
Organizing “Wall-to-Wall”

The Independent Union of All Workers, 1933–1937

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Labor historians continue to debate the causes, course, and consequences of union organization in the mid and late 1930s. Is the emergence of nationally dominated, vertically organized industrial unionism best understood as a contingent historical process that might have turned out differently, or does it make more sense to view it as a historical necessity driven by the material and intellectual structures that shaped working-class experience in this period? This argument has heated up in the mid-1990s, in part because of the contemporary labor movement's continuing crisis, which has focused renewed attention on such issues as organizing strategies, union democracy and structure, the relationship between local and national unions, the place of horizontal organizations within the overall labor movement, and the prospects for revived rank-and-file militancy.

The leading proponent of the historical necessity school is David Brody. Over several decades of respected scholarship, he has refined his argument and influenced the work of a younger generation of historians. Brody contends that workers achieved their goals in the industrial union drive of the 1930s and that these goals were themselves “*shaped by* the new bureaucratic, rationalized system of mass production.” Particularly significant were the corporate welfarist innovations of the 1920s. The key spark for the mid-1930s upheaval was that “corporate managers did not carry through on their logic.” Industrial unions arose, then, to compel management to fulfill their 1920s promises.¹

Proponents of the historical contingency perspective argue that the possibilities of the 1930s were more open-ended and that the ultimate outcome — national, bureaucratic, hierarchical industrial unions — was reached through a conflictual process in which local initiatives

often contended with national exigencies and directives. Staughton Lynd is the most widely recognized advocate of this argument, and he is the editor of a collection of case studies that illustrate the diverse “horizontal” breakthroughs made in many communities in the 1930s. Lynd argues that this “community-based unionism” or “solidarity unionism” represented an alternative to the emergent CIO and its national affiliates. A version of this essay appears in that collection, and though it serves here to introduce the coming of industrial unionism to meatpacking, it is also intended to suggest that the history detailed in this volume did not have to follow the course it did.²

As the Great Depression deepened in the early 1930s, wreaking havoc from workplaces to working-class neighborhoods and homes, most workers were unorganized and undefended. While the entire labor movement had slipped into decline since World War I, in meatpacking the decline had been a virtual extermination. Following the disastrous strike of 1921–1922, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen (AMCBW) had been driven from the industry’s major centers. As unemployment rose across America after 1929, wages were slashed, work schedules became even more erratic and irregular, and working conditions deteriorated. Though workers needed unionization more than ever, an atmosphere of fear seemed to have settled over industrial America, particularly its packing plants.³

Out of this maelstrom would be written some of the most dramatic chapters in American labor history. Southern Minnesota and Iowa figure prominently in this story, for it was here that modern meatpacking unionism was reborn. Despite the atmosphere of fear, the power of corporate employers, and high levels of unemployment, local activists developed militant, creative strategies that enabled them not only to unionize the meatpacking industry in the region but also to bring thousands of other workers into the ranks of a rapidly reviving labor movement. Their vehicle was an unusual labor organization, modeled after the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or Wobblies), called the Independent Union of All Workers (IUAW).

The mid-1930s saw an explosion of local union organizing in the meatpacking industry. There were a number of epicenters, including Chicago, Omaha, Nebraska, Cedar Rapids and Sioux City, Iowa, and Austin, Minnesota. Activists, many of them with radical political allegiances, advanced a strategy of industrial unionism, of uniting all packinghouse workers regardless of skill, ethnicity, or occupation. Often, they extended their network of organizing beyond their own cities,

seeking to organize all packinghouse workers within a specific region. But the IUAW went even further, extending its organization to include other manufacturing workers, as well as transportation, retail, service, and municipal employees.⁴

The heart of the IUAW lay in Austin, a community long dominated by George A. Hormel and Company. The meatpacking concern had begun there in the late 1890s, and its economic ups and downs dictated the well-being of the larger community. In good years, it employed upward of 4,000 workers, and their paychecks helped bring a lively retail and service sector into existence. Albert Lea, twenty-five miles to the west, included a good-sized Wilson meatpacking plant and the American Gas Machine Company, which produced stoves and ice machines. In both communities, the seasonality of packinghouse work and the generally low level of industrial wages pushed most working-class families into depending on more than one breadwinner. These two Minnesota communities would provide the base for the IUAW.⁵

Between 1933 and 1937, this organization spread from Austin and Albert Lea to Faribault, Thief River Falls, Bemidji, Owatonna, Mankato, and South St. Paul, Minnesota; Mitchell and Madison, South Dakota; Fargo, North Dakota; Alma, Wisconsin; and Waterloo, Mason City, Algona, Ottumwa, Fort Dodge, and Estherville, Iowa. The IUAW also collaborated with activists in Madison, Wisconsin; Cedar Rapids and Sioux City, Iowa; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Omaha, Nebraska; Kansas City, Missouri; and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. In many of these cities, the IUAW sought both to spread industrial unionism among packinghouse workers and to organize "wall-to-wall," reaching other industries, even retail and service. In meatpacking, the IUAW sought to link their local organizing drives with other regional organizations, such as the Midwest Union of Packinghouse Workers, based in Cedar Rapids, the unusually militant local of the AMCBW under Sam Twedell's leadership in Sioux City, and, after the formation of the CIO in 1935, CIO unions emerging in Omaha, Kansas City, and Chicago. But between 1933 and 1937, the IUAW remained equally committed to building a horizontal, regional organization that could easily mobilize workers in support of other workers, regardless of their industry.⁶

