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By

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This dissertation explores the political ramifications of the rapid advance of public employee unionization after World War II through a study of Jerry Wurf (1919-1981), organizer, local leader, and eventually national union president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), one of the largest and yet least studied unions in postwar American history. Drawing on union records, personal papers, and a wide range of printed sources, it argues that the growth of unions like AFSCME simultaneously bolstered liberal forces and contributed to the emergence of popular conservatism. Organizing around government workers’ aspirations for equity and dignity, AFSCME surged to the forefront of a burgeoning public sector labor movement that fought for civil rights for African Americans and comparable worth for women, rebuilt the Democratic Party in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and reinvigorated class-based, state-centered liberal social and urban policy.

But Wurf’s very success in building AFSCME set in motion developments that frustrated his union’s hopes and complicated the broader liberal project. First, by winning improved wages and benefits through collective bargaining and political mobilization, unionization imposed new budgetary obligations that came under bitter attack in the poisonous fiscal climate of the 1970s. Second, the growth of unions like AFSCME transformed popular perceptions of organized labor, replacing the sympathetic figure of an exploited industrial or farm worker with the less romantic image of a government employee insulated from economic downturns, thus weakening public
support for unions overall. Third, the emergence of public sector unions like AFSCME
interjected an increasingly visible intermediary—the organized public employee—into divisive
debates about taxes and services, creating an inviting target for the emerging tax revolt. Building
on recent work that looks to the 1970s as the “critical decade” in postwar history, this
dissertation shows that the growth of the public sector labor movement played an important and
largely unrecognized role in lending popular legitimacy and political credibility to a discourse
that pitted taxpayers against tax recipients and thrived on assaults on government programs—a
discourse that still resonates decades later.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the faculty, students, and staff of Georgetown University’s History Department. I could not have hoped for a more cordial and stimulating home over these past seven years. The generous financial support of the department and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences offered me the resources necessary to complete the project and the opportunity to develop as both a teacher and scholar. I have had the opportunity to work as a teaching assistant to exceptional faculty members, including James Shedel, Bryan McCann, and Isadora Helfgott, experiences that shaped both my own approach in the classroom and how I thought about my research. Special thanks to Chandra Manning, who provided an exemplary model of how to design and teach a U.S. survey course in the fall of 2007, and who has never ceased to be a source of support since. John Tutino and Daniel Ernst generously gave their time and advice as I worked my way through my comprehensive exams, challenging me to think beyond the narrow confines of American labor history. The department’s incredible staff, including Lisa Chinn, Miriam Okine Davies, Kathleen Buc Gallagher, Janice Liverance, and Djuana Shields, ensured that the requisite forms got filed, the bills got paid, and that the sixth floor corridor of the Intercultural Center remained functional and welcoming. My fellow graduate students, particularly Paul Adler, Thomas Apel, James Benton, John Corcoran, Rodolfo Fernandez, Benjamin Francis-Fallon, Andrew Hazleton, Toshihiro Higuchi, Eric Gettig, Frederick Gooding, Michael Hill, Daniel Mauldin, Erin Stewart Mauldin, and Anand Toprani, listened graciously as I stumbled toward a research topic in seminars and department common spaces, interjecting with insightful observations as well as an endlessly entertaining array of distractions and tangents, from American labor and politics to “real” football and the National Hockey League.
I have been blessed with a committee that accepted and encouraged my interest in a biographically-driven dissertation. From the earliest research trips through the drafting phase, Michael Kazin proved a source of constant and constructive advice. A late addition to the group, Eric Arnesen offered insightful thoughts on the final draft. It is nearly impossible to put into words the debt that I owe to my adviser, Joseph McCartin. From my first day at Georgetown through the final phases of my defense, he never doubted my ability to complete the project, even as I added chapter after chapter to the original plan. Patiently reading and responding to draft after draft, he has provided an unparalleled model of scholarship and mentorship.

This dissertation also owes a great deal to a much broader intellectual community. The sessions of the D.C. Working Class History Seminar proved stimulating, and I thank Cindy Hahamovitch and Jennifer Luff for allowing me to participate. The conferences of the Labor and Working Class History Association inspired and influenced much in this project, and I am particularly grateful to Alice Kessler-Harris, Michael Honey, and Kimberly L. Phillips for allowing me to serve as LAWCHA’s liaison to the AFL-CIO between 2007 and 2010. Portions of the dissertation were presented at the North American Labor History Conference, the Policy History Conference, and the annual meetings of LAWCHA and the American Historical Association. I wish to thank the chairs, panelists, and audiences of those sessions for their thoughtful comments.

