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# The Fabric of Labor: A Study of Labor History Through the Upstate New York Textile Industry, 1950 – 1968

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**The Fabric of Labor: A Study of Labor History Through the Upstate New York  
Textile Industry, 1950 – 1968**

An honors thesis presented to the  
Department of History,  
University at Albany, State University of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in History

Anthony Parillo

Research Mentor: Christopher Pastore, Ph.D.  
Research Advisor: Carl Bon Tempo, Ph.D.

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores three textile mills in upstate New York in the post-WWII years, and specifically the relationships between mill hands, management, and the national Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA). While historians have studied textile mills and labor relations in the twentieth-century South, they have paid little attention to their northern counterparts during that era. This paper, conversely, writes northern mill workers into the larger scholarly conversation about twentieth-century union decline. It shows that union campaigns often failed due largely to the cunning, if not deceptive, maneuvers of management. Drawing on union records, contemporary local newspapers, and census data, I argue that management effectively kept unions at bay not through belligerence, but rather via more subtle strategies that combined coercion, the exploitation of anti-union thinking in rural culture, and the creation of management-controlled company unions. A more aggressive stance, management learned, only galvanized workers and encouraged them to side with the national union. Thus, company bosses took a more sophisticated approach to defeating union organizing drives.

*Key Words: Independent Union, TWUA, NLRB*

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Many people have aided me through the monumental task of writing my first thesis. Naturally, I would be remiss not to thank my research mentor, Dr. Pastore, and my advisor, Dr. Bon Tempo. Their guidance was critical to the success of this paper; the wisdom and knowledge they passed on was not only a benefit for this paper, but will certainly be crucial for success in my future career.

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Finally, I would like to thank my High School American History teacher Richard Hengsternan, who taught me to love history and set me on the course to pursue it at a college level. Without him I am not sure if I would be writing this today, and for that I will forever be grateful.

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## Introduction

The Lion Brand Inc. textile mill in the small Upstate New York town of Stottville was not a large one, employing only 130 of the town's roughly one thousand residents.<sup>1</sup> Nestled in the foothills of the Taconics of eastern New York, the town was rural and lily white, without a single African-American resident.<sup>2</sup> Located near Hudson, New York — once a center of industry like many of the communities along the Hudson River — Stottville was not unlike the small industrial centers that were abundant in the Northeast in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet the fight that occurred between 1950 and 1968 pitting labor against management and union against union was representative of battles occurring around the region in this declining industry. For months, the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) pushed to organize the mill, stressing the material gains made by workers in other mills who had already done so. Yet those efforts were undermined by the Stottville Independent Union (SIU), which strongly opposed the national union and attempted to offer a more moderate, local solution to the mill's labor issues. Though SIU leaders were not the typical working men associated with a blue-collar industry — one of them was also employed in real estate, while another owned a farm — their connections to the community would nevertheless shape the struggle between Lion Brand Inc. and the TWUA. This helped the Independent Union convince the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to allow the Union to organize the mill's workers.<sup>3</sup> The Independent Union's actions

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<sup>1</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Lion Brand Organizing File*, 1967-1968. NLRB "Charge Against Employer" for violations of NLRB Act Section 8, Subsection 2, 3, and 5. United States Census Bureau. Table 40—Race, Age, and Rural-Farm Population, by Sex, for Places of 1,000 to 2,5000, p. 141 1950. The population of Stottville, NY was calculated as 1,020 in 1950.

<sup>2</sup> United States Census Bureau. Table 40—Race, Age, and Rural-Farm Population, by Sex, for Places of 1,000 to 2,5000, p. 141 1950

<sup>3</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2: Stottville Independent Union Organizing File, 1956-7, 1961, *In the matter of: Stottville Independent Union Inc. CI 19-57*, p. 2.

prompted the TWUA to file suit against the SIU, which led to a protracted organizing battle.

After ten years, a critical election was held at the mill between the TWUA and the SIU, showing the true scope of the mill's labor dispute as it dragged on for years.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will examine Stottville and two other textile mills in Upstate New York to ask the question: what was the cause of the TWUA's failures, and how much of the success or failure of the union was dependent on the tendencies and culture of the workers? It will argue that management's decision to implement a more hands-off strategy with the union ultimately led to the failure of the TWUA; management was much more successful when their tactics were subtle, as an overly aggressive strategy galvanized the workers to side with the union against the bosses. Further, it will argue that the workers themselves were often a barrier to organizing, as the close-knit rural culture of two of the communities made it difficult for the message of urban TWUA outsiders to get through to the mill hands. The organizing failures offer a window into a struggling textile industry and connect to the larger trends of union decline and labor struggles in the United States during this period.<sup>5</sup> Similar patterns arise in two additional case studies in labor organization—one located in Fonda, New York and Newburgh, New York. Fonda and Stottville were similar communities in size and demographics, their mills facing similar incursions by independent unions. Newburgh, conversely, was much larger and more diverse community, which, in turn, produced numerous problems including a vicious strike against the welfare state

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<sup>4</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2: Lion Brand Inc. Organizing File, 1967-8, NLRB Election Ballot, "Report on Lion Brand Inc. Election"

<sup>5</sup> Greenhouse, *Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019). Sam Roberts, "Spirit of Newburgh Past Haunts Political Present," *New York Times* Section B (1992): p.2. Nelson Lichtenstein, "UAW Bargaining Strategy and Shop-Floor Conflict: 1946 – 1970," *Industrial Relations Journal* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1985): p. 360 – 381. Barry Eidlin & Micah Uetricht, "U.S. Union Revitalization and the Missing 'Militant Minority'," *Labor Studies Journal* 44, No. 1 (2019): p. 36 – 59. Karen Nussbaum, "Unions and Democracy," *Labor Studies Journal* 44 (2019): p. 365 – 372. Ruth O'Brien, "Taking the Conservative State Seriously: Statebuilding and Restrictive Labor Practices in Postwar America," *Labor Studies Journal* 21, No. 4 (1997): p. 33 – 63.

that occurred in the early 1960s by conservative city manager Joseph Mitchell.<sup>6</sup> This notable example of conservative backlash shows the growth of conservative political power in the mid-Hudson valley at the time, another contributor to the struggles of the TWUA.

Though this paper will examine the strengths and weaknesses of unions more broadly, it will also look at how white, rural culture affected organizing efforts. By the end of the 1950s, some unions had moved outside of specifically labor-oriented issues, getting involved in, for instance, the Civil Rights Movement. The Union of Auto Workers (UAW), for example, was managed by one of its most notable presidents Walter Ruether, who stated “[He] would rather have 100,000 less members in our union than have a million more and have to compromise our position on civil rights.”<sup>7</sup> Though Ruether did not represent the TWUA, by strongly associating organized labor with civil rights, it is possible many workers in rural, predominantly white communities who would have otherwise been friendly to national organized labor were turned off by this rhetoric. This shows that the TWUA’s failure to organize workers in Upstate New York was not only due to the successful tactics deployed by management but also to the antipathy of workers toward an organization whose values were so fundamentally different from their own.

A closer look at the TWUA’s difficulties in organizing these small-town mills helps explain why labor unions withered during the second half of the twentieth century. Scholars generally consider the period following the second world war to the 1980s as one of declining labor union power. Although there have been significant studies into labor relations, union decline, and the post-war textile industry (1950-1970), that focus has mostly ignored the

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<sup>6</sup> Sam Roberts, “Spirit of Newburgh Past Haunts Political Present,” *New York Times* Section B (1992): p.2.

<sup>7</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor*. (New York: Basic Books, 1995).



Northeast. Instead, regions like the South and unions like the UAW receive the lion's share of focus from labor historians.<sup>8</sup> This is, to an extent, understandable: as John Salmond points out in *The General Textile Strike of 1934: From Maine to Alabama*, "By 1933, the great transfer of the industry from its traditional centers in Massachusetts and Rhode Island to the southern Piedmont was complete," thus making the researchable data in the Northeastern United States sparse.<sup>9</sup> However, this is all the more reason to examine the Northeast. Though the textile industry was gutted in the region, it is worth looking into the fate of the textile mills that managed to hold on.

Another possible reason for the minimal coverage of the TWUA is its relative weakness compared to larger unions like the UAW or USW. Though membership records are sparse, it appears that the UTW— a textile union that preceded the TWUA— had as many as 400,000 people participate in the 1934 textile strike.<sup>10</sup> For context, the USW currently has over 800,000 members, which is after decades of union degradation and steel working jobs being shipped overseas.<sup>11</sup> Yet, if the TWUA was not as prominent as other unions, it was still a major national union that played an important part in the labor movement, primarily in the North. Further, as a weaker union, their struggles are less likely to have succeeded, with their failures being a bellwether to the struggles industry as a whole would have in America in the following decades.

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor*. (New York: Basic Books, 1995), Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. (New York: The New Press, 2010). Randall Patton, "Textile Organizing in a Sunbelt South Community: Northwest Georgia's Carpet Industry in the Early 1960s," *Labor History Journal* 39, No. 3 (1998). Carl Gersuny, "A Devil in Petticoats' and Just Cause: Patterns of Punishment in Two New England Textile Factories," *Business History Review* 50, No. 2 (Summer 1976): p. 131 – 152.

<sup>9</sup> John Salmond, *The General Textile Strike of 1934: From Maine to Alabama*. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002) p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> William Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility: Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870 – 1960*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> US Department of Labor, Office of Labor-Management Standards. File number 000-094. Report submitted March 28, 2014.