The architect of the IUAW was a feisty ex-Wobbly named Frank Ellis. He not only shaped the union's structure and its emphasis on democracy, direct action, and solidarity, he also imprinted its character with his combative personality. In his late forties, Ellis's experiences included the 1904 St. Joseph, Missouri, meatpacking strike; free speech

fighters from Omaha to Seattle before World War I; the IWW's historic struggles in Centralia and Everett, Washington; a seat on the IWW's executive board in the early 1920s; and a lengthy list of arrests, including indictment for criminal syndicalism in Omaha. A skilled "boomer" butcher, he moved around frequently with little difficulty finding work. By the late 1920s, Ellis had worked in packing plants in St. Joseph, Oklahoma City, Omaha, Sioux City, and Albert Lea. Along the way, he had made a lot of contacts. He had also picked up knowledge of a new sausage casing fermentation process, which led Hormel to hire him in 1928 as a foreman to start and run their new casing department.⁷

Though he had only a third-grade education, Ellis brought a wealth of experience to the heated labor climate of the mid-1930s. One of his contemporaries later marveled at how Ellis had "managed to capture workers' restlessness at that time." His approach was to "set a group of workers on edge for a few weeks, get them to do some thinking." His reputation as an "agitational speaker" rested on more than his use of words. Another union veteran recalled that "whenever you mentioned the name Amalgamated or AF of L, he'd spit on the ground."⁸

Ellis had kept a low profile since being hired in 1928, but he helped other experienced (even blacklisted) labor activists get jobs at Hormel. He later told an interviewer:

I'd send out and get rebels that I knew from other towns to come in and go to work, and I'd work them during the rush season, see. Then, when it came to lay off time, instead of laying them off, I'd go to some other boss and say, "Here, I've got a good man. And I hate like hell to lay him off. Can you use him? And I'll take him back as soon as business starts up." And I'd place him in the plant and scatter him out. Well, he was an old union man. He knew what to do. I didn't have to tell him. He knew the idea was to get in there with the gang and to get them emotionally moved so they'd be ready to organize when the time came.⁹

Whether Ellis deserves credit for having brought them into the plant or not, a diverse group of militant activists did find employment there. Together, they promoted a strategy that rested, first and foremost, on direct workplace action. "You worked with a group of people who have never belonged to a union, who have never spoken back to a foreman, and a company that didn't want to recognize you," one activist recalled. They saw the shopfloor as holding the key to dispelling the atmosphere of fear that had held the rank and file back.¹⁰

In the hog kill, where the "disassembly" process began, there was a group of young Austin natives who had already been influenced by Minneapolis Trotskyists Ray Dunne and Carl Skoglund. They were angered by deteriorating working conditions, the tyranny exercised by foremen, and their "second-class" status in the community. Over the next four years, the "hog-kill gang" provided the IUAW with much of its dynamism, and they would be elected to a number of key union offices.¹¹

The hog-kill gang was joined by two very able comrades, both of whom had professional careers interrupted by the Great Depression. From a "very respectable family," Joe Voorhees had attempted to follow his father's footsteps into teaching, but he had lost his job when his rural school had closed. A husky young man with a growing family, Voorhees moved to Austin and found a job on the loading dock at Hormel. There, he got to know many of the workers in the plant, and they came to respect him for his speaking ability. He developed a reputation not just as a good speaker but as a man who stood behind what he said. This earned him election to such key posts as business agent and president of the IUAW. Equally important to the union was Carl Nilson, who had dropped out of the University of Minnesota and tried a variety of odd jobs before catching on in 1935 with the new state Workers Education Bureau. Impressed with the IWW-like character of the IUAW, Nilson volunteered to go to Austin. By October, he was not only teaching classes but also was editing the IUAW's new newspaper, a two-page mimeographed sheet, the *Unionist*. Like hog-kill workers John Winkels and Joe Ollman, Voorhees and Nilson were drawn to the militant Trotskyism being preached and practiced by the activists in and around the Minneapolis teamsters.¹²

From 1933 through 1936, the Trotskyists joined in a "Socialist Club" with a group of independent socialists. Among this group, no one contributed more to the IUAW than Svend Godfredson, who combined his parents' free-thinking traditions with the populism of farmers of northeastern Montana, where they had homesteaded, and the Wobbly beliefs of the itinerant farmhands he had met as a child. By the mid-1920s, Godfredson had abandoned formal education at a Lutheran college and moved to Chicago, where he joined the Socialist Party and participated in the unemployed movement. In July 1933, at the urging of his two brothers who were working at Hormel, he moved to Austin and got a job in the dry sausage department, just as the IUAW was beginning to take shape. He quickly became a shopfloor leader and was soon

elected to the executive board. In 1937, he succeeded Carl Nilson as editor of the *Unionist*, and he eventually became editor of the *Packinghouse Worker*, the national publication of the United Packinghouse Workers of America.¹³