The research for this dissertation took me on a tour of the United States, and I could not have completed the project without the patient support of dozens of librarians and archivists. Limited space prevents a full list, but several deserve special recognition. Generous support from Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and the Cosmos Club of Washington, D.C. funded more than a month’s work at the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State
University in Detroit, home to both Wurf’s personal papers and AFSCME’s institutional records. The Library’s diligent professional and student staff lent incredible assistance, graciously pulling box after box, just so that I could glance at one or two folders. Special thanks to Reference Archivist William LeFevre for helping me navigate the Library’s collections and Louis Jones for allowing me to view then-unprocessed collections from SEIU. I could not have completed the project without the aid of Johanna Russ, who helped me maximize my limited time in Detroit, walked me through AFSCME’s expansive and growing collections, and answered more follow-up questions than anyone ought to. Gail Malmgreen and Melissa C. Haley helped me work through the records of District Council 37 at the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University. A generous grant from the William and Madeline Welder Smith Research Travel fund allowed me to travel to the Briscoe Center for American History in Austin, Texas to examine James Farmer’s papers. Diane Shaw and the helpful staff at Lafayette College’s Skillman Library ensured that my week with William Simon’s papers was productive, despite the intervention of Hurricane Irene. Holly Snyder helped me navigate the Hall-Hoag Collection at Brown University. The staff at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University lent timely assistance when I learned of the existence of Ralph de Toledano’s papers with only two days left in a month-long stay in the city. Patrick Kerwin guided me through the Daniel Patrick Moynihan Collection at the Library of Congress. Finally, I spent more days than I can count traveling back and forth between my Arlington, Virginia apartment and the George Meany Memorial Archives at the National Labor College in Silver Spring, Maryland, but archivists Lynda J. DeLoach and Sarah Springer always ensured that the boxes were pulled and binders were ready upon my arrival, however delayed I might have been by Beltway traffic.
The past seven years have been marked by major changes in my life. My actual sibling (Jim) and two cousins who feel like siblings (Rob and Dana) have each started their own families—bringing what was once a closely-knit group of four up to an ever-expanding group of twelve, including three spouses (Meg, Cristin, and Auggie), a nephew (Jack Adam), a god-daughter (Madison Adele), and two honorary nieces (Tara Grace and Lara Lynn). My in-laws, Michael and Jacki Simmon, have opened their home to me on more than one research trip to New York City and eagerly encouraged my pursuits. My parents, Mark and Cindy, have provided constant support, timely dog-sitting services, and a comfortable rural retreat from the busyness of urban academia. None of them have read a word of this project; most of them don’t even know what it is about. But they have been as critical to its completion as anyone, if for no other reason than providing a constant reminder that there is far more to life than a dissertation.

I have been fortunate to share this incredible experience with my wife, Jessica. We met on our first day at Georgetown, moved in together ten months later, adopted a puppy, Chaseley, a year after that, and got married two years later. We’ve gone through every step of the process together—literally. From orientation and the first-year colloquium through comprehensive exams and back-to-back defense dates, she has lived with this project as much as I have. Taking time from her own work, she has proofed and copy-edited every draft at least twice, and, in some cases, several times more than that. My reference point for all things Jewish and New York, she has done more for this project, and for me, than could possibly be conveyed by the words “Thank you.”
In memory of