The TWUA's struggle to hold on to power and influence mirrored the struggles of most major national unions in the U.S. Though they saw their political power and influence peak in the 1940s and 1950s, their power rapidly waned as public perception changed. Lawrence Richards put it best in his book *Union Free America*, when he stated the following: "[In the 1930s] Both unions and workers were now seen as the underdogs.... Unfortunately for organized labor... [conservatives in the 1950s attempted to convince] Americans that unions were no longer the underdogs they had been, and that they were failing to live up to 'their stated broad objectives for ... speaking for the underprivileged.'" <sup>12</sup> Though the power of workers eroded following the passage of the nation's first Right to Work laws in 1944 and the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, union power in the United States was still strong until the disastrous decade for organized labor that was the 1970s. <sup>13</sup> This begs the question: why then, in the supposedly union-friendly Northeast, did the TWUA and its organizers face such difficulty in the decades prior? This is particularly pertinent because, despite the general weakness of the textile industry, it had fared decently well in the North following the 1934 strikes, even as the union-hostile South saw their labor efforts soundly rejected. <sup>14</sup> However, upon closer examination, one finds that the strength of unions did not lie in the sparsely populated rural areas of the state where the examined mills were located, but in the highly populated industrial centers of Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse, etc. The small towns and villages of upstate were more like the South than they were these cities, not having the same history of robust unionism and instead favoring the rugged

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert Gall, *The Politics of Right to Work* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988). Ellen Dannin, "Using the NLRB as a Resource," *Labor Studies Journal*. Morgan Reynolds, *Power and Privilege: Labor Unions in America*

<sup>14</sup> John Salmond, *The General Textile Strike of 1934: From Maine to Alabama* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), Bryant Simon, *A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910-1948* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). William Hartford, *Where is Our Responsibility* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996)

individualism that came with a lack of union representation. In such a small community, often residents only trusted those who resided within; in this case, the TWUA could be seen as the outsider, trying to organize from their thrones in the often-resented New York City.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, it is important to understand the consensus on the history of the broader labor movement during this period. Kevin Boyle and Nelson Lichtenstein, both experts on mid-century labor issues, state that the cementing of relations between labor and the Democrats was a critical error, as it allowed the party to largely ignore the issues of workers in favor of strident anti-communism abroad and social issues— namely the Civil Rights Movement— at home.<sup>16</sup> Because organized labor like the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) refused to be perpetual political outsiders, their threat to the political establishment in Washington was greatly reduced following the Second World War, shifting their status from, as Boyle puts it, “the ‘vanguard of America’ [to] ... simply another special-interest group.”<sup>17</sup> With limited political power came limited ability to push for radical pro-worker legislation, which led to the beginning of a gradual decline in membership that has yet to bottom out. This only led to further distrust of national unions, who were apparently less concerned with fighting tooth and nail for blue-collar jobs and workers than with cozying up to the political establishment in order to prevent any true fights from emerging.

The workers and TWUA organizers at Stottville and other mills like it did not fail to organize for lack of effort— the fact that they were still fighting for representation years after the

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<sup>15</sup> Gregory Fulkerson & Alexander Thomas, *Reimagining Rural: Urbanormative Portrayals of Rural Life*. (New York: Lexington Books, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995)

formation of the independent union shows that clearly. Rather, the lack of organization was due to a relentless effort on the part of the independent union, whose disinformation campaign against the TWUA led to the national union's failure.<sup>18</sup> Yet the fact that the workers voted down national representation shows not only the strength of management and the independent union and weakness on the part of the TWUA, but the misalignment of values between labor organizers and workers. If the TWUA could not convince workers that it was looking out for their best interests, it stands to reason that they failed at one of the fundamental goals of unions. It is also worth noting that the independent union did not even try to form until—to the surprise of many—the national Steel Workers Union attempted to unionize the mill.<sup>19</sup> This showed the company being reactive to organizing events occurring at their mill rather than proactive. Ultimately, by looking at several small textile mills as case studies, this paper aims to give the reader a clearer understanding of exactly why unions struggled during the decades following WWII, and by doing so, will explore how that connects to the faltering labor movement as a whole.

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<sup>18</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Lion Brand Organizing File*, 1967-1968.

<sup>19</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Stottville Independent Union Organizing File*, 1957-58, 1961. I

### **Stottville: Lion Brand Inc.**

By the 1950s, the village of Stottville in upstate New York was a relatively small, unremarkable place, housing just over 1,000 residents. Of these, around 130 worked in the mills, creating office furniture in what amounted to a modest, working-class living for the time. Located about half an hour south of Albany and a few miles east of the Hudson River, it was not terribly isolated, but it was mostly surrounded by farms and forest. The village was not without its flaws — the much larger Julliard mill, which had employed around ten times that of the Lion Brand Inc. mill, had shut down early in the decade — but nevertheless the industry remained in a region that had seen most of its textile-related jobs shipped south earlier in the century.<sup>20</sup> From the records, it was not a particularly unsafe job and provided just enough for people to get by in a relatively poor region of the state and country. Further, much like in the South, unions had yet to break into the mills, being held back by geographic obscurity and the rural nature of the area.

Like many rural mill towns, Stottville was not nearly as large and impressive as some of the major industrial centers found upstate, like Syracuse, Buffalo, Rochester, etc. It is, and was, a one-road town with most residents living on or near the main street that wanders from east to west and over the river. In the center of this sat the mills, right on the water as was the case with most mill towns. Only a few miles from the city of Hudson along the river of the same name, it was not quite as isolated as rural towns come, its proximity to such a prominent river no doubt played factor in the development of industry in the village. Despite many jobs being provided by the Lion Brand Inc. Mill, the closing of Julliard Mills in 1953 had made a significant impact on the community, leaving residents in a vulnerable position just a few years before the events of

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<sup>20</sup> Bryant Simon, *A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910 - 1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). John Salmond, *The General Textile Strike of 1934: From Maine to Alabama* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002)

this case study took place. The exact reason the mills shut down is unknown, but some residents of the town chalked it up to high wages “[choking them] out of [the] town.”<sup>21</sup> The mills that remained were ununionized, the workers relying on the good graces of their bosses to ensure safe working conditions and fair wages. However, in the 1950s events would transpire that would lead to over a decade of conflict between management, the TWUA, and ordinary working people.

In 1955 there was a strange occurrence at the Lion Brand Inc. textile mill, as the process of unionization began not by the TWUA, but by the local steelworker’s union (USW). Fresh on the heels of an organizing victory nearby— the details of which are not entirely clear— it appeared the USW thought themselves more capable of organizing the mill than the TWUA, which had yet to make an appearance in the mill town.<sup>22</sup> Being a much larger, more well-organized union, with their industry not yet having fallen on hard times like the American textile industry, it seemed the steelworkers’ union was well positioned to bring a union to the mills along Claverack Creek. The reason the steelworkers would decide to organize the mill before the textile union is unclear, but it appears that they were unsatisfied with the wages at the mill as it was setting up operations. The mill had just begun to operate in the early 1950s, and the absence of the TWUA was enough to spur the USW to take charge of organizing the millhands. It is also worth noting that the local chapter of the USW had won an NLRB election recently, giving them confidence that they could organize the textile workers in a mill that had been ignored by unions

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<sup>21</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2: Stottville Independent Union Organizing File, 1956-7, 1961, *In the matter of: Stottville Independent Union Inc. CI 19-57*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

to that point.<sup>23</sup> The process of unionizing the mill was initiated by a man known as “Mr. Evan,” an organizer for the local union chapter who managed to get some Lion Brand Inc. mill workers to sign USW union cards, though the exact number is unknown.<sup>24</sup> Though it was likely far from the 30 percent of the workers needed for an NLRB sponsored union election or the 50 percent required for a union, it was enough to get some of the mill workers to consider a plan to counter this organizing push. This counter-organizing push was made even more pertinent due to the closing of Julliard mills, with some worried that the same fate could befall the Lion Brand Inc. mills if the TWUA set up shop.<sup>25</sup> The men considering countering the TWUA did not want to affiliate with the union. Rather, they wanted to create what was known as an independent union to organize the mills.

An independent union describes a union divorced from larger national unions like the TWUA, USW, UAW, etc., often operating on a local or, at most, a regional level. Most places that had union representation — particularly in the early to mid-twentieth century — were tied to a larger umbrella union, which is, in turn, often represented by the national, industry-spanning American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Workers (AFL-CIO).<sup>26</sup> By combining the resources and manpower of national unions across industries, unions were availed substantially better recourses, not only in terms of funding in the case of a labor dispute, but also with technical matters like legal representation and contract disputation experts. The AFL-CIO, in turn, acted as a big tent labor organization, putting more of an emphasis on the political side of

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<sup>23</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2: Stottville Independent Union Organizing File, 1956-7, 1961, *In the matter of: Stottville Independent Union Inc. CI 19-57*, p. 12

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2: Stottville Independent Union Organizing File, 1956-7, 1961, *In the matter of: Stottville Independent Union Inc. CI 19-57*, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce E. Kaufman, “The Case for the Company Union,” *Labor History Journal* 41, No. 3 (2000).

labor issues, like lobbying Congress, spreading awareness on labor-related issues, etc.

Additionally, they were critical in supporting workers in national labor disputes. Though it seems to make more sense to be represented nationally, some workers felt the large scale of national unions makes representation less personal, with claims sent up by members sometimes getting caught up in bureaucratic red tape. They felt that being able to negotiate with management on the spot would allow for more flexibility, though often at the expense of pressure they were able to put on not only management but also on the entire industry through the threat of a general strike. Despite the differences in resources and representation between an independent and national union, the way they are formed is the same, fairly straightforward process: get 30 percent of workers to sign union cards for an NLRB election to be called or 50 percent to win a union outright.<sup>27</sup>

The process of creating a union—independent or otherwise—did not end with the signing of union cards. Rather, it allowed union organizers to contact the NLRB to conduct a hearing, in which the judge determined whether a union was legitimate and independent of company management. During the NLRB hearings on the creation of the Stottville Independent union that took place in 1957, one of the men arguing on the worker’s behalf discussed the effects labor unions can have on business, especially in a small town. He stated that he was afraid the USW would demand too much from management, saying “once a town gets a black eye with labor other companies stay away. They want nothing to do with it. I mean, it’s just common sense.”<sup>28</sup> This understanding of unions and organized labor is important, as it allows one to see how unions were viewed in smaller, more rural communities. Though we generally think of unions

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<sup>27</sup> Your Right to Form a Union. (n.d.). Retrieved April 24, 2021 from NLRB Website

<sup>28</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2: Stottville Independent Union Organizing File, 1956-7, 1961.



and labor issues in large urban settings, the rift between rural and urban, even in a generally union-friendly state such as New York, was vast. It is also understandable why the community would back such a line of reasoning, considering the residual trauma the village residents felt from the closing of Julliard Mills.<sup>29</sup> According to one of the members of the board of the SIU, the mills were shut down due to overly high wages, with the implication being that the TWUA or USW would do the same to Lion Brand Inc. if they were allowed to organize the mill. Despite this line of reasoning, it is equally likely that Julliard Mills closed shop due to the larger national trends of deindustrialization and relocation of jobs away from the industrial Northeast, a point the SIU members neglected to bring up.<sup>30</sup>

The reason the SIU was founded in the first place was rather straight forward. As it was described in a newspaper article following incorporation, the founding members of the SIU felt that because its officers were “men who grew up with the business [they felt] that they [were] more capable of knowing and handling their own problems than any outside union interest, who occasionally have attempted to instill ‘grass is greener’ thoughts in the minds of the plant’s personnel.”<sup>31</sup> In a community as small as Stottville, people were often skeptical of outsiders, or those who they viewed as unable to understand the problems they faced. Friendship and familial ties were viewed as the most important connections, with those coming from outside as

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<sup>29</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Stottville Independent Union Organizing File*, 1957-58, 1961.