In addition to Ellis, the Trotskyists, and the independent socialists, there was also a Communist Party-affiliated group in the IUAW. Their stronghold was in the beef kill, which had only opened in 1931. Most of the workers there were new to Austin. Among these “boomer” butchers were Eddie Folan and Matt Kovacic. Folan had worked with Ellis in Omaha and Sioux City, and he had been blacklisted after leading the 1921 strike there. In the late 1920s, working under an assumed name, he had come to South St. Paul where he met Kovacic. A Croatian immigrant who had arrived in Minnesota after World War I, Kovacic was the godson of Stjepan Radic, the charismatic leader of the radical peasant movement in Yugoslavia. Kovacic went to work in the South St. Paul Armour plant, but he had been fired in the late twenties. Hired into Hormel when the beef kill opened, both Folan and Kovacic would be elected to a number of offices in the IUAW, and, until late 1936, they cooperated effectively with the other radicals.¹⁴

The richness and diversity within the IUAW's political culture are not all that unusual. As study upon study has shown, radicals played a critical role in the revival of the labor movement in the mid-1930s. They sought to draw lessons from the suppression of the IWW, the failure of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the strike of 1921–1922, and the increasing radicalization of the working class suggested by the unemployed movement of the early 1930s; they also tried to take advantage of the changed political climate after Roosevelt's inauguration. While they did not all draw the same lessons nor propose the same programs, in 1933 they shared a vision of industrial unionism based upon militant workplace tactics.¹⁵

In the summer of 1933, Ellis and the hog-kill gang chose a highly symbolic issue to provoke a shopfloor confrontation — and then launch the union. A cornerstone of Hormel paternalism had long been the Austin Community Chest. The company sought 100 percent participation by its workers. When pledge cards were distributed, one veteran recalled, “the foreman just backed you up against the wall and told you you were going to give. If you didn't, it meant your job.” Bad enough when times were good, this added insult to injury in a context of layoffs, short weeks, and wage cuts. “This was for the poor people,” recalled another old-timer. “Hell, *we* were the poor people!” Over the Fourth of

July holiday, Hormel announced a \$1.20 a week raise — and a new pension plan to be funded by a payroll deduction of \$1.20 a week. Pledge cards for the pension plan were to be distributed by foremen with the pledge cards for the annual Community Chest drive.¹⁶

On July 13, 1933, pledge cards were distributed to the hog kill. When one worker yielded to the foreman's pressure and signed, the radicals stopped work. The rest of the gang followed suit. They surrounded the foreman and insisted that he tear up the card. For ten minutes, no hogs were slaughtered. Then the foreman gave in. Word spread throughout the plant, together with news of an outdoor meeting to be held after work in Sutton Park.¹⁷

The Hormel workers were electrified by the hog-kill action. "You could see the purpose in the eyes of these fellows," an organizer of the outdoor meeting later recalled. "I looked at their eyes. New hope was shining in them."¹⁸

Ellis chaired the meeting. Several speakers—women as well as men—urged the crowd to organize. Ellis laid out his vision of an organization that would reach all the workers in Austin, as well as promote the national unionization of the meatpacking industry along industrial lines. The new union was to be open to "all wage earners, no matter where employed." Undaunted by the presence of company stool pigeons, 600 signed up. The next day, Ellis secured a charter from the state of Minnesota for the IUAW.¹⁹

Twice more in the ensuing months, the IUAW relied on visible workplace confrontations to build the union. Each time, they not only demonstrated their strength to the company, they also demonstrated the workers' own strength to themselves, dispelling the atmosphere of fear. Direct action served as the IUAW's preeminent tactic.

On September 23, while Ellis was behind closed doors bargaining with Jay Hormel, workers massed at the front gates and refused to go in. Hormel and Ellis came out and addressed the crowd from a hastily assembled platform. Ellis—the veteran soapboxer—stood his ground, as did the crowd. Hormel yielded and, in front of the crowd, signed an agreement proffering formal recognition to the union.²⁰

Despite this victory, the union was still denied the wage increase so desperately needed. When six weeks of negotiations brought no agreement on a raise, the IUAW again turned to mass direct action. The timing was important. It was the "hog rush" season, and the workers felt themselves in a position of power. Some had recently joined the Farm Holiday Association in picketing roads into town. Following a tumul-

tuous union meeting on Friday night, November 10, the hog-kill gang went directly to the plant. One of them recalled: "We rushed to the packinghouse and we took over. We told the sheep-kill gang [which worked the late night shift] to clean the sheep, put them in the cooler, and get the hell out." For the next three days, in what some labor historians consider to have been the first sit-down strike of the 1930s, the IUAW maintained control of the plant. Governor Floyd Olson, a Farmer-Laborite, rushed to Austin, refused Hormel's request that he send in the National Guard, and mediated an agreement between the company and the union. A mass meeting at the state armory overwhelmingly approved it.²¹