Evan Armstrong North,

Student, Scholar, and Friend
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<td>AACCG</td>
<td>Americans Against Union Control of Government</td>
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<td>ACWA</td>
<td>Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America</td>
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<td>ADA</td>
<td>Americans for Democratic Action</td>
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<td>AFGE</td>
<td>American Federation of Government Employees</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFL</td>
<td>American Federation of Labor</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFL-CIO</td>
<td>American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFSCME</td>
<td>American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees</td>
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<td>AFT</td>
<td>American Federation of Teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATRM</td>
<td>American Tax Reduction Movement</td>
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<td>BSEIU</td>
<td>Building Service Employees International Union</td>
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<td>CAPE</td>
<td>Coalition of American Public Employees</td>
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<tr>
<td>CETA</td>
<td>Comprehensive Employment and Training Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIO</td>
<td>Congress of Industrial Organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>COPE</td>
<td>Committee on Political Education (AFL-CIO)</td>
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<td>CORE</td>
<td>Congress on Racial Equality</td>
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<td>COUR</td>
<td>Committee on Union Responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Communist Party</td>
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<td>CPUSA</td>
<td>Communist Party of the United States of America</td>
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<td>CSEA</td>
<td>California State Employees Association</td>
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<td>CSF</td>
<td>Civil Service Forum</td>
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<td>CTJ</td>
<td>Citizens for Tax Justice</td>
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<td>CTLC</td>
<td>Central Trades and Labor Council (New York City)</td>
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<td>CWA</td>
<td>Communication Workers of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>DNC</td>
<td>Democratic National Committee</td>
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<td>DSOC</td>
<td>Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee</td>
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<td>EEA</td>
<td>Emergency Employment Act of 1971</td>
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<td>EFCB</td>
<td>Emergency Financial Control Board (New York)</td>
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<td>FAP</td>
<td>Family Assistance Plan</td>
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<td>GCEOC</td>
<td>Government and Civic Employees Organizing Committee</td>
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<td>HEW</td>
<td>Department of Health, Education, and Welfare</td>
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<td>HREU</td>
<td>Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union</td>
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<td>Laborers International Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEA</td>
<td>National Education Association</td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIT</td>
<td>Negative Income Tax</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRWC</td>
<td>National Right to Work Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTRC</td>
<td>National Tax Reform Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTU</td>
<td>National Taxpayers Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>OCAW</td>
<td>Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers International Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>PATCO</td>
<td>Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>PBA</td>
<td>Police Benevolent Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>PED</td>
<td>Public Employees Department (AFL-CIO)</td>
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<td>PERA</td>
<td>Public Employment Relations Act</td>
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<td>PSRC</td>
<td>Public Service Research Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>RWDSU</td>
<td>Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union</td>
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<td>SCMWA</td>
<td>State, County, and Municipal Workers of America</td>
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<td>SEIU</td>
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<td>Social Service Employees Union</td>
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<td>Tax Reduction Immediately (John Birch Society)</td>
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<td>TWU</td>
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<td>United Auto Workers</td>
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<td>UPWA</td>
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<td>WSEA</td>
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INTRODUCTION

“Revolution in Government”: Public Sector Unionism and the Reconstruction of Postwar American Politics

As he limped unsteadily to the stage lectern to address the national convention of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in June 1978, Jerry Wurf was uncharacteristically dour. Three decades after first entering the union as an organizer and fourteen years after first taking office as its national president, he had never been less confident about its future.

The convention met less than a month after California voters delivered a stinging rebuke to AFSCME’s vision of an expansive social service state with their overwhelming passage of Proposition 13. Ostensibly a simple property tax cut, the measure signaled a landmark shift in the politics of public services in American society, as Wurf explained to the chastened and concerned audience. Opportunists and ideologues found common interest in making public employees the manifestation of government’s problems, he warned. “The old conservatives insist they do not need us...the new liberals complain they can’t afford us...and demagogues of every stripe scratch for votes by calling for our scalps.” While not wholly new, Wurf cautioned, the California vote demonstrated the potential danger of the new fiscal politics. “Those people [in California] and others are suffering from the mistakes and poor judgment of our bosses. Their anger is directed as a faceless thing called ‘government’...but the suffering comes down on you, public workers, you who are on the firing line and are visible, easy targets.”

1 Keynote Address by Jerry Wurf to the 23rd International Convention of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, n.d. [1978], AFSCME: Office of the President, Jerry Wurf Collection, Box 157, Folder 57, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Jerry Wurf Collection].
For Wurf, the developments in California marked the culmination of a pair of interconnected trends two decades in the making. The explosive growth of public sector unions since the end of World War II, he had observed in 1970, posed nothing less than a revolutionary challenge to the ancient notion that the government employee was “servant to a master” rather than a “worker with a boss.” On that apparently simple premise, AFSCME surged to a leading position in the public sector labor movement during the 1960s and 1970s, winning wage and benefit gains for public workers, quadrupling its membership to more than one million nationwide, and altering the very operation of government, replacing unilateral authority and “collective begging” with bilateral negotiation and collective bargaining.

Controversial at first, the very concept of a union of government workers, by sheer force of militant reiteration and organized demand, had become so mainstream by the early 1970s that Wurf declared the revolution itself complete. “We have reached that peculiar stage of history for the public employees where we have to worry about whether the counterrevolution that always follows a revolution will help us or hurt us,” he warned a union audience in 1970, “whether it will deal with . . . or destroy our aspirations.” Coming a half-decade after the creation of the first organized opposition to public employee unionism and three years after the near-bankruptcy of New York City thrust the issue to the forefront of national politics, Proposition 13 seemed the capstone to the counterrevolution, a sharp illustration of the paradoxical consequences of organizational success.

