the situation was Chamouris's reversal:

¹¹⁷ "Leather Workers Hold Important Election; Fur Workers Doomed," *Peabody Enterprise*, March 24, 1939, pp. 1, 5.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ "Referendum on Merging Leather Union With Fur Workers Today," *Peabody Enterprise*, April 21, 1939, pp. 1, 5.

He had been strongly opposed to amalgamation prior to [the March 31st] election, [but] now declares that he is in favor, citing reasons for the change that the local union is stagnant, and by joining hands with the Fur Workers, they will have better financial reserves. He admitted that the Fur Workers' Union know absolutely nothing about the leather workers and their problems, but said that the added strength which would come to the locals, would greatly assist the officials in organizing plants which at present are not members of the union.¹²⁰

Chamouris had been re-elected business manager on March 31st because he was against the merger, whereas his opponent, Joseph Massidda, the 1933 strike organizer, was for the merger. By changing his position after the membership had voted, Chamouris denied the majority of Local 21 membership the decision they had voted for—no amalgamation. Chamouris tried to explain his shift in philosophy by playing down the importance of the amalgamation. Dismissing the significance of the Fur Workers' relationship with the Communist Party, Chamouris argued that with the merger Local 21 would not relinquish “any home rule rights, that local autonomy will still prevail.” The 25 cents per week dues that Local 21 collected from the 3,200 members of the Peabody union would still remain in the local treasury, but if the local union needed more money, the fur workers would help.¹²¹ This reversal in Chamouris's amalgamation decision demonstrates a shift in his philosophy; he no longer acted like an organic intellectual, but rather as a follower of a particular hierarchical mandate.

The amalgamation decision also reflected an organizational shift in Local 21 from a community-based union to one that started to look to a national for guidance and direction. These changes, however, were necessary in order for the union to

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

accomplish its goals—a more equitable future for leather workers. In order to move forward with its objectives, Local 21 needed the support of an established national union. With the backing of a national organization, the leadership of Local 21 most likely believed the union would be able to increase its ranks and offer more social programs to its membership. The Massachusetts Leather Manufacturers Association clearly understood the ramifications of such a merger. In a letter sent to its membership, the tannery owners admitted that the NLWA would be a powerful force if joined with the Fur Workers. In terms of organizing other leather workers, the manufacturers recognized that the NLWA “has only scratched the surface. . . . The NLWA cannot do this job without assistance and it is the assistance that the merger with the [fur workers] will provide.”¹²²

The manufacturers’ worry was not unfounded. The results of the hastily initiated second election in April caused even more skepticism and concern about the proposed merger. Only 600 leather workers voted out of the 3,200 registered members of the NLWA.¹²³ According to a *Peabody Times* writer, “what seems to be bothering a lot of folks is why the leaders of the union who two weeks ago were so violently anti-fur workers have changed their minds.” Local 21’s former president and vice president, Kenneth McKinnon and James Brawders, accused Chamouris and Danny Boyle, “who were on the American ticket,” of having fooled the workers. To

¹²² Letter from the Massachusetts Leather Manufacturers Association to members, May 23, 1938, Found in Union Scrapbook entitled Fur Workers 1938-1939 in author’s possession.

¹²³ “Leather Workers at Lynn Conclave Today,” *Peabody Enterprise*, April 28, 1939.

show their disgust with the outcome of this new vote, McKinnon and Brawders called “those sympathetic with affiliation ‘communists’ and worse.”¹²⁴

Because there are no surviving records indicating why Chamouris and others in a leadership position decided to press for a merger agreement, one can only surmise that there was either some type of bribery, fraud, or intimidation going on or Local 21 officials really believed at the last moment that the merger was in everyone’s best interest (which in hindsight it was). In an interview with the *Salem Evening News* in 1938 Chamouris vehemently condemned communist influences in Local 21. He “warned the local association that any un-American influence should be stamped out if it is present in the association and that the democratic spirit should not be forgotten.”¹²⁵ But a little less than a year later, he voted for the union he had headed from its infancy to merge with a communist union.

It could be that Chamouris believed a larger, more financially secure organization was what Local 21 needed to propel itself forward in terms of organizing more leather workers. At the fifth annual NLWA convention in May 1938 a representative of the International Fur Workers International, Irving Potash spoke about the viability of a merger between the two organizations. Maybe in his speech, Potash said something that caused Chamouris to reverse his decision months later. In some respects, Potash’s comments about a merger did make sense. He mentioned how fur and leather workers could present a united front when it came to dealing with worker displacement because of new machinery and the migration of tanneries.

¹²⁴ “Leaders Change Minds,” *Peabody Times*, April 28, 1939.

¹²⁵ *Salem Evening News*, August 31, 1938.

Potash also stressed how any plan on merging would be discussed fully with the “rank and file in order that they would be intelligently informed.”¹²⁶ Presumably Chamouris really believed that he knew what was best for the membership. The constitution that the NLWA ratified at its fifth convention shows evidence that it saw a merger as being a necessity in the future. For instance, right in the preamble—ratified by the membership—the NLWA constitution said:

Workers must organize in the leather industry and its by-products if they desire shorter hours, clean working conditions, and sufficient wages to maintain decent standards of living. The interests of one must be the interest of all. The practice of unfair employers today makes it necessary for workers to unite more firmly than ever before if we wish to receive the full fruits of our labor.¹²⁷

Before the merger could become official, however, delegates at the annual NLWA convention had to vote; more than a two-thirds majority was required to ratify the agreement. Prior to the vote, NLWA delegates listened to advocates of the merger discuss its merits. Clarence Carr, president of the Independent Leather Workers’ Union of Fulton County, New York, speaking in favor of the merger told the union representatives that the only way the leather workers could successfully confront the problems facing the leather industry was by the “unification of all leather workers organizations on an international scale.”¹²⁸

Carr stressed the importance of organizing “every leather center for the protection of our union, wages, and jobs.” Effective organization of all tannery centers required, according to Carr, more money. The community-based organizing

¹²⁶ Third Session of the Fifth Annual Convention National Leather Workers Association, April 29, 30 & May 1, 2, 1938, IFLWU 5676, Box 31, Folder 12.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid. For more on Clarence Carr see Zahavi, “Communism Ain’t No Bug-a-Boo.”

that had formerly characterized the leather industry would not be sufficient to take the industry to the next level. While the merger with an international intimidated many of the rank and filers, Carr admonished that “for any one union to think that it can exist of itself is ridiculous.”¹²⁹

Other labor leaders in the past year had acknowledged that the NLWA was no longer a provincial organization, but an organization embracing other locals in various communities. Because of the job the NLWA had done in six short years, organizing more than 10,000 leather workers, advocates for the merger said that other leather workers across the country were looking to them for guidance. But the NLWA did not have the resources to provide this guidance.¹³⁰

After hearing other labor leaders discuss the positive benefits of a merger and knowing that John Lewis, president of the CIO, supported it, the delegates, representing twelve active NLWA locals, adopted a motion “to empower the incoming national executive board to institute negotiations with the fur workers looking to amalgamation.”¹³¹ With 91 delegates present from various sections of the country, the convention of the National Leather Workers Union unanimously

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ “Merger with Fur Workers Looms for Leather Union,” *People's Press*, May 7, 1938, p. 3; “NLWA General Board Maps Campaign in New England,” *People's Press*, May 28, 1938, p. 3; “CIO Leather Workers Seek Industrial Unity,” *The CIO News* 1 (May 7, 1938): 7; Report of National Organizer Fifth Annual Convention National Leather Workers Association, April 29, 30 & May 1, 2, 1938, IFLWU Manuscript Collection 5676, Box 31, Folder 12. By this time, the NLWA comprised five districts and fourteen locals. District 1 was the New England states consisting of Locals 20, 21, 22, 23, and 26. District 2 had a northern boundary of Westchester County, New York; a southern boundary of Trenton, New Jersey; and a western boundary of the Delaware River. Locals 27, 34, and 35 made up this district. District 3 had a northern boundary running in line from Trenton, New Jersey to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and then southwest to Cumberland, Maryland. It also comprised the entire state of Maryland and the entire state of Delaware. Locals 25 and 30 made up District 3. District 4 had a north boundary of Gowanda, New York to Elkland, Pennsylvania, then south from Elkland to Curwensville, Pennsylvania north back to Gowanda. Locals 31, 37, and 44 made up this district. District 5 consisted of Local 29, which encompassed the entire state of Ohio.

¹³¹ Ben Gold, *Memoirs* (New York: William Howard Publishers, 1988) 152.

endorsed the merger between the hide and fur workers. The union also went on record favoring an organizational drive among unorganized tannery employees.¹³² The fur workers now needed to vote on amalgamation.

While the leather workers in Peabody nervously awaited the outcome of the fur workers' election, others in the community watched the situation as well. Various religious institutions rallied against the merger. "In Boston and in Peabody the priests in twelve churches warned the leather workers not to merge with the Godless Communist Furriers Union."¹³³ The priests' warnings, however, were not enough to prevent amalgamation. The International Fur Workers Union in May 1939 consummated the merger at its thirteenth annual convention. At the convention, the new union known as the International Fur and Leather Workers Union of the United States and Canada mapped out its long-term goals: organize the unorganized, establish uniform rates and hours, implement a standardized union label, initiate a credit union loan fund for members, offer a vacation facility for union members and their families, and advance overall health and welfare of fur and leather workers.¹³⁴

By the late thirties, Local 21 had evolved to a more mature stage of solidarity unionism than it had experienced in its formative years. The national situation for unions was changing. Manufacturers, with the government's help, were making inroads into the gains laborers had wrested from them. Small local unions needed to band together to have the necessary resources to forge ahead.

¹³² "91 Delegates of Leather Workers Here," *Lynn Telegram News*, April 29, 1939; "Hide Workers Endorse Fur Union Merger," *Lynn Telegram News*, April 30, 1939; Same information also appeared in the *Salem Evening News*, April 29, 1939.

¹³³ Gold, *Memoirs*, 152.

¹³⁴ "Fur Workers OK Merger With Leather Union," *The CIO News* 2 (May 22, 1939): 3, 5.

While it appeared with this merger and Chamouris's transformation that Local 21 had indeed lost its grassroots origins and sense of local solidarity, the years following the merger offer a different perspective. Local 21 shifted course in 1939, but this shift was more complex than would first appear. In the early years of the forties, Local 21 began to carve out for itself a niche in a larger union. In its new role, it did open itself up to different viewpoints from an International, but it never relinquished its local control. This becomes evident as one examines Local 21's cultural, educational, and informational activities during the 1940s.

CHAPTER THREE:

Social Equality: A Community of Workers Creates Change

Even when aggrieved populations fail to seize power or to fashion autonomous spheres of opposition, they still influence the exercise of power in their society. In addition, when existing institutions and organizations prove inadequate for the expression of rank and file aspirations, grass-roots activists devise alternative vehicles of contestation to articulate and implement goals that remain unrecognized by those working within conventional channels.¹

With the merger of the NLWA and the International Fur Workers Union (IFWU) and its affiliation with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Local 21 appeared to have lost all the vestiges of a community-based labor organization. Both the IFWU and the newly formed CIO, however, exhibited traits inherent in solidarity unionism. When the CIO formed in 1936, the IFWU, a relatively small organization in New York City, was one of the first to join and was instrumental in the growth of the CIO.²

Ben Gold, as IFWU president and later IFLWU president, mirrored the leadership epitomized by CIO head John Lewis. Gold expected union officials “to live on the same wages as the workers in the trade and to be scrupulously careful as to how they handled workers’ money.”³ The IFWU president did not live at a higher level than the men in his union. Former Local 21 member George Georges confirmed that Gold firmly believed all union members were on an equal footing. In recounting one particularly memorable example of Gold’s moral standards Georges said, “We

¹ George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 13.

² Ann Fagan Ginger and David Christiano, eds., *The Cold War Against Labor*. (Berkeley: Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute, 1987), 406.

³ Ginger and Christiano, *The Cold War Against Labor*, 408.

told him [Ben Gold] to raise his pay. He says, 'I'm getting \$125 a week and I'm satisfied. That's enough. I work and I live good with that.' But, \$125 for an international president. That's all he was getting!" Georges exclaimed.⁴ Local 21 espoused the same philosophy.⁵ Indeed, the CIO, the IFWU, and Local 21 shared many overlapping values in these years. By joining forces with the CIO and IFWU in the late thirties, Local 21 did not lose its sense of solidarity unionism; instead, it refashioned itself to be a more effective union in terms of initiating social and economic reform in the years ahead.

Between 1939 and 1948 the affiliation between the CIO and IFLWU was strong; as a result, Local 21 was able to offer its membership a host of services and benefits formerly unknown to leather workers. This chapter discusses those services and programs. Instead of detailing the strife of the post-World War II years—cost of living increases, labor unrest, Taft-Hartley, and McCarthyism—this chapter concentrates on the improvements that Local 21 instigated in leather workers' quality of life. While some of the initiatives implemented by the union happened later in the forties and some in the fifties, this chapter analyzes these endeavors not so much in the context of the time they were created but rather as signs of the union's commitment to quality-of-life issues. Chapter Four looks at Local 21 during this same period, but in relation to the political issues of the day. Breaking this period (1939-1955) into two chapters—one discussing social and cultural initiatives and the other

⁴ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, April 21-23, 1989 and April 27-30, 1989, Interview with George Georges, 43. In this interview Georges was referring to Gold's salary in the early fifties.

⁵ See Chapter Two for a discussion of how union officials acted during the strike of 1934.

elaborating economic and political limitations—allows a more cohesive and logical discussion of Local 21.

Just in terms of bread and butter issues, Local 21 made immediate gains after its merger with the Fur Workers. A national assessment of wages in the leather industry conducted by the Department of Labor at the end of 1939 found the Peabody area to have the highest wage scale in the country. All but one leather concern in Peabody paid on average more than 75 cents an hour. The industry average was between 55 and 80 cents. The Peabody area experienced such an exceptional hourly rate because it had a higher percentage of unionized workers.⁶ Wage gains alone, however, were not enough for Local 21. The union of leather workers wanted to change society and make life more equitable for all workers regardless of the job they did. With such a lofty goal, Local 21's decision to incorporate with the CIO and IFWU makes perfect sense. In the late thirties and early forties the mood of the country started to change as hostilities grew in Europe and Asia. Labor needed to be attuned and adjust to these changes. Patriotism became a defining feature of the World War II years; militancy and labor strife were no longer condoned by the public.⁷

During the World War II years Local 21 adopted, as did other CIO unions, a no-strike pledge. While labor, represented by the AFL and CIO, voluntarily, but with much misgiving, agreed to a no-strike pledge during the war years, it hoped that "its voluntary surrender would head off anti-strike legislation." Public opinion also

⁶ "Hourly Earnings in the Leather Industry," *Monthly Labor Review* 50 (April 1940): 968-969.

⁷ Aaron Levenstein, *Labor: Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).

influenced labor's no-strike decision. "Ordinarily a union thinks twice before striking; with the defense program under way, public opinion compelled it to think thrice."⁸ In fact, the whole decade of the forties was strike free in Peabody.⁹

Despite a limitation on strike activity and a burgeoning war, the early forties remained a dismal time for many industries, including leather. Business in the Lynn and Peabody leather shops was at its lowest ebb in two years in 1940 and only 1,800 of the 3,200 Local 21 members were working.¹⁰ By merging first with the CIO and then with the IFWU, Local 21's leadership believed it would be better prepared to meet the challenges of the future. In 1937 Local 21 could not know that in the aftermath of World War II the CIO would embrace business unionism and align itself with policymakers in Washington, nor could it know in 1939 that its union with the fur workers would prove ultimately to be a doomed marriage because of the political upheaval of the time.¹¹ The decisions Local 21 made in the waning years of the thirties were choices that seemed best at the time.

Local 21 was not alone in deciding to join an international. The Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America commended the "trend toward industry-wide organization" as being a practical way for labor to join forces and project a united front.¹² In the early forties approximately 60 percent of all the workers engaged in the leather tanning trade worked in plants covered by a national or

⁸ Levenstein, *Labor: Today and Tomorrow*, 43.

⁹ "Congratulations All," *Peabody Times*, April 22, 1949, p. 7. That is not to say that acrimony did not exist between manufacturers and the union during this time. The leather industry continued to consolidate and to use machinery to replace workers; the rank and file still wanted higher wages. But throughout the forties, labor and the Association managed to coexist.

¹⁰ *Lynn Telegram News*, May 14, 1940.

¹¹ Local 21's problems with the CIO and the IFLWU are covered extensively in Chapter Four.

¹² "Churches Hail Union Gains," *CIO News* 20 (September 4, 1939): 5.

international union contract. And most of the organized workers were in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York—the leading tanning states. Out of the twenty-nine states producing leather, twenty had union activity. In addition, eighty percent of all organized leather workers claimed allegiance with the IFLWU and only ten percent with the United Leather Workers International Union, of the AFL. Independents represented the remaining 10 percent.¹³

Shortly after the IFWU approved the merger, Gold, the president of the newly formed IFLWU, went on the local Peabody airwaves to discuss the amalgamation. In his radio address, Gold acknowledged that the merger was necessary to preserve a leather workers union that was shrinking. He acknowledged that the NLWA “failed to organize the leather workers even during the years of 1936, 1937, and 1938 when unprecedented numbers of unorganized workers flocked to the young militant, progressive CIO organization.” Characterizing the situation as pitiful, Gold reminded the Local 21 members of their lack of funds, programs, and plans. “It [Local 21] was a small island in the open sea,” Gold said. “It was surrounded by an overwhelming majority of unorganized workers.”¹⁴ Gold’s words were accurate; Local 21’s attempts to unionize the A.C. Lawrence employees had been disastrous.

Although the decision to join with the Fur Workers was contentious in the beginning, after the merger the majority of the membership seemed satisfied. “Oh, we did better. . . . When we joined the furriers and the leather and after we joined whew!

¹³ “Union Agreement in the Leather Tanning Industry in 1943,” *Monthly Labor Review* 58 (June 1944): 1219.

¹⁴ Ben Gold Radio Address 1939, p. 7-8, IFLWU Manuscript Collection 5676, Box 27a, Folder 3, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M.P. Catherwood Library, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University.

We became the fourth best union in the country. First we were way behind. Our wages were nothing. But when we joined with the Furriers, we got better. Much better,” according to former leather worker George Georges.¹⁵

Corroborating Georges’s account, former leather worker Ed Freeman saw the merger as essential. “[Our union made] the real gains . . . when the leather workers joined with the fur workers.” This merger came about through the initial urgings of the CIO. Freeman explained it this way:

At that time we were members of the CIO. The CIO evidently wanted to take a lot of these smaller unions and merge them into larger unions. And they tried to take unions that had something, some association or connection. We were leather. The fur was fur, fur pelts, fur skins. And the CIO suggested or recommended that we band together. The fur workers had large membership. They had money. They had the organizers. They had the ability to negotiate contracts. So we merged. We had to have a vote on it. There were some people in the city that were opposed to it because they thought that the fur workers were a communist group. But eventually, we became one union, fur and leather.¹⁶

This alliance with the Fur Workers lasted until 1955, and for much of that time, it was a positive, beneficial relationship. It is during these years, 1939-1955, that Local 21 solidified its role as an organization dedicated to revamping the social, political, and economic life—the moral economy—of the leather workers in Peabody.

One way to understand the type of community Local 21 tried to create for Peabody leather workers and their families during the forties and fifties is to examine local, district, and national IFLWU newspapers. Union periodicals mailed to the homes of members— *Local 21 Bulletin*, *District One Reporter*, and the *Fur and Leather Worker*, respectively—described labor activities, local and national events,

¹⁵ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with George Georges, 44.

¹⁶ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, Interview with Ed Freeman at the Union Hall, 75.

and information about the union itself. These labor periodicals, however, were not only a source of what was going on in the union, but as artifacts themselves illustrate the desire on the part of the rank and file worker to create a vehicle to communicate with and educate other workers. This desire for communication is especially noteworthy in Peabody because it was such an ethnically diverse community. The leather industry in the early part of the twentieth century “brought about an abnormal demand for labor in the unskilled work of the tanneries”; immigrants filled this niche.¹⁷ Irish, Russian, Canadian, Turkish, Greek, French Canadian, Portuguese, Polish, Austrian, and Armenian immigrants made up approximately half of Peabody’s population.¹⁸

These first- and second-generation immigrants provided the perfect base from which to create an alternative vision of American life. The Americanization process practiced by the IFLWU centered around a few main themes: social equality for all regardless of race, religion or ethnicity; governmental regulation of big business; and an extension of the New Deal welfare state. While this ideology adhered to the CIO platform—a platform espousing a social, democratic public agenda—it was a radically different version of the Americanization process typically adopted by federal, state, and local governments and social service groups.¹⁹ From these publications it becomes evident that Local 21 took its role as caretaker for the rank

¹⁷ John Wells, *The Peabody Story: Events in Peabody's History 1626-1972* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1972), 387.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 446.

¹⁹ James R. Barrett, “Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880-1930,” *Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 996-1020; Joyce L. Kornbluh, *A New Deal for Workers' Education: The Workers' Service Program 1933-1942* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

and file worker very seriously. Under the auspices of the International, Local 21 sought to create not only better working conditions and higher wages for its ethnically diverse membership but a well-educated, tight-knit community of workers sharing similar ideals. The city of Peabody at this time did offer a variety of ethnic clubs, veterans' organizations, and a host of churches and synagogues, but each of these social institutions served to establish and maintain the various ethnic barriers. From its inception, Local 21 endeavored to break down barriers separating different groups. This goal was shared by the Fur Workers and the CIO.

“Because the shop paper was the union’s most intimate speech to the union member,” the labor press serves as a window onto the thoughts and actions of worker groups and the propaganda the union wished to disseminate.²⁰ A close analysis of the IFLWU publications from 1939 to April 1955, when the IFLWU merged with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, demonstrates these functions of the labor press. Because the IFLWU publications were dedicated to educating the membership about the union, they are a valuable source in trying to understand union life. These newspapers are critical in establishing that the IFLWU worked to create a specific culture—a more economically, socially, culturally, and politically democratic one—for its members. This type of environment was not being provided by the federal, state or local governments, by the larger mass culture, or by the employers.

²⁰ Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 117 (quote); Phil E. Ziegler and the Editors of the ALPA, “A Symposium on the Labor Press,” in *American Labor Dynamics: In The Light of Post War Developments*, ed. J.B.S. Hardman (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1928; New York: Arno and the New York Times, 1969), 400.

An analysis of the social programs Local 21 initiated—with the International and CIO’s backing—provides insight into the type of community it tried to create for its membership. The IFLWU developed a vast network of services to ensure its membership’s well-being. It is imperative to remember, however, that even though the IFLWU had a large-union bureaucracy it remained more horizontally structured than most of its counterparts; it placed each local in an autonomous position to govern its membership the way that best served that particular local. Thus, in these early years of the CIO and the IFLWU, both organizations exhibited the characteristics of solidarity unionism. But when either the CIO or the International policy diverged from that of Local 21, the local union asserted its own agenda.²¹

In and of themselves, the IFLWU labor periodicals illustrate the dedication of the Local 21 leadership and the rank and file worker to creating a more socially equitable culture. The mere existence of a Local 21 publication is significant. Local 21 realized that a national publication could not possibly educate all members about the significant issues and activities affecting the fur and leather workers. The leadership of the IFLWU stressed at its May 1946 convention that to be better able to fight for “their rights and demands and to expose the lies and distortion of the reactionary commercial radio, press and other propaganda outlets” locals should form their own publications.²² Local 21 took this recommendation seriously; exactly one year later it had its own monthly publication, the *Local 21 Bulletin*, which lasted until

²¹ This situation will be discussed in Chapter Four.

²² “Educational Work Stressed; Union Leadership training School to be Established,” *Fur and Leather Worker*, June 1946, p. 30.

the early seventies.²³ Edited by rank and file leather worker Richard “Mike” O’Keefe and mailed to the homes of 4,500 members, the *Local 21 Bulletin* was “dedicated to furthering the interests of the union membership, their families, and the entire community.”²⁴ Paid for by advertising from local businesses and union dues, the *Local 21 Bulletin* carried news about the local political battles being fought by labor and the employment situation. As editor, O’Keefe, a stalwart union member who succeeded Chamouris as business manager, continuously asked for feedback on the publication and how it could better serve the needs of the local.

Sam Pizzigati and Fred Solowey, communication specialists for large labor unions, argued that in the middle part of the twentieth century it was not unusual for union locals and national unions to produce a publication because postal rates were so low. These papers, however, were largely ineffective, they said, in competing for workers’ attention because “economic and cultural forces had combined to obscure the role of class—and class consciousness—in American life.” The majority of labor publications became puff pieces.²⁵ As a generalization, Pizzagati and Solowey’s claims may be accurate, but their sentiments do not hold true for Peabody or the *Local 21 Bulletin*. The obfuscation of class identity, for example, did not exist in Peabody. In the forties, fifties, and even sixties, Peabody was still an ethnically

²³ With the breakup of the IFLWU (in 1955), the *Local 21 Bulletin* was renamed the *Bulletin* and became the International mouthpiece of Local 21’s new union—Leather Workers International Union of America, AFL, CIO. The new *Bulletin* was published for the first time in the early months of 1956. Instead of being published monthly, as was the *Local 21 Bulletin*, the new publication was bimonthly and then just four times a year. With the new publication in 1956, the objective of the publication changed. It no longer was an interactive periodical exhibiting characteristics of a long-range view; instead, it resembled the *District One Reporter* from the forties—a mouthpiece for the union.

²⁴ *Local 21 Bulletin*, June 18, 1947, p. 1.