This first contract provided Hormel workers with extraordinary breakthroughs in collective bargaining, far beyond the relatively token wage increases they received. It established a "guaranteed annual wage" by banking workers' overtime earnings and doling them out during slack periods, thereby leveling out wages. New stability was also ensured through a fifty-two-week layoff notice provision. Thus, in one fell swoop, Hormel workers had obtained steady employment in an industry long known for its erratic pattern of heavy work periods and pronounced slow ones. This contract also introduced a system of "gains sharing," a complicated group piecework bonus system that gave workers the ability to increase their earnings collectively and to maintain some control over the pace of work. These arrangements would come to be known in the industry as "the Hormel difference." Many observers—and even later generations of workers—would credit Jay Hormel's "paternalism" as the source of this "difference," although the historical record would suggest that the strength of the IUAW was the crucial factor.²²

The IUAW maintained a strong shopfloor presence in the Hormel plant. Each department elected a three-person committee, and each committee elected a chairperson. Although the agreement set up a formal grievance procedure with arbitration, these committees relied on direct action—slowdowns, sitdowns—to resolve grievances on the spot. One union veteran recalled:

Frank Ellis would sit down in the union hall. They would call him up and say: "Come on over, the department is sitting down. . . ." So over Frank goes. Frank would go over to the hog kill or the hog cut or one of the departments, and here the people were madder than hell, sitting against the wall, refusing to work. And then the company

would meet with Frank, and Frank was 175 percent for the worker. . . . You never had to worry about Frank seeing the company side of anything. They'd get the grievance settled right on the job.

Ellis himself explained to an interviewer:

Most of our strikes were sit-down, sit-down right on the job and not do a damn bit of work until we got it settled. . . . We had strikes every day. Hell, if a fellow farted crooked we would strike about it.²³

From this base in the Hormel plant, the IUAW spread, both to other workers in Austin and to a dozen other communities. In Austin, it included "units" of truckers and warehouse workers, barbers and beauticians, construction tradesmen and laborers, Works Progress Administration laborers, automobile mechanics and service station attendants, laundry and dry cleaning workers, retail clerks, and municipal employees. From beauty shops with three employees to the local Montgomery Ward, every retail and service establishment in Austin came under contract with the IUAW. Many of these units were grouped together as the Uptown Workers Association, with its own female business agent, veteran waitress Eva Sauers.²⁴

The IUAW built a rich, active culture for its members and their families. The *Unionist* was delivered free on Friday mornings to every household in Austin. Its first issue, in October 1935, declared: "In line with the history and tradition of the union, this paper will be radical and militant, dynamic rather than static, alive rather than asleep." Carl Nilson, its editor, taught classes in public speaking, parliamentary rules, labor history, economics, and current events. He also organized classes in band, chorus, and dramatics. The union and its Ladies Auxiliary organized a lively Drum and Bugle Corps, which led many parades, and a drama troupe, which performed several plays. The IUAW also established a library in the union hall, featuring works by Edward Bellamy, John Reed, and Upton Sinclair. The *Unionist* included a regular book review column, written by Nilson's wife, Marian (whose father had been a Knights of Labor activist in the 1880s).²⁵

The IUAW was structured for maximum participation. Units met on a weekly basis, with all rank and file able to shape policy for this industry. Local 1, which consisted of delegates elected by each Austin unit, met monthly and considered issues of concern to the entire IUAW. Once a week there was an open meeting—"the big meeting," one union veteran recalled, "to have a solidarity of the masses, as Frank Ellis used

to talk about." These mass meetings did not take formal votes or set specific policies for the union, but they brought together rank and file and auxiliary members from across the city to hear speakers, debate political issues, and map out solidarity campaigns.²⁶

The Ladies Auxiliary brought workers' families directly into the life of the union. Organized in the summer of 1933, its leadership was drawn from active women workers as well as male workers' spouses. This was not without its contradictions, for while it promoted women's and families' participation, it also encouraged men to see women as "auxiliary" to the "real" work of the union. Yet, the auxiliary played a vital role in the overall movement. It collected dues of ten cents a month and held biweekly meetings in the union hall. Each meeting opened with "Solidarity Forever," followed by thirty minutes of group song. The auxiliary ran strike kitchens and commissaries, promoted boycotts of companies embroiled in labor conflicts, maintained the popular Drum and Bugle Corps, organized a community lecture series which brought diverse speakers to town, and raised money for union projects by performing plays, holding card parties, dances, and bake sales. Women workers who were active in the auxiliary were also active in their respective units, from beauticians to packinghouse workers.²⁷