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2 Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Jerry Wurf, International President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, for a Panel Before the Conference of National Organizations, Miami Beach, FL, 5 November 1970, Box 70, Folder 16, Jerry Wurf Collection

3 “Getting It Together,” Remarks of Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees to the Convention of the American Federation of Teachers, 17 August 1970, Box 70, Folder 18, Jerry Wurf Collection.
This dissertation explores the political consequences of public sector unionization in the United States since World War II. Largely unorganized as late as the 1950s, government employees constituted a majority of all union members by 2010. More than just a critical development in American labor history, this rapid advance is central to understanding two key developments in twentieth century political history: the crisis of postwar liberalism and the rise of popular conservatism.

Historians have long sought an explanation for the collapse of New Deal liberalism and the ascent of the New Right during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Most accounts turn on some version of a racial-social-cultural backlash thesis, focusing on the reaction of white working- and middle-class voters to the tumultuous 1960s. Particularly in near-contemporary and popularized forms, this literature tended to focus on the events surrounding the pivotal year 1968, when assassinations, anti-war activism, and racialized urban violence combined to “unravel” the New Deal coalition by driving white working-class voters from the party of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman and paving the way for the election of Richard Nixon and setting the country on a rightward bound course that led, more or less directly, to Ronald Reagan in 1980. The persistent success of conservative politics at the national level during the 1980s forced historians to reconsider the simple backlash narrative, often drawing attention to the limits of New Deal liberalism and long-term, structural weaknesses in the Democratic coalition.

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4 Two dramatic trends have defined the American labor movement in the postwar era: the precipitous decline of private sector union density from 35% in the mid-1950s to 7.2% in 2010 and the explosive growth of public sector union density from around 12% in the 1950s to 37.4% in 2007. In 2010, for the first time, more union members worked for federal, state, or local governments than private sector employers. Annual Report on Union Members for 2009, Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 22, 2010.


Though few accounts countered the core elements of the “backlash” narrative, they added layers of structure to give it historical and political context, stretching the chronological scope and adding causal strands. More recently, historians have shifted focus from the decline of New Deal liberalism to the intellectual, social, and organizational development of the New Right. The two decades since have seen a flourishing of scholarship on American conservatism, including a particularly pronounced and well-developed treatment of the impact of suburbanization in facilitating the construction of an ostensibly color-blind, free market homeowner identity central to the new conservative movement.

In each of its permutations, then, the history of postwar politics tends to link the emergence of conservatism to developments of the long 1960s. Yet the further one gets from the developments of the decade, the less effectively they seem to explain the broader transformations of the last quarter of the 20th century. For one thing, the sixties-centered narrative tends to encourage an exaggerated interpretation of liberalism’s decline. Democratic defeats in the 1968 and 1972 presidential elections seem less decisive in light of the relative moderation of the Nixon administration’s domestic agenda, the liberal resurgence in Congress after Watergate, and the election of centrist Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1976 over moderate Republican Gerald Ford.

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More importantly, the emphasis on racial, cultural, and social backlash inadequately explains the anti-statist, anti-government core of late-century popular conservatism.

This dissertation thus builds on a growing number of works that look to the 1970s as the “pivotal decade” in the postwar era. The decade witnessed social and cultural upheavals at least as significant as its more famous predecessor, but was really distinguished by its economic and political transformations, which were matched in scale only by those of the 1930s—the only other decade of the century, as Judith Stein has pointed out, in which the average American ended up poorer than they began. More than simply an era of significant events, Jefferson Cowie has noted, the 1970s were a time of “fundamental realignment,” when every segment and aspect of American society seemed poised to move in a new direction. Overarching economic transformations, some of which were only incompletely and incorrectly understood, intermixed with a paralyzed and increasingly dated brand of Keynesian liberalism that proved incapable of generating a coherent response to the three-headed monster of stagnant economic growth, rising unemployment, and rampant inflation. All the while, the political base of the Democratic Party, which had dominated national politics since the 1930s, shifted from urban centers to the more affluent suburbs, where post-economic issues (family life, the environment, foreign affairs, etc.) tended to dominate the political process. Taken together, the economic and political developments undermined the premises of New Deal liberalism and created the space for the success of a previously marginalized conservative movement.