²⁵ Sam Pizzigati and Fred J. Solowey, eds., *The New Labor Press: Journalism for a Changing Union Movement* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1992), xiii.

diverse city with a population comprised of haves and have nots.²⁶ The have nots were in most cases the leather workers who were still fighting for wage gains, better health benefits and pension plans. Compounding these efforts was the looming specter of a declining industry. The closing of leather factories had become a common occurrence in Peabody by the forties. Thus, Peabody leather workers were still highly conscious of class differences.²⁷ One former leather seamstress, Pauline Comora, recalled a certain section of Peabody, near Bishop Fenwick High School that had tree-lined streets with beautiful homes. When asked if she knew anyone on this street, Comora replied, “Those people were not my kind. They were well-to-do. They did not associate with people like me.”²⁸

These leather workers also knew that certain parts of Peabody life—such as the Hebrew Community Center—were off limits to them. In the Center’s 1938 Concert and Ball Gala program, Max Korn, a well-known Peabody leather manufacturer and honorary president of the Community Center, said “Preserving Americanism is our assurance that democracy shall not perish from the earth. The facilities of our Center are available only to those groups that maintain these principles.”²⁹ Because of escalating world tension, trade unionism had once again become an evil force in society—a force equated with Communism and surely able to

²⁶ In 1960 the population of Peabody was 32,202 and 14,219 of that number were of foreign parentage: 19.9% Canadian, 15.1% Irish, 12.5% Greek, 10.3% Russian, and 8.9% Polish. Wells, *The Peabody Story*, 446.

²⁷ Robert Zieger, *The CIO 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 115. In his work on the CIO, Zieger concurs that in the early forties “consumption patterns revealed a working-class America that was fabulously privileged by world standards yet far removed from the plenty and security that corporate America had promised.”

²⁸ Interview with Pauline Comora by author in Peabody, Massachusetts, Spring of 1994.

²⁹ “Annual Cabaret and Dance Program, 1941,” Box Peabody Churches, Folder Congregation Sons of Israel, George Peabody House Museum, Peabody, Massachusetts.

undermine the American sense of patriotism. In saying that the Center was closed to groups that did not practice democracy, Korn was referring to Local 21 and its merger with the Fur Workers which had a Communist Party member, Ben Gold, as its president.

Local 21 membership was aware of the social hierarchy in Peabody, and in trying to reform society, Local 21 labor leaders worked to eliminate the class differentials that created such an unequal lifestyle among Peabodyites. But in order to create a more moral economy in Peabody's social, industrial, political, and economic spheres, Local 21 needed the financial support and organizational apparatus that both the CIO and the IFLWU had at their disposal. Thirty years' worth of editorials by *Local 21 Bulletin* editor O'Keefe illustrate the desire to create a more equitable community for leather workers. One main theme permeated all the editorials O'Keefe wrote for the *Local 21 Bulletin*:

We are interested in proper and complete health care, we want more educational opportunities, we want equality for everyone, we want to eliminate slums and ghettos, and we want to provide hope for the poor and their families. We want everyone to live a brighter today.³⁰

In seeking a better life for Local 21 members, O'Keefe never shied away from confronting the larger community of Peabody or the International or CIO bureaucracy when these entities proposed initiatives that would negatively affect the Peabody leather workers. This quality harkens back to Local 21's solidarity unionism roots.

The IFLWU leadership, which included Local 21 officials, did not believe that in the World War II-era of big business, the mainstream press presented labor's

³⁰ "What's it all About," *The Bulletin* 11 (July, August, September 1966): 2.

viewpoints. Speaking at the Eighth CIO Convention in 1946, CIO President Philip Murray said:

It is extremely difficult for a labor organization to change the point of view of a newspaper chain that is owned by a great monopoly. . . . It should be borne in mind, however, that they do not reflect public opinion. They merely reflect the opinion of people that own considerable property and have a great deal of wealth . . . and that may not have too much interest in either the well being of the individual or the well being of the country.³¹

The leadership of the IFLWU saw a two-fold purpose for a union publication: disseminate labor news and correct the errors of the mainstream press.³² Issue after issue of the *Local 21 Bulletin* and *Fur and Leather Worker* decried the abuses of the commercial press. It was not uncommon to read in any issue of the national or local publication statements like this:

When a slanderous attack was made on Local 21 [or any local], as a result of a brief one-sided “hearing,” the papers everywhere spread it all over page one. When we denounced the attack and denied the charges, the stories were buried inside or, as in the case of the *Boston Post*, not carried at all.

After writing about a series of injustices similar to this one, the *Local 21 Bulletin* said that “the moral of this story is obvious: Don’t rely on the big daily press for the truth about unions. Read your Union press.”³³ With the use of the labor press, Local 21 expanded its dissemination of information to its members. In the thirties, the labor union relied on a small number of paid advertisements in the local newspapers to educate its members and the community on its ideals. As the national sentiment began

³¹ “Demand for Wage Increases Highlight CIO 8th Convention,” *Fur and Leather Worker*, December 1946, p. 3.

³² Labor radio espoused similar goals. A good example is WCFL; see Nathan Godfried’s work on this subject.

³³ “Press Shows Anti-Union Slant in News,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, July 28, 1954, p. 2.

to shift away from a pro-union stance with the arrival of World War II, Local 21, like other unions, continually had to remind its membership of what the labor movement really meant because the mainstream press would not objectively report on union events. Peabody's local newspapers were no exception. For the most part, the only time Local 21 appeared in the local newspapers during World War II and the postwar years was when there was a labor disagreement. In regards to the positive work the union was doing, there was very little mention.³⁴ And in most cases, when referring to the union's wage negotiations, the local papers would put a derogatory connotation on the union by using certain words and phrases. One article detailing the 1949 wage negotiations between the leather union and the manufacturers characterized the union in the opening sentence as "the industry's Communist dominated union" and then in the following paragraph followed this lead by saying, "Leaders of the Massachusetts Leather Manufacturers Association as well as spokesmen for the Red-controlled International Fur and Leather Workers Union"³⁵ Thus, the first two paragraphs of this wage controversy story established Local 21 as un-American. The rest of the story solidified this initial assertion. Articles like this certainly did not help the leather union win support in the community.

George Kleinman edited the International's publication, *Fur and Leather Worker*, which was created after the merger of the National Leather Workers Association and the International Fur Workers in April 1939.³⁶ Kleinman, a New

³⁴ The author bases this assertion on an overview of local papers during the World War II and post-World War II years.

³⁵ "Leather Parley Seeks Strike Ban," *Boston Traveler*, April 18, 1949, p. 1, 11.

³⁶ Prior to the merger, the fur workers had their own publication entitled *The Fur Worker*, which began in August of 1937. There is no record of a publication for the NLWA.

York fur cutter, came out of the shop to produce the paper. Published eleven times a year, the *Fur and Leather Worker* played an important role in the organizing drive of the IFLWU.³⁷ The *Fur and Leather Worker* dedicated itself to fighting red-baiting, anti-Semitism, and anti-Negro propaganda; exposing conditions in open shop tanneries; headlining union gains; and providing organizing and political messages. The objective of the *Fur and Leather Worker* was “to acquaint the union members with the activities and the progress of every local union and of every fur and leather center throughout the nation, to enable them to participate consciously and effectively in the life of their own locals and of the International as a whole.”³⁸ Kleinman had no formal training as a writer or editor. He was a leather craftsman and an organic intellectual. Through the *Fur and Leather Worker*, Kleinman educated thousands of leather workers on the intricacies of the U.S. capitalist system, U.S. foreign policy, and the role of union members in rectifying the inequality between classes in America. (In most cases the IFLWU condemned U.S. cold war policies and supported Henry Wallace’s platform against the “reactionary war makers” in America.³⁹) Thus, the *Fur and Leather Worker* aimed to “serve as an educator and organizer of the union.”⁴⁰

The IFLWU did not see the *Fur and Leather Worker* merely as a mouthpiece for the leadership. In a memo sent to all locals in October 1945, Gold asked the

³⁷ By the early 1950s, the *Fur and Leather Worker* did not strictly adhere to its publication schedule. In many instances, it would only produce six or seven issues in a year; it would double up on months and produce only one publication for any two months.

³⁸ *Fur and Leather Worker*, December 1939, p. 6.

³⁹ Henry Wallace, “Peace and Security Depend Upon Allied Unity—Not on Atom Bomb,” *Fur and Leather Worker*, October 1946, p. 8A.

⁴⁰ Letter from Ben Gold to all locals, October 31, 1945, IFLWU 5676, Box 9, Folder 34.

various labor leaders to query their membership on what they wanted to see in their union publication. Prefacing his remarks by commenting on how he believed Kleinman had done a wonderful job during the war years having the publication address membership issues, labor movement topics, and national and foreign policy, Gold said that the International would like the *Fur and Leather Worker* to be as effective as possible for the union:

We are very eager to have your opinion and the opinion of the Local Executive Board members. If you have any suggestions which you believe would serve to improve the contents—the articles, news coverage, feature stories—and appearance of the publication, please communicate them to me, as well as suggestions for additional features and other material which would be of special interest and importance to our members.⁴¹

In response to Gold's plea, O'Keefe wrote back commending the International for such a wonderful paper. "The membership of our local read the paper every month and are right on our necks if they fail to receive an issue," O'Keefe replied.⁴² This exchange between Gold and O'Keefe indicates that the Local 21 membership did read the paper and had opportunities to present their opinions about the union's publication. Even though Local 21 had become part of a large organization, its members still had a voice in a key union activity—its publication.

For the most part, IFLWU publications concentrated on addressing the day-to-day concerns of the membership. Over a thirty-year span, the union's publications commented on relevant federal legislation such as the Wagner Act and Taft-Hartley Act, World War II, rent and price controls, and McCarthyism. While the district and local publications focused on issues directly affecting Massachusetts and Peabody,

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

respectively, all three publications devoted space to discussing world and national issues and how they affected the labor movement. These publications criticized the American “war machine” and explained that American labor is “fighting a decisive battle against our homegrown fascists, against the worshippers of Hitlerism and the Nazi conspiracy of world domination . . . against those who even now are maneuvering to re-establish the international cartels and trusts of the big monopolies and munition makers.”⁴³

In characterizing union publications, J.B.S. Hardman, a labor editor writing in the 1920s, described two different approaches editors could take: the short-range or the long-range view. Union papers adopting a short view were little more than house organs; the editor’s job “is to sing the song of praise of the ‘administration’ that feeds him. . . . Syndicated canned features. . . and eulogistic matter” provide the content.⁴⁴ This description does not fit the local and national IFLWU publications, but it does describe the District One publication, the *District One Reporter*. Produced in Boston, the *Reporter* attempted to provide a little positive information in every issue about all of its Massachusetts locals. Although District One officially covered all of the New England states, the *Reporter* focused on Massachusetts and tried to educate its membership about legislative issues. These pieces always depicted Big Business as evil, but never devoted enough space to educate the worker on what he or she could do to change the situation. The *Reporter*, consisting of only four pages with dense

⁴³ “Support Labor’s Strike Struggle,” *Fur and Leather Worker*, January 1946, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Hardman, “A View of the Trade-Union Press,” 410.

type and few photos, most likely provided its readers with a cursory understanding of what the union was doing.

Both the *Fur and Leather Worker* and the *Local 21 Bulletin* served as a mouthpiece for the union, but they provided other services as well—services necessary for creating an avid following. The *Fur and Leather Worker* and *Local 21 Bulletin* would fall into Hardman's definition of the long-range view adopted by some union press editors. A long-range view encompasses the "larger aims of the union and movement. The strategy of the union, its politics, its problems, its aspirations and relation to the labor movement and the social problems of the time, will be the paper's concern." The IFLWU local and national publications tried to fulfill these functions. Both publications educated the IFLWU membership on a wide spectrum of issues, investigating stories of injustice and providing information that the rank and file could use in their daily lives. The *Fur and Leather Worker* and the *Local 21 Bulletin* sought to become "the clearinghouse of both the rank and file of the organization and the leadership, where their views may be voiced and clarified and eventually integrated."⁴⁵ Both publications wanted feedback from their readership. For instance, the *Local 21 Bulletin* offered a five-dollar prize to the person who had the best letter suggesting ways of improving the *Local 21 Bulletin*:

The award will be made by the board for the ideas suggested, not on the basis of the length of the letter or its fancy writing. This newspaper is the property of the membership and it strives to be the kind of a newspaper you want. The contest is being run to encourage constructive criticism from our membership.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "\$5 Prize for Letter Contest," *Local 21 Bulletin*, August 25, 1948, p. 1.

Hardman believed that in order to create a “powerful instrument in the service of the union movement” a union paper must have a number of key characteristics: interesting stories, accuracy, discussion of union issues—good and bad, an appeal to family members, and a local angle. “If these components are part of the labor paper, the press will be appreciated by both the intelligent leaders and the active rank and file, and will become influential, as it should, in molding the union’s course.”⁴⁷ Writing in the twenties, Hardman said that the labor press had not yet achieved this type of periodical. Fifty years later Pizzigati and Solowey still characterized these elements as important aspects of the labor press, but aspects that were for the most part still missing. Pizzigati and Solowey argued that the kind of labor press needed is one “that reflects the lives of working people—their hopes, their fears, their troubles, their triumphs.”⁴⁸

The IFLWU’s periodicals reveal elements of what Hardman, Pizzigati and Solowey considered good labor journalism. From the very first issue of both, the *Fur and Leather Worker* and the *Local 21 Bulletin* presented information in a pleasing, interesting manner. In addition to local news and comments, Kleinman and O’Keefe strived to create publications that reflected the concerns and interests of the union membership, which the mass culture was not doing. Pizzigati and Solowey characterized the popular mass media as giving “us a world where working people—and the challenges working people face—barely exist. In the parade of celebrities that

⁴⁷ Ibid., 410-411. According to Helen G. Norton, an instructor of labor journalism at Brookwood Labor College during the 1920s, too many labor publications ignored the local connection. “The use of syndicated labor news and particularly of syndicated editorials makes for a disheartening uniformity among such labor papers.” Helen G. Norton, “The Gopher Prairie Press,” in *American Labor Dynamics*, 406.

⁴⁸ Pizzigati and Solowey, *The New Labor Press*, xiv.

dominates America's front pages and television screens, few working people ever appear. We see the peccadillos of our politicians. We follow the careers of our stars. We seldom see ourselves."⁴⁹ It was against this backdrop that the efforts of the *Fur and Leather Worker* and *Local 21 Bulletin* become so interesting. These publications offered Peabody leather workers two things: a glimpse of their own lives and another viewpoint from which to form an opinion of international, national, regional, and local events. A view of the individuals who made up the rank and file of Peabody was missing in the local paper of the forties. Local publications focused on the war effort during the early years of the forties and then spent the remainder of the decade centered on the need to purge the communist elements from the community's midst. The labor periodicals offered something else.

While there was a general format for each of these publications, they varied in design from issue to issue depending on the information they wanted to highlight. New departments were added when circumstances demonstrated a need. For instance, after World War II, the *Fur and Leather Worker* began a monthly feature devoted to the veteran. In this column, the editor dealt with commonly asked questions veterans had about benefits they were eligible for and employment opportunities. In conjunction with an appeal by International president Ben Gold to help veterans get back into civilian life, Local 21 established a Veteran's Committee that recruited counselors from the Veteran's Administration in Salem, Massachusetts, to answer questions that Peabody's veterans had with respect to terminal leave pay, insurance,

⁴⁹ Ibid. Some scholars disagree with Pizzagati and Solowey's argument that the working class was not represented in the popular mass media during the thirties and forties. See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998).

on-the-job training, and rehabilitation.⁵⁰ This information regularly appeared in the *Local 21 Bulletin* and illustrated a concerted effort on the part of the IFLWU to offer workers services that would aid all aspects of their lives—not just their factory day. Returning IFLWU veterans, many first- or second- generation immigrants, were still unsure of the intricacies of the U. S. legal proceedings; informational services provided by the union and publicized in its papers were vital.

Although the *Local 21 Bulletin* was only four pages long, this monthly publication provided in-depth, detailed information about union activities, contract language and negotiations, labor problems, and relations with other unions. Many photos featuring a wide variety of the membership were utilized and cartoons poking fun at big business were a common feature. Even those workers who did not speak English could understand the implied message in a caricature featuring big business or the government as the enemy. Indeed, some studies suggest that cartoons and comic strips are more popular than editorials.⁵¹ With the *Local 21 Bulletin*, long-time editor and business manager O’Keefe tried to reflect the issues pertinent to union membership. Relying on constant feedback from the readers, O’Keefe saw the publication as a two-way process of communicating with members. Instead of living in a distant place and putting in syndicated information, O’Keefe lived in the community, attended social events with other leather workers, and actively participated in what happened in the greater Peabody area. Seeking a better life for

⁵⁰ “Counsellor Aids Vets,” *Fur and Leather Workers*, September 1946, 20.

⁵¹ William J. Puette, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1992), 74.

Peabody leather workers was at the heart of O'Keefe's agenda; the contents of the *Local 21 Bulletin* demonstrate this.

Richard "Mike" O'Keefe, who assumed a leadership role with the union that lasted from the early forties until his death in 1973, epitomized the essence of an organic intellectual. Born in Salem to Irish Catholic immigrants, O'Keefe's family owed its very existence to the leather industry. His father emigrated to work in Peabody's leather industry. Following in his father's path, O'Keefe left school after the eighth grade to work in the tanneries. As a young father of four, however, O'Keefe found the limitations of factory life troubling. No matter how hard he worked, there was never enough money. The strike of 1933 and the growth of the NLWA meant a change in his fortunes and that of all leather workers, a change he welcomed. Even during the early war years when labor was used as a scapegoat, O'Keefe, who was deeply religious, found inspiration to continue his union affiliation after talking with his long-time friend and spiritual leader Reverend Father John McCormack.

According to McCormack, O'Keefe had an innate ability to empathize and relate to all different people. McCormack characterized him "as a sensitive man, a man who was not afraid to become involved with people, no matter what walk of life they may have come."⁵² This made him an effective leader. Even after serving as business manager for a number of years, O'Keefe never lost his ability to understand the leather worker's position. He knew what it was like to work in a beam house

⁵² Carl Johnson, "Rites for 'Mike' O'Keefe are attended by hundreds," *Salem Evening News*, December 6, 1973, p. 2.

sloshing around in wet, smelly water cleaning hides or as a tacker stretching the leather on frames day after day while one's fingers bled. He had done these jobs, and he never forgot the inhumane conditions confronting all leather workers. Because he really cared about the leather workers and their problems, the union members listened to him and were influenced by his opinions.

City officials and tannery owners also respected O'Keefe. After his election to the Salem School Committee in 1954, more than five hundred Salem-Peabody community members, including city and state officials, honored O'Keefe at a testimonial banquet. Judge Henry F. Duggan, of the Peabody District Court, "praised O'Keefe for his contributions to community welfare through his leadership in the IFLWU, recreational activities, fund drives, and other public affairs."⁵³ He was articulate; he presented himself well; and he cared about the people he represented. As an organic intellectual, O'Keefe did not allow others to control him. He looked to the International and the CIO for advice, but he based his decisions on the needs of the membership he served. An avid reader, O'Keefe did not let his lack of an education deter him from his goals. He knew that in order to enact real and lasting change, the leather workers needed to understand the issues facing them. With the *Local 21 Bulletin*, O'Keefe tried to educate the membership.⁵⁴

There were limitations, however, to what O'Keefe could accomplish with the *Local 21 Bulletin* since it was so short. The much longer—usually twenty pages—*Fur*

⁵³ "500 Attend O'Keefe Banquet," *Local 21 Bulletin*, March 24, 1954, 2.

⁵⁴ The information about Richard "Mike" O'Keefe is based on a series of interviews with two of his daughters, a brief conversation with his son, interviews with his two long-time secretaries, and discussions with two former labor leaders—Al Quantros and Jim Sawyer. The author conducted these interviews between 2001 and 2002. Audiotapes and partial transcripts of these interviews are in the author's possession.

and Leather Worker offered more information about the various locals, readers' responses, national and international concerns, and human-interest stories. In addition, it analyzed the political scene and how various pieces of legislation were going to affect the fur and leather workers. Stories dealing with racial discrimination and anti-Semitism were monthly features throughout the paper's history. Thus, the rank and file worker could see positive images of himself or herself, while becoming more familiar with the glaring inequalities in society. Stories of discrimination showcased what happened when one group assumed superiority over another. For instance, the *Fur and Leather Worker* did an in-depth feature story on the Jim Crow South and how one African-American family lost everything they owned because the father, a leather worker, had been lynched. In a city as diverse as Peabody, ethnic and religious tensions were bound to erupt. By illustrating the harmful consequences of discrimination, the IFLWU leadership hoped to unite its many different communities of workers. From the various stories on discrimination, Peabody workers most likely recognized that any effective fight against the tannery owners required solidarity.

While the IFLWU's publications provide insight on the International's mission and goals, these labor periodicals also describe the union's chronological history of social, cultural, and political activities and programs. This information offers a clear picture of the society Local 21 was trying to create. For instance, at the first joint convention of the IFLWU in 1939, the International committed itself to a host of general welfare issues: sick insurance, a loan bureau, a legal aid bureau, a legislative department, establishing and encouraging children's activities (tap dancing classes, singing groups, dramatic groups, hikes, picnics, Junior unions), organizing

women's auxiliaries, and creating a health and welfare department to "help organize, direct and guide the health and welfare committees of all locals."⁵⁵ These programs had been discussed at the 1938 NLWA convention. In fact, at that conference, Chamouris detailed the need for each local to establish credit unions and to push for an industry-wide pension plan.⁵⁶ At the time, though, Local 21 lacked the financial wherewithal to initiate these programs.

Writing in the 1930s, journalist Mary Heaton Vorse characterized these various labor programs—worker education, women's auxiliaries, and a strong labor press, for instance—as "demonstrat[ing] how the labor movement was being reborn through the community."⁵⁷ And that was exactly what Local 21 sought: the creation of a more equitable society for its members. However, Local 21 did not try to reform society in terms of gender roles. The union did not consider women "real" workers. As James Sawyer, a former Local 21 official, explained, the union "fought for a decent wage, so that our wives would not have to work. I didn't want my wife working."⁵⁸ Mrs. Helen Pavensky corroborated Sawyer's sentiment about working women: "After the war my husband couldn't find a job in the tanneries, so I went to work as a stitcher. I did not consider it a permanent position. I was just working until my husband found employment."⁵⁹

Understanding the need to appeal to the whole family, the national and local publications made sure they offered women something in every issue—a recipe,

⁵⁵ *The Fur Worker*, June 1939, p. 5.

⁵⁶ "1938 NLWA Convention," IFLWU 5676, Box 31, Folder 12.

⁵⁷ Faue, *Community of Suffering*, 2.

⁵⁸ Interview with James Sawyer, Peabody, Massachusetts, December 23, 2001.

⁵⁹ Interview with Mrs. Helen Pavensky, Peabody, Massachusetts, October 1998.

pattern, advice on children's lunches, etc. In some issues a half page would be dedicated to women's topics. In terms of its perception of women, Local 21 seemed to share the same viewpoint as the IFLWU—all people were equal in theory, but this did not always work out in practice. While there were occasional glimpses of progressive thinking in terms of women workers—a few articles dealing with leadership training for women, equal pay, and special insurance benefits covering maternity and maternity leave—the publications mostly dealt with females as wives and mothers and not as workers.⁶⁰

Both the IFLWU and Local 21 seemed content just to adopt the CIO's policy of developing women's auxiliaries.⁶¹ According to labor scholar Robert Zieger, the CIO fell short in terms of "legitimate expectations" of what it hoped to do for women:

Innovative and imaginative in many areas of tactics and structure, CIO men failed to grasp the importance of women's growing role in the labor force and the possibilities for even more effective activism and organization that responsiveness to women's economics and political concerns might have afforded.⁶²

Following the CIO lead, IFLWU publications carried very few serious articles devoted to the concerns of working women: childcare, maternity and sick benefits, etc. Cartoons featuring women relied on the stereotypical image of the well-dressed, high-heeled matron fighting by her husband's side. Very few actually featured a female worker attired in more realistic clothing, i.e. work clothes.

Just as Local 21 stereotyped women's issues in its publications, in its programming and negotiating efforts it neglected the needs of the working mother.

⁶⁰ "Women Delegates Active in Convention Work; Urge Leadership Training," *Fur and Leather Worker*, June 1946, 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Zieger, *CIO*, 376-377.

Periodically, there were brief discussions in the union publications about fighting for better wages for the female leather employees, but these attempts at equalizing the pay scale between men and women never took precedence either in union meetings or in negotiations with the manufacturers. This was a legacy of its parent organization—the CIO. Just as the CIO felt comfortable viewing the family along the traditional lines in which the male head of the household earned enough for the family to live on, the IFLWU and Local 21 followed suit, ignoring women’s presence in the labor force.

To some degree, this inattention to the female union members reflected women’s declining position in unions nationally; from 1946 to 1954, for example, women’s union membership declined.⁶³ This lack of attention to the female worker might have also resulted from the small number of females actually employed in the leather industry. For instance, in 1940 women made up only one-twelfth of the leather industry’s wage earners.⁶⁴ Even during the war years, Peabody women did not flock to the leather factories; enough men remained behind to fill the wartime production need.⁶⁵

Some IFLWU locals, especially the ones in New York, did create day care programs, but Local 21 did not. They discussed it as a possibility, but it was never realized. Working mothers in Peabody relied on neighbors or other family members

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁶⁴ “Hourly Earnings in Leather Industry September 1939,” *Monthly Labor Review* 50 (April 1940): 957.

⁶⁵ Based on information from interviews by the author with a variety of former leather workers and union officials.

to care for their children.⁶⁶ A typical day for a working mother of Local 21 consisted of dropping children off at a designated house on the neighborhood block, picking the children up after a physically taxing day in the leather factory, going to the corner grocery store, and making dinner. Evenings were dedicated to getting children to bed, cleaning, mending, and other household chores.⁶⁷ Local 21 did not initiate any programs to ease the burden of these women in part, perhaps, because working women did not request them. O’Keefe’s long-time secretary Margaret Abbott said that Local 21’s female members never asked for anything. “They were content with what the union had done overall,” Abbott said.⁶⁸ Many Peabody women came from ethnic and religious backgrounds that advocated self-reliance and subordinate roles for women. Domestic duties and childcare were part of these female roles. These women may have seen childcare and housework as roles they could not relinquish—and not the union’s responsibility.⁶⁹ For the Catholic leather workers the Boston archdiocese preached continuously about the hazards encountered when the homemaker “is forced to leave the circle of the home, and seek remunerative work in business or industry.” The Catholic church insisted that serious injury was “done to the welfare of society” when women went to work.⁷⁰ Through the middle years of the twentieth century, *The Pilot* printed numerous sermons and stories discussing the virtues of the stay-at-home mother. Calling the stay-at-home mother the “queen of the

⁶⁶ Information on Peabody mothers from oral histories conducted by Professor John J. Fox, a retired instructor from Salem State College, in Salem, Massachusetts, at the Salem Maritime Festival in 1991. These oral histories are housed at the George Peabody House in Peabody, Massachusetts.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Interview with Margaret Abbott, Waltham, Massachusetts, October 2001.