Between 1933 and 1937, Austin labor activists spread the IUAW into other communities in southern Minnesota, Iowa, the Dakotas, and Wisconsin. Typically, they led a team of volunteer organizers (usually reviled by the local press as "outside agitators") who connected with local activists based in a packinghouse or other industrial facility. Ellis usually led the way with some inspirational public speaking. Other experienced activists helped with publishing newsletters and leaflets. During strikes, some IUAW members joined in on picket lines while others back home in Austin provided material aid to the strikers and their families. The IUAW used mobile pickets to block delivery trucks in one strike against a transfer company in southern Minnesota, and in 1933 and 1934 they joined Farm Holiday Association picket lines on rural roads and even helped hold the ranks during "penny auctions" organized by farm activists to block foreclosure sales.²⁸

These "outside agitators" participated in demonstrations and picketing in Faribault, Albert Lea, Owatonna, Mason City, Waterloo, and Estherville. In July 1935, the IUAW coordinated a series of sympathy strikes by more than 1,000 Wilson packinghouse workers in Faribault and Albert Lea, in support of 100 striking Wilson poultry plant workers in Faribault. In January 1935 and April 1937, members of the Austin

IUAW responded en masse to “an SOS call from Albert Lea.” Both times, they joined in street fighting with squads of special deputies. Ellis emphasized the power of this sort of solidarity in a speech to a mass meeting of striking Rath Packing Company workers in Waterloo in February 1935: “If you say so, we’ll bring in militant workers from other cities who will put this thing over. We’ll shut down the packing houses in Austin and Albert Lea if necessary to get men in here to win this strike.”²⁹

The IUAW provided a cohesive, regional network for labor activism in these disparate communities. Annual conventions brought together formal delegates from each of thirteen “Local Unions,” both to handle union business and to picnic and commune together. “Wall-to-wall” unionism may never have been fully attained in these other communities, but a powerful foundation was laid for the development of permanent union organization. In some communities, IUAW activists entered local and regional politics, usually through farmer-labor formations. In Austin and Albert Lea, for instance, they captured seats on the school board and city council, initiated farmer-labor newspapers, and became a force in the congressional district.³⁰

The Hormel packinghouse activists who initiated and extended the IUAW wrestled with a complex problem. Hormel management insisted that raises given to their workers be linked to raises achieved by packinghouse workers throughout the country. This pressure was certainly a factor in efforts to extend the IUAW. It also led Austin activists to meet with packinghouse unionists from around the Midwest to discuss linking their activities, if not their organizations. After the CIO was formed in 1935, some of the activists contacted John L. Lewis and asked for his help. In these efforts, they continued to face an apparent dilemma: how to build a cohesive national organization that would still rest on the local democracy and horizontal solidarity that had been the lifeblood of the IUAW.³¹

These issues were widely debated within the IUAW, at rank-and-file meetings, on the shopfloor, and in the pages of the *Unionist*. Virtually all the radicals — Trotskyists, Communists, and Socialists — agreed on the importance of building an industrial union in the meatpacking industry and that this would be most attainable through the CIO. Even the “straight business unionists” within the IUAW favored participation in some sort of national organization. Interestingly, Frank Ellis was the strongest voice of scepticism toward affiliation with the CIO. He was not opposed to being part of a national network or even a national organi-

zation, but he was very concerned that the dynamics of local and regional cross-industry solidarity not be sacrificed.³²

Even as the IUAW debated its future, external forces began to shape its choices. In the fall of 1936, conflict grew between the AFL and the CIO and between Communists and Trotskyists. National leaders of the AFL and the CIO increased their pressure on affiliated and independent unions as they turned their guns on each other, competing for membership and economic power. Individual national unions promoted internal hierarchy and centralized authority, even to the degree of discouraging solidarity with labor organizations tied to the competing federation. Both organizations assaulted horizontally structured bodies, forcing local workers and activists to choose sides. Simultaneously, disagreements between Communists and Trotskyists exploded into open conflict. Each group suspected the other of trying to gain control over labor organizations in order to exclude them. Mistrust and hostility ate away at efforts to maintain the principles of solidarity that had underpinned the growth of the labor movement not just in the upper Midwest, but across the United States.³³

In the spring of 1937, a series of events swept the IUAW's membership toward a fateful decision that would permanently alter the labor movement in the region. In March and April, several sit-down strikes broke out in Albert Lea. Initially, these strikes generated the sort of solidarity at which the IUAW's brand of horizontal, community unionism excelled. On March 8, truck drivers and warehouse workers at two transfer companies in Albert Lea went on strike. They occupied the warehouses, and in a matter of days freight began to pile up at the local railroad station. Carl Nilson, who had resigned the editorship of the *Unionist* to take the lead in organizing truckers in southern Minnesota and northern Iowa into the IUAW, coordinated the Albert Lea strike.³⁴

The situation grew to new proportions as other strikes broke out. On March 19, Ray Hemenway, the leading activist in IUAW Local 2 — described as “part Wobbly, part Trotskyist” by one veteran — approached the Woolworth's department store management with a petition signed by all twenty-five employees demanding union recognition and raises to \$14 to \$16 a week. When the store manager began to threaten and intimidate the young women individually, the union members opted to strike. They chose to occupy the store rather than picket it.³⁵