By focusing on the implications of public sector unionization for contests over taxes and government services, this dissertation highlights the one of the important but understudied domestic developments of the 1970s, the connections between public sector and the decline of middle-class support for the state-centered agenda of traditional New Deal-Great Society liberalism. I argue that the growth of public sector unions transformed the relationship between citizens and their government by redefining both the payment of taxes and the consumption of government services—an intellectual shift critical to the success of conservatism in the last quarter of the twentieth century.13

A greater attention to the implications of public sector unionism on postwar politics clarifies three key sets of issues raised by recent scholarship: the political meaning of homeownership and taxes, the development of the institutional conservative movement and its relationship to popular conservatism, and the erosion of labor liberalism from the Democratic Party in the 1970s.

The emergence of taxes and homeownership as key political issues are each better understood, and their impact more precisely defined, if put in the context of broader conflicts over the costs and benefits of government services. While initially deployed narrowly as a tool to contest school integration and welfare services, the homeowner-parent identity took on a broader meaning and power during the course of the 1970s, a malleable idea onto which a whole range of grievances and concerns could be mapped. Taxes became a key mechanism for political conservatives precisely because it fused popular perceptions about the inefficiency of government workers and general skepticism toward “big government” with the material concerns

of middle-class families. These concerns became all the more pressing in the mid-1970s, as the decade’s economic crisis swelled working- and middle-class tax payments through “bracket creep” without boosting their take-home pay. Together, these two sets of developments made the pay and benefits of government employees an explosive and divisive political issue, particularly in the wake of New York City’s near bankruptcy in 1975, a symbolic (though highly misleading) demonstration of the dangers posed by public sector union success in securing benefit and pension packages.

These gains were necessary but insufficient to spur a taxpayer revolt against public sector workers. From the early 1970s, conservative activists worked to make public sector union power a central component of their critique of liberal governance. Initially the product of a relatively narrow base of anti-union activists, the anti-union sentiment filtered down and through the conservative movement in a series of phases over the ensuing decade. Soaring union membership and high-profile strikes spurred the creation of an organized opposition to public sector unionization in the mid-1970s, with the creation of the Public Service Research Council (1973), but the movement remained relatively small through 1975, when the urban fiscal crisis, particularly the near bankruptcy of New York City, popularized concerns about the long-term consequences of public sector union power and created a political landscape that encouraged elected officials to take stronger stands against union demands. Despite its visibility and growing membership rolls, though, the PSRC struggled to win any significant rollback of public sector

14 On the politicization of taxes, see Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991). On the importance of middle-class and affluent voters to the resurgence of political conservatism is the last quarter of the twentieth century, see Larry M. Bartels, Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008).

union power through 1978, when the anti-union, anti-worker rhetoric was picked up by anti-tax activists like Howard Jarvis, eager to find a way to broaden the base of appeal for their regressive tax cutting policies.¹⁶

Third and finally, a greater focus on public sector unionism illuminates and clarifies broader transformations in the ideological content of American liberalism. Here the project feeds into a maturing literature on what scholars have called “labor liberalism,” the center-left, social democratic tendency in American labor politics pushed by the United Auto Workers and a handful of other unions through the postwar era. In sharp contrast to the “bread and butter” material agenda pushed by the craft-dominated AFL-CIO, advocates of labor liberalism poured resources into campaigns for economic planning, a larger welfare state, and a more elaborate systems of personal and group rights. In the traditional narrative, this tendency fell victim to divisions over Vietnam around 1968 and, after a brief resurgence around the McGovern campaign in 1972, retreated to their own institutional concerns (labor law reform, trade agreements and foreign competition). More recently, scholars like Andrew Battista have shown that the “bifurcation” of the labor movement persisted well into the 1970s and 1980s, largely through non-party entities like the Citizens Energy Coalition, Progressive Alliance, and other coalitional groups.¹⁷

¹⁶ This dissertation, then, offers one way of resolving what Laura Kalman has recently identified as one of the key paradoxes of late twentieth century politics: the prevalence of a “taxes, no; big government, no; services, yes” attitude among American voters. Kalman, Right Star Rising, 232-248.
These groups are undoubtedly important, but too close a focus on the narrow successes of these organizational efforts can obscure broader weaknesses in labor liberalism. To a much greater degree than other national union leaders, Wurf continued to press an ambitious, social democratic vision of the welfare state within the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO well into the late 1970s. Building on both the union’s vested interests and his own personal commitment to a social democratic brand of reformist politics, Wurf worked tirelessly to build support for expanded federal aid to state and local governments, improved welfare and social services, and progressive tax reform, all while battling the encroachment of private sector alternatives to public social provision, from deinstitutionalization to contracting-out. Wurf and other left-leaning union leaders pushed the emerging New Politics wing to embrace economic issues at the Democratic Party’s critical 1974 midterm conference, only to find the meeting overwhelmed by persistent battles over issues of political representation. Similarly, AFSCME failed to win a greater engagement by the AFL-CIO with tax reform and other public sector issues, finding the union’s positions often subordinated to the interests of its private sector counterparts.