⁶⁹ Interview with Mrs. Helen Pavensky, Peabody, Massachusetts, October 1998.

⁷⁰ “The Catholic Church and Social Justice Sunday’s Radio Address,” *The Pilot* 105 (September 1, 1934): 6.

home,” *The Pilot* said, “only the most pressing and exceptional economic circumstances should cause the married woman to leave the home and seek remunerative work in the industrial world.”⁷¹ This type of advice from the local archdiocese had to have affected the perceptions of female wage earners and limited their chances of making workplace gains.

Although the IFLWU did not try to reorder gender roles, some unions advocated female equality in the workplace. One example was the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) representing the Mexican cannery women working in southern California’s food processing industry. By 1946 UCAPAWA boasted that sixty-six percent of its contracts “had ‘equal pay for equal work’ clauses and seventy-five percent provided for leaves of absence without loss of seniority.”⁷² Unlike the food processing industry consisting mainly of women with similar backgrounds, men dominated the leather industry and considered much of the work unsuitable for women. This could be another reason why the IFLWU did not push for gender reform in the workplace.

In other areas, though, the IFLWU did exemplify progressive thinking. For instance, the International leadership urged every local to set up an education and recreation committee. Each education committee was responsible for a minimum amount of educational work: training shop chairmen for union leadership and contract enforcement; training shop chairmen and active workers in parliamentary procedure and public speaking; providing classes in citizenship, American history, the principles

⁷¹ “Radio Address on Church and Laborer Given,” *The Pilot* 104 (September 9, 1933): 6.

⁷² Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women/Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 88.

of trade unionism, and English for foreign-language speaking workers. These goals were also discussed at the NLWA's fifth convention. In addition, the International advocated having at least one open forum rally a month. "One of the best means of achieving an education program is the open forum rallies. We suggest at least one forum a month be sponsored by the locals where the . . . workers and their families will be invited to listen to prominent men in the community who might speak on the various problems facing the workers as a whole." Establishing education committees and bringing in guest speakers were both goals the NLWA had adopted at its fifth convention in 1938. Thus, these were not directives issued by the IFLWU and followed by Local 21. Instead, these programs were initiatives Local 21 had decided on two years previous and managed to implement once it had the financial backing.⁷³ The International also urged the formation of district training schools. This type of worker education was not exclusive to the labor movement. As part of the New Deal, the government—through the Federal Emergency Program—sponsored workers' education activities across the country. Although there is no indication that a federally sponsored program existed in Peabody, one did exist in nearby New Bedford. This community developed a workers' school that offered classes on the symptoms of depression, employment goals, public speaking, general science, dramatics, handicrafts, group sewing, and dancing.⁷⁴

This list of objectives demonstrates the International's commitment to providing workers with a host of services that workers received from no other source.

⁷³ "1938 NLWA Convention," IFLWU 5676, Box 31, Folder 12.

⁷⁴ "Recent Developments in Education in Various States," *Monthly Labor Review* 40 (April 1935): 950.

All of these goals were initiatives that Local 21 had thought about in the thirties but was unable to organize because of financial and organizational constraints. As an independent union, Local 21 did not have enough money in its coffers to adequately meet the monetary demands of organizing more leather workers. With the backing of an International and the CIO, Local 21 tried to implement all the goals espoused at the first International convention. These objectives naturally intersected with the goals of Peabody's early 1933 strikers: that is, a better quality of life, both inside and outside the factory for all rank and filers.

While committing itself to achieving these goals, Local 21 did not become distracted from day-to-day factory concerns. Its affiliation with an International that had CIO backing allowed Local 21 to pursue more than one union objective at a time. Thus, as Local 21 worked to establish more social service programs for its members, it remained attuned to plant-floor disruptions such as the displacement of workers by new equipment. In the early forties Peabody tanneries faced a quandary: some plants, like the Dimond Kid Manufacturing Company, decided to discontinue operations "because the plant [and equipment] they were using was out of date and inefficient and was giving them a cost of production which made it impossible to compete."⁷⁵ While the union wanted the factories to modernize, provide safer working conditions, and stay in Peabody, the union adamantly opposed plants modernizing with equipment that would displace workers. This was the quandary: lose plants because of ill-equipped tanneries or have workers displaced because of new equipment. The union decided to focus on displaced workers. Chamouris, who still served as business

⁷⁵ "Workers To Fight Modern Machines," *Lynn Telegram*, January 31, 1940.

agent for Local 21 in 1940, utilized the local newspaper to warn manufacturers not to “attempt to displace workers with bigger and more specialized machines.” This warning came in response to a local tannery’s buying new shaving machines which were three times bigger than the shaving machines currently in operation. The new machines would displace about 140 shavers in the city, leaving only sixty. The union went on record with its opinion of the new shavers:

The Union has no objection to the operation of newer and bigger machines as long as they do not displace workers and reduce wages. . . .For the present the union has directed me to warn manufacturers using or intending to use the new shaving machines that the present shavers will not be permitted to do more work than they now average on the smaller machines. Even if they work only three hours in producing the quota.⁷⁶

If Local 21 had really wanted to craft a more equitable life for the leather worker, it would have incorporated job retraining into its worker education programs, instead of fighting modernization. This, however, did not happen to any real degree. Instead, the union chose to put its efforts into convincing the manufacturers that whenever they introduced new machinery “such a price per unit produced on the new machine will not cause hardships, lower wages, or unemployment for our members.”⁷⁷ The union’s bottom line was that new machines should not create unemployment or lower wages.

While the union did not prepare its members for new careers in the face of technological displacement, it did invest its energies into other programs and activities. Peabody’s chapter of the IFLWU seemed especially committed to reaching out to the union member’s family. Besides printing information that would appeal to all family members in its periodical (albeit in a stereotypical way for the women),

⁷⁶ “Workers To Fight Modern Machines,” *Lynn Telegram*, January 31, 1940.

⁷⁷ “Preparing for Mass Contract Renewal,” *Fur and Leather Worker*, October 1940, p. 8.

Local 21 organized a women's auxiliary in October 1947 to better serve the needs of union members' families. In 1946, the International devoted much space in the *Fur and Leather Worker* to discussing the merits of women's auxiliaries. In these issues the leadership stressed that every union member's wife had an important role to play: fighting by her husband's side for higher wages, better working conditions, rent and price controls, and political and legislative battles.⁷⁸ The *Fur and Leather Worker* used scare tactics to rally support for the auxiliaries.

More of our locals are beginning to think of organizing women's auxiliaries. The time to do it is now! The reactionaries and the bosses, the trusts and the tories are not waiting. They made the greatest profits in history during the war. They not only want to keep on making the same profits, they want to make more—and that more is going to come right out of the pockets of workers and their families unless we put a stop to it. If your local doesn't have a women's auxiliary organized yet, now is the time to get busy and start one.⁷⁹

At the Sixteenth Biennial Convention in June 1946, members approved the official chartering of women's auxiliaries and the designation of full-time representatives or organizers for the women's auxiliaries. Delegates also allocated funds to establish these auxiliaries.⁸⁰

While only a handful of women showed up to establish women's auxiliaries in some unions, Local 21 had seventy-five women attend the first meeting. The women of Local 21 planned some of the projects that became the mainstay of the Women's Auxiliary: an annual Christmas party for children of members; special children's classes in painting, music, and craft work; entertainment and educational films; work

⁷⁸ *Fur and Leather Worker*, December 1946, p. 21.

⁷⁹ "The Women Have a Vital Stake in Labor's Struggles," *Fur and Leather Worker*, January 1946, p. 20.

⁸⁰ "Auxiliaries to be Chartered," *Fur and Leather Worker*, June 1946, p. 12.

in the community on hot school lunches and recreational facilities; and support of union programs on such things as rent control, lower prices, and repeal of the Taft-Hartley law.⁸¹ Many of these programs came to fruition and proved successful, especially the ones geared toward the children. While the International offered suggestions for programming and activities, it was the women in Peabody who tailored a women's auxiliary to meet the needs of the community.

Creating a well-rounded life for children of leather workers was a primary objective of the Local 21 Women's Auxiliary. Adhering to the International's philosophy that "organizing members' children into such groups [as the Junior Union and a children's band] brings them closer to the Union and makes them more union conscious," the auxiliary, with Local 21's help, created many cultural and educational opportunities for the children of Peabody. The Christmas party, which started in the late 1930s, ended up becoming an annual event that grew every year. One year 1,500 union youngsters were entertained at this special event. Children's classes also became quite popular. About fifty children, ranging in age from five to twelve, were able to enjoy free tap dancing and ballet lessons because of the efforts of the Local 21 Auxiliary.⁸² From these children's activities, the union hoped to accomplish two things: educate youngsters about the "struggles their parents live through to better their economic condition" and provide additional opportunities for these working class children.⁸³

⁸¹ "75 at Party Plan Activities for Members," *Local 21 Bulletin*, October 29, 1947.

⁸² *Local 21 Bulletin*, March 23, 1949, p. 1.

⁸³ *The Fur Worker*, June 1939, p. 9.

Letters to the editor in both the local and national publications favorably acknowledged the union's goal of reaching out to young people. For instance, one young girl wrote to the *Fur and Leather Worker* expressing thanks for being able to go to camp. "I am enjoying a camp vacation this year," this young girl said. "My father would never have been able to send me to camp if you didn't help. I am proud that my father belongs to such a good union."⁸⁴

In addition to providing programs for children and a host of activities—dances, fashion shows, lectures—for families, it provided other services that were previously unavailable. For instance, the Bureau of Labor Statistics in Washington had characterized the leather industry as one of the most hazardous occupations in the nation, but until the formation of the IFLWU, employers had done little to ensure workers' safety.⁸⁵ Just a year after amalgamation, Local 21 members voted to pay a special 5-cent weekly assessment to finance a death benefit policy of one hundred dollars for any member in good standing.⁸⁶ Through the efforts of Local 21, leather workers in Peabody obtained health insurance, free protective equipment, and free medical screenings for occupational hazards like tuberculosis.⁸⁷ Local 21, in fact, was instrumental in initiating a free chest x-ray service that the majority of the

⁸⁴ *Fur and Leather Worker*, October 1940, p. 18.

⁸⁵ "Leather Industry 9th Most Perilous," *Local 21 Bulletin*, January 21, 1948, p. 2. For a good discussion of the hazards facing the tannery worker see "Health and Industrial Hygiene: Sickness Among Male Industrial Employees," *Monthly Labor Review* 41 (July 1935): 81-82 and Andrew Roland, "Tanning Leather, Tanning Hides: Health and Safety Struggles in a Leather Factory" in *Workers' Struggles Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader*, ed. James Green (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 362-378.

⁸⁶ *Lynn Telegram News*, May 14, 1940. The union defined a member in good standing as someone who paid his/her union dues.

⁸⁷ "Higher Wages for Employes [sic] in Factories," *Peabody Enterprise*, January 24, 1941, p. 1.

membership took advantage of in the late forties and early fifties.⁸⁸ Many issues of the *Local 21 Bulletin* featured notices advising every leather worker and family member to get his or her x-ray photograph during this month-long program.

“Remember: Tuberculosis is catching. Someone who works near you or lives in your household can give the disease to you or someone else, if he or she has it” warned the *Local 21 Bulletin*.⁸⁹

Local 21 also initiated a health survey in 1952, which was called a Health Protection Clinic. This clinic was “the first one outside of Boston and the first time that one has been run jointly by the state and a labor union.”⁹⁰ Local 21, with the cooperation of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, conducted the screenings, which were paid for by the state. While not a permanent affair, the clinic was an “extension of the chest x-ray survey.” In addition to chest x-rays, this Health Protection Clinic provided blood tests, urinalysis, and electrocardiographs. Each person being surveyed received a confidential report.⁹¹ Both the unemployed and non-leather worker were eligible for the chest x-ray as well. The Health Screening tests were carried out in April and May 1953. According to the *Local 21 Bulletin*, “the health survey [was] expected to attract considerable attention in medical circles, for it will be the first such state-financed project in the history of the Commonwealth—and possibly the first in the nation—for an industrial group.”⁹² Although the state spent between \$50,000 and \$60,000 on the survey, it was free for

⁸⁸ *Local 21 Bulletin*, June 28, 1950, p. 1.

⁸⁹ *Local 21 Bulletin*, December 21, 1950, pp. 1-2.

⁹⁰ “Local Plans Free Clinic,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, January 30, 1952, p. 1.

⁹¹ “Medical Society Approval Sought for Health Survey,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, February 25, 1952, p. 1.

⁹² *Local 21 Bulletin*, February 25, 1953, p. 1.

the worker, family and community members. During the first wave of x-rays, 3,802 Peabodyites—approximately 80 percent of the workforce—from 105 different establishments, mainly leather, received free x-rays.⁹³

As is evidenced by the Health Protection Clinic, Local 21, whenever possible, tried to involve the whole community in its health initiatives. Donating blood to the local Red Cross was a good example of the union rallying community support and participation. Union officials not only encouraged union members to donate blood, but they tried to inspire the community at large to participate by using a beach wagon and traveling around the city to attract attention for the Red Cross.⁹⁴ To encourage support for national health insurance, Local 21's Activities Committee hosted a one-hour forum on WESX, a local radio station. This forum featured a doctor from Massachusetts General Hospital who favored the proposal to extend social security to cover all medical, dental, and hospital care and a prominent Essex County physician who opposed it. After the broadcast, the forum audience, consisting of union members and area residents, asked questions for another hour. By providing a debate-like format and opening it to the community, Local 21 not only educated its own members about an important issue but the larger community as well.⁹⁵ WESX also hosted a Thursday night show that discussed issues facing the leather industry.

Local 21 never forgot that it was part of the larger community and anything it could do for the larger community would benefit both the leather worker and the

⁹³ "3,802 Get Free Chest X-Rays," *Local 21 Bulletin*, June 16, 1948, p. 1.

⁹⁴ "Eighteen Officials of Local 21 to Donate Blood Tomorrow," *Peabody Times*, February 25, 1944, p. 1.

⁹⁵ "Radio Forum Wins Praise," *Local 21 Bulletin*, May 10, 1950, p. 2; "Top-Flight Physicians Debate Health Plan on Union Forum," *Local 21 Bulletin*, March 29, 1950.

nonleather worker. Besides participating in Red Cross blood drives, Local 21 supported the Community Fund, which donated money to support eighteen area agencies focused on health, welfare, and recreation.⁹⁶ The union also aided the community by participating in fund raisers for a variety of charitable organizations: Infantile Paralysis Campaign, Salvation Army, March of Dimes, and the North Shore Council of Boy Scouts, to name a few.⁹⁷ In addition, Local 21's Activities Committee worked with the cities of Peabody and Salem to improve the medical care of children in school. The aim of this program was "to guarantee maximum protection for the health of our children."⁹⁸ These programs were significant because they demonstrated the union's concern for the physical well-being of the workers and the community at large; this concern for the larger community is consistent with the characteristics of solidarity unionism.⁹⁹

Economically, the gains made for the leather workers since the merger with the fur workers in 1939 were quite significant as well. By 1946 the leather division of the IFLWU was 85 percent organized and had managed to achieve job security, higher wages, paid vacations, paid holidays, seniority, and a grievance procedure.¹⁰⁰ From the end of the war until 1947, Local 21 members increased their salaries by twelve dollars a week, improved safety and sanitary conditions in the factories, and

⁹⁶ "Community Fund Drive Is On," *Local 21 Bulletin*, September 28, 1949, p. 4.

⁹⁷ For a listing of some of Local 21's charitable work see *Local 21 Bulletin*, March 28, 1951; *Local 21 Bulletin*, April 29, 1952, p. 1.

⁹⁸ "Child Health Bill Backed By Local 21," *Local 21 Bulletin*, January 31, 1951, p. 3.

⁹⁹ Other historians have characterized this type of community involvement not as an example of solidarity unionism but rather an example of a union's attempt to form a corporate alliance with business and government. For a discussion of this union/corporate alliance see Godfried, *WCFL*.

¹⁰⁰ *Fur and Leather Worker*, April-May 1946, p. 37.

earned a thirteen-week sick benefit policy.¹⁰¹ Besides the economic gains Local 21 achieved for its membership, it also sought to alleviate the pressure of post-war inflation by offering a number of services: a credit union, a Consumer Service, a Union Buying Service, and a Consumer Union. Credit unions had become popular in the late thirties. In 1939 more than 1,000 new credit unions were established around the country.¹⁰² Functioning like a bank, the credit union was designed to act as a savings and loan institution, generally for “small borrowers who can offer little or no security except their own personal integrity.”¹⁰³ Not only did members borrow money at a lower interest rate than at traditional banks, but the credit union also kept union members’ money “out of the clutches of the loan sharks,” according to the *Local 21 Bulletin*.¹⁰⁴ Loan sharks, of course, were the capitalist bankers and manufacturers. Local 21’s credit union opened in August 1950 and lasted until the mid sixties.¹⁰⁵ The *Local 21 Bulletin* ran many articles and anecdotes to inform members of the merits of the credit union. One story featured a real situation where a member of Local 21 borrowed money from a regular bank instead of using the credit union. The article ended by saying “If he had borrowed the \$300 from the Local 21 Credit Union. . .he would have paid a total of fourteen dollars in interest—a savings of \$39.65.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 52 (January 11, 1947).

¹⁰² “Operations of Credit Unions,” *Monthly Labor Review* 51 (September 1940): 654.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 654.

¹⁰⁴ “Credit Union Helps Membership Save Money, Fight Loan Sharks,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, February 25, 1953, p. 1. See also “The Credit Union: It’s the Nemesis of Loan Sharks,” *CIO News* 12 (January 3, 1949): 10.

¹⁰⁵ An exact date of the closing of the Credit Union is not known. James Sawyer believes it was in the 1960s. Interview with James Sawyer, Peabody, Massachusetts, February 22, 2001.

¹⁰⁶ “Credit Union Could Have Saved Loan Firm Victim \$39 Interest,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, March 25, 1953, p. 1.

The credit union reflected Local 21's efforts at creating institutions to serve its membership and its ideals. It not only allowed workers a place to save and receive low interest loans, but it provided another opportunity for Local 21 to educate its members about the corrupt policies of big business which had its hand in other lending institutions. Workers also had a role in creating and maintaining the credit union. The criterion for being on the governing board of the credit union was membership in it, so any person who had the 25-cent initiation fee and the \$5 membership share could participate in the governing of the financial institution.¹⁰⁷ Thus, the very premise of a credit union epitomized the essence of solidarity unionism—an organization for the people and run by the people. One did not need to be a leader in the union or the community to have a voice in the day-to-day operations of the credit union.

Another membership-controlled service was the Consumer Service, a store designed to offer union members household appliances and goods at a reduced cost. "Goods [were] marked up from wholesale just enough to cover costs of operation."¹⁰⁸ Working in conjunction with Local 20, in Lynn, Local 21 opened a Consumer Service in 1953. Although the store was reported to be "a considerable financial aid to those members who patronized it," the volume of shoppers was not heavy enough to make the store self-supporting. Rather than trying to make the store self-supporting by investing more money and moving it to a bigger space or raising prices, Local 21

¹⁰⁷ "Credit Union is Growing as Members See Value," *Local 21 Bulletin*, June 27, 1951, p. 1; "Local Sets Up Credit Union," *Local 21 Bulletin*, January 25, 1950.

¹⁰⁸ *Local 21 Bulletin*, February 25, 1953, p. 1.

decided to liquidate it after only one year in business.¹⁰⁹ Though this venture lasted only a short time, it was another attempt by Local 21 to offer its members more services—services in which the members had expressed an interest. However, when it was obvious that members were not utilizing this service as much as necessary, the Local 21 leadership listened to what the membership wanted. The store was closed.

To offset the closing of the Union Store in February 1954, the *Local 21 Bulletin* started running a half page ad by the Union Buying Service in April 1954. The Union Buying Service was a “cooperative effort to provide for [the] membership quality goods at reduced prices.”¹¹⁰ This service featured a host of household products—housewares, appliances, linens, giftware, infant supplies—on which the Union Buying Service could obtain discounts.¹¹¹ Purchased articles were mailed to members’ homes and the Union Buying Service picked up the shipping costs. In addition to this Buying Service, the *Local 21 Bulletin* and the *District One Reporter* began printing a classified section called the Trading Post in the early fifties. Any member who wanted to sell something could run an advertisement free of charge. This feature, which was initiated because of membership demand, ran in the *Local 21 Bulletin* until the very end of its publication life in 1973.

Another service designed to help consumers “get the most for their rapidly shrinking dollar” was the Consumer Union, a non-profit testing agency, featuring products that had been tested and found to be the best buy for the money.¹¹² Initiated

¹⁰⁹ “Union Closes Store in Lynn,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, February 24, 1954, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ “District Opens Buying Service for Members,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, April 28, 1954.

¹¹¹ It is unclear if all these items were union made. It appears that the Union Buying Service came out of the District office in Boston.

¹¹² “Watch What and Where You Buy,” *Fur and Leather Worker*, October 1946, p. 15.

in the mid 1940s when the government's Office of Price Administration (OPA) had been disbanded, the Consumer Union allowed workers and their families a way to economize. Understanding the inflationary pressures confronting labor, the Consumer Union tested products useful to the rank and file.

The Consumer Union tried to service the consumer. For instance, to help the savvy buyer during white sales in the month of January, the Consumer Union tested—by rubbing, pulling and washing—fifty-three brands of sheets. Consumer Union discovered that “while white heavy muslin sheets will give you more wear per dollar, percales may make up for their higher price in lower laundry costs and greater comfort.”¹¹³ The Consumer Union was a regular feature of the *Fur and Leather Worker*, but it ran inconsistently in the *Local 21 Bulletin*. Interestingly enough, the local Catholic Church did not condone the Consumer Union because it offered a thirty-two-page report on contraceptive materials and their reliability. The Boston archdiocese said that the “Consumer Union reveals itself as a service which the decent-minded disdain.”¹¹⁴ Whether Catholic leather workers heeded the Church's advice on this point is unknown.

With these various buying and testing services, Local 21, with the International's help, offered members a host of ways to offset post-war inflationary prices. Ventures were tried and then discontinued when they proved ineffective. New ideas were implemented—like the Trading Post—from membership input and were retained because they had a tremendous appeal and following.

¹¹³ *Fur and Leather Worker*, January 1941, p. 13.

¹¹⁴ “This ‘Union’ is Leagued Right Against Living,” *The Pilot*, September 26, 1947, p. 4.

In addition to its consumer initiatives, Local 21 evinced a real desire to maintain health care for the workers and initiate a pension program. Discussion in the *Local 21 Bulletin* of the need for a pension plan dated to the late forties. In 1949 the *Local 21 Bulletin* ran an article taken from the leather industry's own publication, *Leather and Shoes*. This article urged tanneries to create pension plans for workers. Comparing men to machines, the editorial in *Leather and Shoes* said that "the industry must sharply and quickly convert its perspective toward pensions [and] it must provide at least the same respectful considerations for men as it does for machines and mules." Taking this comparison between men and machines one step further, the editorial suggested that just as one writes off the cost of a machine depreciating, the cost of "manpower should also be deducted."¹¹⁵

While the leather industry conceded that pensions were necessary, nothing was done. In October 1953, the *Local 21 Bulletin* ran an article entitled "Peabody Survey Shows Need for Tannery Pension Program." This article related how a survey by the Traveler's Insurance Company showed that forty-five percent of Peabody leather workers were forty-five years old and out of "2,811 tannery workers in the area. . .32 percent were in the 46-60 age group, 11 percent in the 61-70 group and 2 percent in the 71 year and over group." The *Local 21 Bulletin* characterized the Traveler's report as pointing "up a major contention of our union. . .an adequate pension program is mandatory—for reasons of humanity and justice and for the

¹¹⁵ "Tanning Industry's Own Paper Urges Pensions for Workers," *Local 21 Bulletin*, February 16, 1949, p. 2.

welfare of the industry itself.”¹¹⁶ Together these two articles gave labor more ammunition with which to intensify its struggle for a pension plan by the mid-1950s.

The 1954 wage negotiations between Local 21 and the manufacturers revolved around the establishment of a pension fund. In presenting its case, Local 21 said that “the evidence and considerations in this case overwhelmingly demand that at least five cents of the wage award in this arbitration be set aside for a pension fund.” The union said such a pension fund would provide a service to workers, the industry, and the community where workers live. Claiming that upwards of one third of all leather workers—and almost three quarters of all industrial workers—were now covered by pension plans, Local 21 made the case that pensions were no longer unprecedented and that to provide adequately for themselves in retirement, leatherworkers needed this fund to be established. (A.C. Lawrence had initiated a pension program in 1919 and in 1947 the company expanded eligibility for the plan.)¹¹⁷ “Even the recently improved level of social security retirement benefits fails to meet the very minimum needs of retired workers as estimated by the government,” the union said. Further exacerbating the need for a pension fund, the union discussed the health toll the leather industry exacted:

[The] excessive health hazards of the [leather] industry, which create medical bills and loss of wages not protected by Blue Cross-Blue Shield or by the Workmen’s Compensation and which lay the basis for greater than normal financial difficulties in old age [need to be addressed in the form of a pension].¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ “Peabody Survey Shows Need for Tannery Pension Program,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, October 28, 1953, p. 1.

¹¹⁷ “A.C. Lawrence Leather Co. Broadens Eligibility for Pensions,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 52 (November 15, 1947): 33.

¹¹⁸ “1954 Wage Re-Opening Arbitration,” page 12, IFLWU 5676, Box 27, Folder 20.