The very next day, sit-down strikes also broke out in the two plants of the American Gas Machine Company. Next to Wilson's packinghouse, this company was Albert Lea's major industrial employer. Since the

IUAW had expanded into Albert Lea, labor conflict had been frequent — and often violent — at American Gas Machine. In February 1935, a brief strike at the Potter Foundry (a subcontractor of American Gas Machine) had escalated into a walkout at the main plant and a physical confrontation between IUAW pickets and sheriff's deputies that resulted in several injuries and arrests. Half a dozen IUAW activists were sentenced to sixty days at hard labor as a result of this battle, and a bitter enmity between the union and the sheriff, Helmer Myre, was established. Over the next two years, the IUAW had won a grudging recognition from the American Gas Machine management. The frequent cyclical and seasonal ups and downs of this business, together with the anti-unionism of its management, had kept the IUAW's foothold an insecure one. The *Unionist* called Albert Lea "one of the most vicious and well-organized anti-labor towns in Minnesota."³⁶

The day the clerks took control of Woolworth's, American Gas Machine management took a provocative action. They fired four IUAW activists from the main plant. Though they claimed that a business downturn had necessitated a round of layoffs, the IUAW saw this selective discharge as an attack on the union. The following day, the IUAW initiated a sit-down strike at the company's two plants, on Front Street and Clark Street. At the latter location, strikers took up positions in the large street-level display window, waving to passers-by and demonstrating their high spirits to the public.³⁷

Although all the strikes were depicted by the *Albert Lea Evening Tribune* and the Chamber of Commerce as "illegal seizures of private property," the young women at Woolworth's were singled out for engaging in behavior inappropriate for their gender. Their parents were approached by Sheriff Myre, who warned them "that immoral things were going on at the Woolworth store." Rumors were spread that the young women were being "forced" to sit-in by male union activists. On Saturday night, March 20, the local police chief visited them to ask if any wanted to leave. The union's hastily produced daily *Strike News* (edited by Carl Nilson) reported the response as "a chorused 'We're sticking.'" The Easter holiday was also used as a source of pressure. The *Tribune* asked the strikers if they were willing to miss out on wearing their new Easter outfits and bonnets and marching to and from church.³⁸

The IUAW responded to these charges in creative ways, but in ways that did not challenge a paternalistic public image of these workers. "Mature leaders of the Women's Auxiliary" joined the Woolworth's strikers during their sit-down as virtual chaperones. The auxiliary also

established a kitchen and commissary "to see that the sit-downers are kept well fed and happy." "We are still happy and contented," the women assured the public a week into the strike.

We have plenty to eat, including regular meals, lunches, candy, ice cream, fruit and gum — furnished by the union sympathizers.

We each have a private bed of our own, plenty of blankets, and plenty reading material. We have a radio and pass most of our time dancing and singing.³⁹

What particularly endeared these young women to the general public was their singing. They wrote a "theme song" to the tune of the "Old Gray Mare," whose chorus became well known throughout Albert Lea and Austin:

The five and dime
She ain't what she used to be
Ain't what she used to be
The five and dime
She ain't what she used to be.⁴⁰

The wholesome image of these young women singing undermined the rumors being spread by anti-union forces. The *Strike News* described a parade of hundreds of IUAW members on Friday night, March 26, that conveyed that clearly.

The Girls' Drum and Bugle Corps signalled for stops at both of the American Gas Machine plants and the F.W. Woolworth Store on South Broadway. The girls serenaded the sit-down strikers with a few peppy selections at each of the three stops, outstanding union leaders spoke words of encouragement and the great crowd cheered to the echo.

At the Woolworth Store the courageous girl sit-downers grouped themselves together on an improvised platform inside and in front of the swinging doors that have been locked for more than a week. Then they sang their sit-downers' theme song. When the fighting damsels concluded their little ditty it seemed that all Broadway was yelling its approval.⁴¹

On Easter Sunday afternoon, a Methodist minister conducted service for the young women in the store. Some of their supporters joined in. The *Strike News* reported that the reverend "urged" the women to "fight for their rights." Besides the boost to their morale that this pro-

vided, it also countered any contention that these women had no interest in Easter. The following morning, Judge Norman Peterson (known unaffectionately as "Injunction" Peterson by the IUAW) issued an order against the sit-down strikers, demanding that they immediately vacate all occupied premises. The women did eventually get a union contract.⁴²

The Albert Lea strikes generated just the sort of solidarity at which the horizontal, community unionism of the IUAW excelled. For two weeks, all three strikes had held firm. The IUAW Drum and Bugle Corps paraded down the streets of Albert Lea, marching from one occupied workplace to another. The Women's Auxiliary provided food for the sit-downers, while IUAW members in both Albert Lea and Austin expressed their active solidarity. But the denouement of these strikes was to change the historic course of the IUAW. By the end of the Albert Lea struggle, the structure and internal dynamics of the IUAW began to show the impact of sophisticated employer opposition, political co-optation, the hostility of the AFL, and radical organizations that placed their own agendas over and above the interests of the IUAW.