<sup>30</sup> Salmond, *The General Textile Strike of 1934: From Maine to Alabama* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002). William Hartford, *Where Is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Stottville Independent Union Organizing File*, 1957-58, 1961. News clipping, *Independent Union Wins Vote at Stottville*.

untrustworthy.<sup>32</sup> This idea was leaned upon by the organizers of the independent union during the NLRB hearings, in which they reference the closing of the Julliard Mills and the pain that caused to the community to gain sympathy to their less adversarial stance towards management.<sup>33</sup> By playing up the fact that they would only be representing the one mill, they characterized themselves as looking out for the community and workers, while the TWUA and USW were described as outsiders who would demand so much from management that the mill was sure to close as a result.

The motives behind the formation of the SIU come into question when one looks at the occupation of the members of its board. Three of the four were employed outside of the mill. Joseph Himmel, James Maloy, and Leonard Cascioli all had outside sources of wealth, as a real estate agent, collecting Social Security, and dairy farm owner, respectively. As the memo on the union's formation puts it, "Three of the four incorporators who were present at the [NLRB] hearing are not entirely dependent upon their employment at Lion Brand for their livelihood."<sup>34</sup> This makes the claims of them working with management—as the TWUA claimed they were—more likely, as they would likely be less concerned with things like wage increases and hours. The "independence" of the independent union then comes less from their separate status from the TWUA, but from the board member's independence from the life lived by the average mill worker.

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<sup>32</sup> Strach, Patricia, "Why Rural America is Joining the Movement for Black Lives," *Pew Research Center*. Bryant Simon, *A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910 – 1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2: Stottville Independent Union Organizing File, 1956-7, 1961, *In the matter of: Stottville Independent Union Inc. CI 19-57*, p. 12

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

Though the material status of the SIU board members calls into question the motives of the independent union, the contract written up at the union's formation provides even greater reason to question their intent. In Section 11 of the contract between Lion Brand Inc. and Stottville Independent Union, the SIU stated "the union agrees that no strike shall be called for a period of ninety (90) days after the breakdown or suspension of negotiations."<sup>35</sup> This type of language essentially provides a built-in cool-down period for whenever tensions may arise in the workplace, giving time for management to gather the resources to deal with a potential strike. Further, by making workers wait to go on strike, it kills the momentum that would have otherwise been there at the height of worker-management tensions, making it far less likely that the strike would be successful, if it were to occur at all. Mandatory wait periods for strikes are often reviled by unions in the same way right-to-work laws are, as they suck the power and life out of them, weakening their power in the long run.<sup>36</sup> Why then, it should be asked, would union organizers make this provision in their constitution, one that hampers their abilities to put pressure on management when collective bargaining falls through? It appears to call into question the motives of the SIU even further, making it seem like putting pressure on the ownership and management class of the mill is far from their priority.

The argument that the SIU was a de facto company union, though worth pondering, was not enough to convince the NLRB judge to throw out the case. The fact of the matter was that, at least according to SIU board member Leonard Cascioli, 95 percent of the workers at the Lion Brand Inc. mills had signed union cards for the Independent Union, showing an overwhelming

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<sup>35</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2: Stottville Independent Union Organizing File, 1956-7, 1961, *AGREEMENT, made... between LION BRAND, INC. ... and STOTTVILLE INDEPENDENT UNION*. p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Greenhouse, *Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019).

level of support.<sup>37</sup> There are multiple possible explanations for this, one of them being the nature of the community. As previously mentioned, Stottville was a small village in the largely rural Columbia County, New York. Though scholarly literature on the union movement is scarce for a region of that makeup, what is known is that the primary centers for organized labor in the state were the large, industrialized cities, such as Schenectady, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, etc. This was, in part, due to the demographic makeup of these areas, as the number of working-class men and women numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Stottville, in contrast, had only several hundred working class citizens, preventing pro-union sentiment from developing. As the independent union formed for the stated goal of preventing too harsh of concessions from being asked of the mill owners, it makes sense why the community would support this, as they were not radicalized as many of their urban counterparts were. Whatever the reason, the support among the workers for the independent union was there, and their formation was solidified after the 1957 NLRB hearings.<sup>38</sup>

Understanding why the workers of the mill decided to vote against the TWUA is important, as it allows one to understand the struggles of the union more broadly. Though the tactics of management and rural nature were the main contributors, the ethnic background of the village is also worth examining. Primarily consisting of native-born Americans, the community— like many across the country at the time— was made up of the descendants of immigrants, often second and third generation. As William Hartford points out in his landmark book on the textile industry “Where is Our Responsibility: Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960,” “Where newer immigrants tended to embrace the

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<sup>37</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2: Stottville Independent Union Organizing File, 1956-7, 1961, *In the matter of: Stottville Independent Union Inc. CI 19-57*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

CIO with enthusiasm, many workers from older immigrant groups kept their distance.”<sup>39</sup> As Stottville was primarily made up of older European immigrant groups, it stands to reason that they would be less likely to embrace unionism than their recent-immigrant counterparts.<sup>40</sup>

Though the mill at Stottville was now under union representation, this was an unsatisfactory result to many involved in working-class labor organization, resulting in rebukes from an unexpected source: the International Union of Electrical workers (IUE). Following the certification of the union, they publicly came out against it, claiming “It would seem that Joseph Zellinger, co-owner of the L & B, is the spokesman for the Independent Union.... We have continually brought out this point, namely that the entire Independent Union operation at Stottville ... is actually controlled by the owners of the L & B Corporation.”<sup>41</sup> For this reason, they urged the NLRB to invalidate the results of the election held at the mill not a year after the SIU initially won, in which the Independent Union was victorious in winning over mill workers. This apparently led to another vote within the mill just a few years later, this time between the SIU and the IUE in a battle to keep the newly founded Independent Union alive. In this too the SIU was victorious, winning out against the IUE by a vote of 51 to 33.<sup>42</sup> The fact that the workers of the Lion Brand Inc. textile mill were willing to vote for SIU representation twice in such quick succession shows that, despite the arguments made against them by larger national unions, there was a fundamental trust of the organizers by the workers. This is possibly a reflection of the community ties in rural America, as rather than bowing to the whims of unions

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<sup>39</sup> William Hartford, *Where Is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p. 71.

<sup>40</sup> United States Census Bureau. Table 40—Race, Age, and Rural-Farm Population, by Sex, for Places of 1,000 to 2,5000, p. 141 1950

<sup>41</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Stottville Independent Union Organizing File*, 1957-58, 1961. News clipping, *Independent Union Wins Vote at Stottville*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

based in NYC and Buffalo, they instead preferred their home-grown union, even if it did not provide them with quite the same benefits the national ones promised.

The fight for representation certainly would not end there. Though it is unclear exactly what happened between the formation of the SIU and the late 1960s, what is clear is that the TWUA was still fighting to organize the mill under them almost a decade later in 1968, when they petitioned the NLRB to have another election at the mill. On the ballot would be three options: the status quo of SIU representation, national representation under the TWUA (specifically the Hudson Valley Joint Board branch), or no representation at all. The TWUA seemed confident in themselves, with leaflets sent out to the workers touting the benefits that came with the national union, like wage hikes, better hours, and so on.<sup>43</sup> The confidence of the TWUA and their organizers, however, was met with an equal conviction on the part of the SIU, who put out several political cartoons disparaging the TWUA. One of them was so bold as to compare the TWUA contract to toilet paper, showing a roll labeled “Wall Paper Contract.”<sup>44</sup> Though the political comics likely did not hurt the SIU’s efforts, their preferable treatment by management and general favorability by the millhands were apparently enough to push the union over the top, as according to a memo from the TWUA in the aftermath, the SIU was victorious in the election held in 1968.