The union argued that not having a pension plan made it more difficult to attract a skilled labor pool because the younger workers had left the leather industry to pursue jobs at Lynn's General Electric plant, which did provide a pension plan.¹¹⁹ Even after such an extensive listing of why Peabody leather manufacturers should adopt a pension plan for their workers, local concerns still did not provide one.

Workers and Local 21 leadership felt strongly about the need for a pension plan and refused to be thwarted in their efforts. Five years after the Traveler's Report came out and almost ten years after the report in *Leather and Shoes*, Local 21 heralded the implementation of the Massachusetts Leather Pension Fund sponsored by the employers. Enacted in 1958, the pension plan highlighted the degree of interaction between the union and its members.¹²⁰ With the closing of more and more leather factories in the late fifties, uncertainty marred the leather industry's future and heightened workers' concerns. The Massachusetts Leather Pension Fund gave leather workers at least some measure of security.

In order to maintain unity and a sense of camaraderie among the membership, Local 21, with the International's help, sought to educate its membership on many levels—culturally, politically, and socially. Each of these areas was related and had an impact on creating unity. Cultural enhancement was a large part of the educational effort. The International believed that “the American people have always expressed a desire for cultural development. Amongst us there are singers, actors, writers, musicians, playwrights, and artists. It is our obligation to find this talent, to develop it

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ “Pension Data is Being Collected by Two Locals,” *The Bulletin*, February 22, 1958, p. 1.

and use it for the benefit of the entire working class movement.”¹²¹ Because the mass media were so deficient in representing the needs of workers, the IFLWU wanted members to work together in creating an alternative form of entertainment—entertainment that encapsulated the needs and circumstances of the working class.

With this aim in mind, the International encouraged all locals to initiate drama, chorus, and photography groups; chess and checker clubs; and to highlight the hobbies of their members. While it is not evident if Local 21 sponsored any types of clubs or groups (besides sporting groups), it did acknowledge and promote workers’ hobbies. The *Local 21 Bulletin* periodically devoted a good deal of column space to highlighting the interesting hobbies of various members. Usually these stories were enhanced with photos of the brother and his hobby (in all cases men were showcased). Apparently, some members actually used supplies from the leather industry for their hobbies. For instance, Carl Henry, a splitter at the Korn Leather plant in Peabody in the 1940s, was a carver. Instead of carving out of wood, he carved “red chalk used in cellar departments for marking wet leather.”¹²² Henry’s work was so professional he was able to sell his wares and services. Such special features in the *Local 21 Bulletin* offered members another perspective on life, one that highlighted individuals for their skills and ingenuity. This was in stark contrast to how rank and file workers were traditionally characterized in the mainstream press—

¹²¹ *The Fur Worker*, June 1939, p. 9. This type of language brings to mind Michael Denning’s discussion of the Popular Front ideology. With the Popular Front movement of the thirties, Denning saw a segment he labeled cultural workers. These individuals worked in the cultural industries— theatre, radio, and the movies—and by so doing created an alternative form of entertainment. Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

¹²² “Cark Henry is Expert Carver,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, August 25, 1948, p. 3.

“as victims. . .unemployed. . .unable to afford health care or a house [and] alienated from work.”¹²³

In terms of other cultural outlets, Local 21 members had access to the Local 21 Free Library, and they could read the movie, theatre and book reviews offered by the *Fur and Leather Worker*. Sponsored by the Education Committee, the Local 21 Free Library experienced considerable use. While not a regular feature of the *Local 21 Bulletin*, the newspaper occasionally printed the titles of the new books the library purchased. The range of titles was quite interesting; while some books obviously had ties to the labor movement—*The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair—other titles were timeless classics—*Moby Dick* and *Leaves of Grass*. Many of the books had an international theme—*Behind the Silken Curtain*, Bartley Crum’s depiction of the fight over Palestine and Near Eastern oil.¹²⁴

In the books chosen for the Free Library there was a definite attempt to educate leather workers on a whole range of subjects: American ideals, world cultures, religion, union philosophy, to name a few. Although there is no way to gauge the effect this library and its books had on union members, comments in the *Local 21 Bulletin* indicate that workers utilized this opportunity and took books out on a regular basis.

Besides the Free Library, the IFLWU participated in a book club service with the publishing firm of Cameron and Kahn. This service, which ran advertisements in the *Fur and Leather Worker* and the *Local 21 Bulletin* in the fifties, provided newly

¹²³ Pizzigati and Solowey, *The New Labor Press*, xv.

¹²⁴ “Local 21 Library Buys New Books,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, October 29, 1947, p. 1.

published books to union members at a discounted price. The first book choice for the book club was *The Game of Death* by Albert E. Kahn. The advertisement for the book promised the story of anti-labor propaganda in the schools, why drug addiction and crime are a problem with young people, and the poisonous effects of comic books, radio, and television on children.¹²⁵ This book espoused some of the major political underpinnings of the IFLWU and provided a perfect opportunity to educate the membership about anti-labor propaganda and the machinations of the mass media and other monopolistic enterprises.

Book reviews were also a common feature in the *Fur and Leather Worker*. In this section workers could get a concise plot summary of a novel and find out about the author. Books like *Iron City* by Lloyd Brown were typical of what was highlighted. Brown, an African-American author, wrote his first novel *Iron City* based on his experiences as a labor organizer in the early thirties. The *Fur and Leather Worker* characterized it as an excellent novel that should be read.¹²⁶

In addition to book reviews, the *Fur and Leather Worker* occasionally ran advertisements featuring books and magazines. One advertisement was for *Friday*, a short-lived, national picture magazine. Periodically in 1941 the *Fur and Leather Worker* featured a half-page, tabloid-sized advertisement for *Friday*. An advertisement placed in the January 1941 issue promised readers “the truth about Ford” if they read *Friday*, “the magazine that dares to tell the truth—marshals—for you to read—all the facts about Ford and the fascist type empire he directs.” Whether

¹²⁵ *Fur and Leather Worker*, July and August 1953, p. 13.

¹²⁶ *Fur and Leather Worker*, November 1951, p. 19

workers chose to buy this magazine is immaterial. Just devoting so much space to an advertisement that featured tantalizing teasers about upcoming issues had to have affected some readers. According to historian Michael Denning, for those individuals who read the magazine there is no doubt about its effectiveness; unlike the mainstream press, it represented the “CIO working classes. . . and captured the common sense of its audience, the second generation blue collar and white collar ethnic workers.”¹²⁷

Like *Friday*, the majority of the books and periodicals reviewed had ties to the labor movement or labor philosophy—*The People Don't Know* by George Seldes, *Simple Speaks His Mind* by Langston Hughes, *In the City, Was a Garden* by Henry Kraus, and *The Wall* by John Hersey and Albert A. Knopf to name a few. Through these book reviews, the leadership made a concerted effort to offer readers a selection of books that mirrored the IFLWU philosophy. This philosophy espoused the ideals of equality for all, the need to fight big business and government for worker rights, and the need to work collectively. These themes went directly against the messages emanating from more traditional mass culture outlets.¹²⁸

The monthly movie and theater reviews in the *Fur and Leather Worker* also served to educate workers on labor philosophy and offered an alternative vision of American life. The leadership of the IFLWU wanted the membership to understand

¹²⁷ *Fur and Leather Worker*, January 1941, p. 6; Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 156.

¹²⁸ For a discussion of what post-war popular culture advocated see Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); David Marc, *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

their situation in life. Movies that unrealistically portrayed working life thus would not aid the union's objectives. The leadership of the IFLWU hoped to inspire its membership and illustrate how a united front would allow them to accomplish their goals of a more equitable society. In addition, movie reviews gave workers a better idea of how best to spend their hard-earned dollars. Movies were rated according to Best Bets, Also Acceptable, At Your Own Risk, and Skip. In November 1950, the *Fur and Leather Worker* described these current films as a "best bet": *Distant Journey*, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (a reissue), *The Men*, *No Way Out*, *Hollywood Ten*, and *City Lights* (a reissue). The "acceptable" films were *Three Little Words*, *Summer Stock*, *Fancy Pants*, *Tea for Two*, *Eye Witness*, *Broken Arrow*, and *Flame and the Arrow*. Movies considered to be "at your own risk" included *Stella*, *Shakedown*, *The Furies*, *Cariboo Trail*, *Black Rose*, *My Widow and I*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, and *My Friend Irma Goes West*. Movies to "skip" were *Abbot and Costello in the Foreign Legion*, *Desert Hawk*, *Death of a Dream*, and *Good Humor Man*.¹²⁹

One can understand why a "best bet" would include a movie like *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Though made in 1930 as a commentary on World War I, its reissue in 1950 directly epitomized the anti-war stance of the IFLWU. Reissued when the United States was escalating its involvement in Korea, *All Quiet on the Western Front* portrayed what the IFLWU wanted its membership to understand: the human consequences of war. The movie depicted the human costs of war and promoted pacifism, which coincided with the strongly worded political editorials detailing the

¹²⁹ *Fur and Leather Worker*, November 1950, p. 19.

monetary ramifications of the war machine found in the IFLWU periodicals.

Acceptable movies in the minds of the IFLWU leadership garnered a detailed write-up. In discussing *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, a movie advocated by the *Fur and Leather Worker*, the International championed its realistic portrayal of politics.

We are shown how machine politics reach right up to Congress to force passage of fraudulent bills to line the pockets of the gang back home. The home boys control every newspaper in the state, so that not a single word of the gallant fight young Senator Smith puts up to expose the senatorial state politician racket can reach the voter.

The language in this movie review was meant to make leather and fur workers ponder the political process. Just in case there was any doubt in the minds of its union members after reading the first part of the review, the IFLWU reiterated further along in the article that the government was not interested in the poor, blue-collar worker and that labor could only look to its union for help.

Labor can learn a valuable lesson from Mr. Smith's experience in Washington. The state of Mississippi [sic] shown in the picture could just as well have been most any other state in the union; the political machine which dominates candidates can be founding in every one of the 48 states. The press almost without exception is everywhere controlled by powerful politicians and self seekers. Labor's interest, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, clearly shows can best be served by electing labor candidates through organizations like Labor's Non Partisan League and by supporting the Labor press such as their own union paper, CIO News etc.¹³⁰

In movie reviews like this, the International tried to raise the political awareness of the average worker and reaffirm the importance of union publications. By so doing the union hoped to insert itself into the lives of its members and show these members that the union always had their best interests at heart.

¹³⁰ *Fur and Leather Worker*, December 1939, 15.

While movies like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* were highly praised, movies like *The Red Menace* were severely lambasted. The *Fur and Leather Worker* called the 1949 release of *The Red Menace*, a “Fascist-like portrayal in line with current Hollywood hysteria and the un-American Committee definition of Americanism.” It recommended that readers “skip” the movie.¹³¹ Obviously, the negative review reflected the IFLWU’s own ongoing battle with the CIO over its affiliation with the Communist Party.¹³² A “best bet” film detailed issues pertinent to the union’s cause, while a “skip” film illustrated ideals contrary to the labor union’s philosophy.

Besides movie reviews, Local 21 membership could have also benefited—both culturally and politically—from the theatre reviews done in the *Fur and Leather Worker*. New York City, the home of the Furriers Joint Council (FJC), a major local of the IFLWU, was the site of many worker theatre productions, both amateur and professional. The *Fur and Leather Worker* did monthly features on these plays. Most of the plays reviewed had a labor slant and were not only entertaining but also educational in terms of espousing union philosophy.¹³³

Although these plays only ran for a short length of time and were inaccessible to many because of where they were performed—in New York City theatres with limited seating and cramped stages—reviews in the *Fur and Leather Worker* gave readers the sense of being there. In reviewing a performance of *The Aristocrats*, by N. Pogodin, a celebrated Soviet dramatist, the educational director of the Joint Board of Fur Dressers and Dyers said that the play was “a weapon in the struggle for truth.”

¹³¹ *Fur and Leather Worker*, August 1949, 15.

¹³² Chapter Four discusses the CIO’s communist charges against the IFLWU.

¹³³ *Fur and Leather Worker*, January-February 1951, p. 23.

The educational director's only lament was that too few people were able to see the play.

Were it put on Broadway and in the movies it would reach trade unionists and others who would be thrilled with this powerful state of human change and would give them added inspiration and understanding for the great, complicated tasks of examination and uniting of labor.¹³⁴

Although the majority of rank and file workers were unable to attend these off-Broadway shows, the commentaries and reviews gave workers a sense of an alternative medium of entertainment. These shows were not available locally, but they did exist. They showed the rank and file workers that their life experiences were important and that others shared similar hardships. In addition, the outcomes in many of these books, movies, and plays showed workers that by banding together they could change their circumstances in life.

All of these efforts at cultural uplift would fail if workers did not speak a common language. This posed a real problem in Peabody because the leather industry employed a large immigrant population. In an effort to aid the leather worker, the Education Committee of Local 21 provided citizenship instruction and English classes for all members and their families. In addition to the classes offered by the Union, the *Local 21 Bulletin* also advertised the classes sponsored by the adult civic education department in Peabody.¹³⁵ In some locals members who enrolled in the union's English classes were able to prepare for an examination to allow them to earn public school diplomas.¹³⁶ One local, the FJC in New York City—an especially

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ "Classes Planned in Citizenship," *Local 21 Bulletin*, November 26, 1947.

¹³⁶ *Fur and Leather Worker*, April-May 1946, p. 47.

progressive local—had afternoon classes for unemployed members. The classes taught unemployed workers union procedures and provided skills, like public speaking and problem articulation. An added benefit from these classes was that they provided workers with a place to go during a slow employment season.¹³⁷ Local 21, however, understood that ethnic heritage was an integral part of leather workers' lives. According to long-time Local 21 member Al Quantros, O'Keefe had a knack for bringing people together:

Ya know, we had a lot of foreign-speaking people, and he always made sure that there would be somebody that could interpret for someone who was unable to speak the language. He'd have a Greek person who could interpret for a Greek person, a Polish person for a Polish person, a Portuguese person . . . that kind of thing. He always had somebody who would take care of the foreign-speaking people. It truly was probably one of the most important things in keeping the union together, the fact that they had someone there who would speak for the people who could not speak English. If there wasn't anyone on the board or an appointed office, he'd go out and find someone.¹³⁸

O'Keefe's efforts to include all workers demonstrated that these classes served as more than attempts to Americanize immigrants. In its early days (1939 until the immediate post-World War II years), the *Fur and Leather Worker* printed special pages in other languages for its different ethnic groups, and Local 21 utilized translators at its meetings. According to former Local 21 officials, this became unnecessary by the end of the forties and was discontinued.¹³⁹ It became unnecessary because immigration had drastically tapered off after World War I in response to the

¹³⁷ *Fur and Leather Worker*, February 1940, p. 10.

¹³⁸ Transcripts from *Leather Soul*, April 21-23, 1989 and April 27-30, 1989 Interview with Al Quantros at the Union Hall, 78.

¹³⁹ Interview with James Sawyer, Peabody, Massachusetts, February 2001.

Immigration Acts of 1917, 1921, and 1924 and the Great Depression.¹⁴⁰ Thus, by the late 1940s, the union's abandonment of foreign language pages and translators reflected the changing needs of its members.¹⁴¹

Another aspect of the union's education mission meant keeping the members well informed of their union rights. The *Local 21 Bulletin* was replete with regular features providing information about insurance and health benefits and contract rules and regulations. To help ensure that all workers received the full benefits they were due, the *Local 21 Bulletin* ran features discussing a host of job-related questions. Some of these features were a rehash of lectures that were conducted at membership meetings. For instance, in the fall of 1947, a Boston attorney came to a Local 21 membership meeting and spoke on how to make sure workers injured on the job got their full monetary benefits. "Many workers fail to collect their full benefits for injuries received on the job because they do not obtain the facts and witnesses at the time of the accident," Harold Roitman, Boston attorney in the firm of Grant and Angoff, warned the membership.¹⁴² Other articles were devoted to answering commonly asked questions workers had or highlighting a speech an important person made at a Local 21 outing. In the late forties and early fifties, Local 21 brought in an interesting array of individuals to speak to workers at holiday celebrations. These

¹⁴⁰ "Population Changes Indicate Need for Careful Planning in New England," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 52 (September 13, 1947): 68. This information is corroborated in Melvyn Dubofsky's "Not So 'Turbulent Years': A New Look at the 1930s," in *Life and Labor: Dimensions of American Working-Class History*, eds. Charles Stephenson and Robert Asher (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 209;

¹⁴¹ Sara Douglas, *Labor's News: Unions and the Mass Media* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1986), 53.

¹⁴² "Act Quickly for Benefits on Injuries," *Local 21 Bulletin*, November 26, 1947 (emphasis in original.)

holiday gatherings usually attracted large numbers of leather workers and provided the perfect setting to educate the leather community on a myriad of issues.

One discussion topic, for example, was the lack of manufacturing opportunities in the city of Peabody and the state as a whole. To address unemployment problems in 1949, Local 21 formed a Council of the Unemployed “to launch a campaign for more liberal unemployment compensation in Massachusetts.” The committee aimed to boost maximum unemployment benefits, which, at \$30 for forty weeks, was not sufficient to cover the basic needs of unemployed leather workers.¹⁴³

While recognizing the necessity of education, the IFLWU also believed in supporting recreational opportunities for its members. In October 1946, the IFLWU joined with other CIO and AFL locals to create a Sports Federation, designed to foster inter-union competition. The IFLWU encouraged each local to set up a basketball, bowling, and softball league; to sponsor various sporting tournaments; and to use union publications to report scores. Sports were an integral part of Local 21 life. At the Eighteenth Biennial Convention of the IFLWU in the spring of 1950, the International praised Local 21 for its sports program, especially its bowling league which was the largest in the nation.¹⁴⁴

Local 21 saw its sports program as helping “to bring many of our members together and enabl[ing] them to appreciate more the good fellowship that they receive from this.”¹⁴⁵ In sponsoring a basketball team, a softball league, a golf tournament,

¹⁴³ “Form Council of Unemployed for Local 21,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, February 16, 1949, p. 4.

¹⁴⁴ “Convention Praises Local Sports Activity,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, June 28, 1950, p. 4.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

and a bowling league, Local 21 fulfilled its goal of promoting social advancement.¹⁴⁶ Through the sports program members could feel a part of a larger group. In talking about the rise of labor sports across the country in the mid thirties, the *Daily Worker*, a Communist Party publication, acknowledged “there’s a very valuable experience of workers uniting with spirit and efficiency to weld something for their own benefit.” The *Daily Worker* envisioned the day when labor sports would displace attendance at professional sporting events.¹⁴⁷ While maybe not displacing the importance of professional sport, labor sports became an integral part of Local 21’s life. The *Local 21 Bulletin* devoted its back page to discussing its sports programs—golf, softball, and bowling. The various tournaments and league games had an avid following, and banquets culminated all of the athletic contests. These sporting events built a feeling of camaraderie, a feeling that was cultivated and fostered by union leaders.

Prior to the formation of Local 21’s sports program, there were a few progressive tanneries in the Peabody area that did sponsor a baseball team; A.C. Lawrence was one of those companies.¹⁴⁸ Because there were so few local teams, the A.C. Lawrence team had to travel throughout the greater Northshore area to compete.¹⁴⁹ That changed when the union began to sponsor teams in the early forties. The union sporting events provided entertainment for the whole community and served to strengthen the bonds of solidarity unionism. Manufacturers quickly realized

¹⁴⁶ “Our Union Grows,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, January 19, 1949, p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ Lester Rodney, “Labor Sports Spreading in U.S.,” *Daily Worker* 13 (December 21, 1936): 8.

¹⁴⁸ “Tanning Baseball,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (September 2, 1933): 10. For a discussion of sports and corporate life see Gerald Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism: The Shoeworkers and Tanners of Endicott Johnson, 1890-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 50-51.

¹⁴⁹ “The A.C. Lawrence Company Baseball Team,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 38 (July 29, 1933): 10.

the benefits of organized sports for the workers. By 1945 many of the leather manufacturers also sponsored softball and bowling teams. The *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* said that by equipping and sponsoring their own team, the manufacturers had taken “a step [in the] right direction to promote and maintain cooperation and better understanding between labor and manufacturers.”¹⁵⁰

With these sporting activities the union and leather employers vied for workers’ attention and loyalty. While workers engaged in both union sports activities and company-sponsored sporting events, the manufacturers’ paternalistic advances proved insufficient in diminishing Local 21’s impact on workers’ lives. A close analysis of the activities of Local 21 illustrates that despite the efforts of big business, popular culture, and governmental regulations to limit and hinder unionization in the 1940s, the IFLWU, and more specifically Local 21, managed to ensure an alternative community for its members. With the financial and organizational backing of the CIO and the IFLWU, Local 21 implemented a host of programs and activities that served to equalize some of the economic and cultural discrepancies found in society. Although there was still a wealthy class and a laboring class in mid-twentieth century Peabody, the laboring class had started to attain more equality in terms of workplace rights, cultural and recreational opportunities, and social programs. Tannery owners were no longer the only ones on the golf course. Union members could be found on the links, as well.

¹⁵⁰ “Verza Tanning Company Peabody Massachusetts Championship Softball Team of 1945,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 50 (September 15, 1945): 19.

Local 21's programs and activities were not unusual for the period. Many of the goals of the IFLWU came directly from the CIO platform and the programs adopted by Local 21 were creations of the CIO.¹⁵¹ What distinguished Local 21 from other unions, however, was that it carried out so many of these initiatives and cultivated a worker culture for so long. Even after the disbanding of the IFLWU, Local 21 tried to maintain and advance programs and activities for its members well into the 1960s.

Under the auspices of the IFLWU and the CIO, Local 21, through the services and programs it provided, initiated a moral economy in the city of Peabody for the leather workers. In creating this moral economy, the union concerned itself with creating a better quality of life for the workers. They defined this quality of life not only in terms of workplace reforms but also in regards to leisure time, economic opportunity, and social activities. These rank and file workers understood that the "political democracy that exists in America, the right to choose between opposing candidates, falls far short. . . . The ultimate issue that has always been at the base of the progressive vision is genuine democracy, the rule of the people in all aspects of society, political, social and economic."¹⁵² With the leadership of Chamouris and later O'Keefe, Local 21 began to "chip away" at Peabody's social and economic inequities. Local 21 did not merely reflect the International's directives, but instead reflected and was shaped by the workers living in the Leather City. Former union

¹⁵¹ For more information about the CIO and its initiatives see Zieger, *CIO 1935-1955*; Douglas, *Labor's News*; Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*.

¹⁵² Andrew Levison, *The Working Class Majority* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1974), 290.

leader Al Quantros credited O’Keefe with being instrumental in initiating all the post-war union activities:

I think that was all part of Mike’s personality—all part of Mike’s bringing people together and getting people to know one another. He would get them all involved. He’s actually the one who started the bowling leagues and all of the leagues that we had. Of course, a lot of it came from some of the members who would say, “Why don’t we have one and he would go right out and push for it, work for it, and get it going.”¹⁵³

Cooperation, unity, and strong leadership epitomized Local 21 in the early post-World War II years. When O’Keefe listened to what the membership wanted in regards to social activities and workplace gains, he ensured the union’s viability in the postwar years. Local 21 tried to remain an essential organization in the leather workers’ lives. By appealing to workers’ social and physical needs, Local 21 did not allow itself to become irrelevant; nor did it allow the manufacturers to gain workers’ attention.

The leather workers in Peabody were active molders and shapers of their future. Their sense of activism and independence epitomized the true character of solidarity unionism. This becomes evident in Chapter Four, which details the way Local 21 handled its expulsion from the CIO and its ultimate divorce from the Fur Workers.

¹⁵³ Transcripts from Leather Soul, Al Quantros and the Union Hall 78.

CHAPTER FOUR:

The Repression of the Postwar Years: Local 21's Fight to Retain Solidarity Unionism

Even though [the labor movement] may always remain a minority movement in point of membership among workers, it will exercise the power that a minority always exercises in proportion to its clearness of purpose, its efficiency of organization, and the integrity of its directors. In as much as the labor left demonstrated courage and leadership on the issues of rank and file democracy, control of the workplace conditions, and gender and race equality, it had power to change them and American society. Its struggle for autonomy, dignity, and decent standards of living had and still has a heroic quality in a world where poverty, disease, and the increasing control of corporations of our daily lives are reality.¹

The decade of the forties was a progressive period in which Local 21 initiated a host of programs and activities. It also marked a crucial decade in labor history. At the end of World War II, labor's "aggregate numbers suggested real power."² By 1945, eleven million workers were organized—thirty-six percent of the labor force.³ Cost of living increases, war sacrifices, and wartime no-strike pledges all served to create post-war labor strife. In 1945, there were 4,750 strikes involving 1.34 million workers. Four million workers were involved in 4,985 strikes in 1946, the largest yearly total in American history.⁴ This strike wave cost the country 119.8 million

¹ Mary Beard, quoted in Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) xiv-xv.

² Irving Richter, *Labor's Struggles, 1945-1950: A Participant's View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

³ Solomon Barkin, "The Decline of the Labor Movement," in *American Labor: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Jerold S. Auerbach (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1978), 411. David Brody cites the number of unionized being 15 million after World War II. David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 157-158.

⁴ Gerald Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism: The Shoeworkers and Tanners of Endicott Johnson, 1890-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 194. For more information on the post-World War II strike wave see Melvyn Dubofksy, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

man-days of lost production.⁵ Leather workers were not immune to the national situation.

Although the leather workers comprising the IFLWU had adhered to a no-strike pledge and had accepted nominal wage increases through the war years, their docility was only temporary. When leather manufacturers tried to cut wages at the conclusion of the war, the leather workers united “to protect the gains already made, but also to carry on the fight for continued improvements until they were won.” In an unprecedented show of solidarity, 60,000 leather workers in eighteen states participated in a one-day work stoppage on November 15, 1945. Rallying support for this nationwide stoppage, Ben Gold told the leather workers that their union was vital:

[Leather] is an important, basic industry of our country. It requires training and skill to produce leather. It is injurious to the workers' health. The least the industry can do for its workers is to provide them with a decent livelihood. During the war years, the unscrupulous profiteers in our country, in violation of the President's Executive Order, and in violation of every decent principle of patriotism, raised the cost of living to such a degree that the millions of workers were unable to meet the high prices. As a result, the wages of the workers were actually reduced, compared with the rise in the cost of living. The millions of American workers throughout the country are therefore forced to demand that this great injustice be rectified. American labor demands a substantial wage increase.⁶

Leather workers wanted a thirty percent wage increase to offset the high and rapidly rising cost of living. Local 21 unanimously supported this stoppage. In a Western Union telegram to IFLWU president Ben Gold, Local 21's business manager Richard “Mike” O’Keefe said:

⁵ Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, 157-158.