The Albert Lea Chamber of Commerce and its "Secret Committee of 500" laid plans to defeat the IUAW. This "Secret Committee" linked Judge Cooney, the virulently anti-union vice president of Wilson meatpacking, the local American Gas Machine management, local retailers whose businesses had been unionized by the IUAW, and the enemies of organized labor from the Twin Cities, particularly the Minneapolis Citizens Alliance. Their scheme involved the creation of a virtually city-wide company union, the "Albert Lea Employees Labor Association" (ALELA). They installed Jack Blades, the most notorious sheriff's deputy in town, as its president. They planned to start a back-to-work movement under the auspices of this "labor" organization, denounce the interference of the "outside agitators" of the IUAW, and, eventually grant formal union recognition to the ALELA.⁴³

While District Court Judge Peterson was issuing an injunction ordering the evacuation of the workplaces, Sheriff Myre was swearing in 150 special deputies, some of whom were experienced anti-union private police from the Twin Cities. The *Albert Lea Evening Tribune* berated the strikers, their "violation" of the "rights of private property," the "immorality" of the young women occupying Woolworth's, and the influence of "outside agitators." After Peterson issued his injunction, the newspaper published the names of those who would risk arrest by defying it. The *Tribune* also began to claim that back-to-work sentiment

was growing. Its claims were further supported by the appearance of a daily ALELA news sheet, the *Labor News*, which red-baited the leadership of the IUAW. The crowning piece in the strategy was provided by the state AFL, which in the midst of this conflict acted on its own organizational agenda and granted the ALELA a charter.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, a back-to-work movement never materialized, and the strikers held firm. But the IUAW and the strikers finally decided to yield to the judge's injunction. On the morning of April 2, they vacated the plants, warehouses, and department store. They took up positions as mass pickets in each location. Sheriff Myre and his deputies attacked the pickets outside the main American Gas Machine plant, dispersing them under a cloud of tear gas and a barrage of rubber hoses. The "forces of order" then laid siege to the IUAW hall, ultimately destroying it. Sixty-two men were arrested, most at the union headquarters, and herded to the county jail. Among them were some of the IUAW activists from Austin. Ray Hemenway and some others only escaped by climbing onto the roof and getting away from there. The scene was a chaotic, pitched battle, reminiscent of the sacking of IWW offices in the Pacific Northwest during the World War I era.⁴⁵

Word quickly reached the Hormel plant in Austin. According to some participants in the events, at least 400 men put aside their tools and walked out. They stopped at home to pick up assorted weapons and then drove in a caravan to Albert Lea. There, joined by angry Albert Lea IUAW members, they marched down Main Street to the jail and demanded that all the prisoners be freed. When the brand-new Albert Lea police cruiser pulled up, the crowd surrounded it, took the police out, rolled it over, set it on fire, and then slid the charred remains into the lake across the street. Armed with crowbars, individuals from the crowd began to pry open the bars on the jail windows. Seated on top of the building, a deputy either could not figure out how to operate the World War I machine gun that Sheriff Myre had obtained or was unwilling to use it. The crowd was clearly in command of the situation.⁴⁶

At this dramatic moment, Governor Elmer Benson made his way through the crowd. A Farmer-Laborite, he had won the election of 1936 after the death of popular governor Floyd Olson. Benson had arrived the previous day, eager to mediate a settlement as his predecessor had done in Austin in 1933. So far, he had had little luck on this score. When the crowd laid siege to the jail, Benson left his hotel and approached the jail himself. He strode forward and demanded the keys from Sheriff Myre. He then freed all the prisoners, who were carried

away by the crowd. According to local lore, several prisoners being held for non-strike-related offenses (such as drunk and disorderly) were so jubilant over their liberation that they joined the IUAW on the spot.⁴⁷

The crowd streamed back to the Clark Street plant, eager to avenge the morning's rout. When they surrounded the plant, the deputies fled up to the fourth floor. IUAW leaders negotiated the surrender of the deputies. In a scene reminiscent of the humiliation of the Pinkertons in the Homestead steel strike of 1892, the deputies were forced to put their badges and weapons in boxes outside the door and then to pass through a gauntlet of strikers and their supporters.⁴⁸

That night, Governor Benson attempted to negotiate a settlement. The union was to call off the strike and return to work immediately. The companies were to rehire all strikers and the four IUAW members fired at American Gas Machine. They would also recognize the IUAW and bargain with them, but on one condition — that the IUAW affiliate with a national union within sixty days. This condition was put forward by the employers, but Benson was encouraged to promote it by his advisors, several of whom were close to the Communist Party and eager to build the CIO (which is where all figured the major pieces of the IUAW would end up). With Ellis behind bars hundreds of miles away and both the Communists and the Trotskyists in favor of affiliation with the CIO, the IUAW leadership accepted Benson's terms.⁴⁹