The ‘Wall Paper Contract’ political comic was far from the only piece of organizing propaganda used in the leadup to the NLRB election, by both the SIU and the TWUA. In a less aggressive manner, the TWUA published a document titled “*DOLLARS AND CENTS: Horse*

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<sup>43</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Lion Brand Organizing File*, 1967-1968. “Who’s Scared of the Big Bad Wolf”

<sup>44</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Lion Brand Organizing File*, 1967-1968. “Wall Paper Contract”

*Sense – Boss’ Cents*,” they made a great effort to show how committed to the community they were, possibly to push back against the narrative that they were less concerned with the community than with dues. They emphasized how “One-half of [their] Union dues ... stays right in the local area organization ... to be used as deemed necessary to advance the ... members’ interest locally.”<sup>45</sup> They explained how the rest of the money was used to ensure smooth operation of the union at large, hoping that by providing transparency as to where the money went, the workers would feel less like paying dues was a waste of their money. Not only that, but they further justified the payment that came with union dues by stating, “Compare what you pay in Union dues with what you may get in economic benefits and you have the answer!” The reason for this pamphlet seemed to be two-fold: first, it explained that, though they were sending money to an organization outside the community, it would be worth it, as workers would reap financial benefits that outpaced the price of dues. However, there was also the more subtle pushback against the idea that the union was taking advantage of the workers for monetary gain. Since the 1940s, there had been an effort by conservatives to paint unions as corrupt, hence the further scrutiny placed on them through the passage of Taft-Hartley. By providing transparency as to where their money was going and asserting that they would almost certainly benefit by it, they are attempting to reject the claim that they are looking out for themselves above all else.<sup>46</sup>

The political and cultural dynamics had changed by 1968. The textile industry in the Northeast, having suffered greatly during the 1950s and 1960s, was now essentially gone, with mill owners outsourcing jobs, failing to upgrade equipment, and generally fed up with unions

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<sup>45</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Lion Brand Organizing File*, 1967-1968. *DOLLARS AND CENTS: Horse Sense – Boss’ Cents*

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

continually pushing for better conditions and wages.<sup>47</sup> All this considered, it is impressive that the Lion Brand Inc. mill held on during these turbulent times, something that the workers must have taken into account when casting their votes in the 1968 NLRB election. If the SIU could keep the factory in town, particularly when they were closing across the region—including in mills represented by the TWUA—what reason was there to change unions now? Perhaps there was a chance at an increase in wages and benefits, but what if those increases caused the mill to leave town?

Though there was certainly a good amount of disinformation spread by the SIU and abetted by management, one must also realize that workers at the mill had had nearly a decade to get acquainted with the Stottville Independent Union. They knew how the SIU represented them, how their decidedly non-adversarial relationship toward management had gone, and were apparently satisfied enough with it to vote for them again in the 1968 election. Had they been displeased with the SIU and misinformed about national union organizing efforts, it is likely they would have voted for the third option on the ballot: no representation whatsoever. Instead, the efforts of the Independent Union had apparently been satisfactory enough to convince the workers to allow them to keep their status as sole representatives.

One of the pitches made by the TWUA to persuade workers to vote for them in the upcoming NLRB election in 1968 was the general lack of worker protections and benefits codified in the contract mill workers were made to sign upon employment. In a leaflet distributed to workers, they exclaimed how “the company cannot take anything such as wages, holidays, vacation or other privileges ... like giving out turkeys which is not in the contract, away from

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<sup>47</sup> William Hartford, *Where Is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p. 149.



you.”<sup>48</sup> The implication from this is clear: management and the independent union were not fighting for clear, tangible rights and the TWUA would do exactly that. Promising better and more resilient benefits and wages is clearly a familiar and reliable union organizing tactic, mainly due to the simplicity and general effectiveness it has in spurring workers to push back against management.<sup>49</sup> However, the Independent Union and management effectively countered this message, arguing that these promises were nothing more than just that, and were they implemented, they might cause the mill to fold under financial strain.

The national union also tried to argue that they were not only asking for more benefits, but they were effective in getting these because of technical prowess—a result of being such a large group with vast resources. They put it succinctly in the pamphlet *Yes There is a Difference!* stating “What is the difference between a Strong National Union and an Independent Union? –Trained Personnel to Bargain for You!”<sup>50</sup> As an organization dedicated to protecting workers, they stressed the importance of being represented by a group of people dedicated to investigating labor disputes, like contract enforcement and grievances. They also handled personal matters, such as investigating why a hospital bill was not covered by your insurance company and helping you understand unemployment insurance. By offering a much greater number of resources than the Independent Union, the TWUA attempted to override the insular nature of rural communities, arguing that it was more practical to choose a group with much greater resources.

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<sup>48</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Lion Brand, Inc.* — *Folder 1*, 1967-68, “Textile Workers Union of America in Action”

<sup>49</sup> Barry Eidlin & Micah Uetracht, “U.S. Union Revitalization and the Missing ‘Militant Minority’,” *Labor Studies Journal* 44, No. 1 (2019): p. 36 – 59. Karen Nussbaum, “Unions and Democracy,” *Labor Studies Journal* 44 (2019): p. 365 – 372.

<sup>50</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Lion Brand, Inc.* — *Folder 1*, 1967-68, “Yes There is a Difference!”

The failure of the TWUA in the NLRB election of 1968 is critical to understanding why the workers would reject the union that was supposedly looking out for their best interests. After all, if they could not win here, the likelihood of success in other small-town mills would be grim. The TWUA did not see the victory as the underdog union besting the big outsider; rather, they saw their defeat as coming from management, who they claimed showed favoritism to the SIU. They argued that, rather than both sides receiving fair treatment, the SIU was given as much time as they desired to pass out pamphlets beneficial to them, whereas the TWUA was forced to ask management for time to do the same. The claims of favoritism were not understated; in a memo sent out by pro-TWUA workers at the mill, they went so far as to label it a “company-dominated union.”<sup>51</sup> Pointing this out, however, did not make much of a difference. At the end of the day, the SIU still dominated, leaving the TWUA to continue to struggle to represent the plant.

In a memo sent out by the company, there was what appeared to be both a thinly veiled threat and a call to the community sensibility of the workers at the mill. It discussed the secret ballots that were to be cast in the NLRB election, urging workers not to “be taken in by attacks on the company” and that they should be careful with their vote, lest “the history of this area and problems which we do not want to occur again” were to occur.<sup>52</sup> The message implied by this pamphlet—that the “issues” of high wages that had driven Julliard out of the area might happen again if employees cast the “wrong” vote—is enough to get a worker at the mill thinking about the cost of their vote. Even if they were not fully happy with the independent union as their representative, would that not be better than no job at all? On a separate note, there seems to

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<sup>51</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Lion Brand Organizing File*, 1967-1968. “...Seeking a change in the setup of the company-dominated union,” memo from The Committee for Change.

<sup>52</sup> <sup>52</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 2, *Lion Brand Organizing File*, 1967-1968. *Memo to All Employees from Lion Brand Inc.* April 15, 1968.

have been a play at the sense of community of the employees, as the TWUA could not possibly understand the hardship faced by the workers through the closure of the Julliard Mills. This type of not-so-subtle threat is the type that could be constantly fed to the workers throughout their shift, as management could put up as much of this type of material as possible, while outside unions needed certification to put up campaign materials.

Ultimately, though management's preferable treatment of the SIU and the Independent Union's disinformation campaign against the TWUA were certainly reasons for the union's loss at Stottville, the loss was brought on by the workers. Overwhelmingly supporting the independent union in multiple elections, it appears that management and the SIU board was able to play into the sense of community and rural culture, painting the TWUA as outsiders that would drive out the Lion Brand Inc. mill the same way the Julliard Mills were driven out. The importance of this distinction cannot be understated: with management in natural opposition to the union and the workers united behind the SIU, there was no natural constituency for the TWUA. Though the union tried to make the case that wages and benefits would increase for the millhands if they chose the TWUA, it was not enough to override the cultural dynamic at play; its failure was one of many that occurred nation-wide during this period, not only in the textile industry, but in almost every part of the industrial sector.

### **Fonda: Fonda Glove Lining, Inc.**

The communities of Stottville and Fonda were quite alike in terms of demographics. The two villages were remarkably similar, both home to only around 1000 residents and almost entirely white. Fonda's immigrant population was around ten percent, much like that of the surrounding Upstate communities, and the surrounding area was rural, with Montgomery county having only around 60,000 residents.<sup>53</sup> Like the mill we examined at Stottville, the factory in Fonda was not particularly large, with only around seventy-five workers there total.<sup>54</sup> It lay on the North bank of the Mohawk River, some fifty or so miles northwest of Albany, with its bustling Main Street only a quarter mile from the river. A block from Main Street were the train tracks that shipped the town's products to Albany, where they would go down the Hudson for distribution in faraway New York City. Along the Mohawk sat the Fonda Fairgrounds, where people gathered each year for a night of festivities and where four NASCAR races were held in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>55</sup> Only a few miles away from what were known as the "Glove Cities"—Gloversville and Johnstown, cities made prosperous through glove manufacturing and the industries associated with it—the region fared well through World War II, experiencing a boom as the War created high demand for gloves. However, Fonda had not fared quite as well, as there had been a steep decline in population in the decades prior, having lost half of all residents who had resided there in the 1930 census.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> United States Census Bureau. Table 40—Race, Age, and Rural-Farm Population, by Sex, for Places of 1,000 to 2,5000, p. 138 1950. The exact population of Fonda, NY in 1950 was 1,025 people, only five more than in Stottville in the same year.

<sup>54</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *Testimony by Sy Cohen on Events at Fonda Glove Lining Co.*

<sup>55</sup> Village of Fonda, New York Historical Society

<sup>56</sup> United States Census Bureau, 1930/1950.

Though alike demographically, the situations at the textile mill in Fonda were quite different from that of Stottville. If the lesson to be taken away from Stottville is that rural culture, coupled with subtle manipulation from management and the SIU, was the key factor in holding back union organization, there is quite a different thing to be said about Fonda. Fonda's story is one of unmasked aggression by management, with little subtlety in their tactics. Though they took a similar route in securing a union to organize in the mill that was much friendlier to management than the TWUA, it was not through playing to the worker's culture or sowing distrust in the TWUA that this independent union was brought about. Rather, it was a much more blatant move on management's part to destroy what had been rather effective efforts by the TWUA. With the earliest records starting May 11, 1955 at a mill owned by the Fonda Glove Lining Company, which produced glove linings and other related materials, there was an incident in which two employees were fired for unclear reasons.<sup>57</sup> According to their account, they were fired for distributing union materials. This was an issue of great concern, as firing someone for promoting unionization was banned through the passage of the Wagner Act of 1934.<sup>58</sup> These workers— named Camilla Spagnolo and Bob Ten Eyke, members of the TWUA and active organizers of the union— brought their complaints to the union, who in turn levelled formal accusations against Fonda Glove Lining Company, arguing they had violated Section 8, subsections 1, 3, and 5 of the National Labor Relations Board Act.<sup>59</sup> Management, however, had a different perspective, arguing the workers were fired for distributing literature when they were

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<sup>57</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *Testimony by Sy Cohen on Events at Fonda Glove Lining Co.*