⁶ “Memo from Ben Gold to Locals on Work Stoppage,” IFLWU 5676, Box 29, Folder 33 Work Stoppage, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M. P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University.

The leather workers of Peabody . . . unanimously support you as our spokesman and leader in demanding a decent living wage for the leather workers. We assure you of our determination to stand united with the rest of the leather workers in our international for a strong progressive union and a human standard of living for all workers.⁷

Leather workers' show of solidarity had its desired effect. Across the country, tannery bosses conceded to wage increases and other improvements.⁸

Labor in a host of other industries replicated the "overt show of force on the part of" leather workers. To thwart this rising tide of union militancy, the government, industry, and the public joined forces in "a growing mood of conservatism."⁹ To protect their profits big business, with the help of the government, began to undercut the labor movement by resorting to the tactic it had employed earlier in the century: red-baiting. Business and government "began a heated campaign against the communists who agitate and incite the workers to demand higher wages and who carry out strikes in order to ruin American industries."¹⁰

Historian Gary Gerstle traced the beginnings of the conservative, anti-labor tide to the strike wave of the mid thirties, which instigated a "middle-class backlash against organized labor."¹¹ And by the late thirties, feelings of intense anti-communism once again began to sweep the nation. "Anticommunism, by 1939, had become as deeply felt a sentiment in Catholic communities, [such as Peabody], as had

⁷ Western Union telegram to Ben Gold from Richard O'Keefe, November 15, 1945, IFLWU Manuscript Collection 5676, Box 29, Folder 32.

⁸ Ben Gold, *Memoirs* (New York: William Howard Publishers, 1988), 163-164.

⁹ Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism*, 194. See Joshua Freeman for more information about the Cold War and labor. Freeman, *In Transit*, 267.

¹⁰ Ann Fagan Ginger and David Christiano eds., *The Cold War Against Labor* (Berkeley: Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute, 1987), 236.

¹¹ Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 257.

devotion to Roosevelt and his new deal.”¹² By the postwar years, the witch-hunt was on.

Labor provided a special target for the Truman administration’s anti communism . . . Unions constituted one of the few institutions in U.S. society where Communists, although few in number, actually maintained a visible presence and provided a potential threat to stability. Anti communism offered a convenient way of drumming up labor support for Truman’s foreign policy, of isolating and discrediting militants within the working class, of further consolidating the power of union bureaucrats, and, just in case any of those failed, of identifying real Communists as scapegoats.¹³

Eradicating the Communist element from the labor movement became synonymous with internal security.¹⁴

To deal with “Big Labor,” the nickname in the forties for the AFL and CIO, the Eightieth Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act, also known as the Labor Management Relations Act, in 1947. Even though President Truman vetoed Taft-Hartley, Congress had enough support to override his veto. While Taft-Hartley “retained the Wagner Act’s framework of certification of unions through elections supervised by the NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] and its prohibitions against specified ‘unfair labor practices’ . . . it changed the thrust of the [Wagner Act]” by outlawing the closed shop, contract strikes, mass picketing, secondary boycotts “and other actions of solidarity.”¹⁵

Called the slave labor act by labor, Taft-Hartley ushered in a new period in the American labor movement. In order to curb labor successfully, though, the

¹² Ibid., 286.

¹³ George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 190.

¹⁴ Ellen W. Schrecker, “McCarthyism and the Labor Movement: The Role of the State,” in Steve Rosswurm ed. *The CIO’s Left-Led Unions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 140.

¹⁵ Richter, *Labor’s Struggles*, vii.

government needed to form a tighter bond with the CIO. This did not prove difficult; the government offered the CIO representation in federal legislation if the CIO helped the government in its quest to further its foreign policy and contain unrest on the home front. By unrest at home the government meant labor, specifically labor with ties to the Communist Party. The CIO became a willing accomplice. By 1948 the CIO adamantly acknowledged that it would not permit Communists to be part of its organization. CIO President Philip Murray chose to close his convention remarks in 1948 by verifying his anti-communist stance.

Under no circumstances am I going to permit . . . Communist infiltration into the national CIO movement. I make this statement with sincere conviction based upon a knowledge that has come down to me through the years, of the damaging effects, the devastating effects, the degrading effects that special outside interests, particularly the Communist Party, may have upon the labor movement in the USA.¹⁶

In making this statement, Murray engaged in selective amnesia. He chose to disregard that the CIO, from its inception, had willingly allowed Communists, who made up fifteen to twenty percent of the CIO, to flourish within its ranks and that they had been instrumental in allowing the CIO to attain many of its goals for worker equality. The CIO's leftist fringe included some of the most effective trade unions in terms of bargaining for contract and wage concessions. "Even some of the pro-Soviet left's fiercest critics have conceded that the Communist-influenced unions were among the most egalitarian, the most honest and well administered, the most racially progressive, and the most class conscious."¹⁷

¹⁶ *CIO News* 11 (November 29, 1948): 3.

¹⁷ Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 374. See also Rosswurm, *CIO's Left-Led Unions*, Introduction; James R. Prickett, "Communism and Trade Unions: An Exchange," *Industrial Relations* 13 (1974): 219-243. Walter Galenson presents a contrary

The federation, however, broadly defined its policy of ousting the Communist element. Mirroring the government's policy, the CIO labeled "all opposition to the imperialistic policy labeled Cold War, with its aggression abroad and its repression at home" as Communist.¹⁸ Ridding the labor movement of the Red influence became the top priority of the government and the CIO. Unions adhering to a Communist philosophy "were too important to ignore, and the state was too strong to resist."¹⁹ In accordance with a directive from U.S. policymakers, the CIO began a campaign to oust left-wing unions from its midst. In all, the CIO expelled eleven unions on charges that they were Communist dominated. The IFLWU was one of the eleven unions. The ouster of the IFLWU from the CIO had many consequences. Most importantly, it eventually led to the dismantling of the International union. It did not, however, signal the end for Local 21. Exploring the downfall of the IFLWU highlights the dynamic, democratic forces within Local 21. By remaining true to its origins as a community-based union, Local 21 relied on its strong leadership and sense of solidarity to persevere through a difficult time. By 1955, when the CIO and AFL merged, Local 21 had returned to its roots—an independent union.

A closer inspection of the events that transpired between 1939 and 1955 reinforces the reputation the local had earned for offering its members something

argument: that trade unions can only have a limited function in a democratic, capitalistic society and that American Communist union members "have never professed their devotion to American democratic governments." Walter Galenson, "Communists and Trade Union Democracy," *Industrial Relations* 13 (1974): 228-236.

¹⁸ Ginger and Christiano, *The Cold War Against Labor*, 242. See also Zieger, *CIO*, 277; "CIO Again Moves Against Reds," *CIO News* 13 (February 20, 1950): 4.

¹⁹ Schrecker, "McCarthyism and the Labor Movement," 140. For more information about the percentage of communist members in the CIO, see Douglas P. Seaton, *Catholics and Radicals: The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists and the American Labor Movement, from Depression to Cold War* (London: Associated University Presses, 1981), 187.

other than business unionism. During this tumultuous decade, Local 21 battled on various fronts—within the local itself, the community, the state and federal governments, and the International—and yet managed to retain its sense of duty to its Peabody constituents. While simultaneously handling a series of crises, Local 21, under the leadership of O’Keefe, kept the needs of the leather workers at the forefront of its mission and implemented a host of programs and initiatives that moved the union closer to realizing its goal of revamping society economically, socially, culturally, and politically.²⁰

While the affiliation between the CIO and IFLWU was strong for many years, the post-World War II years were difficult for labor. The anti-communist sentiments expressed by the CIO leadership in 1948 were reaffirmed at the Cleveland convention in 1949. Convention delegates “voted to put the skids on the Commies, to bar them from membership on the CIO Executive Board and to pave the way for expulsion of unions which adhere to the party line in preference to CIO policy.”²¹ In denying the charge that it had swung to the right, the CIO leadership explained that it was still “left of center,” but it could no longer tolerate the Communist influence if it wanted to have any voice in swaying Congress to enact labor-friendly legislation.²²

In private after the 1949 CIO convention, CIO president Murray and ex-president John Lewis told the IFLWU’s Ben Gold that the CIO could not spend its time fighting against Taft-Hartley as Gold wished because it “would bring the CIO

²⁰ See Chapter Three for a discussion of these programs and initiatives.

²¹ “Communists Using ‘Big Lie’ Technique,” *CIO News* 12 (December 5, 1949): 4. See also *CIO News* 12 (November 7, 1949): 3; Max Kampelman, *The Communist Party vs. The C.I.O.: A Study in Power Politics* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1957), 158-159; Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, 211; “CIO Leaders Map Fight on Leftists,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1949.

²² “CIO’s ‘Swing to Right’ a Myth,” *CIO News* 13 (March 6, 1950): 4.

into conflict with the government.” Knowing that the House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities (formerly known as the Dies Committee) would call the CIO for a hearing, Lewis told Gold that the CIO had to be ready.

We have to have the speeches of our major leaders down in black and white in order to wipe the floor with the Dies Committee when they dare to call us! . . . Our goal is the machine! We must have our representatives in Congress and in the Senate who will represent the millions of workers and curb the reactionaries, the enemies of the workers.²³

To be a player in post-war political life, the CIO claimed it had to make concessions. One of those concessions was cleaning its house of the left-led unions. In order to preserve what it characterized as “the greater good, the CIO leadership was willing to sacrifice a few unions for the benefit of other CIO affiliates.”²⁴

The IFLWU made an easy target for the CIO since its president, Ben Gold, was a declared member of the Communist Party. The CIO, however, said that Gold’s affiliation with the union was not enough to “sustain the charges against” the union. To find more evidence that the IFLWU was adhering to Communist doctrine, the CIO conducted a detailed investigation of the IFLWU’s papers and policy statements. As a result of this investigation, the CIO determined that there was more than enough information to tie the IFLWU to the Communist Party. In making its case, the CIO concluded that the purpose of the Communist Party, which has from “its inception been to establish a new order of society—‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’—which would be controlled by and operated in the interests of the working class, has been the purpose of the IFLWU.” Instead of being “genuinely devoted to the advancement of

²³ Ginger and Christiano, eds., *The Cold War*, 302.

²⁴ Seaton, *Catholics and Radicals*, 188.

the cause of American labor and American democracy,” the CIO contended that the IFLWU was intent on undermining the basic democratic structure of the United States because its “policies and activities are determined by the Communist party.”²⁵ The committee explained that the union’s official publication, *Fur and Leather Worker*, rife with Marxist and Stalinist doctrine, “offered some amusing reading material to ‘prove’ that Soviet Russia is a worker’s paradise.”²⁶

Some of the charges the CIO made were correct. The IFLWU did support a socialist economic system, but coupled with a democratic government; the International believed this form of governmental structure would allow working people to experience a better quality of life. Local 21, in its quest to create a more equitable society, characterized as a moral economy, also espoused a socialist economic system that favored a redistribution of income “via progressive taxation, welfare spending, public works projects, and the regulation of financial and labor markets.”²⁷ This, however, was not a shift in thinking for either of these labor organizations. In saying that it advocated a socialist economic philosophy, Local 21 adamantly denied it supported communism. Characterizing communism as “a blight on the American picture and throughout the world,” O’Keefe declared communism to be “a dictatorship and neither Stalin nor Franco nor any other dictator can ever expect

²⁵ “Report of Executive Board Committee Appointed by President Murray to Investigate Charges Against the International Fur and Leather Workers Union,” Archives Union File 6046, Box 35, Folder 5 Congress of Industrial Organizations Community Trials, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M. P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University.

²⁶ *CIO News* 13 (June 19, 1950): 2. See also “Report of Executive Board Committee Appointed by President Murray to Investigate Charges Against the International Fur and Leather Workers Union,” Archives Union File 6046, Box 35, Folder 5.

²⁷ Gerstle, *Working Class Capitalism*, 181-182. The Woonsocket, Rhode Island unionists that Gerstle studied labeled this philosophy industrial democracy.

to have the people swallow their form of government.”²⁸ O’Keefe explained that Local 21’s governing philosophy was to “establish real unity [based] on a sound democratic principle. Everyone in the Union is on the same basis—regardless of color, political belief or religion—and everyone has a right to speak up at meetings, help decide policies and state his differences without fear or favor.”²⁹

Regardless of how the IFLWU, and Local 21, described its political philosophy, the CIO Executive Board officially charged the International on November 5, 1949, with carrying out activities and policies “consistently directed toward the achievement of the program or the purposes of the Communist Party rather than the objectives set forth in the Constitution of the CIO.” The CIO set April 18, 1950, as the date for the formal hearing for the IFLWU. After Gold requested a postponement until after the annual IFLWU convention, the CIO rescheduled the hearing for June 1, 1950. When June 1 arrived, however, instead of sending representatives to the hearing, the IFLWU sent a telegram that read:

Resolution adopted at 18th Biennial Convention of International Fur and Leather Workers Union rejects charges by CIO officials against our union as false and dishonest. It rejects kangaroo hearing set by CIO officials against our union. It condemns raiding, splitting, union wrecking, and strikebreaking directed by officials of National CIO. It condemns policy of CIO officials as declared by Carey to unite with fascists in third world war. In view above, convention decided overwhelmingly to disaffiliate from CIO with only three opposing votes. Our union stands for united labor movement of AFL, CIO, Miners union, railroad brotherhoods and all independent unions on policy of trade union democracy and original policies of CIO against war and fascism for security, democracy, and peace.³⁰

²⁸ “Officers of Local 21 Deny Gold Defense Cash Asked,” *Salem Evening News*, March 6, 1954, p. 1; Richard B. O’Keefe, “Constitution Weakened,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, June 27, 1951, p. 2.

²⁹ Richard B. O’Keefe, “Why We Move Ahead,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, January 28, 1953, p. 2.

³⁰ “Report of Executive Board Committee Appointed by President Murray to Investigate Charges Against the International Fur and Leather Workers Union,” Archives Union File 6046, Box 35, Folder 5.

With this telegram, the IFLWU severed its connection with the CIO and confirmed its commitment to those ideals it had stood for since its merger in 1939: equality for all individuals regardless of race, religion and ethnicity and a better quality of life for the working person. Gold explained that the CIO no longer shared similar goals or a sense of democracy:

The expulsions of the progressive trade unions, is nothing but an active demonstration by Phil Murray and his lieutenants of their readiness and willingness to silence the voice of progressive trade unionism and to crush resistance on the part of progressive labor against the efforts of reaction to force upon labor its war program and war preparations.³¹

After reading Gold's telegram, the CIO investigating committee determined to proceed with the hearing despite the failure of the IFLWU to appear. After going over all the evidence, the CIO investigating committee recommended that "the Executive Board exercise the powers granted to it . . . and revoke the certificate of affiliation heretofore granted to the IFLWU and expel it from the CIO."³² Without a dissenting vote, the CIO officially expelled the IFLWU from the federation on June 15, 1950.

The United States government validated the CIO's findings when the subcommittee on Labor and Labor Management Relations, under the guidance of Hubert Humphrey, presented the CIO report on the IFLWU before the Eighty-second Congress. Humphrey characterized the report as being significant for two reasons: "[it] demonstrate[s] how an alert and democratically governed organization destroyed Communist infiltration by due process, [and it] illuminate[s] the nature of Communist

³¹ "Fur Workers Quit CIO on Trial Eve," *CIO News* 13 (May, 29, 1950): 7. See also "CIO Committee May Urge IFLWU Ouster," *The Leader-Republican-Gloversville and Johnstown*, June 15, 1950. Historian Art Preis agrees with this assessment of the CIO. See Art Preis, *Twenty Years of the CIO: Labor's Giant Step* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), xviii-xix.

³² "Report of Executive Board Committee Appointed by President Murray".

strategy as a conspiracy to subvert unions as democratic institutions and to convert them into bases for the extension of Communist power.”³³ Humphrey’s words against the IFLWU sealed the international’s fate: it would survive intact for only another five years. Gold, in his memoirs, acknowledged that withdrawing from the CIO before it was expelled made the IFLWU an independent union, separated from the mainstream labor movement. “This separation weakened the union. Our isolation from the labor movement began a process which severely affected the International, resulting in vital losses of membership because of raids on the leather locals by other unions.”³⁴ This was not the case with Local 21.

The Peabody local managed to outlast the IFLWU because of its leadership. Under O’Keefe, Local 21 used honesty and full disclosure to remain strong and united throughout this turbulent time. O’Keefe understood that solidarity was key to the union’s survival. By keeping members informed and updated on the problems with the labor federation, the elected officials of Local 21 created a feeling that all leather workers were a team. Local 21 did not wait for the local media or the International to educate its membership. When the CIO began pressuring the IFLWU about its Communist members, Local 21 immediately discussed the controversy in its monthly publication. Through the *Local 21 Bulletin* union officials, most notably O’Keefe, maintained a steady dialogue with the membership.

³³ 82nd Congress 1st Session, Document #89 Communist Domination of Certain Unions, Report of the Subcommittee on Labor and Labor –Management Relations of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, United States Senate, 82nd Congress, 1st Session on Communist Domination of Certain Unions, Presented by Mr. Humphrey, October 19, 1951, Archives Union File 6046, Box 35, Folder 5. See also “House Investigates IFLWU,” *Leather and Shoes*, September 11, 1948.

³⁴ Furriers Joint Council 50 Years of Progress 1912-1962, IFLWU 5676, Box 32, Folder 6.

In addition, Local 21 did not just follow the International's lead in seceding from the CIO; it had its own reasons for wanting to leave the CIO. The Peabody union did not like many of the policies enacted by the CIO. In a strongly worded statement in the *Bulletin*, O'Keefe said that Local 21 refused to "knuckle under to the political thinking and dictatorship of this ruling crowd [in the CIO] We have a union where we decide our own policies. We have full guarantees of our personal rights and liberties. No one dictates to us."³⁵ The leadership of Local 21 made it clear to the membership that the problems between the CIO and International began before the Communist investigation in 1950. "The trouble is that the national leadership of the AFL and CIO have tied themselves so closely to the Truman administration and its policies that they don't dare do anything effective. Labor has lost its bargaining power in Washington, and the men in Congress from both parties know it."³⁶ A similar development occurred within individual states. O'Keefe detailed how at the state level, the CIO had failed to support some crucial benefits for Local 21's membership in 1949.

Since last January our Union has been carrying on a vigorous campaign to increase benefits and extend duration of unemployment compensation. We filed a bill (House 905) in the state legislature last December to boost benefits from \$25 to \$30 per week for single workers and to increase duration of benefits from 23 weeks to 40. Realizing the importance of this measure, we presented it first to the state CIO and urged that organization to introduce it. The CIO refused to do it and suggested we introduce it instead. Since that day, although the unemployment situation has become more critical every week, the state CIO has actually opposed our program to give needed aid to many tens of thousands of idle workers in Massachusetts.³⁷

³⁵ Richard B. O'Keefe, "Wrong Union Policies," *Local 21 Bulletin*, December 21, 1949, p. 2.

³⁶ Richard B. O'Keefe, "Time For Action," *Local 21 Bulletin*, July 31, 1951, p. 2.

³⁷ Richard B. O'Keefe, "State CIO Fails in Its Duty," *Local 21 Bulletin*, August 31, 1949, p. 2.

O’Keefe explained that the CIO had sacrificed its goals and objectives for the working person to appease politicians at all levels of government. As a result of the CIO’s reversal in position, Local 21 no longer wanted to take advice from an organization that was focused on aiding the business community and government rather than the worker. Historian Art Preis shares a similar opinion about the postwar CIO: “At every step of the way they [the CIO] sought to subordinate the interests of the workers to the dictates of the capitalist state or entrust the workers’ interests to the decisions of the capitalist government.”³⁸

In outlining the CIO’s transgressions, O’Keefe told the membership that the IFLWU would not take any action against the CIO—like withdrawal—unless it had the members’ approval. At the 1949 IFLWU district conference of the twelve New England locals, delegates adopted a resolution solidifying their conviction that all union members have a part in decision-making:

Our union’s policies are determined by our membership. At the same time, our members and locals have always been guaranteed complete freedom of thought and political action. This democratic principle makes us united and strong. It assures us that the welfare of our members will always come first in all our activities. . . . We oppose any attempt by the controlling group on the national CIO executive board to dictate the thinking of our membership.³⁹

Although Local 21 did not want to divide the labor movement by leaving the CIO, protecting the workers remained the union’s ultimate objective. In describing the CIO controversy to the rank and file, O’Keefe was frank. While he admitted that it was unfortunate that the split from the CIO would divide the labor movement, he did not see any alternative. “We would much prefer that the CIO went back to its former

³⁸ Preis, *Twenty Years of the CIO*, xviii-xix.

³⁹ “We Demand Right to Set Our Policies,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, October 26, 1949, p. 1.

democratic program. But rather than see our union abandon its democratic policies in order to stay in the CIO, we prefer to be out.”⁴⁰ Local 21’s membership believed what O’Keefe said about the CIO; they demonstrated their trust by voting overwhelmingly to re-elect O’Keefe as business manager in the 1949 spring election. The landslide victory he received “testified as to the extreme confidence the union members have in [his] stewardship.”⁴¹

Because O’Keefe had such strong support, it is not surprising that at a Local 21 membership meeting scheduled directly after the IFLWU’s Eighteenth Biennial Convention in May 1950, where the International decided to leave the CIO, the Local 21 membership voted—with only seven members in opposition—to support the convention’s decision of “withdrawal of our union from the CIO in protest against open scab-herding, strike breaking, and dictatorship.”⁴² O’Keefe assured the local’s membership that no longer being affiliated with the CIO would not alter the union’s goals and objectives. “Even when our union was part of the CIO, we set our own independent course on negotiations, organization, etc. The rulers of the CIO treated us as independent. CIO didn’t organize for us. They never gave us a dime.”⁴³

Regardless of whether O’Keefe was telling the truth about the monetary arrangement between Local 21 and the CIO, the relationship between the two organizations was not as simple as the labor leader proclaimed. Because of the CIO’s extensive administrative network, it had more resources available to develop programs and

⁴⁰ Richard O’Keefe, “Important Convention,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, May 10, 1950, p. 2.

⁴¹ “Dave O’Neil Takes Over As President of Local 21,” *Peabody Times*, April 1, 1949, p. 3.

⁴² “Action by Convention Supported,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, June 28, 1950, p. 1. This was standard procedure. After every IFLWU convention, delegates were required to return to their local and report to a membership meeting, and the membership then voted on the convention decision.

⁴³ Richard O’Keefe, “We Gain Strength,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, June 28, 1950.

activities that affiliated unions could adopt. Local 21 did use the CIO programs as models for its activities. However, maybe by 1949 the Peabody union had learned enough from this labor federation. Whatever the reality was, O'Keefe tried to downplay the significance of the CIO expulsion.

O'Keefe's leadership role during the CIO controversy was key. During a confusing period, O'Keefe kept union members focused on the local's ideal: creating a better society. His message did not change: leaving the CIO was a difficult decision, but the federation had become too dependent on Washington's opinion and goodwill. If O'Keefe had wavered in his commitment to the International, the membership, most likely, would have followed. Decisiveness was of paramount importance. As an organic intellectual, O'Keefe inherently understood that "when existing institutions and organizations prove inadequate for the expression of rank and file aspirations . . . alternative vehicles of contestation" must be devised.⁴⁴ It was time to leave the CIO fold.

While there was much information in the *Local 21 Bulletin* about the situation with the CIO and Local 21's feelings on the disaffiliation, interestingly enough, the local media ignored the controversy. Even after the CIO expelled the IFLWU, local newspaper accounts still used the CIO label when referring to Local 21. The only published account of the expulsion was in an editorial by Dr. Goldstein, a Catholic priest, in *The Pilot*. Goldstein admonished the IFLWU for its Communist influences and said, "when trade unions become direct or indirect instruments for furthering the

⁴⁴ George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 13

Communist cause, loyal citizens should quit them or their existence should be outlawed.”⁴⁵ Why the rest of the local media did not discuss this issue is unclear; communism was certainly a concern on the local level. For instance, as far back as 1933, Peabodyites involved with the Rotary Club and area churches—to name a few organizations—had been indoctrinated into the evils of communism. Early in 1933 the Reverend Arthur Johnson, of Ipswich, Massachusetts, warned the Peabody Rotary Club about the “seven planks named by Karl Marx as being desirable for Communists [and] practically in force in this country. . . . We are in the throes of a bloodless social revolution.”⁴⁶ The Reverend Clinton Macy, minister at St. Peter’s Episcopalian Church in Salem, also did not hesitate to integrate the hazards of communism into his sermons. Although communism most definitely was a topic on Peabodyites’ minds, because this controversy peaked just a little before McCarthyism became a real concern, maybe anti-communist sentiment had not yet reached a newsworthy level in the Northshore community.

Another explanation for the lack of local media coverage might be that Local 21’s programs and initiatives in the latter part of the forties favorably impressed the community. In addition to the assortment of activities developed by the local, wages had also increased on a yearly basis.⁴⁷ This was a point that even the CIO conceded. In a report that CIO President Murray prepared for the 1949 convention, he disclosed that only two industrial unions had won wage increases in 1948. The IFLWU was one

⁴⁵ “Dr. Goldstein Column,” *The Pilot*, December 10, 1949, p. 4.

⁴⁶ “Peabody Paragraphs,” *Salem Evening News*, March 28, 1933.

⁴⁷ Steve Rosswurm ed., *The CIO’s Left-Led Unionism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 9, 12.

of the two unions.⁴⁸ According to a State Department of Labor report issued in the spring of 1948, Peabody's industrial workers, of which leather workers made up the majority, led all other cities in the state in average weekly wages.⁴⁹ Residents of the greater Peabody community most likely looked at Local 21 as a savior because of its wage gains. Maybe this expulsion was too intangible to affect community members' opinion of the union.