It was out of frustration with the inability to move the union’s broader agenda that AFSCME turned to Jimmy Carter in 1976, and after Carter proved an ineffective and disappointing ally, the same impulse drove the union’s commitment to the proliferating liberal-left coalitions later in the decade. In both cases, political activity sprang from disenchantment with traditional avenues, and while groups like Democratic Agenda and the Progressive Alliance provided energizing outlets, they were substantively ineffective at marshalling responses to the growing waive of anti-union, anti-worker, and anti-tax sentiments—testaments to the crisis, not the revival, of labor liberalism.
The failure of these efforts left AFSCME vulnerable in the late 1970s. Under pressure from the ascendant tax revolt and working within a political climate increasingly hostile to “government” itself, AFSCME was forced to abandon a significant portion of its agenda in order to defend the gains of the previous decade. As public polling registered declining support for government unionization for the first time since the late 1950s, public sector unions like AFSCME found themselves the targets of bipartisan political attacks. Though the union fared reasonably well at warding off the most severe attacks and maintaining its basic organizational security, it was rendered incapable of articulating the positive vision of government that had marked the unions’ politics just a half-decade earlier.

**Recovering the Public Worker**

Despite its significance for postwar history, the growth of public sector unionism is both understudied and poorly understood. Organized government employees have attracted far less attention from scholars than the shrinking unions of the industrial sector—resulting in what Joseph A. McCartin has recently characterized as “an astonishing misallocation of scholarly interest and energy” and a significantly distorted historiography on post-war American labor.\(^\text{18}\) To the extent that they appear at all in many accounts of postwar labor history, it is as an instrument that obscured the scale of the labor movement’s crisis by masking changes in overall rate of union density.\(^\text{19}\)


\(^{19}\) For a prominent example of this tendency, see Michel Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
Neither the recentness of the developments nor the extent to which public sector unions depart from the traditional declension narrative of postwar labor history offers a sufficient explanation for the relative lack of serious historical inquiry. Public employee unions are not as new as often suggested, and in fact, as Joseph Slater has pointed out, union density in the public sector tracked fairly closely with key parts of the private sector through the 1930s, falling in relative terms only after the passage of the Wagner Act and Depression-era boom in union membership.\textsuperscript{20} Certainly public employee unions are no more recent than farm worker unionism, which by comparison has a far more mature body of historical work. The challenge that public sector unions pose to the rise-and-fall narrative is more compelling as an explanation, but even here, doubts remain, since much historical work has been done complicating that arc, and since several groups who would seem fall outside of it (agricultural and service workers) have enjoyed fuller treatment than public employees.

To an important extent, both the marginal treatment afforded to public sector employees and the passive way in which they enter the consensus labor narrative are rooted in historians’ unwillingness to conceptualized government employees as “real” workers. At root, Joseph Slater has noted, much of the negligence of historians in dealing with government workers can be traced to the intransigence of a neo-Marxist conception of class that has bounded labor history to “the relationships and conflicts created by the capitalist mode of production.”\textsuperscript{21} Because public sector organization contested neither the distribution of profits nor the means of production, it has often been left out of labor history as something less than class conflict. Yet if the boundaries

\textsuperscript{20} Public sector union density held firm at around 10\% during much of the first half of the twentieth century; though the unions were smaller than many private sector organizations, parts of the public sector were as well organized as major industrial sectors like steel until the 1930s. Joseph E. Slater, \textit{Public Workers: Government Employee Unions, the Law, and the State, 1900-1962} (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2004), 2-4.

of class are defined less in Marxist categories and more on the basis of “the power and authority people have at work,” as Michael Zweig has suggested, then public sector workers seem just as worthy of treatment as any other.²² More importantly, greater attention to the ways in which organizations like AFSCME pioneered forms of “gray-collar unionism” makes the idea of a twenty-first century working class more comprehensible by breaking down an older blue-white collar dichotomy.²³

Treating public sector unionism as a serious part of labor history requires pushing beyond what two scholars have termed “the distinctive incentives and constraints” of government employment.²⁴ To date, much of the work that has been done on organized public employees has focused on their exceptional development, on what separates them from their private sector counterparts: Paul Johnston has suggested that the public and private sectors housed “two labor movements” following “contrary paths of change,” while Clyde Summers titled a recent article, “Public Sector Bargaining: A Different Animal.”²⁵ The differences between public and private sector landscapes, particularly the often determinative influence of public opinion in negotiations, are explored at length in this project, but an implicitly comparative approach runs the risk of reducing public sector labor history to an instrument for tweaking arguments and narratives derived from the private sector. It also tends to distort as much as clarify the emergence of public sector unionization, ignoring the extent to which government employees

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organized for the same reasons that their private sector counterparts did—to address traditional bread-and-butter concerns (wages, hours, and working conditions) and to secure a modicum of democracy at the workplace.