The IUAW lost at the bargaining table what it had won in the streets of Albert Lea. A month later, the Albert Lea Employees Labor Association actually defeated the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) in an election at American Gas Machine, largely on the votes of several hundred "workers" hired after the strike — and discharged after the election.⁵⁰

Even more important, the IUAW itself began to melt away. City by city, individual units voted over the next several months to affiliate with national unions or CIO organizing committees. Some connected with the AFL-affiliated Teamsters. Austin's organized "uptown workers" — largely female retail clerks, waitresses, hotel maids, beauticians, and the like — bounced from the IUAW to the Teamsters to District 50 of the United Mine Workers, losing members with each new affiliation. Some units never found a home with a national union and faded away altogether.⁵¹

It proved distressingly easy for organizational distinctions to become the basis for hostilities. Nilson's truckers' and warehousemen's units in Austin, Albert Lea, Mason City, and Ottumwa left the IUAW to join the

Teamsters. The national Teamsters leadership lost no time informing Nilson that since this included a relationship with the AFL, they were to have no ongoing relationship with the units of the IUAW that had affiliated with the CIO. Nilson soon lost his job as a business agent for the Teamsters and also found himself blacklisted from his former position with the state Bureau of Workers Education. The Communists and the Trotskyists turned on each other, letting loose a paroxysm of name-calling and mutual recriminations that soon poisoned the atmosphere within the unions. Letters attacking each other appeared in the local press and the union newspaper alike. An independent socialist recalled, "It's fantastic the way the Communists and the Trotskyists hated each other."⁵²

Efforts to maintain the horizontal solidarity of the IUAW were no match for the forces pulling it apart. In late 1937, Svend Godfredson, the independent socialist who had replaced Nilson as editor of the *Unionist*, promoted the formation of an Austin Central Labor Assembly. It proved to be stillborn, however, undermined by the centrifugal tendencies of other communities fearful of domination by Austin and by the sectarian squabble of Communists and Trotskyists. A year later, an effort to link all packinghouse workers in the region in an autonomous organization was scuttled by the CIO itself and its Communist-affiliated regional director.⁵³

The Hormel unit affiliated with the CIO, first directly and then with the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee, when it was established. Key local leaders joined the regional or national staff and left Austin. By World War II, a group of "straight trade unionists" had assumed the leadership of the Hormel union. They were able to build on the gains made in the IUAW era — strong shopfloor organization, the guaranteed annual wage, the fifty-two-week layoff notice, the gains-sharing program. The efforts of diverse activists had helped build a strong national union, and they also helped ensure excellent wages and working conditions for two generations of Hormel workers.⁵⁴

But something very important was lost in the dissolution of the IUAW, and some of the activists realized what was at stake. In the summer of 1937, Svend Godfredson wrote in the *Unionist*:

Since 1933 the workers in Austin have never let up their efforts to make Austin 100% union. . . . Above all, Austin's unionization is not a shallow thing, but a master organization that penetrates far into the very lives of the workers that live in Austin. . . . It is not merely a mat-

ter of wages and more money to spend. . . . With unionization comes a new freedom — a freedom of the individual that will grow in importance as the organizational experience grows older. A new freedom of thought, of action and knowledge, are products of workers' lives protected through organizations of their own choosing.⁵⁵

But there was no turning back. As national unions took shape and incorporated internal hierarchies and vertical structures, the bonds of local solidarity weakened. As these new structures and dynamics sank deeper roots, the transformative qualities of the mid-1930s movement receded into the past. A veteran packinghouse worker from Omaha who described himself as influenced by Ellis's "one big union" philosophy conveyed the sense of loss that accompanied the demise of the IUAW:

I thought we were going into an era . . . where we'd tell the leaders of this industrial society how we wanted the country to run. It never came out that way. . . . I thought we'd have a case where we'd permanently make a change so that people would have much more to say about the kind of society they lived under. I know we had the foremen off balance. Don't worry, those foremen didn't get away with too much. We had democracy in most of those plants. But I thought there was a possibility that you would make a permanent change in that direction. . . .⁵⁶

The IUAW fell short of making that "permanent change." Under the pressure of external circumstances and hindered by internal conflicts, its leading activists opted for institutional security through national industrial unionism at the expense of the culture of local and regional solidarity that they, and the IUAW's rank and file, had built between 1933 and 1937. While some IUAW activists, such as Frank Ellis and Svend Godfredson, felt that the movement could build national industrial unionism *and* horizontal networks of broad solidarity, there were too many forces outside of their control, undercutting the prospects of being able to maintain this choice.⁵⁷

The essays in this book trace the construction of this national union over the next generation and its consequent deterioration over the following generation. Fifty years after the birth of the IUAW, the Austin local (United Food and Commercial Workers Local P-9) would retrace the steps of the IUAW in their efforts to combat Hormel's demands for rolling back many of the gains their parents and grandparents had worked so hard to achieve. The activists of the mid-1980s