Whatever the reason, the CIO expulsion did not become an issue in Peabody. Instead, in the fall of 1949 local newspapers, when they discussed Local 21, discussed the union's 25-week strike at Kirstein Leather and Kirstein Tanning, two separate plants owned by David Kirstein, employing 350 workers together.⁵⁰ With this work stoppage, Local 21 once again demonstrated its tenacity and sense of solidarity unionism. Relying on direct action—the strike—leather workers held firm and refused to give in to the demands of the company.⁵¹ In the end, the leather factory conceded and ratified an agreement based on the “same terms as demanded by the workers when they went on strike.”⁵² In his monthly editorial in the *Local 21 Bulletin*, O'Keefe boasted that the “great Kirstein strike victory is a milestone in the history of our union in New EnglandIf we had been like other CIO unions that pride themselves on being right wing we probably would have sat down with the employer

⁴⁸ “1, 500, 000 Total Gain in New England,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, February 18, 1948, p. 1.

⁴⁹ “Peabody Leads in Weekly Pay,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, April 21, 1948, p. 1. In 1949 Peabody had 113 industrial establishments and 78 of them were in the leather industry. These 113 industries employed 6,376 individuals and out of that pool, the leather industry employed 5,000. Only 1,300 were employed in other industries. John Wells, Report on the Leather Industry of Peabody and Salem, Massachusetts and the South Essex Sewerage District for the Salem-Peabody Area Tanners (SPAT). (no date for this report)

⁵⁰ “Agreement Ends 25-Week Strike at Kirstein Plants,” *Salem Evening News*, October 27, 1949, p. 1.

⁵¹ Staughton Lynd, *Solidarity Unionism: Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Below* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1992), 25.

⁵² “Kirstein Strikers Victorious,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, November 23, 1949, p. 1.

and agreed to a speed-up Let's continue devoting ourselves to our members' welfare and stronger contracts."⁵³

As evidenced by the Kirtein strike, the International's troubles with the federation did not deter Local 21's ability to advocate successfully for the rank and file. Once the IFLWU was officially expelled from the CIO, Local 21 still managed some major successes. The biggest accomplishment was the winning of the Peabody A.C. Lawrence leather workers into its fold—something the union had been trying to do since its inception in 1933. On May 16, 1951, the workers at A.C. Lawrence, Peabody's biggest leather complex, voted to abandon their company union—by an overwhelming margin of 1,160 votes out of 1,350 cast—and join with the IFLWU as Local 33.⁵⁴ O'Keefe credited Local 21's track record in winning wage concessions and benefits as the key reason rank and filers at A.C. Lawrence decided to give up their company union.

In the face of today's wage cutting, anti-union drive by industry, it is clear that all leather workers must unite to defend their conditions and win new gains in wages. Our workers remember that we did not start making real gains in wages and conditions in this area until we went out and united into one union 85 percent of all tannery workers in the United States. The importance of A.C. Lawrence in this area is such that the workers there and our own members make the best progress only if we are all united in one union.⁵⁵

O'Keefe credited three factors as crucial in swaying A.C. Lawrence employees to join with the IFLWU: Local 21 was a clean, democratic union (although

⁵³ "A Great Victory," *Local 21 Bulletin*, November 23, 1949, p. 2.

⁵⁴ "A.C. Lawrence Workers Join with IFLWU," *Salem Evening News*, May 17, 1951. See also "Peabody Group Switches Unions," *Boston Herald*, May 17, 1951; "Join Our Strong Union to Win New Benefits, Fight Speed-up Plan," *Local 21 Bulletin*, May 23, 1951, p.1. Although Local 33 was given its own identifying label, it was in reality a part of Local 21, sharing office space, union officials, and a labor publication. It, however, voted on issues separately from Local 21.

⁵⁵ "Union Spurns Drive to Organize ACL, Defeat Company Program," *Local 21 Bulletin*, January 25, 1950, p. 1.

the CIO certainly did not agree with this assessment); wage and contract benefits were significant; and members had complete freedom to determine their own affairs. As O'Keefe reiterated in the pages of the *Local 21 Bulletin*, "No one seeks to dictate to us how we think or how we run our local."⁵⁶ That was a freedom that members of A.C. Lawrence's company union did not have.

Local 21 union officials characterized the organization of A.C. Lawrence employees as a "victory for tannery workers everywhere" because the majority of Peabody's leather workers would now "represent a united front to the employers." Any wage gains that Peabody leather workers could expect to make would help leather workers throughout the country. While citing past achievements—Local 21 led all industrial unions in New England in getting wage increases, job security, and other contract benefits—O'Keefe predicted further advances as a result of the dissolution of the A.C. Lawrence company union. Fighting A.C. Lawrence's speed-up programs and winning increased job security for all leather workers were the short-term goals of the union in the spring of 1951.⁵⁷

O'Keefe's words were not just idle rhetoric. In its first contract negotiation Local 21 reversed a no wage increase trend at A.C. Lawrence and won a general wage increase of eleven cents an hour, plus other substantial benefits in June 1952. "For the first time in the history of the Swift organization [A.C. Lawrence was a part of the Swift conglomeration], a union succeeded in ending the system of the 25

⁵⁶ Ibid. See also Richard B. O'Keefe, "Welcome, A.C.L. Workers," *Local 21 Bulletin*, May 23, 1951.

⁵⁷ O'Keefe, "Welcome, ACL Workers," p. 2.

percent wage reduction forced upon the workers under the corporation bonus incentive plan.”⁵⁸

In addition to gathering A.C. Lawrence employees into the IFLWU fold and winning major concessions for them, Local 21 continued to win concessions from the National Leather Manufacturers Association, which represented the rest of the major tanneries in the city.⁵⁹ The union, because of its tenacity, won a fifth-round wage increase in August 1950. Ruling against the nine-cent wage cut employers wanted to institute, an arbitrator for the case justified the wage increase “on the basis of the rising cost of living, the higher productivity of North Shore leather workers, high profits of tanners, and post-war wage gains by [Local 21] in other parts of the country.”⁶⁰ And in July 1952, an arbitrator granted a six-cent boost to the 6,000 workers in Locals 20, 21, 22, and 270.

Breaking through the wage cutting or no-increase drive of New England soft goods industries [Local 21] won general increases . . . for most of our leather workers in the district, boosting them to among the highest paid industrial workers in the area The victories—bringing all Peabody area workers up to an average wage of \$1.83 per hour—came in the face of the fact that leather workers have suffered from extremely heavy unemployment for more than a year.⁶¹

Although tannery owners complained that they had lost money over the past twelve months, the arbitrator found the strength of the IFLWU elsewhere in the country was such that similar increases were being won from competing tanners. The arbitrator said that “the welfare of the workers was a paramount consideration” and the rank

⁵⁸ 1954 IFLWU Convention Report, IFLWU 5676, Box 6, Folder 10.

⁵⁹ See Chapter Three for background on the Manufacturers Association.

⁶⁰ “Three Cent Gain for North Shore in Arbitration,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, August 30, 1950, p. 1.

⁶¹ “Union Defeats Wage-Cut Plans of N.E. Industries; 7, 500 Workers Benefit,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, July 23, 1952, p. 1-2.

and file should not “bear the necessary risks of operating a tannery.” In making his decision in favor of the union request, the arbitrator pointed out that the proportion of labor costs to total costs is relatively low in leather and that in determining “success or failure (of a tannery) the price of hides plus judgment and luck in dealings in the hide market would appear to be more significant than a six cent increase in the price of labor.”⁶² Because of these gains, the IFLWU led all other industrial unions in New England in wage increases, job security, and other contract benefits.⁶³

Other groups noticed the gains Local 21 had made against seemingly insurmountable odds—disaffiliation from the CIO, unemployment, and a slowdown in the leather industry. The production and maintenance workers of the Winslow Potato Chip Company in Marblehead asked O’Keefe if they could join Local 21 “insist[ing] they wanted our union [Local 21] because of our record of winning benefits and protecting our membership.” Although O’Keefe tried to convince the workers to pick a food union, they “unanimously insisted they wanted the IFLWU.”⁶⁴

Even though Local 21 made significant gains in the early fifties, more problems were on the horizon. These problems had their roots in the 1949-1950 CIO conflict and the nation’s growing fear of communism.⁶⁵ Historian Steve Rosswurm argues that the expulsions from the CIO were “devastating for both trade unionism and American working people” for a number of reasons.⁶⁶ The ostracization of these eleven unions created an atmosphere in the United States that denounced dissent and

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ O’Keefe, “Welcome, A.C.L. Workers,” p. 2.

⁶⁴ “Our Local is in the Chips,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, December 24, 1952, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Zieger, *CIO*, 374.

⁶⁶ Rosswurm, *CIO’s Left-Led Unions*, 13.

encouraged conformity. People and organizations questioning U.S. foreign policy easily fell victim to red-baiting attacks and persecution. Rosswurm believes that “the drive against left unionists, both in the expelled unions and those in remaining CIO unions, eliminated and/or silenced a generation of shop-floor militants and helped solidify the developing ‘workplace rule of law’ and trade union reliance on the federal government.”⁶⁷ Local 21’s problem, however, was its refusal to silence itself. Because of its sense of solidarity unionism, Local 21 could not remain inactive (and quiet) when forces—cultural, political, social, economic—sought to undermine workers’ quest for a more democratic future. This inability to be more docile in the early fifties put Local 21 squarely in the spotlight of McCarthyism.

While Local 21’s problems with anti-communist government agencies started with the CIO expulsion of the IFLWU, its vocal condemnation of Big Business during the early fifties did not help the situation. Instead of trying to keep a lower profile as anti-communism raged through the country, Local 21 utilized every opportunity to blame Big Business and its role in U.S. foreign and domestic policy for the high cost of living and drastic unemployment the country was experiencing.⁶⁸ O’Keefe, through the Local’s paper, described Big Business as “systematically robbing the American people through passage of unfair laws and control of the whole machinery of government.”⁶⁹ He blamed unemployment on the greedy practices of business owners and argued no place in America was immune from this unemployment crisis, least of all New England.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 13-14. See also Schrecker, “McCarthyism and the Labor Movement.”

⁶⁸ Rosswurm, *CIO’s Left-Led Unions*, 13.

⁶⁹ Richard B. O’Keefe, “Time For Action,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, July 31, 1951, p. 2.

O'Keefe's assessment of the unemployment situation was correct. "With its heavy concentration of textile, leather, and machinery factories," New England found itself in a precarious employment situation by January 1950.⁷⁰ In testimony before the Senate Committee on Public Works, John Edelman, the CIO Textile Workers Washington representative, acknowledged that while the rest of the nation was experiencing rising employment levels, "New England's key industries have been slipping badly in the last 25 years. Textiles and leather goods, once the main foundation of this region's economy, have been migrating to other areas. . . . In February of this year, when unemployment in the nation amounted to 7.6 percent of the total labor force, the rate of unemployment in New England was approximately 9.5 percent."⁷¹ By 1951, unemployment in the leather tanning business reached its highest level ever.⁷² Local 21 estimated that one third of its membership was unemployed.⁷³

Using the Local's newspaper, O'Keefe tried to help workers understand why they did not have a job. He said, "high taxes and high prices are reducing the people's buying power, while industry reaps profits that are at the highest level in history." In describing the slowdown in the leather industry, O'Keefe described the ploys Big Business used to make quick money:

⁷⁰ "Labor Developments in 1949," *Monthly Labor Review* 71 (February 1950): 127.

⁷¹ "Study of Resources Urged for New England," *CIO News*, July 10, 1950, p. 8. See also "Labor Developments," p. 127; "Development of the New England Economy," *Monthly Labor Review* 73 (October 1951): 458-459.

⁷² *Local 21 Bulletin*, October 31, 1951, p. 1. This slowdown in the leather industry only worsened. According to the Census of Manufactures, between 1947 and 1960, the U.S. leather tanning industry witnessed a twenty-five percent drop in output and a forty percent loss in jobs from 51,500 in 1947 to 30,200 in 1960. Patrick E. Gorman, "The Impact of Automation," in *American Labor: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Jerold S. Auerbach (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1978), 458.

⁷³ "Industry Fearful of Price Fluctuations," *The Boston Sunday Express*, October 17, 1948.

Planning to get rich on the Korean bloodshed, the shoe industry increased production ten percent in 1950 and early 1951 and boosted prices more than sixteen percent. The industry produced 25 million more pairs of shoes than people could buy with their cut-rate dollars. Shoe plants closed down or cut back production, forcing tanneries to lay off workers Another factor has been the attempt of the big meat packers to reap huge profits out of hides.⁷⁴

This explanation of the circular effect of employer greed showed Peabody's rank and file how America's capitalist system worked: each action had a significant reaction that usually affected the worker. The rank and file did not need to look too far to see the immediate consequences of Big Business: leather workers were being laid off and those who could find employment landed jobs at the General Electric plant in Lynn, which was experiencing a war-time boost due to the fighting in Korea and growing fears of Communism on the homefront. Ironically, these leather workers, as part of the IFLWU's political platform, had denounced America's role in any militaristic conflict. In commenting on the situation in the *Bulletin*, O'Keefe said "it is a sad state of affairs when we must rely upon production of weapons of destruction in order to have jobs for our people." O'Keefe blamed the situation on Big Business which he said was orchestrating Washington's every move. "The war program is being used to pile up higher and higher profits, at the expense of the people."⁷⁵ Unpatriotic sentiments like this, in the early fifties, were harbingers of trouble. It was only a matter of time before Local 21 and O'Keefe would be scrutinized for Communist sentiments.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ "Taxes, Prices Kill Jobs," *Local 21 Bulletin*, November 28, 1951, 3.

⁷⁵ Michael O'Keefe, "Tannery Unemployment," *Local 21 Bulletin*, August 29, 1951, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Prior to the Massachusetts State Commission of Communism's public hearing with O'Keefe, the Commission conducted an investigation and scrutinized union publications. "Red Activity in Six Unions Bared," *Boston Post*, May 19, 1954, p. 1. This Commission will be briefly explained in the upcoming pages.

O'Keefe probably speeded the Communist-interrogation process with the way he handled the next IFLWU crisis: the National Labor Relations Board's (NLRB) revoking of IFLWU privileges.⁷⁷ In May 1954 the NLRB took an unprecedented action and refused to give the IFLWU "the privileges of its services" because the IFLWU did not remove Gold from his position as president of the International after he was convicted of lying on his Taft-Hartley affidavit. Section 9(h) of the Taft-Hartley Act required that every local and international union officer file an annual affidavit with the NLRB stating that the individual is not a Communist Party member or affiliated with the Communist Party. In addition, the officer had to verify that he/she did "not believe in, and I am not a member of, nor do I support, any organization that believes in or teaches the overthrow of the United States Government by force or by any illegal or unconstitutional methods."⁷⁸ The federal court of New York found Gold guilty of making two false statements: that he was not a member of the Communist Party and that he did not support any organization that advocated overthrowing the government. Local 21 quickly found itself embroiled in this problem.⁷⁹ After reporting on the NLRB's unprecedented action, the *Salem Evening News* responded with an editorial stating the paper's disappointment with Local 21:

This action of the Labor Board is the first time in history that a national labor union has been denied the services of the NLRB. It certainly establishes a

⁷⁷ Official Text of the National Labor Relations Board's Order of May 28 1954—Re Compliance Status of the International Fur and Leather Workers Union. Memo in author's possession.

⁷⁸ Rosswurm, *The CIO's Left-Led Unions*, 147.

⁷⁹ "Ben Gold Case: A Sober Lesson to Those Who Live by Easy Promises," *Salem Evening News*, June 19, 1954; "Leather Union Barred From Services of NLRB," *Salem Evening News*, June 1, 1954, cover; "Gold is Re-Elected President of Leather Workers Despite Conviction," *Leather and Shoes*, May 15, 1954, p. 11.

precedent that can be as portentous for all labor organizations as anything that has occurred. It is most unfortunate that our friends and neighbors are involved in any infraction of federal laws particularly those that relate to labor law. The publicity, which of course, is international in scope, centers itself too close to home.⁸⁰

The situation for the IFLWU and Local 21 intensified after O'Keefe, who headed the New England section of the IFLWU's leather division (in addition to his role as business manager for Local 21), and other delegates voted at the 20th biennial convention to re-elect Gold even though he had been charged and convicted for falsifying his non-Communist affidavit. The convention delegates also pledged "full organizational, financial, and moral support by the union to defeat the recent court ruling against Gold" and to post bail so the International president would not need to remain in jail until his trial. Only sixteen delegates out of 339 voted against supporting Gold.⁸¹ O'Keefe's vote in this important election put him squarely at odds with the local Catholic archdiocese, community churches, and some of his own constituents. St. Ann's Church of Peabody wasted no time publicly condemning the activities of the IFLWU and O'Keefe in its official publications and in the local media. In addition, the Reverend Gilbert S. Leduc, a local curate at St. Ann's Church, preached from the pulpit for "leather workers to fight for what is right and elect officers who best represent the common interest of social charity and social justice."⁸² The curate equated the common interest of the community with a disavowal of anything remotely related to Communism. In an extended sermon that was reprinted in many of the local newspapers, Leduc warned parishioners to be aware of

⁸⁰ "Which Way Next?" *Salem Evening News*, June 10, 1954, p. 33.

⁸¹ "Gold is Re-Elected President of Leather Workers Convention Despite Conviction," *Leather and Shoes*, May 15, 1954, p. 11.

⁸² "Priest Blasts Union Men Apathetic to Communism," *Salem Evening News*, June 7, 1954, p. 1.

“Communist infiltration within the framework of any union.” Leduc urged that all Catholic Local 21 union members no longer “tolerate the election for 30 successive years of a president who uses their numerical influence” to further the spread of Communism.⁸³

Exhibiting its customary fighting spirit, Local 21, under O’Keefe’s guidance, did not accept the church’s opinion nor did it rely merely on the *Local 21 Bulletin* to get its message out as it had with the CIO controversy. The leather union began a weekly half hour radio address aired over WESX to inform the citizens of the greater Peabody community about issues facing the leather industry during this controversial time. In countering what Peabodyites read in the local paper, O’Keefe used the airwaves to stress the union’s democratic principles and independence. O’Keefe explained:

[Local 21] takes no dictation from the top. We allow freedom of expression. We believe in the greatest benefits to the greatest number There is no sudden Red menace We take second place to no one in our devotion to Americanism. Our union exists for one purpose: to improve wages and the working conditions of our members.⁸⁴

When his own integrity was questioned, O’Keefe elaborated his personal positions on Communism. He stated that he and other top-ranking leaders of Local 21 had signed loyalty oaths which were on file with the NLRB; he also explained that while he “differed politically with Ben Gold,” he wanted IFLWU members “to withhold final judgment on Gold until the due processes of law are completed in the Supreme Court. . . . I have answered the \$54 question on communism and all of the leaders of Local

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Transcript from the June 22, 1954 5:30 p.m. WESX radio broadcast. Original in author’s possession.

21 have done likewise,” O’Keefe told his radio audience.⁸⁵ Besides doing radio addresses and writing editorials in various community and church publications, O’Keefe spoke to community organizations.

In fighting the Communist charges against the union, O’Keefe tried to inform civic organizations about how the red-scare threat was a menace manufactured by the government so the American people would support the buildup of weapons. In a talk before the Peabody Rotary Club in 1952, O’Keefe said “Big business, not the workers are responsible for spiraling prices.” He stressed to the Rotarians the “fact that local businessmen and the operators of small industries such as tanneries have more in common with organized labor than they have with Big Business, who dominate industry and government.” In closing his talk, O’Keefe asked the local businessmen to “be alert to the growing campaign by big industry to weaken or smash the labor movement in the United States.”⁸⁶

Understanding the seriousness of the red-baiting charges and the need to rectify the misinformation in the media, Local 21 leadership adopted a direct mail approach to further reach the membership and keep it informed. Local 21 officials cautioned that a misstatement of fact “whether intentional or through ignorance, could result in splitting, dividing, and destroying our union.”⁸⁷ Being true to the union’s solidarity unionism roots and his sense of organic intellectualism, O’Keefe, in these mailings, asked union members to refrain from judging Gold too early. He reminded

⁸⁵ June 15, 1954 radio address: “O’Keefe Says Loyalty Differences,” IFLWU 5676, Box 29, Folder 20.

⁸⁶ “O’Keefe Urges Rotarians See Labor as Ally,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, October 29, 1952, p. 4.

⁸⁷ June 17, 1954 memo to Local 21 members from the Officers of Local 21. Original in author’s possession.

the membership that Gold resigned his membership in the Communist Party in 1950 before he signed the affidavit under Taft-Hartley.

It is a fundamental American principle that a person is innocent until proved guilty beyond a reasonable doubt and after a trial by his or her equals Many critics of our Union are going to town over the indictment of our International president, Ben Gold, on a charge of perjury in connection with his signing of the non-Communist affidavit required by the Taft-Hartley law.

To face these accusations against their union, O’Keefe urged every member to stay united: “it is not the first and it will not be the last attack on our Union and its leadership. If we were a weak and ineffective union, we wouldn’t be attacked.”⁸⁸

O’Keefe’s efforts at dispelling membership anxiety did not work as well with this controversy as it did with the CIO expulsion. The *Boston Post* reported that Local 21 “members aren’t listening to O’Keefe with the same militancy as in the past. They are demanding a cleanup—or else.”⁸⁹ The most vocal critics of O’Keefe and the International were Local 33 members. One A.C. Lawrence union member said, “We can not, and must not, give him (President Gold) any aid whatsoever in his appeal.” While acknowledging the wonderful work Gold did for the working class of Peabody, the A.C. Lawrence employee explained that “like any other citizen, President Gold, is no different. If he disobeys the laws of the United States, he should be punished.” The union member summarized the sentiment of Local 33 as being a case of Americanism versus Ben Gold.⁹⁰

While O’Keefe had his own personal beliefs about Gold, he desired solidarity in the ranks of the Peabody leather workers. He put the needs of the membership

⁸⁸ Richard B. O’Keefe, “Attack on Our Union,” *Local 21 Bulletin*, September 30, 1953, p. 2. See also *Peabody Times*, March 11, 1954; *Salem Evening News*, March 11, 1954, p. 11.

⁸⁹ James F. Leonard, “Revolt Brewing in Peabody Union Ranks,” *Boston Post*, June 20, 1954, p. A7.

⁹⁰ “Local Prefers Americanism to Ben Gold,” *Salem Evening News*, June 10, 1954, p. 1.

ahead of his own judgment and acquiesced to members' wishes that Local 21 (and Local 33) not support Gold financially in his trial.⁹¹ In the end, however, O'Keefe was right; the Supreme Court vindicated Gold.

During this whole controversy, the Massachusetts State Commission on Communism had been conducting an investigation of O'Keefe and other top-ranking union leaders from both the IFLWU and other labor organizations around the state. In September 1954 O'Keefe appeared before the labor sub-committee of the Massachusetts Commission on Communism at a public hearing. O'Keefe and Local 21 business agent Arthur Cecelski testified before that committee:

We were not and never had been Communists and Local 21 has not been and is not now under domination of any group or individuals, Communist or otherwise. In the light of our union's record it was fantastic for anyone to charge that our local is dominated by anyone Our uniting in the IFLWU of 90 percent of all U.S. leather workers has given us the strength to make steady advances in wages, working conditions, and other benefits—without a major strike in 20 years Our members know our union is run on thoroughly democratic principles, with every local running its own affairs and with strict financial accounting of every penny spent.⁹²

Even after the Massachusetts Committee on Communism cleared O'Keefe of communist ties, there were still those in the Peabody community and in the union who had doubts about the local.⁹³ Fueling these doubts was a former Local 21 president, John L. Silk. Elected in March 1947, Silk resigned his position as president of Local 21 after only three months "because of Communism in the Union." Silk charged he was unable to fulfill the duties of his elected office "because of imported workers with Communist leanings who have infiltrated the industry and have been

⁹¹ "Union Spurns Ex-Red Aid," *Boston Traveler*, March 5, 1954, p. 13.

⁹² Local 21 Officials Deny Red Ties," *Salem Evening News*, August 17, 1954, p. 1.

⁹³ "Reds 'Still Around Us,'" *Salem Evening News*, July 28, 1955, p. 1.

put on committees by the powers that be.” When he tried to address the Communist influence within the union, Silk said he was rebuffed:

My protests of actions of certain officers within the union have been of no avail and instead of receiving support and encouragement in trying to run the union on purely American lines, I have been cautioned to suppress my thoughts and urged to go along with the suggestions of certain members within Local 21.⁹⁴

In rebuttal to Silk’s charges, O’Keefe said “it was no surprise that the former president has raised the cry of Communism—that always seems to be the method of people who do wrong.” According to Local 21’s executive board, Silk had been accused of trying to “assume dictatorial powers in office and has exercised the power of that office against the best interests of the union,” but instead of defending himself against these charges, Silk decided to resign. The union accepted his resignation, and assumed the matter was closed when Silk gave up his union membership. But during the 1954 controversy over Gold, Silk’s charges became public once again.⁹⁵

While allegations never got any further than a few newspaper reports, Silk was not the only community member charging Local 21 with being influenced by Communists. *Salem Evening News* editorial writer Colonel Roland W. Estey began a series of scathing columns in June 1954 against Local 21. Having only the harshest criticism for Gold and for those who supported him, Estey said:

⁹⁴ “Union Head Quits; Charges Communism,” *Hide and Leather and Shoes*, August 9, 1947, pp. 12, 14. See also “Union Leader Discounts Silk’s Communism Cry,” *Hide and Leather and Shoes*, August 1947, p. 12; “Head of Local 21 Resigns, Revealing Internal Strife,” *Salem Evening News*, August 5, 1947; “Peabody Fur Workers Union Chief Quits, Says Reds Rule,” *Boston Herald*, August 6, 1947, pp. 1, 9.

⁹⁵ Although Silk talked with the State Commission on Communism, he most likely did not instigate the investigation of O’Keefe and other Local 21 leaders. With its ouster from the CIO, all locals of the IFLWU came under scrutiny.