This dissertation builds on an important recent wave of work that subjects government employee organization to the central questions of labor history: the social construction of unions, organizing drives, the relationship between workers and labor leaders, and between unions and the rest of the labor movement. Prior to 1990 or so, histories of public sector unions were few, and were generally limited to localized studies of a single union. The last decade of the twentieth century saw a small flowering of books on public sector unionism, including Marjorie Murphy’s *Blackboard Unions.* Paul Johnston’s *Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace* (1994) was one of the first works to argue explicitly for moving beyond institutional and comparative approaches to public sector labor history and focusing instead on what he termed the “public sectors’ movements themselves.” More recently, “new institutionalist” labor historians like Joseph Slater, Joseph A. McCartin, and Francis Ryan have sought to push the literature beyond particular occupational groups and pose broader historical questions about public sector unionism, highlighting the importance of “bringing the state’s workers in” to mainstream historiography.

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26 Because New York City’s fiscal crisis drew substantial public and scholarly attention to municipal unions, it was particularly popular as a case study. For perhaps the best example, see Jewel and Bernard Bellush, *Union Power and New York: Victor Gotbaum and District Council 37* (New York: Praeger, 1984).
28 Johnston, *Success While Others Fail*, 4. Johnston’s interest was as much in service sector-oriented organizations with public sector memberships (like the Service Employees International Union) as with purely public sector unions. The book was written as a call-to-arms for the contemporary labor movement, but its attempt to inject a social component into the history of public sector unionism has been influential in subsequent scholarship.
Three questions broadly frame this recent literature on public sector labor. First, what explains the sudden growth of public sector unionism in and after the 1960s? Second, what was the role of law in spurring and shaping government employee unionization? Third, to what extent did differences in the employer-employee relationship affect the form and functions of public sector organization?

The first questions are interdependent, because both contemporary commentators and scholars have long linked the explosion of public sector union membership in the 1960s to changes in local, state, and federal law. As Slater has shown, both organization and collective bargaining lagged in the public sector after the disastrous Boston police strike of 1919 in part because a hostile judiciary consistently ruled that traditional labor relations models were unfit for government workers.\textsuperscript{30} Judicial hostility waned after World War II, creating the legal space for cities like Philadelphia and New York (and, later, the state of Wisconsin) to establish labor relations systems that included some limited form of union recognition during the 1950s, which in turn provided crucial precedents for John F. Kennedy’s Executive Order 10988 (1962), long credited with spurring legalization and organizing in the public sector. Because these legal changes coincided with union growth, contemporaries tended to impart a causal relationship. In 1970, Derek Bok and John T. Dunlop argued that the growth of government unions stemmed


\textsuperscript{30} The persistence of legal obstacles to public sector unionism stemmed from two key doctrines related to state structure: first, judges believed that legislatures had delegated control over public employment to local governments and that the courts ought not interfere in those decisions by intervening in the employment relationship (deference); second, the courts also found that the state could not legitimately surrender even partial authority to unelected private actors (delegation). The strict prohibition on the delegation of state power to private actors persisted in the public sector long after it was generally disposed of in the Supreme Court’s decision in \textit{Schechter}. Moreover, the courts refused to accept a definition of union as anything other than a vehicle for bargaining and striking, both of which were illegitimate when the state was the employer. Using each of these legal rationales, Slater showed, the courts arrived at a remarkably consistent position: “given the type of organization they perceived unions to be, courts would at minimum not interfere with the decisions of government officials to avoid dealing with them” and at maximum would prevent public workers from gaining institutional rights through enabling legislation. Slater, \textit{Public Workers}, 75-86.
from “a new set of favorable [legal] circumstances” rather than changes in tactics, resources, or leadership by the labor movement, a view echoed in the mid-1980s by Richard Freeman.\(^{31}\)