<sup>58</sup> Code 1934 Edition, Supplement 2, Title 29: Labor, Chapter 7: National Labor Relations, Sections 151-166. Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *Charge Against Employer*

<sup>59</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *Charge Against Employer*

not permitted to.<sup>60</sup> After this incident occurred, the workers were offered their positions back, hoping to avoid conflict with the TWUA. Further, the other two charges laid against the company— withholding vacation time and refusing to meet or acknowledge the TWUA— were refuted by management, with the first only being true for employees who were uncooperative with management and the second being labelled as an outright lie. This, however, was not enough to satisfy the workers, who went on strike soon after the firing of the employees in early June 1955.<sup>61</sup>

With the millhands on strike, the work now began for the TWUA, who were put in charge of representing the workers to management. Jack Rubenstein—the New York State Director of the TWUA—met with the company’s attorney, Henry Ram, in New York City to discuss terms.<sup>62</sup> Trying to seem reasonable, Ram stated that he would be happy to work with the union as the de facto mill representative, however he would not do that without a vote through the NLRB, which was only required if the TWUA had gotten between 30%-50% of workers to sign their union cards. According to the union, they had secured a majority, so a hearing would not be necessary.<sup>63</sup> In this interaction, we see an attempt to satisfy the union leadership without granting representation, as Ram offers up dues with the promise that there would be a vote at the mill, eventually. Rubenstein, seeing this—along with the additional promise of union dues before

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<sup>60</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *Letter from Assistant Secretary for Fonda Glove Lining Company Frank Lichtenberg to NLRB Field Manager Edward H. Noonan Jr.*

<sup>61</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *To Whom this May Concern*, October 14, 1955

<sup>62</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *RE: Fonda Glove Lining Company Case No. 3-CA-893*, April 12, 1956.

<sup>63</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *Testimony from Sy Cohen on the Events at Fonda*

the vote was even held—as an attempt at soft bribery, pushed back, stating he was not interested in dues but in employees being represented, and that he would not negotiate on these matters one-on-one as it excluded workers from the conversation; “I further told him that the union could not depend upon the personal promises or commitments of an individual for doing something in the distant future in place of recognizing the union.”<sup>64</sup> In this we can see Rubenstein navigating a tense situation, in which he wishes to help the workers while also preventing talks with management from fully falling through. His reaction here, or at least how he described his reaction, seemed to have the best interests of the employees in mind, as he did not want dues if it meant union representation would be pushed off even further.

Though rural culture was more of an element in the Stottville union efforts, it was still present at Fonda. Following the firing of employees Spagnolo and Ten Eyke and the subsequent pushback by fellow workers and the TWUA, the plant manager Clarence Sytz argued against reinstating them, saying “they shouldn’t let outsiders tell them what to do.”<sup>65</sup> By painting the TWUA as “outsiders” rather than an organization negotiating on behalf of the workers at Fonda, it seems management was attempting to drive a wedge between the two groups, as in rural communities there tends to be more of an aversion towards outsiders. This, however, did not seem to work, as according to regional TWUA manager Sy Cohen, about forty to fifty workers agreed to go on strike for a union contract after the refusal by Sykes to reinstate the workers they had fired, this occurring within the first week or so of June 1955.<sup>66</sup> This was more than half of the members at the mill, as it was stated by Sy Cohen that the TWUA had received a majority of

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<sup>64</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

union cards from workers, that number standing at forty-five of the possible seventy-five workers at the mill.<sup>67</sup>

Despite ongoing negotiations between Rubenstein and the owners of Fonda Glove Lining Co. at their New York City office, negotiations in Fonda had stalled out. Sensing the mounting pressure from the union and striking workers, management dug in their heels, offering to reinstate the two workers that had been fired but refusing to recognize the union without an election. They called on workers to end the strike only days after it had begun, which was too much for the workers without union representation, leading them to vote no on calling off the strike. Further meetings between management and union representations failed to produce results, as though Cohen proved that a majority of workers had signed union cards, management was unwilling to recognize the TWUA. Further, Cohen levelled accusations against the company of inducing workers with pay raises, vacation time, and paid holidays in order to prevent them from joining a union, conduct which was illegal.<sup>68</sup> Though companies would offer incentives to hold back unions—a trend known as welfare capitalism that was somewhat unique to the United States and was very prominent at General Electric in nearby Schenectady—the act of offering incentives to workers to prevent unionization was made explicitly illegal in the 1930s.<sup>69</sup>

What is interesting to note here is how management—represented by plant manager Clarence Sytz, as well as other men like company president Henry Reem, foremen Alfred

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<sup>67</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *Testimony by Sy Cohen on Events at Fonda Glove Lining Co.*

<sup>68</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *Memo from Sy Cohen Regarding Negotiations at Fonda Glove Lining Co.*

<sup>69</sup> Gerald Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism: The Shoeworkers and Tanners of Endicott Johnson, 1890-1950* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Ronald W. Schatz, *The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923-1960* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983).



Goodell and Alexander Moody, and comptroller Samuel Kreger—used the NLRB against the TWUA to advance their own anti-union goals. As previously mentioned, an election and formal NLRB hearing is only required when less than a majority but more than 30% of workers sign union cards. Despite knowing that a majority of workers had signed their union cards, the men from management insisted that the union conduct an election, which would give them time to find ways to push back against the TWUA. Stalling in many different forms was a common tactic deployed by management to take the steam out of any given labor movement—something we will examine in our case study of Newburgh—and in this case management was able to make the claim that their stalling was in good faith, to ensure an election was held despite it not being necessary. The process of contacting the NLRB, calling an election, and the time leading up to the election could very well have taken steam out of the organizing drive, particularly relating to the anger felt by the workers towards the firing of their coworkers, something management was likely counting on in this calculation.

Between the negotiations between labor and management and the strike, the heads of the mill appeared to have been concocting a plot to kneecap the TWUA permanently. Before the strike had fizzled out by late Spring of 1956, management went out of their way to recruit a new union—known as the Union of Textile Workers of America (UTWA)—to represent the mill over the TWUA. According to the NLRB hearing that took place in 1957, management “recognized the [UTWA] when said labor organization did not represent a majority of its employees.”<sup>70</sup> Considering how much of a fuss was made over going through the formal procedures for an NLRB election, even when the TWUA had proof they had gotten a majority of workers to sign

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<sup>70</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958)

union cards, this is a particularly heavy-handed decision. For the workers, this plot was entirely unknown, as they were under the impression that, were there to be any union representation, it would surely be from the organization that had spent months fighting for them. Though there are no records on exactly who the men were that ran the union, the fact that the UTWA was presented and promoted to the workers on company time—which stood in stark contrast to how the TWUA was treated—shows the favorable view the heads of the company held of them. Considering how terribly management had treated the TWUA thus far, it is strange to think the bosses would bring in a genuine union that might threaten to raise wages or expand benefits, something management had threatened to move the mill south for.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the ongoing strikes and a continued push by Cohen and Rubenstein to get a hearing from the NLRB over unfair treatment of the workers organizing and pushing for a union, the case was discarded by the NLRB nearly a year later in April 1956.<sup>72</sup> In appealing this decision, Rubenstein claimed, “The company has made a travesty and mockery and has shown nothing but contempt for the mere posting of notices of non-interference,” going on to paint a rather bizarre picture. He described how the new union—the United Textile Workers of America—had been introduced by the company to the workers “despite the fact that the union involved had not at any time prior to this meeting, to the knowledge of the employers, carried on any union activity whatsoever.”<sup>73</sup> He described how the majority of workers who supported the TWUA had been “destroyed ... by fear and intimidation” and went on to mention how the jobs

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<sup>71</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *RE: Fonda Glove Lining Company Case No. 3-CA-893*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*

of striking workers had been replaced by “people with no previous experience,” an extension of the contempt that had been shown by management since the beginning of the debacle.<sup>74</sup>

This battle between the workers, TWUA, and management was quite different than the situation in Stottville in multiple ways. First, the workers were clearly behind the TWUA from the beginning, going so far as to strike for a union contract. This stands in stark contrast to Stottville, where the union tried—and failed—multiple times to secure representations, with workers themselves striking down their efforts. Not only that, but the alternative union (UTWA)—rather than being made of employees known to all and having an incident to point to to make the TWUA look unreasonable (that being Julliard Mills in Stottville)—was entirely unknown to the workers until they were abruptly introduced to them by management. Attesting to just how unexpected the introduction of this new union was, an employee in a written testimonial stated, “No worker in the mill of all the workers I talked to ever heard of any activity being made by this union before the company called these meetings.”<sup>75</sup>

With the UTWA entering the picture seemingly out of nowhere, there was another issue for the TWUA to deal with. Not only was this a rival union, but they claimed to have 60 percent of workers at the mill signed on, which would have been enough to give them representative power over the mill. Further, it seemed that management was much more friendly with the UTWA than the TWUA. In aforementioned memo, the employee pointed out that the multiple meetings management had hosted—during which the new union was not only introduced, but employees were encouraged to sign union cards—was “All ... on company time, in this mending room.” It is quite shocking how bold and aggressive management was in their goal of shutting

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *Exhibit 2-a*.

out the TWUA, as not only did the employees question the new union but multiple testimonies like the one above said they had never heard of the UTWA before, and there is no record of any employees signing union cards for them, much less 60 percent. In another testimony, an employee stated, “Many of the workers [they] questioned could not give me the names of these Union Representatives. No worker in the mill of all the workers I talked to ever heard of any activity being made by this union before the company called these meetings.”<sup>76</sup> It seems it could not be clearer—this new union was entirely new to the millhands, almost certainly brought in by management to prevent the TWUA from organizing the mill.

Nearly a year after the introduction of the UTWA and two years after the initial workers had been fired, multiple cases were filed with the NLRB by the TWUA. They were separate cases, with the first case (Case No. 2-CA-893) being filed against Fonda Glove Lining Co. and the other (Case No. 3-CA-947) filed jointly against the UTWA and Fonda Glove Lining Co. The charges involved interfering, restraining and coercing its employees, working with and dominating the operations of the UTWA, and discriminating against employees through recognizing the independent union despite no NLRB hearing, election, or a majority of workers having signed UTWA union cards.<sup>77</sup> Essentially the TWUA claimed that the company not only treated its employees poorly through coercion and firing, but they then went on to treat the union poorly and eventually illegally sign on to a contract with the UTWA.