One cannot support editorially and verbally, people who have been found guilty of advocating the violent overthrow of the country, and it is most stupid to defy the U.S. government by electing to a top union office a man who has been sentenced by the courts for falsifying an affidavit that he was not a member of a Communist party or Communist group.

In encouraging the local to “make a fresh start and become an organization for the leather workers instead of a financial contributor to a union with a very dark name,” Estey remarked that the fall might bring “some startling changes in the top administration of the IFLWU. And, it is about time, for the leather workers of Salem, Peabody, and Danvers have been misled, pushed around and in some instances threats have been reported.”⁹⁶

Estey was correct in asserting that some change was imminent in the upper ranks of the IFLWU; during the summer of 1954 the International leadership, of which Gold was still a part, secretly began discussing plans for a possible merger with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, affiliated with the AFL. As rumors about this possible merger spread, Gold denied them, saying the union “has not been talking merger with the AFL” and characterizing the rumor as “such fantastic stories, slanders, and inventions.”⁹⁷ Because the IFLWU had lost its NLRB benefits, a merger with the meat cutters would have re-established the leather and fur workers collective bargaining rights. A merger between these two internationals seemed unrealistic, however, since the AFL Butchers were virulently against communism.⁹⁸ Even O’Keefe, who was an International executive board member,

⁹⁶ “Column by Colonel Roland W. Estey,” *Salem Evening News*, September 22, 1954, p. 16.

⁹⁷ “Gold Denies Plan to Merge With AFL,” *Leather and Shoes*, July 3, 1954, p. 12. See also “Officials of Fur Union Deny Merger Reports With AFL,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, June 15, 1954, p. 75.

⁹⁸ “Left Wing Leather Union May Merge With AFL Butcher Workmen,” *Leather and Shoes*, June 19, 1954, p. 28.

knew nothing about the merger under discussion other than what he read in local newspapers, trade publications, and the memo all members received from Gold.

At this point, O'Keefe needed to make some decisions. Throughout his ten-year career as business manager, he had been successful in leading the local forward in its objectives.⁹⁹ For the most part, the rank and file had always respected his leadership abilities. That was not the case in the fall of 1954. Animosity confronted O'Keefe on all sides: A growing cadre of union members were displeased by the rumors of a possible merger with the Amalgamated Butchers. A significant number of A.C. Lawrence union members were displeased about the International executive committee's re-election of Gold; they partly blamed O'Keefe for this because he vocally supported Gold. And the community was also turning against the union because of the growing stigma of communism.

Once again, O'Keefe needed to take decisive action. He did. By early December 1954, Local 21, under O'Keefe's direction, had set up a special committee to deal with possible options if Local 21 left the International. O'Keefe then resigned his position as International executive board member of the IFLWU. By the end of December, Local 21 officials believed that secession from the IFLWU would best serve the union.¹⁰⁰ In making these decisions, O'Keefe, ever the organic intellectual, held staunchly to his convictions about Gold's innocence. He said he did not resign

⁹⁹ According to Local 21's bylaws, the office of business manager was the most important union position. While the union president served as a figurehead officiating at union meetings and collected a small stipend, the business manager was a full-time, paid union position. It was the business manager's responsibility to handle all grievances, supervise the union office, maintain relationships with shop stewards, make reports at meetings, and keep the membership abreast of union developments. "By-laws of Local 21, IFLWU 5676, Box 27a, Folder 3.

¹⁰⁰ "O'Keefe Letter," December 23, 1954, IFLWU 5676, Box 29, Folder 20.

because the IFLWU had a communist leader, but because in trying to get information about the proposed merger with the Butchers, he was told he would be “given no information from the office.”¹⁰¹ Such secrecy went against everything Local 21 and O’Keefe believed in and stood for. At the very heart of Local 21’s organization was the commitment that all members have a say in how the union would be run. The International’s closed-door bargaining with the Butchers violated solidarity unionism. In accepting the Local’s decision on Gold, and putting aside his own desires, O’Keefe again exhibited democratic leadership. This quality was further evidenced when he listened to the sentiments of the workers and began to distance the Local from the IFLWU.

On December 28, 1954, the administration of Local 21 sent a telegram to Abe Fineglass, who replaced Gold as president of the IFLWU. The telegram was in response to one sent by the International saying that it had suspended Local 21. In reply Local 21 said that “neither we nor our Local recognizes your suspension. In accordance to our elected offices we shall carry out our duties in accordance with the instructions of our local membership. We also claim the International has broken its contracts and agreement with our local membership. Your proposed pact with the Butchers Union smells to high heaven.”¹⁰²

On January 6, 1955, Local 21 hosted a special membership meeting to vote on disaffiliation from the IFLWU.¹⁰³ In a letter sent to the International, Local 21 listed ten primary reasons for disaffiliation from the IFLWU. Foremost among these was

¹⁰¹ “O’Keefe Resignation Letter,” December 14, 1954, IFLWU 5676, Box 29, Folder 20.

¹⁰² “Western Union Memo,” December 23, 1954, IFLWU 5676, Box 29, Folder 20.

¹⁰³ “Flyer,” January 6, 1955, IFLWU 5676, Box 29, Folder 20.

Local 21's belief that the International had been deceitful to the membership and was no longer effective as a bargaining agent for the rank and file:

The International Fur and Leather Workers Union cannot carry out the purposes of an American trade union, in that it cannot effectively bargain with respect to wages, hours, and working conditions in the future. As a result of this failure to clean house, it is apparent that this union will be unable to organize leather workers, particularly among those workers who are employed by employers who have run away from our locality to northern New England and to other parts. . . . It is apparent that the International Fur and Leather Workers Union is on the verge of complete collapse which was admitted by President Feinglass at a recent meeting in Boston when he said that "we have to get into the main stream of the American labor movement because we cannot live as we are."¹⁰⁴

The local voted 1203 to 8 at a mass meeting in early January 1955 to disaffiliate from the IFLWU. Local 21 officially disaffiliated from the IFLWU on January 10, 1955, and renamed itself the Leather Workers Organizing Committee (LWOC).¹⁰⁵

At this point Local 21 exhibited a more conservative approach. While it still advocated a more equitable society for the working class in its monthly publication, it realized that the political atmosphere of the fifties could limit its effectiveness as a trade union. Distancing itself from Communist elements was necessary for Local 21's survival. In addition, the IFLWU was no longer trustworthy; it had secretly agreed to merge with the Butchers without consulting the various locals. This went against all the democratic principles the International had espoused throughout its history. Peabody's union of leather workers could not afford to alienate itself from the larger community and staying with the IFLWU would have tested the city's tolerance. Thus,

¹⁰⁴ "Letter to President Feinglass," IFLWU 5676, Box 29.

¹⁰⁵ *Monthly Labor Review* 78 (March 1955): 335; "Memo of 1955," IFLWU 5676, Box 6, Folder 20.

Local 21's philosophy did not change, but it tempered its rhetoric during this tumultuous time.

After only a few months as an independent union, however, the officers of Local 21 realized that if it wanted to grow and prosper, it would have to build "up a powerful international" and expand "the committee into all areas of the country." This meant affiliating, once again, with the CIO.¹⁰⁶ As a small union in a politically unfriendly environment, Local 21's survival depended on organizing other leather workers; it had to rejoin the CIO. Anti-union and anti-Communist sentiment made it nearly impossible for an independent community-based union to survive in the mid fifties. While affiliating with a federated labor organization once again made sense, reaffiliating with the CIO was not assured.

The 1949 expulsion proved not to be a problem, however. In March 1955 "60,000 CIO members located in the North Shore area voted through their delegates to the North Shore Industrial Union Council to welcome back to their ranks the leather workers' local unions which have been affiliated with the Leather Workers Organizing Committee." A resolution presented at the meeting said that the CIO had been working for the past four years "to induce the members of those expelled unions to break away from their Communist leadership and return to free democratic American trade unionism under the banner of the CIO." In disaffiliating from the IFLWU, the North Shore Industrial Union Council praised Peabody leather workers for having the "courage and initiative" to cast off "the shackles of the IFLWU by

¹⁰⁶ "LWOC Will Proceed to Build Up Strong Union After New England Poll," *Footwear News*, June 10, 1955, p. 38.

voting to return to the CIO and the North Shore Industrial Union Council.”¹⁰⁷ This was good news to the officials of Local 21; they would once again be accepted into the CIO fold. The good news, however, was tempered by the fact that the IFLWU had by this time merged with the AFL Butchers and was contesting with the CIO for representational rights of the leather workers.¹⁰⁸

The NLRB ordered an election between the LWOC and the Amalgamated Butchers to determine which group would represent the leather workers in the various Peabody plants.¹⁰⁹ On May 19, 1955, the jurisdictional election took place; 3,218 workers in eighty-four tanneries in the Peabody area had a choice between either the LWOC, CIO; the Amalgamated Butchers, AFL; or no union.¹¹⁰ By the time election day arrived, tensions had reached such a frenzy that “federal agents moved [to Peabody] . . . to keep a close eye on the bitter fight for union control of the 1000’s of leather workers.” International executives of the CIO sent telegrams reminding Local 21 workers that “the entire nation was watching the outcome,” looking to Local 21 to “lead the way in the establishment of a union for leather workers that will be free of communist domination and commies” by voting for the LWOC, CIO.¹¹¹

Officers of Local 21 did not just hope for the best in regards to this election. They used the various local media to educate the leather workers of Peabody.¹¹² With monetary sponsorship from the national CIO, Local 21 bombarded Peabody residents

¹⁰⁷ “LWOC Welcomed Back Into Fold of North Shore CIO Unit,” *Salem Evening News*, March 25, 1955.

¹⁰⁸ “3200 Leather Workers Will Ballot Amalgamated on Thursday,” *Lynn Telegram News*, May 15, 1955, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ “Factions Will Plan Leather Union Election,” *Salem Evening News*, May 3, 1955, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ “CIO vs. AFL,” *Salem Evening News*, May 10, 1955.

¹¹¹ “FBI is Assigned to Union Election,” *Salem Evening News*, May 5, 1955, p. 1.

¹¹² “3200 Leather Workers,” p. 20.

with leaflets, radio broadcasts aired over WESX, and newspaper advertising. The Butchers, however, also used the local media to get out its message.¹¹³ Leaflets explaining each side's viewpoint were mailed and distributed citywide. In one such leaflet, Local 21 officers and stewards tried to make the membership understand why a vote for the LWOC was necessary. In this leaflet union officials appealed to members' sense of Americanism and democracy. In addition, officials stressed how the decisions made by Local 21 were directives of the membership:

FIVE MONTHS AGO the Stewards and Officers of Local 21 recommended that our Union break its ties with the International Fur and Leather Workers Union and join with the CIO in building a clean, free, democratic Union, of, by and for leather workers. This decision was directed by the membership of the Local Union—the workers in the leather factories. The membership, 1200 strong at the High School meeting, and thousands more in the shops, greeted this action with cheers and a spirit of unity never before seen in our Local. Nevermore will we have to apologize for, or try to explain away, the presence of Communists among our national leaders. Nevermore will we fear the courts, the government Boards and agencies, that were closing in on all groups that had been tainted by Communism. Nevermore will the newspapers, the radio, the churches, the schools, even our families and neighbors, class us with Communism. At long last, we can look any man in the eye and know that our union is fighting the enemies of our free, democratic way of life while at the same time protecting our conditions, our wages and our security and always working to improve them.¹¹⁴

This plea in the newspapers explaining Local 21's position illustrates the conservative approach the union adopted after its divorce from the IFLWU. The election between the LWOC and the Butchers took place at the height of McCarthyism. Local 21 knew its survival depended on winning back the support of the Peabody community by pledging its abhorrence to communism. After appealing to members' sense of

¹¹³ Leather Union Scrapbook, 1955-1957, in author's possession; "CIO-AFL Leather Election Today," *Salem Evening News*, May 19, 1955, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Pamphlet "Leather Workers Speak Out—From Your Officers and Stewards," Local 21 Leather Union Scrapbook, 1955-1957.

democracy, the leaflet tried to dispel some of the accusations that the AFL had spread about the inner workings of Local 21.

We knew that the Communist forces would not take this defeat meekly or in silence. We expected attacks, character assassination, lies and vilification to be hurled at us. . . . Some of the tactics and charges of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butchers—dictated to them by the same Communist puppets we drove from our midst—have plumbed the lowest depths of indignity, dishonesty, and depravity. They have singled out our Business Manager, Mike O’Keefe, as their target. Destroy O’Keefe, they say, and you destroy the unity and determination of Local 21 leather workers. They overlook one important truth. Mike O’Keefe, like every officer and steward of Local 21, is just the expression of the will and the desires of the membership. . . . Mike O’Keefe is each and every one of us. An attack on him is an attack on us and you. The Communists should name all leather workers—not just one—when they seek to attack their enemies.¹¹⁵

Local 21’s messages appeared to work. Peabodyites seemed committed to the LWOC.¹¹⁶ A vote in sixty-three Peabody tanneries yielded 1,658 ballots in favor of the LWOC and only 448 in favor of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen.¹¹⁷ In a memo to its affiliates, the Massachusetts Leather Manufacturers Association told its members that 89.6 percent of those eligible actually voted, with only about one percent voting for no union. After this decisive vote, the CIO became the union voice for practically all the leather workers in the Peabody, Danvers, Salem area.¹¹⁸

Once affiliated with the CIO, Local 21, representing 3,500 leather workers in the Salem, Peabody, and Danvers area confidently looked forward to rapid growth and further action. The first test would come with their comrades at the A.C.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ *Leather and Shoes*, March 26, 1955, p. 25.

¹¹⁷ “Leather Workers Favor CIO,” *Salem Evening News*, May 20, 1955, p. 1.

¹¹⁸ Memo from Massachusetts Leather Manufacturers Association in *Leather Union Scrapebook*, 1955-1957. See also “CIO, Tanners Demands Kept Hush Hush,” *Leather and Shoes*, July 2, 1955, p. 11.

Lawrence plant. Members of Local 33 had not yet voted for which union would represent them. Slated for July 26, 1955, Local 33's election was key to Local 21's quest to build the union on a national scale. Once again, prior to the election, Local 33 members were inundated with local newspaper advertisements taken out by both the Amalgamated Butchers and the LWOC. In these advertisements, each side purported to be providing Local 33 members with the truth about each of the two unions. Local 33 held its election on July 26, 1955. While 357 A.C. Lawrence workers were swayed by the Butchers, most Local 33 members stood as a united front with the other leather workers in the community and "scored a complete break with the elements of the old Red-dominated Fur and Leather Workers Union." Eight hundred and eleven A.C. Lawrence leather workers voted for the LWOC. Four individuals left their ballots blank.¹¹⁹ According to Local 33 officials, the union's decision to side with the LWOC was in keeping with this its anti-communist sentiments:

When it [Local 33] was part of the Fur and Leather Workers Union, it led the fight against alleged Communist domination of the union. It was the leader in the campaign to clean house of alleged Communist influence and it was the first IFLWU local to vote no support to Ben Gold, the then leader of the IFLWU. During the hectic days preceding the disaffiliation of Local 33 from the IFLWU, the union's rank and file demanded a house cleaning.¹²⁰

With all the leather workers in Peabody under the auspices of the CIO, it did not take long for the labor federation to see that the LWOC had committed itself to bettering the cause of the leather worker. By November 1955, the CIO's executive board "authorized the LWOC as a full fledged international union" with the "right to

¹¹⁹ "North Shore Workers Snub Leather Union," *Boston Herald*, July 27, 1955, p. 18; "LWOC Wins 2-1 in Election at A.C. Lawrence," *Footwear News*, July 29, 1955, p. 51.

¹²⁰ "CIO Beats AFL in ACL Balloting," *Salem Evening News*, July 27, 1955, p. 1.

shape its own destinies and avoid complications that might occur in the merger of the AFL and CIO.” By the end of the year, the merger of the two labor federations was a reality. In relaying information about the AFL-CIO merger to the membership, O’Keefe was optimistic. He said that the “newfound unity of the AFL-CIO offers labor an unprecedented opportunity to make its voice felt so strongly that candidates and parties will be forced to accept the progressive and liberal legislation we sponsor.”¹²¹ With the support and sanction of the AFL-CIO, the LWOC, renamed the Leather Workers International Union of America (LWIUA), slowly gained ground and momentum in organizing the leather workers who had previously been with the IFLWU. By the fall of 1955, the LWIUA consisted of approximately fifteen locals and around 10, 000 dues-paying members.¹²²

The Peabody leather workers not only whole-heartedly supported the LWIUA, they overwhelmingly believed in Mike O’Keefe. The slanderous attacks on O’Keefe’s character that had dominated the headlines in the local press since the spring of 1954 had been ineffective in swaying leather workers’ opinions of their leader. In the March 1956 election, Local 21 members returned O’Keefe to his position as business manager, for the eleventh consecutive year, with the highest number of votes cast for any office in the election.¹²³ (He had served as a Local 21 officer since 1945.) At this time, he was also elected president of the newly formed International. In the early days of the new International, O’Keefe exhibited his strong

¹²¹ Richard O’Keefe, “Every Vote Counts,” *The Bulletin*, August 22, 1956, p. 2.

¹²² “O’Keefe May Be Head of Leather Union,” *Salem Evening News*, November 14, 1955, 14; “LWOC Votes to Change Name,” *Footwear News*, November 18, 1955, p. 46; “CIO Gives Leather Union Autonomy,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, November 9, 1955, p. 65.

¹²³ “Cyarnecki New Leader of Peabody Local,” *Leather and Shoes*, March 31, 1956, p. 10.

leadership qualities. Through his monthly columns in *The Bulletin*, he tried to dispel members' uncertainty about the future of the labor movement. He also stressed that this International was "not a one-man union . . . this is a union responsive to the needs and desires of its membership and it is being run by a team of officers and executive board leaderships selected by the membership and working together."¹²⁴

Local 21 had been through a difficult period, but it had not lost its vision for a more equitable society for the working class. By working as a united organization, Local 21 began to focus once again on its overarching goal: creating a moral economy for the working class. In its first wage negotiations as an independent, Local 21 negotiated a five-cent hourly wage increase and received improved fringe benefits, including an extra paid holiday and an increase in sickness insurance and hospitalization payments for its 3,500 members.¹²⁵ In addition, under the auspices of the LWIUA, Local 21 finally secured a pension plan, and the first pension payments were issued on May 25, 1959. A group of forty-six retired Local 21 members received the first pension checks ever to be granted in the leather industry under a union-negotiated pension plan.¹²⁶ Local 21 also helped women office workers employed in the tanneries. These female clerical workers, represented by the LWIUA, received wage increases raising the office minimum to sixty dollars a week and a maximum of seventy-five dollars. The new contract also provided for a normal workweek of thirty-six hours and twenty-five minutes with one and a half hours for

¹²⁴ "IEB Hails Big Gains of Union," *The Bulletin*, December 22, 1956, p. 1.

¹²⁵ "Developments in Industrial Relations," *Monthly Labor Review* 78 (November 1955): 1287.

¹²⁶ "First Pensioners Get Checks," *The Bulletin*, June-July 1959, p. 1. See Chapter Three for more information about the pension plan.

lunch and a fifteen-minute rest period during the day. The office workers also won vacation pay.¹²⁷

Besides the monetary gains, Local 21 won back the approval of the community. At a testimonial dinner for O'Keefe in 1964, more than 1,000 civic and labor leaders paid tribute to him. The governor of Massachusetts attended the event and praised O'Keefe for bringing the "standard of living to where it is today." He told those individuals employed in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that they "owed a debt of gratitude to labor leaders like O'Keefe who have carried on a continuing battle to improve the status of the working man."¹²⁸ The local clergy were also vocal in their support. At a LWIUA banquet in 1957, the Reverend Francis W. McDonnell from the Boston Archdiocese assured Peabodyites that the "vast majority of America's 50,000 labor officers are completely honest, sincere, loyal Americans." Dispelling the negative feelings the Boston Archdiocese had felt toward Local 21 in the early fifties, McDonnell said:

Most of the labor movement is being conducted in conformity with what is good for the community Our society is a democracy and it is also an individual society. Unions are not only normal but essential. When you have big industry on the one hand, no worker is able to bargain successfully for himself.¹²⁹

Clergy of all denominations, represented by the Peabody Ministerial Association, seemed to come to a similar conclusion as McDonnell. When the Ministerial Association met with O'Keefe in 1958 to better understand the union and its

¹²⁷ "Union Aids Office Girls," *The Bulletin*, February-March 1959, p. 2.

¹²⁸ "Massachusetts Governor Lauds O'Keefe Leadership," *The Bulletin*, April-May-June 1964, p. 1.

¹²⁹ "Most Labor Leaders Honest Priest Says at LWIUA Banquet," *The Bulletin*, June 22, 1957, p. 3.

activities, both sides—labor and the churches—seemed to benefit from the exchange.¹³⁰

One reason the local clergy might have again endorsed the union is that in divorcing itself from the Fur Workers Union, Local 21 still adhered to its sense of solidarity unionism. True to its community-based origins, Local 21, as part of the LWIUA, did not forget its relationship with the city of Peabody. O’Keefe used his editorials in *The Bulletin* to remind the membership about helping those less fortunate in the community. In one editorial, O’Keefe urged members to do a kind deed for the senior citizens of the community. He called the aged, the “victims of invisibility. They are everywhere.” He called on all members to “volunteer some of our free time to help bring about a better life for those who must need it but cannot get it.”¹³¹

O’Keefe also asked union members to remember the preamble to the LWIUA constitution that said:

The struggle for human freedom is a continuous one. The task of those who would bring security and greater understanding to mankind throughout the world is endless. Racial persecution, intolerance, selfishness, and greed have no place in the human family. We will not be satisfied until ours is a world of free men and women and of happy children.¹³²

O’Keefe really believed those words. Many of his editorials in the sixties discussed the need to continue fighting for the rights of all Americans, not just the leather workers. With the backing of the International and Local 21, O’Keefe extolled the virtues of a minimum income standard for all Americans and urged members to vote for individuals “who will not tolerate the prevalence of widespread poverty and

¹³⁰ “Clergymen Meet With Union Head,” *The Bulletin*, December 1958-January 1959, pp. 1, 4.

¹³¹ Richard O’Keefe, “Something to Think About,” *The Bulletin*, April, May, June 1963, p. 2.

¹³² Richard O’Keefe, “Things to Think About,” *The Bulletin*, January, February, March 1968, p. 2.

substandard conditions.”¹³³ This was not idle rhetoric. In terms of providing community service work, offering health screenings, and trying to educate workers about the needs of others in the community, Local 21 committed itself wholeheartedly to these initiatives.¹³⁴

While the organizational changes Local 21 made throughout the fifties—leaving the CIO, disbanding from the IFLWU, and rejoining the CIO—tested the union’s commitment to solidarity unionism, these changes also made the union stronger and more willing to fight for additional workplace gains. In the thirty years since its inception, Local 21 had grown and matured. It had weathered many storms—accusations of unfair labor practices by manufacturers, communist charges, and loss of federated union support—but through it all, the resilient local persevered. Local 21 engaged in what historian Steve Rosswurm characterizes as a “collective struggle against the boundaries of our existence.” While the union of leather workers recognized that “there were boundaries out there . . . they understood that the world could be transformed—barriers to equality can be lowered and attitudes can be altered.”¹³⁵ The struggles Local 21 encountered in the late forties and early fifties prepared the union of leather workers to make inroads throughout the rest of the decade and into the next. Their tenacity allowed them to continue forging ahead and building up the ranks of the new International.

Throughout its whole history—even in the fifties—Local 21 never lost sight of its ultimate goal: creating a more equitable future for the rank and file. The union

¹³³ Richard O’Keefe, “Humane Standards for All,” *The Bulletin*, April, May, June 1967, p. 2.

¹³⁴ For a fuller discussion of these initiatives see Chapter Three.

¹³⁵ Rosswurm, *CIO’s Left-Led Unions*, x.

defined an equitable future as a society that practiced a moral economy; members of Local 21 did not want capitalists to govern everyday life. Instead, they wanted the working person to live comfortably and engage in leisure activities. Local 21 members envisioned a society where each worker was treated as a person with certain rights—health care, pension funds, adequate housing and food, safe working conditions, and the ability to enjoy social and cultural activities. Peabody’s leather union members wanted to enjoy the same security and pleasures in life that the factory owners enjoyed. Leather workers advocated for a future when workers and manufacturers would band together to meet the challenges of the leather industry: when industry conditions were good, owners and workers would reap the benefits. And when conditions were poor, all would share in pooling resources. Although this type of moral economy was never realized, the effort of working to achieve it caused Local 21 to adapt and change throughout its history. Because Local 21 remained attuned to its solidarity roots, it felt compelled to react to the community. Thus, when McCarthyism became a real concern in Peabody in the fifties, the union distanced itself from the Fur Workers and the IFLWU, a visible communist entity. Adhering itself to the Fur Workers in 1939, however, made sense at the time; the merger fit Local 21’s philosophy of accepting all workers regardless of their race, religion or political philosophy. But the social and political environment was more friendly and accepting of left-leaning union members in the thirties than it was in the postwar years.

Local 21, in fact, probably remained with the IFLWU a little longer than was prudent because of O’Keefe. The longtime business manager staunchly believed in

accepting people for their actions not their beliefs. O'Keefe never doubted Gold's commitment to the working person or his integrity as a U.S. citizen. It would appear that O'Keefe accepted the notion that people could compartmentalize different aspects of their lives. So in this respect, according to O'Keefe, although Gold was a self-described Communist, he could still be an American citizen trying to make the U.S. government more responsive to the working individual, not trying to overthrow it.