Among the claims filed against Fonda Glove Lining Co. and the UTWA was a particularly striking one that bears further examination. The report from the NLRB trial examiner

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<sup>76</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330) — Correspondence (1955 – 1958), *Exhibit 2-b*.

<sup>77</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, TWUA —Fonda Glove Lining (Local 330), NLRB Hearings, 1956 – 1957, *IR-86: Fonda, NY*

stated that a member of management “ [threatened workers] ... Engel, Perry, and Leitt on April 27, 1956, that the [mill] would move the plant to the South if the bargaining demands were too high.”<sup>78</sup> As mentioned before, often the tactics of management were subtle: pushing off time between a labor dispute and a strike, offering incentives to workers in exchange for not organizing, and so forth. Yet here, we see what can only be described as an open threat to the mill hands, not only showing the heavy-handed tactics management was willing to use to push back against labor, but how threatened they felt by the TWUA. The union drive, which had verifiably received more than enough signatures to represent the mill, was apparently such a threat to management that they were willing to openly threaten their workers with relocation to mitigate the threat. Despite this being a clear violation of labor law, they were willing to threaten them, perhaps because they thought they could get away with it, showing how depleted union strength and the NLRB was in this area and time.

Though the results of the NLRB hearing are inconclusive—the records for this were unattainable at the time of writing—the general sense going through what is available is that Fonda Glove Lining Co. was without a doubt in the wrong, and it seemed to be viewed this way by all parties. The trial examiner’s report gave a recount of the events that painted the company in a terrible light, as a company that openly threatened workers, coerced them with promises of benefits were they to forgo the union, and outright lied when the facts were inconvenient to their case. However, despite this, it is hard to see this battle as a victory for labor. The truth of the matter is thousands of dollars and multiple years were sunk into this case concerning the representation of less than one-hundred workers. If that was the case, how much more struggle, time, and money would be needed at a mill ten times that, like the one that was present at

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid

Julliard? And how many situations like this took place without alerting the NLRB—considering how brazen management was with their tactics against the union, it seems the bosses figured they would be able to get away with it, and perhaps with good cause. The victory by the TWUA at Fonda was pyrrhic, rather than being decisive.

What Fonda can tell us about the union's struggle is simple: going all out against the union is a poor strategy for management to implement. By showing they were more than willing to use dirty tactics like enlisting a company union and threatening workers who were thinking of unionizing, management made themselves the enemy. This was a perfect gift to the TWUA, whose job was usually made difficult as they had to convince the workers that it was in their best interest to join the union. Without a clear threat to the employee's job security or wages, it was common for workers to feel ambivalent about unions. Yet seeing as the bosses were openly threatening their workers and very clearly using dirty tactics (such as with the company union), the workers likely felt they had no choice but to join the union. Had management done what the bosses in Stottville or, as we will see, Newburgh had— using lighter tactics and allying with the company union more subtly— they might have avoided the workers turning on management en masse. In the next section, this paper will examine a mill in Newburgh where the strategy deployed by the bosses was almost the exact opposite of that at Fonda: they relied on the worker's doubts about unions and conceded just enough in negotiations to prevent the mill hands from striking back against them.

## Newburgh: American Felt Company

About a hundred miles down the Hudson river from Stottville sat the once thriving community of Newburgh, a city made prosperous by the second industrial revolution. Home to George Washington’s base of operations during the American Revolution, it was influential from the start, described as “the linchpin of the thriving Hudson River maritime trade.”<sup>79</sup> Its important shipping industry along with its strategic location about halfway between New York City and Albany gave Newburgh an advantage over other Hudson Valley communities. Stores lined the aptly named Broadway, a street nearly 100 feet wide with trolley lines running along the arterial in the early part of the twentieth century. Atop the hills just several hundred feet from the water sat beautiful Victorian manors, mixing architectural styles like French Revival and Romanesque and often populated by the most well-to-do of Newburgh society—primarily the owner class that would have run the city’s factories. Yet this city filled with architectural beauty and with such a storied history also had plenty of less glamorous houses and residents. Workers, many clustered near the waterfront along Water Street—a street later stripped of working-class housing during the “urban renewal” efforts of the 1960s and 1970s— would make their way to the nearby wharves for work, or up Broadway using the trolley, which operated until the 1920s.<sup>80</sup> Though still growing by the time the 1950 census was taken, Newburgh’s population had begun to shrink by the 1960s, highlighting the declining industrial base that had given the community much of its prosperity.

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<sup>79</sup> Michael Deibert, “Resurrecting Newburgh, the once-grand American city that had its heart torn out,” *The Guardian* (April 8, 2015).

<sup>80</sup> Livelihood Editor, “Of Bulldozers and Builders: The False Promise of Urban Renewal,” *Medium*. February 11, 2020.

Just south of the city borders sat the community of New Windsor and one of four American Felt Company mills. Unlike its counterparts across the Northeast (Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, specifically), New Windsor's mills were not unionized, which is somewhat surprising given that New Windsor was more urban than the smaller textile communities of Fonda and Stottville.<sup>81</sup> This logical mismatch was noticed by the TWUA—the union that represented the other three mills—as early records indicate they were trying to organize the mill as early as April 16, 1956.<sup>82</sup> The thing that distinguished the case at Newburgh from those at Fonda and Stottville was the seeming lack of pushback from management. There was no strike at the American Felt Company mill, nor was there an independent union or management who was more than willing to use open threats and coercion to get their way. Further, there was not even an NLRB case filed, as the union never got close enough to majority support from the workers for a hearing to be requested. Rather, there is simply pamphlet after pamphlet from the TWUA calling on the mill hands to recognize their exploitation and the benefits that would be gained from signing their 'blue cards,' with little success. This begs the question: why did the workers seem ambivalent about unionizing, or at least less motivated than their partners in Fonda and, to a lesser extent, Stottville?

The answer is simple: management was working against the union in the American Felt Co. mill, only in a much more subtle manner than was seen in the other mills at Fonda and Stottville. Rather than working alongside an independent union and relying on rural culture to suppress the TWUA, or blatantly threatening workers and recruiting an even less subtle independent union (as was the case in Stottville), management at Newburgh had a simpler

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<sup>81</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *You Get Only Part of the Improvements*

<sup>82</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *Latest Union Information*, 4/16/56



strategy: stall. Though it was not as satisfying as a protracted battle between workers, their union, and management, the American Felt Co. employed a method commonly used by management across industries. By telling their workers to keep waiting, the American Felt Co. made their workers believe that they would receive the same benefits of other American Felt Co. mills that had already unionized. This gave management time to develop a counter-strategy to the union. At the same time, the organizing zeal of workers dissipated. Further, in a strange twist of events, management used other unionized mills to their advantage, extending some worker benefits won by their sister mills to the mill in Newburgh, which, in turn, removed a major incentive for workers to actively organize under the TWUA.

Though there were incentives to join the union as emphasized by the TWUA—who pointed to differences in wages and benefits between Newburgh workers and workers at the unionized mills—this did not seem to matter to the mill hands.<sup>83</sup> At the end of the day, the actions of the unionized mills brought subsequent benefits to Newburgh, and though they may not have been as substantial, the workers enjoyed such benefits without the hardships that came with union organizing and negotiations. Ultimately the struggle to make an effective case can be seen in the less-than-confident messaging of the union, seen when they stated in a memo, “Whatever benefits gained by our union and its organized union members may be given to you ... but without a strong union contract, you will not have the same job protection.”<sup>84</sup> Though protection from unfair treatment was beneficial for workers, the messaging came off as weak, as

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<sup>83</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *We Explain the Twelve and One-Half Cents*

<sup>84</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *Latest Union Information*

the average worker would have likely taken from it that they would receive the benefits of the union without the drawbacks.

Taking a step back, it is important that we look at how the situation at Newburgh fit into the broader national conversation. At this period in American labor history, though the labor movement had run into certain hurdles, unionization rates were at their peak, having topped out at between 25 and 30 percent.<sup>85</sup> This point is emphasized by the TWUA, in which they push the workers to unionize partially by citing the “15,000,000 organized workers in the great American labor movement” as possibly a way to increase worker confidence in the union, seeing it backed up by such a large portion of the American population (just under 10 percent of the 1950 population).<sup>86</sup> Why, then, would workers be hesitant to unionize when the wind was at their backs? Obviously, being able to rely on the unionized mills to deliver their wage and benefit hikes was a factor, but it was not the only one. Another, less obvious factor may have been the Taft-Hartley Act which, having been passed only several years earlier in 1947, put severe limitations on unions and generally tipped the scales back toward management.<sup>87</sup> Though union membership had reached an all-time high, its seemingly meteoric rise was stunted right after this and other anti-union legislation had been passed.<sup>88</sup> It stands to reason that this tidal shift, still in its early days, could be sensed by workers, who were seemingly happy they were keeping their

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<sup>85</sup> Gerald Mayer, Union Membership Trends in the United States, CRS Report for Congress, August 31, 2004. Table A1, Union Membership in the United States, 1930 – 2003

<sup>86</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 1950. Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962

<sup>87</sup> Ellen Dannin, “Using the NLRB as a Resource,” *Labor Studies Journal* 24, No. 3 (Fall 1999): p. 38 – 53. Ruth O’Brien, “Taking the Conservative State Seriously: Statebuilding and Restrictive Labor Practices in Postwar America,” *Labor Studies Journal* 21, No. 4 (1997): p. 33 – 63.

<sup>88</sup> Gerald Mayer, “Union Membership Trends in the United States, CRS Report for Congress,” August 31, 2004. Table A1, Union Membership in the United States, 1930 – 2003.

jobs and expanding their wages while many companies nationwide saw their operations shuttered.

At a union informational meeting hosted by the TWUA that took place on April 14, 1956, we get a glimpse into the anxieties of mill hands and workers in general, as it was said by the union that “Some [workers] seem worried about losing their jobs if they started a campaign to organize the plant under our union.”<sup>89</sup> This quote exposes the larger trend in management gained the upper hand to workers following WWII.<sup>90</sup> Not only that, but it also gives us an idea of what working in the Newburgh mill was like. Clearly, the mill hands believed that their bosses were not likely to be friendly to any union activity. Though this may have been based on what they had seen happen in other mills—such as with incidents like in Fonda, where union efforts were met with open aggression—the fact that this was a concern means there had been no active effort to show conciliatory relation with unions on the part of the mill managers. The way the TWUA representatives responded is also telling, having said that they “could not stop progress” regarding moving forward with unionization.<sup>91</sup> This reveals at least part of the reason the union had such a difficult time getting workers on board with organizing, as instead of quelling the well-founded fears of workers regarding the outsourcing their jobs, the union simply stated that unionizing is progress and naturally progress must progress. Workers, even with the larger social safety net that existed at that time, could often not afford to lose their jobs, as it could have meant the difference between making rent or not. Not properly addressing these concerns seems contradictory to their goal, as the entire reason for a union is to, at least in part, protect and

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<sup>89</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *Meeting of American Felt Workers*

<sup>90</sup> Greenhouse, *Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019). Karen Nussbaum, “Unions and Democracy,” *Labor Studies Journal* 44 (2019): p. 365 – 372.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

expand the wages and benefits of workers, something that would be impossible if their jobs were shipped to another state or country.

The simple reason for the failure of the TWUA to organize the mill—a fact that is made apparent through the fact that the documents available run through 1967 and allude to their ongoing efforts to unionize—was that management had done enough for the workers. In the mill hands’ eyes, their biggest issues concerned bread and butter—are the wages high enough and the benefits satisfactory?<sup>92</sup> Not only that, but throughout the drive we see how the TWUA failed to effectively relay their message to workers, often getting tied up in technical matters when trying to explain why the mill hands should join up. An example of this occurred when the union explained why the locals at the other unionized mills voted down a \$0.12 wage hike, explaining that “The company offer was twelve and one-half cents, but, the company wanted to put five cents on the base rates and seven and one half cents on the present incentive earnings.”<sup>93</sup> It is likely that, were you not tuned in to the policy specifics of the work environment—as was the case for most blue collar mill workers at the time—this would come off as nearly incomprehensible. The fact that the other mills were unionized, rather than being an asset the TWUA could have used as momentum to push workers in Newburgh to organize, was a hinderance, as it took away the ability of the union to focus on issues like raising wages and benefits since the workers were getting those benefits regardless. Not only that, but in the case of the \$0.12 memo, the TWUA was hindering itself. The average worker saw not a union fighting for higher wages, but one that was fixated on smaller wage raises ‘applied to base rates rather

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<sup>92</sup> Annie Palmer, “How Amazon fought the union drive in Alabama” *CNBC*. April 16, 2021

<sup>93</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *We Explain the Twelve and One-Half Cents*

than incentive earnings.’ If joining the union means turning down pay raises for seemingly no reason, why would the average worker even bother?

Despite the general messaging failure, just a few days after the publication of the \$0.12 leaflet, we see signs of hope for the union. On May 1, the TWUA negotiated a \$0.14 wage hike for workers at all the mills, fulfilling their promise of taking a hard stance in negotiations to gain greater benefits. This may have had an impact on the millhands, who previously might have written off the union due to the lackluster performance. This was partially corroborated by the union, as just a few days after the new wages were announced the union pointed out how “The [TWUA] committee reports many workers of the American Felt Company in Newburgh, N.Y. have signed their Union cards,” which would seem to offer hope for the future of the union at Newburgh.<sup>94</sup> However, just a few sentences after that quote there is another telling piece of information: it was mentioned that many workers were simply waiting to see what the other workers would do, which did not bode well considering momentum had been lackluster at best up to that point. If the union wanted to make substantial progress here, it would have to capitalize on its previous successes while convincingly making the case that the workers would stand to benefit by signing their blue cards.

After a three-year gap between 1956 and 1959 in which the TWUA was not actively campaigning to organize the mill in Newburgh, it once again started up operations.<sup>95</sup> On May 5, 1959, it was reported in the local paper that the TWUA organizers at Newburgh were attempting to get the mill hands to participate in a ‘sympathy strike’ alongside the workers of the unionized

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<sup>94</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *May 3, 1956 Meeting!*

<sup>95</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *Mr. Burnes Has Been Back Again*

American Felt Company mills. This was to create momentum for organizing the S. Stroock & Co. mill, as the desire for a union had been sorely lacking since the union's efforts had begun at Newburgh three years prior. In a sign of the failure of the TWUA to excite the workers, it was reported that the attempted strike "failed ... to keep ' even one employe [sic] from going to work."<sup>96</sup> The reason for this, and the difficulties the union had been having in the city for years was summed up just a few lines later, when an "outside source" stated that employees were enjoying the benefits of a union without the risks associated with it.<sup>97</sup> This was because whenever one of the unionized American Felt Company mills negotiated a wage hike or increased benefits, the company often applied it to all its mills owned, even if they had not participated in the negotiations. If this was the case, there seemed to be little reason to risk losing jobs or facing the belligerence management had shown in places like the Fonda.

Yet this same article pointed out something that seemed to contradict the idea that the union had failed to excite worker's interest. The article stated that the union had signed on, to that point, sixty workers at the mill, which meant that only an additional twenty-four more blue cards needed to be signed to constitute a majority of the mill's 168 workers. Further, at a meeting held just the day before the failed May 5<sup>th</sup> sympathy strike, it was reported by the TWUA that thirty-nine workers at the Newburgh mill had attended a general meeting hosted by the union, bringing into question why none of those workers wished to go on strike, considering their apparent favorable stance towards the union.<sup>98</sup> One possibility is the visibility aspect: to sign a union card or attend a meeting after company hours was one thing. A worker could generally

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<sup>96</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *Picketing Goes On at Felt Co.*

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

keep his head down and stay below management's radar when he was signing a card or meeting off the clock. To strike, however, could be seen as an act of war by management, a sort of "firing the first shot." This would then give the bosses the upper hand in the public eye, as it would appear that the workers and union were attacking a company that had given them the same rather generous benefits and wage hikes as they had for the workers at the other mills. In that situation, firing workers, hiring scabs, or threatening to move the mill's operations out of state or overseas might have been more palatable to the public. It would be a much harder sell to take punitive action against workers who were simply showing interest in the TWUA.

In the "sympathy strike" article we also see possible bias by the writer, as it stated the reason for the strike was to "force members of the New Windsor plant to join the TWUA." It seems odd that they would have chosen to describe the strike as "forcing" people to join the union, as the TWUA would have argued that they were giving the workers the opportunity to choose between a union and no representation. To say 'force' was to imply that the TWUA wished to give the workers no choice in the matter, which took out one of the factors that made unions palatable to the public: the choice in representation. In a pamphlet distributed to workers by the TWUA, the union actively refuted the idea that they wanted to force workers to join, saying "Legally we have no way of forcing anyone to ... [join] a union. And in a free country we believe this is a good thing."<sup>99</sup> This statement by the union was likely to push back against the sentiment shown by the reporter that painted unions in a negative light. Usually the onus was on management, which often opposed union activity among workers. Further, while the article did mention voices representing the union—such as when they discuss the amount of workers that

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<sup>99</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *To all Employees of the American Felt Company*, March 8, 1962

had signed their union cards and attended the meeting the previous night—it gave more of a voice to management. This was shown through several paragraphs going on the word of “Mr. Armstrong,” the plant manager, in which he refuted the claims made by the union that workers at Newburgh were making \$1.60 an hour rather than the \$2.00 afforded to workers in the unionized mills. There was no voice from the TWUA backing up their assertion of unequal pay, and it seemed that the writer was relying solely on the word of Mr. Armstrong, relegating the union to a more opinion-based, rather than factual, voice.

This unequal treatment points to a cultural issue at the time, in which unions were increasingly viewed as unfair and adversarial to management for the sake of it, rather than to benefit the workers they represented. This shift in the media narrative was observed by Lawrence Richards in his book *Union Free America*, in which he described how the media began to scrutinize workers who went on strike despite having quite favorable working conditions. He cited an article from the *New Republic* in which the author wrote that “The Ford Motor Company ... does not run a sweatshop. Its 160,000 wage workers average more than \$4.50 an hour; yet they are on strike.”<sup>100</sup> The sentiment in this article was similar to that of the “sympathy strike” one, as both seemed to question the point of striking when the wages and benefits were quite favorable for workers. This shift was described by Richards as “the [new] impression that ‘the AFL-CIO [was] ... speaking for the possessors and not the dispossessed’,” as a large reason unions were supported was to help those at the bottom of the working-class ranks.<sup>101</sup> In this regard, success was a double-edged sword, as it gave people like the reporter in Newburgh the

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<sup>100</sup> Lawrence Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008)

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*



ability to criticize the union for pushing management too hard. In a sense, management had become the new underdog, at least in the eyes of the public.

At Newburgh management continued to stall, hoping that time and the benefits already afforded to the workers would keep the union out of the mill. No matter how much this was pointed out by the TWUA—such as in a self-explanatory union pamphlet titled “Give us Six More Months”—the workers were simply unwilling to join the union in large enough numbers to matter. Even when the union tried to ignite passion in the workers, it was a failure. For example, the TWUA brought a charge of unfair firing to the NLRB after a worker was dismissed for unsatisfactory performance. Not long after the case was filed, the worker had apparently found another job and requested the case be pulled, which it was.<sup>102</sup> Not only does this show the union’s further failures, but the language of their pamphlets began to take on patronizing tones, showing their desperate state: “Some of the boys are consoling themselves with the thought, ‘Well, in the long run we got the same thing [as the unionized mills],’ but, ~~did~~ are you?” The tone places shame on the workers, as the union had been, to that point, unable to convince the millhands that organizing under the TWUA would benefit them materially. In this same pamphlet, the union announced they were “signing off” in terms of their operations at Newburgh, yet they would reignite those operations not a year later in 1960.