The Gold debacle tested the strength of Local 21's sense of solidarity unionism. O'Keefe was reluctant to listen to what the membership and the community felt about Gold and the Fur Workers. In voting to support Gold, O'Keefe did not act as a representative of the Local 21 membership. In hindsight, O'Keefe's actions, while seemingly dictatorial, can convey other qualities as well. By 1953 O'Keefe had earned the respect of the more than 4,000 leather workers in his community. O'Keefe most likely believed in himself and felt that he was sometimes privy to information that the rank and file did not fully understand. This organic intellectual might have thought Gold's ordeal with the federal government would dissipate and that the International president would be a free man in the near future. Because Gold personified the essence of what Local 21 wanted—equity for all people—it must have been difficult for O'Keefe to turn his back on this man. But in the end, O'Keefe did. In resigning his International executive board position and then sending a letter to the IFLWU describing Local 21's disaffiliation, O'Keefe showed his integrity as a leader of a solidarity union. He understood that he was only the

spokesperson of the Local 21 membership and that the sentiments of the majority always overshadowed the minority opinion.

Union members forgave O'Keefe for his momentary lapse in judgment in the mid fifties. In 1958 he once again was re-elected business manager.¹³⁶ But even for O'Keefe, the years ahead would be difficult. Local 21 suffered a double misfortune during the 1950s. Not only had it suffered the ramifications of being associated with an international that had communist ties, but it also served an industry that was slowly dying. Between 1955 and 1966 eighteen leather concerns left the city of Peabody.¹³⁷ For most of its existence after its withdrawal from the IFLWU, Local 21 had to contend with the social, political, economic, and cultural consequences of deindustrialization. The Epilogue details how the forces of deindustrialization ultimately stifled the Peabody union of leather workers and the leather industry itself.

¹³⁶ "O'Keefe Peabody Victor," *The Bulletin*, April, May 1958, p. 1.

¹³⁷ John Wells, *The Peabody Story: Events in Peabody's History 1626-1972* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1972), 461.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Epilogue: A Community Responds to a Dying Industry

The historian is just another dim figure trudging along in another part of the procession. And as the procession winds along, swerving now to the right and now to the left, sometimes doubling back on itself; the relative position of the different parts of the procession is constantly changing . . . new vistas, new angles of vision, constantly appear as the process—and the historian with it—moves along. The historian is part of the history. The point in the procession at which he [she] finds himself [herself] determines his [her] angle of vision over the past.¹

While the leather industry had long been an economically precarious industry, by the late fifties leather manufacturers faced many obstacles—substitutes, foreign competition, rising labor costs, tariffs and quotas, and environmental regulations.² This signaled change for Peabody as well. Instead of becoming a defunct factory town, however, Peabody altered its destiny. The late fifties ushered in a period of remarkable growth in the Leather City. The blossoming of industry along Route 128, which served as a beltway around Boston, was a boon to Peabody. Located alongside Route 128, Peabody was a perfect bedroom community for workers flocking to the capital city to take part in the technological revolution. To service this influx of new residents, service-oriented businesses, like the North Shore Shopping Center, started to replace the leather factories.³

Compounding these social and industrial changes was the achievement, at least in part, of Local 21's efforts at equalizing society. As leather workers realized

¹ Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1961), 42-43.

² "Sole Leather Tanners' Difficulties," *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoe News* 43 (December 17, 1938): 21.

³ Construction on Peabody's first shopping plaza, later turned into a mall, was completed in 1956. The shopping center became a major incentive for other service-centered businesses and potential residents to relocate to the Leather City. It also brought in much-needed revenue.

better wages, working conditions, and benefits, more workers had the income to buy cars and to travel outside their community for leisure activities. This, however, was a double-edged sword: “The automobile really changed things,” explained former Local 21 secretary Margaret Abbott.⁴ Because of the automobile, social networks outside the community supplanted the union and its social activities. Although the leather workers’ union still fought to break down barriers of inequality throughout the rest of the sixties and seventies, Peabody’s altered industrial and social landscape started to erode the union’s significance. In addition, older leather workers began to want and expect a different lifestyle for their children. Fewer and fewer leather workers were encouraging their offspring to enter the leather industry. And fewer and fewer young people were joining Local 21. Exacerbating these changes was the death of O’Keefe in 1973. When O’Keefe died, solidarity unionism died in Peabody.

A former, long-time Peabody mayor, Peter Torigian, characterized the decline of the leather industry commencing shortly after World War II as a second economic depression for the city.⁵ Instead of rebounding as other industries did during and after World War II, leather manufacturing faced stiffer competition, both at home and abroad, while increasingly stringent environmental regulations “chased many tanneries from the city in those post-war years.”⁶ By the time Torigian assumed office in the spring of 1979, Peabody’s leather industry was beyond help. In the end efforts to save the industry on the part of union, industry, and city officials proved insufficient.

⁴ Interview with Margaret Abbott, former Local 21 secretary, Peabody, Massachusetts, September 2001.

⁵ Torigian served as mayor from 1979 to 2001.

⁶ “Mayor Has Made His Mark on Peabody,” *Salem Evening News*, April 28, 2000.

While O'Keefe was still at the helm, though, the union fought a dual battle: it tried to maintain and increase workplace reform for Peabody leather workers and fight for industry-wide reform to save the leather industry. O'Keefe believed industry-wide reform necessitated increased workplace reform, which started with manufacturers reinvesting in their current plants. O'Keefe warned about the hazards of not reinvesting in the future:

Tanners in this area have failed to re-invest in new plants and equipment as they should have or to the extent that Midwest tanners have. If this has affected their competitive position to any extent, it is not the Union's responsibility and the workers should not be penalized for it. However, in actuality, it seems apparent that the employers have found ways to keep pace with the increased productivity elsewhere in the industry out of the sweat of the workers.⁷

In addition to not reinvesting in outdated equipment, O'Keefe argued that Peabody manufacturers had been too interested in the bottom line for too long and had been "negligent in promoting [their] products in competition for the consumer's dollar. [They have] not spent the money [they] should on research to develop a better product."⁸

In his *Bulletin* editorials, O'Keefe explained to the membership that other factors—foreign competition, lack of uniform national workmen's compensation standards, low minimum wage levels, and impractical unemployment compensation benefits—contributed to the leather industry's present stand-still as well. O'Keefe told union members that if leather wages could be standardized across the country, leather factories would not leave Peabody to settle in Maine or in various southern

⁷ "1954 Wage Re-Opening Arbitration," IFLWU 5676, Box 27, Folder 20, p. 10.

⁸ "Area Worried About Possible Out of State Migrations," *Leather and Shoes*, January 9, 1954, pp. 17-18.

states to find cheaper labor. And if the government would stop allowing the exportation of American hides to foreign countries and importation of finished shoes back into the country, the U.S. leather industry would have a chance at survival. Unfortunately, very few people in the leather industry or community attended to O'Keefe's warnings in time.⁹

Instead of heeding O'Keefe's words manufacturers used the union as a scapegoat. Bertram Creese, the executive secretary for the Massachusetts Leather Manufacturers Association in the fifties, explained to union and city officials that manufacturers did not want to invest further capital into their Peabody plants because wage rates were too high and productivity too low.¹⁰ These manufacturers did not think they would ever see a return on their investment. This statement by Creese, however, was inaccurate. New England leather workers only earned on average \$2.10 an hour, whereas their counterparts in the Middle Atlantic states and Great Lakes area earned \$2.20 and \$2.27 respectively. By the early sixties, the only leather workers earning less than those in New England were the ones in the Southeast.¹¹ Even with their misstatements of fact, the manufacturers could not blame all their troubles on the union. In terms of the national slowdown in the leather industry, local leather manufacturers reluctantly agreed that the industry as a whole had not done enough to

⁹ For an example of O'Keefe's warnings see Richard O'Keefe, "Actions Need to End Depression," *The Bulletin*, April-May 1958, p. 2.

¹⁰ Peabody City Council Meeting Minutes, December 22, 1953, Book 7, p. 266; Peabody City Council Meeting Minutes, January 14, 1954, Book 7, p. 271; *Peabody Times*, February 11, 1954, p. 1.

¹¹ "Earnings in Leather Tanning and Finishing," *Monthly Labor Review* 86 (March 1963): 944. Women still only accounted for 1/10 of the production workers and earned, on average, 36 cents less per hour than their male counterparts.

promote its product.¹² Industry leaders knew they had to start working harder to promote leather goods. Unfortunately, their efforts were too little too late.

In May 1959 A.C. Lawrence made a concerted effort to tell the world about its leather product; it implemented “the biggest advertising campaign yet undertaken by the world’s largest leather tanner.” With this new advertising push in the late 1950s, A.C. Lawrence tried to “make the name LAWRENCE synonymous with LEATHER the world over.” A.C. Lawrence touted its record of experience and quality when it said, “No company in the leather industry can approach the size and scope of operations familiar to us at A.C. Lawrence.” These advertisements tried to “acquaint people with our Company—its heritage, operations, and people.”

Before the advertisements appeared, A.C. Lawrence told its employees about the public relations campaign and how important they were to the continued success of the company. A.C. Lawrence challenged each employee “to do his best so that the combined skills and experience of all will deliver consistently high quality products to our customers at a reasonable cost. This is the kind of teamwork that helps guarantee jobs.”¹³ While this advertising venture mainly appeared in publications of the leather and shoe trade, A.C. Lawrence did not forget its local customers. In 1959 A.C. Lawrence set up a display, called the “World of Leather,” at the newly built North Shore Shopping Center. This display offered community members the chance to see what A.C. Lawrence produced. “The reaction from most people was

¹² “Leather Union Asks Ban on Hide Duties,” *Leather and Shoes*, July 3, 1953, p. 14.

¹³ “Lawrence Launches Extensive Promotional Campaign,” *Tan-O-Gram*, May 1959, pp. 4-5.

amazement at the variety of products and the complexity of the tanning process along with admiration of the beauty of quality leather in all its many uses.”¹⁴

Even after A.C. Lawrence’s successful advertisement and public relations campaign, it was not until the mid sixties that other leather manufacturers made a concerted effort to promote their products. In 1965, recognizing the need to expand its market, the New England Shoe and Leather Association “jointly sponsor[ed] a program of billboard advertisings designed to promote the sale of all-leather shoes.” This advertising campaign focused on two major shoe-buying seasons: back to school and Easter. Both advertisement campaigns lasted thirty days and promoted the “fashion and the natural beauty of genuine leather.” These advertisements appeared in the Boston area; Worcester, Massachusetts; Portland, Maine; and Providence and Pawtucket, Rhode Island.¹⁵

During the summer of 1967, the Leather Industries of America (LIA), the promotional arm of the U.S. tanning industry, presented a series of weeklong fashion shows at major retail centers throughout the country. Peabody hosted one of these traveling shows. Hundreds of Northshore residents watched as models demonstrated the latest in leather fashion. As part of these promotions, LIA trained sales clerks to identify the positive merchandising advantages of American made leather merchandise. Unfortunately, these major efforts on the part of the leather industry were too late. Synthetic and other ready-to-wear clothing had already won over the hearts of consumers.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Leather Trade Associations Sponsor Billboard Ad Campaign,” *Tan-O-Gram* 14 (August-September 1965): 2.

Although the manufacturers were slow to respond to a changing consumer market, city officials in Peabody had been well aware of the problems facing the leather industry. Throughout the history of Local 21, the city of Peabody had spent considerable time and energy addressing the volatile state of the leather industry and trying various initiatives to stabilize conditions in the Leather City. For the most part, Peabody's governing officials worked to retain and bring in new industry to this manufacturing center, but oftentimes their efforts just could not reverse downward trends that had a way of spiraling out of control.

For instance, in the winter of 1954 members of the city council, the mayor, and the city solicitor met with the directors of the Chamber of Commerce to address how to improve conditions for business in the city. This particular meeting looked at how well the city had addressed a list of items that the Chamber of Commerce had presented two years earlier that were considered a priority for the city. One of these items was the adoption of a long-range advisory commission that would determine the future needs of the city. The Chamber had founded a commission and in its first report, the commission determined the city to "be very lax in providing information later than 1937 in zoning maps and up-to-date data which prospective buyers of industrial sites in Peabody would want to know." To address the deficiency, a \$5,000 appropriation was given to the planning board.¹⁶

In addition to updating information about industrial sites, Peabody officials developed an Industrial Development Commission early in the fifties. The

¹⁶ "Chamber Directors and City Officials Discuss Betterment of Local Affairs," *Peabody Times*, February 18, 1954, p. 8.

commission, which was one of the first of its kind according to Peabody city officials, tried to impress upon the citizens of Peabody that since the thirties many leather firms had been closing and the city had not been expanding industrially.¹⁷ While home construction had blossomed in Peabody during the fifties, the cost of building new streets, electric lines, water facilities, and schoolhouses had not been offset by expanding business.¹⁸ Through the various media outlets, the commission explained to the public that in order to attract “new and diversified industries, it is necessary to open up new and modern sites in areas not recently zoned for this type of building.” Because Peabody was growing residentially, the commission told Peabodyites that attracting new industry would help the city confront and pay for necessary changes to the infrastructure, like sewage.

One of the main problems confronting Peabody in the next decade will be sewerage. This will be a most expensive job, and almost too much for individual homeowners to pay for, so we need more industry to help absorb this tremendous cost. With more industry—and a determined effort to keep what we have, Peabody will be able to face this problem. . . . We repeat—Peabody has ALWAYS been industrial—it needs to be kept so for the benefit of all. Factories provide not only tax money but employment—jobs—wages—which are the life blood of any community. Factories attract people to the city—people spend money in the Peabody stores—we build up our residential, commercial, mercantile and industrial groups together, and all prosper. We are interdependent, one upon the other. Keep Peabody industrial.¹⁹

Keeping Peabody industrial in terms of the leather industry, however, began to be more of a challenge in the mid fifties. And with the relocation of the Kirstein Tanning Company in July 1955, after twenty years of operation in Peabody, conditions in the leather industry began to look even bleaker for the Leather City.

¹⁷ *Peabody Times*, January 7, 1954, p. 4.

¹⁸ By 1960 the population of Peabody had increased by 42 percent since 1950. That equaled an increase of 9, 557 individuals. Information from Wells, *The Peabody Story*, 446.

¹⁹ *Peabody Times*, July 23, 1953.

Leaving seventy employees jobless, the Kirstein Tanning Company explained that it was “unable to compete with tanneries operating in New Hampshire and Maine. . . . ‘I can’t compete with tanneries only twenty miles from Peabody because of production costs,’ David Kirstein said. . . . ‘These other tanneries are underselling me three or four cents per unit and I can’t compete.’” Intending to open a factory in Vermont, Kirstein said he did not arrive at his decision lightly. Before deciding to move, he installed a new water system and new engines to cut down the overhead, but “labor costs in this area are higher than out of state and production is lower.”²⁰ Kirstein claimed that these factors added to his inability to meet the out-of-state competition.

Not everyone in leather circles was willing to castigate labor as the main problem in the Northshore leather industry, however. In 1957 at the tercentennial anniversary of the leather industry in the Northshore area, Irving R. Glass, executive vice president of the Tanners Council of America, talked about his hope for the leather industry. Seeing inefficiency as the biggest problem facing the industry, he cautioned: “The North Shore leather industry must be streamlined if it is to become a part of the country’s healthy industrial climate The individual practices of every North Shore tanner must be streamlined, corrected, and updated if the industry is to gain its rightful place in the new industrial climate which prevails in the nation today.” Echoing O’Keefe’s sentiments, Glass said that too many tannery operators had failed to react to the “dynamic change” going on in the industry. Advising industry leaders to shift their thinking, Glass suggested that instead of seeing the

²⁰ “Kirstein Tanning Company Closes Peabody Plant,” *Salem Evening News*, July 19, 1955, pp. 1-2.

leather industry as “being mature and even venerable,” industry leaders must see it as a young industry with unprecedented opportunities.

Modern technology is now revamping the shape and character of this industry. There are developments in the techniques of producing leather which compare with the most startling advances in new areas of industry. Our industry is no longer content to produce the familiar leathers or to follow the established production routines of the past. It is responding to the necessity in today’s competitive industrial markets for new products and the enhanced efficiency of chemistry and engineering.

To be successful in the modern leather industry, Glass explained, one must engage in “technical progress, market alertness and productive efficiency,” without foregoing the “traditions of quality and of craftsmanship long associated with New England.” If a leather manufacture failed to adjust his business priorities and relied on “fixed practicing, the dead weight of obsolete routines and restrictive antiquated production concepts,” then that enterprise would not be able to survive, Glass warned. He said:

In a free enterprise system every industry and every company within it has to scrape the barnacles off its own hull. No one else will do it for you. The reward which is within sight well justifies every company and every leather community in trying to make certain that it sails in this new race toward new opportunity without an anchor dragging.²¹

Glass and O’Keefe were not alone in their sentiments that leather manufacturers had to modernize their equipment. A report issued eighteen years earlier—in 1939—by the New England Regional Planning Commission, composed of the heads of the six New England state planning boards, stated that “there must be quicker scrapping of obsolete equipment and machinery and quicker application of modern management methods free from nepotism.” This report went on to praise “labor legislation in New England, which has brought about better working

²¹ “‘Modernize,’ Glass Tells Leather Men,” *The Salem Evening News*, March 13, 1957, pp. 1-2.

conditions than in the country as a whole, as reflecting the intelligent organization of skilled workmen under good leadership.”²² The *Weekly Bulletin Leather and Shoe News* also stressed the need for tanneries to become more efficient and the manufacturing process to be improved and shortened if these tanneries wanted to stay in business.²³

Unfortunately, many of the Peabody tanneries were unable or unwilling—for whatever reason—to change the way they manufactured leather. Some of the smaller shops just did not have the capital to undertake any degree of modernization. Other plants chose not to look to the future. One company, however, was willing and able to change the way it did business: A.C. Lawrence. In order to try to adapt to a changing industrial landscape, A.C. Lawrence initiated a bi-monthly colloquium between laboratory personnel and production supervisors to discuss what practices were working in the company and what changes needed to be made. Leaders of A.C. Lawrence hoped that these forums would provide worthwhile information that would keep A.C. Lawrence ahead of its competition.²⁴

This optimistic philosophy about the growth and potential of the leather industry, however, could not alter the future in Peabody. The majority of the tanneries had been lackadaisical about industry conditions for too long and by the time they realized that the Northshore leather industry might be experiencing a permanent downward spiral, there were too many factors working against tannery owners. For too long, tanners had been “concerned about the large losses that they would take on

²² “Prosperity of New England in the Future Depends on Planning Now,” *The Salem Evening News*, May 15, 1939.

²³ “Future of Tanning Industry,” *Weekly Bulletin Leather and Shoe News* 48 (July 24, 1943): 19.

²⁴ “ACL’s Men of Science Get Together in Research Forum,” *Tan-O-Gram* 7 (March 1957): 1.

their inventories in the event of a market drop in hide prices.” Consumed with the price of raw stock, moreso than the profit margin between raw stock and finished leather, tanners throughout the thirties, forties, and fifties felt that “by shrewd buying they can outguess their competitors and provide their customers with cheaper leather, thereby taking a greater share of the business themselves.” This practice led to problems when over capacity resulted. Unless markets expanded, over capacity would continue. The modernization of plants only served to exacerbate the situation. This trend of “short and sharp price cycles” in the leather industry created erratic earnings and forced tannery owners “to do things that were not good for the industry as a whole . . . [and] with further expansion cut off by the limitations of both our potential market and the supply of raw stock available, there is little hope of satisfactory profits without universal recognition of these circumstances and adequate leadership within the industry.”²⁵

Further exacerbating the situation was the lack of export controls on hides. A national organization, called the Hide Action Program consisting of 20 different groups, unions and leather manufacturers alike, joined forces to produce a pamphlet detailing the crisis situation facing the United States. The pamphlet opened with this dire warning:

Our industry is facing a crisis situation. Unless it is solved, the impact on our jobs could be quite severe. Foreign countries, especially Japan, are buying all the cattle hides they can and will pay any price to get them. . . . If the United States doesn't do something right now to limit hide exports the leather goods industry won't have the raw material we need to make our finished products. This means plant shutdowns and job losses at tanneries and factories where we make shoes, handbags, belts, furniture, gloves, briefcases, and garments.

²⁵ “Industry Problems,” *Weekly Bulletin of Leather and Shoes* 43 (October 22, 1938): 13, 17.

Even if a manufacturer can get the leather he needs, the price he charges for his wallets, belts, clothing and shoes will be higher. . . a lot higher. This means more inflation when we are told inflation is our number one national problem.

Lamenting the fact that they—leather goods companies and trade associations—had not been able to get the government to act, this pamphlet beseeched American citizens to get “our government to act.”²⁶ This type of plea by both unions and industry was somewhat hypocritical, however. As historian Dana Frank explains, in the seventies, industry leaders throughout the manufacturing sector complained about the Asian market taking over many of the U.S. major industries, but it was these same industry leaders who had moved overseas in the fifties and sixties to make bigger profits. Using the garment industry as an example, Frank said that “Fashion U.S.A. only meant a corporate shell based nominally in the United States, as the manufacturers went global, like a heat-seeking missile flying at the speed of international capital toward the lowest wages anywhere on earth.”²⁷

Unfortunately, the leather industry followed the lead set by Fashion U.S.A. By the late 1980s, despite aggressive initiatives by Peabody city leaders, the leather industry had relocated to Asian and Latin American locales and left the Leather City behind. When the production of shoe side upper leather in Peabody, a large part of A.C. Lawrence’s leather niche, began a rapid decline because of a lack of demand, leather workers knew the situation was bleak. Even though A.C. Lawrence promised to “try to help affected employees find other work,” workers knew they were seeing

²⁶ “Hide Exports Threaten Our Industry,” Box Leather Industry, Folder Miscellaneous Correspondence 2001.17.25, George Peabody House Museum, Peabody, Massachusetts.

²⁷ Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 159.

the end of an era.²⁸ A brief reprieve came in 1976 when ten senior management employees, all former leather workers, took over the operation of the company when it was on the verge of closing, hoping to turn it around. Although the new owners were not able to prevent the ultimate demise of the company, they did ensure seven hundred jobs for another fifteen years.²⁹ After leading the country in the leather industry for one hundred and sixty years, however, A.C. Lawrence, with its six plants from Maine to Kentucky producing forty million square feet of leather annually, could no longer compete with cheaper foreign imports and tougher federal environmental regulations.³⁰ By the time A.C. Lawrence closed its doors in 1991, there was really nothing anybody could do to stem the tide of deindustrialization. With the closure of A.C. Lawrence, many of Peabody's smaller leather plants shut their doors as well. Instead of factory whistles greeting the downtown visitor, the sound of bulldozers and wrecking balls had become the sounds for the new millennium.

While Local 21 tried to educate its membership about the mounting problems facing the industry, it was unable to enact any type of lasting change in the way manufacturers did business. In 1970 O'Keefe wrote an editorial in *The Bulletin* lamenting the government's insufficient trade policy:

The U.S. government has failed to face up to new developments in world trade and the present trade policy is more applicable to the world of the late

²⁸ A.C. Lawrence Memo to Employees, September 4, 1969, Box Leather Tanneries and Strike, Folder Letters Regarding Negotiations in Strike at A.C.L 1964, George Peabody House Museum, Peabody, Massachusetts.

²⁹ "ACL 'Gamble' Saved 700 Jobs," *Salem Evening News*, January 30, 1978, p. 12.

³⁰ "Tanner's Twilight," *Salem Evening News*, July 3, 1991, Box Leather Tanneries and Strike, Folder Letters Regarding Negotiations in Strike at ACL, 1964, George Peabody House Museum, Peabody, Massachusetts.

forties and fifties, than the seventies. The U.S. position in world trade has deteriorated with harsh effects on workers and their communities because of new developments in the postwar years. That accelerated in the sixties. These include the spread of managed national economies, with direct and indirect government barriers to imports and aid to exports; the internationalization of technology; the skyrocketing use of investments by U.S. companies in foreign subsidiaries; and the spread of U.S. based multi-national corporations.

In order to stem the current trend in the leather industry, O'Keefe called for a "thorough revision of U.S. government posture and policy" in regards to foreign markets.³¹ O'Keefe planned to keep fighting this trade policy issue with Massachusetts government representatives and in Washington. Unfortunately, this was not to be.

Shortly after this editorial was published, O'Keefe suffered a series of illnesses that kept him out of the office more and more. In the fall of 1973, doctors diagnosed him with cancer. Two weeks after the diagnosis, he died. O'Keefe's death signaled the end of the progressive leather union and its International. Although the union would continue to represent leather workers through the remainder of the seventies and into the eighties, O'Keefe's death marked a deviation from the union's overall structure. While solidarity unionism was based on the efforts of workers joining together to enact change, leadership was a necessity for coalescing the various voices into a united front. This unified front was especially important in the mid-seventies as the industry seriously contracted.

Unfortunately for Local 21 and the leather industry, the various individuals who assumed leadership positions after O'Keefe lacked his abilities as an organic

³¹ Richard O'Keefe, "New Direction Asked in U.S. Trade Program: LWIU Gears For Union Huddle in Nation's Capital," *The Bulletin*, January, February, March 1970, p. 1.

intellectual. O’Keefe possessed the rare ability to take the needs, wants and desires of a diverse group of individuals and fashion these elements into a cohesive agenda. With his death Local 21 lacked the leadership necessary to synthesize peoples’ desires into concrete realities and to promote effectively the interests of the leather industry to the wider community. “When Mike died, many of the social activities and programs the union offered ceased,” said Margaret Abbott; and so did Local 21’s role as an activist organization in the larger community.³² As the seventies waned, Local 21 no longer functioned as a community-based union intent on creating a moral economy. It had become strictly a business union representing fewer and fewer leather workers. In 1978, Local 21 only represented 2,110 leather workers.³³

At the close of the twentieth century, Local 21 still existed but the essence of its organization no longer did. It had mutated into an entity representing a whole host of other industries—clerical, office, machinery, and plastics to name a few. Like any viable entity in the twenty-first century, Local 21 had to diversify. While housed in the same location as in its heyday, Local 21 lost its official relationship with the leather industry when it became the Office and Professional Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, in the mid nineties. While some old-timers at the union office remember Peabody’s leather heyday, most Local 21 members now have no connection with the leather industry. An ironic twist to Peabody’s leather saga is that an industry that at one time could not maintain and retain an effective union, finally found a union that outlived the industry.

³² Interview with Margaret Abbott, former Local 21 secretary, Peabody, Massachusetts, September 2001.

³³ Adrian A. Paradis and Grace D. Paradis, *The Labor Almanac* (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1983), 53.

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