The rest of the story of the mill at Newburgh is more of the same, with leaflets being distributed by the TWUA to the workers at the mill, seemingly to no avail. They continued to use encouraging language to try to get the mill hands excited at the prospect of organizing, but ultimately the workers saw no point. After all, why should they put their jobs at risk when they

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<sup>102</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *Signing Off*

could rely on the work of others; this seemed to be the sentiment that drove the workers. This makes sense when you consider the situation Newburgh and the immediately surrounding communities were in at that time. The last records available regarding the failed organizing drive are from 1967. By that point, the city had lost much of the industrial base that had been its backbone from the second industrial revolution onwards.<sup>103</sup> For the workers, simply having a stable job was enough—the threat of having their jobs shipped overseas or otherwise lost from the closing of the mill was a near constant threat by the mid-1960s. As William Hartford put it in his book *Where is Our Responsibility?* he described how “By 1954, unemployment in ... New England woolen centers were running at levels not seen since the worst years of the Great Depression.”<sup>104</sup> With this in mind, it was no wonder the workers were wary of participating in union activity, whether overt or covert, as with such a catastrophic hit to the industry they were surely aware that their jobs could disappear in an instant. In the case of Newburgh, we see perhaps the most effective strategy management could use to push back against organized labor: nothing.

Stalling was a large part of management’s do-nothing strategy. By forcing the workers to wait months and even years to gain benefits—often the same benefits already availed to the workers in the unionized New England mills—the mill hands would undoubtedly be grateful when they ultimately did see their pay hike. This feeling of gratefulness would overpower any anger they may have felt towards management, making them less likely to desire a union. The TWUA attempted to push back against this by pointing out that wages and benefits might rise, but the worker protections offered by a union could never be given by the New England plant

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<sup>103</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, “Newburgh Tries to Recapture its Past Glory,” *The New York Times*. March 13, 1986.

<sup>104</sup> William Hartford, *Where Is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

workers.<sup>105</sup> But this messaging rang hollow, as there was only one case of an employee being fired in the more than decade long organizing campaign at Newburgh, and even then the employee who was fired did not want to bring charges against the mill.<sup>106</sup> In the workers eyes, if they got all (or most) of the benefits without the pains of joining a union and striking, what was the point in joining a union? And this was the second part of management's do-nothing strategy: rely on the already unionized mills to kill pro-union sentiment in their mill. The heads of the Newburgh mill had no reason to push back against unions in the New England mills; that was a problem for the corporate heads to worry about. With that in mind, management at Newburgh was likely grateful that the other mills were unionized, as it was the heads of those mills that had to worry about dealing with the union and all the troubles associated. Though light-handed strategy relied on other company mills already being organized—which was often not the case—they played into well, giving the workers just enough to appease them, to the detriment of the union.

Ultimately, despite numerous additional attempts by the TWUA at Newburgh to ignite organizing fervor in the workers, no union ever formed there. The documents covering the work done by the union at the New Windsor plant end around 1968, with little new developments occurring between the early 1960s and then. In the end, there was no need for any advanced strategy to be deployed by management, as the other company mills already being unionized was enough to dissuade workers from joining. What can be taken from this is as follows: the momentum for unions was on the decline in the 1960s, one it has yet to recover from today. Although there certainly were—and are—companies like Fonda Glove Lining Co. that deployed

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<sup>105</sup> Grenander Special Collections Archives, State University of New York at Albany, Hudson Valley Joint Board, American Felt Company, 1956 – 57, 1959 – 60, 1962, *Signing Off*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

aggressive strategies to push back against union drives, often the simpler way of doing this was to feed into doubts the workers had about unions. From the beginning of unionism in the nineteenth century through today, management has held a generally adversarial relationship with unions. Yet following the passage of Taft-Hartley in 1947, many laborers began to question whether unionizing would be financially wise.<sup>107</sup> Doubt was sown into workers' minds: would the benefits of joining a union offset the cost, which may include losing your job? In Newburgh, the workers decided it was not, and this was the same decision made by many workers nationwide. The best tactics from management was relying on what was already there: doubt in the minds of workers that unions were worth it. By giving occasional wage hikes in line with the unionized mills, the bosses could make the case that a union was unnecessary, with good reasoning behind that logic. When workers like those at Newburgh did not feel their decision was being made for them by management (like in Fonda), they often decided no on their own volition. This problem faced by unions would not be going away, and its ramifications on the national labor movement were immense.

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<sup>107</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor*. (New York: Basic Books, 1995). Ruth O'Brien, "Taking the Conservative State Seriously: Statebuilding and Restrictive Labor Practices in Postwar America," *Labor Studies Journal* 21, No. 4 (1997): p. 33 – 63.

## Conclusion

By the 1970s, the mills in Stottville and Fonda had closed, with the New Windsor plant operating at greatly reduced capacity.<sup>108</sup> Whether it was due to jobs moving out or the mills burning down, the result was that workers' livelihoods had been lost. This was typical of industrial America during this period, when industries across the nation closed shop, leaving many people without a job and gutting some communities. In communities like Newburgh, a conservative counter-attack on the welfare state with racially coded language in the early 1960s showed just how far the community had fallen, as many of the buildings once teeming with life were destroyed during the poorly planned "urban renewal" of the 1960s and 1970s. The industrial base that had brought the city to greatness at the turn of the century was largely abandoned, with the city descending into crime and poverty for decades following. Meanwhile, rural industrial communities like Fonda and Stottville followed similar trajectories, losing much of their industrial base and, with it, their populations. Fonda, for instance, has not seen a population increase in decades, and has lost about a quarter of their population after industry left.<sup>109</sup> At the root of all of this lies the question: why could the TWUA not convince textile workers to join up, despite the hardships that would come? As unions often sell themselves by promising job protection, why was this not enough to sway most of the workers?

Though management in all three mills played a part in the TWUA's demise, the reality was more complicated than manufactured consent from the bosses. Instead, it was a combination of rural and anti-union culture, antipathy from workers, alliances between management and company unions, and reliance on worker's general apathy and job insecurity that made it so

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<sup>108</sup> Village of Fonda, New York Historical Society

<sup>109</sup> U.S. Census, 1930 – 1950.

difficult for the union to organize. Put simply, it was much more complicated than management versus union. Pressures put on the textile industry in the 1950s and 1960s resulting from an unfavorable trade policies made foreign competition in the textile trade fierce; the general slate of anti-labor legislation passed in the late 1940s meant protections for workers would not be able to protect against this.<sup>110</sup> Further, labor's alignment within the Democratic Party meant unions held less influence than before, when labor was willing to work outside of party politics to have their demands met, though organized labor was still a considerable special interest group within the party.<sup>111</sup> All of this created the unfavorable environment in which unions like the TWUA were trying to operate within, making their standing weak from the outset.

As the case studies in this paper have shown, the job of unions in America was neither easy nor straightforward, and we can see that this trend has continued through to the present day, as the failure of the TWUA reflected the broader national decline of unions that continues today. Recently, while writing this paper, there was a vote in Bessemer, Alabama about whether to unionize an Amazon plant under the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). The union ultimately failed, and examining why reveals greater insight into the TWUA case studies. One of the factors in the RWDSU's defeat was cultural: the union was unable to gain support from influential members of the community.<sup>112</sup> Little effort was made by the RWDSU to reach out to local leaders—religious, labor or otherwise—until late in the drive. Instead, much was made of the national media attention paid to Bessemer, which was not a proper replacement

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<sup>110</sup> H. Richard Friman, *Patchwork Protectionism: Textile Trade Policy in the United States, Japan, and West Germany*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990). Vinod Aggarwal, *Liberal Protectionism: The International Politics of Organized Textile Trade*. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>111</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor*. (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

<sup>112</sup> Jane McAlevey, "Blowout in Bessemer: A Postmortem on the Amazon Campaign" *The Nation*. April 9, 2021

for local, grassroots support that union drives are powered by. Further, the door-knocking and community canvassing game of the organizers was severely lacking, and as we learned throughout this paper, connecting with the workers on an individual level is critical.<sup>113</sup> All of this points to a paltry union effort to make connections to the community they were trying to organize; though not as rural and isolated an area as Stottville or Fonda, a sense of community and trust of those within was still a critical factor in the union's failure. Not only that, but the union did not appear to make a convincing case that an organized factory would bring greater material benefit to the workers. With a \$15 minimum wage and decent conditions on the factory floor, Amazon was able to use the relatively good conditions of their plant to their benefit, as some workers were unable to see what would be gained by voting 'yes' on a union.<sup>114</sup>

Though there are similarities between the TWUA's failures in New York and the RWDSU's failure in Bessemer, the differences reveal just how far organized labor has declined since the period in which this paper is set. Management's tactics—rather than being subtle in a way that was shown to be the most effective in the textile case studies—were decisive and aggressive against the union. Forcing workers to sit through anti-union propaganda on company time, sending anti-union texts to workers and papering the walls of the factory with anti-union posters, and even installing a postal drop-box on factory premises where workers could be monitored when casting their vote—these are just a handful of the strong-arm tactics used by Amazon to push out the RWDSU.<sup>115</sup> Though there will likely be charges brought to the NLRB challenging the election results due to anti-union activity, the fact that these tactics were so

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<sup>113</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, "The Next Amazon Union Drive: Lessons from the Bessemer defeat" *Dissent Magazine*. April 12, 2021

<sup>114</sup> Annabelle Williams, "The Amazon union vote failed. 2 workers explain why they voted against unionizing" *Business Insider*. April 9, 2021

<sup>115</sup> Annie Palmer, "How Amazon fought the union drive in Alabama" *CNBC*. April 16, 2021

successful as compared to, say, the similar tactics deployed at Fonda shows how weak organized labor has become over the past half-century. Though this does not spell the end of organized labor—indeed labor activity like strikes have surged in recent years—it shows us how the difficulties faced in New York’s textile industry was just one small part of a much larger war between unions and industry, one that is likely to continue for years to come.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Margaret Poydock & Heidi Shierholz, “Continued surge in strike activity signals worker dissatisfaction with wage growth” *Economic Policy Institute*. February 11, 2020.



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