Though particularly popular at the height of the 1970s fiscal crisis, this view has persisted into more recent scholarship, and historians generally continue to insist on the importance of the “relatively neutral” organizing environment in explaining public sector success.\(^{32}\)

While the emphasis on the importance of legal differences is critical to understanding key aspects of public sector labor history, it also raises as many questions as it answers. Four key problems seem raised and insufficiently addressed by the law-as-causal framework. First, it offers little explanation for the timing of the appearance of beneficial laws; if the laws created the unions, then what political forces lay behind legalization? Second, it implies a sequence of events not born out by history, since, more often than not, extra-legal workplace organization preceded legalized collective bargaining. Third, it underplays the limits and exaggerates the


effects of legalization, which generally recognized a much narrower set of workplace rights than in the private sector, rights that Wurf and other early public sector union leaders often found meaningless without persistent, militant action. Fourth, and most importantly, it forces both the public worker and the union activist into reactive roles, marginalizing them in their own labor struggle while giving primacy to the motives of elected officials, obscuring the extent to which public sector activists had to mobilize, demonstrate, lobby, politick, and sometimes strike to secure modest concessions from elected officials reluctant to share even a modicum of power at the workplace.33

Similarly, the spillover effect from the “rights” movements of the 1960s offers only a partial and insufficient explanation for the emergence of public sector unionism.34 While the activist spirit of the 1960s undeniably shaped the character of public sector unionism, it was not so much a cause of early public sector union growth as it was an accelerant of trends already underway. The real importance of the social movements was in the way they animated grievances around which the nascent public sector unions were already organizing, underscoring and legitimizing calls for dignity and empowerment at the workplace.

33 Joshua Freeman has show how the workers of New York City’s transit system struggled for decades to win recognition from the city, even after the subway system was brought under full public ownership. Joshua B. Freeman, In Transit: The Transportation Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). As Joseph Slater has shown, the expansion of legal bargaining rights for public employees was the product of the “political agitation” of the public sector unions, not simply the political calculation of government officials: “It was the agency of workers themselves, matched with new political and social circumstances, that made the legal and organizational successes possible.” Slater, Public Workers, 195.

34 Bok and Dunlop, Labor and the American Community; Aronowitz, From the Ashes of the Old: American Labor and America’s Future (New York: Basic Books, 1998). For one thing, as Joshua Freeman and Francis Ryan have shown, the origins of the public sector labor movement in cities like New York and Philadelphia lay in the 1930s, and many of the leading early figures had at best tangential interests in building a movement that spoke to concerns beyond the workplace. Freeman, In Transit; Ryan, AFSCME’s Philadelphia Story. Too rosy a depiction of the public sector union-civil rights alliance also risks ignoring those instances when the two movements came into conflict, such as the 1968 teachers’ strike in New York City, when civil rights reformers’ demands for community control over schools ran square against union insistence on due process for its members. Jerald E. Podair, The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Richard D. Kahlenberg, Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battle of Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
This dissertation suggests that the growth of public sector unionism was rooted in an explosion of workplace militancy that stemmed from the collapse of older distinctions between public and private employment. The emergence of the public sector union movement coincided with a key historical moment, when extensive unionization and the postwar boom pulled millions of private-sector workers into the American middle-class, eroding the traditional benefit and status advantages of government work. This relative grievance was critical in the construction of public sector unionism in the postwar era, the basis for Wurf’s frequent invocation of the “dignity” of the public worker, the refusal to accept “collective begging” rather than collective bargaining, and the regular insistence that public workers deserved nothing less than “parity with their peers.”

It was a compelling argument, one that managed to unite an occupationally and demographically diverse collection of state and local government workers that ranged from high-paid administrators and engineers to low-wage street sweepers and janitors; from social workers and clerical staff to highway construction crews and sanitation men. But it also contained the seeds of its own crisis. By modeling the emerging public sector labor movement on its private sector counterpart, Wurf and other early architects unknowingly tied themselves to a pattern of labor relations that would come under sustained attack at just the moment that public sector unions began to break through, the 1970s. More importantly, the entire experiment was premised on a set of assumptions about the American economy—that prosperity was a more or less permanent condition; that the key question was how to divide an expanding economic pie; that private sector workers would continue their own steady rise toward middle-class comfort—that were overturned by the crisis of the mid-1970s, when stagnating real incomes, soaring inflation,
and rising unemployment all combined to squeeze middle-class taxpayers and turn them on the organized public worker.

The Biographical Tradition in American Labor History

This dissertation explores the causes and consequences of public sector union growth through the career of Jerry Wurf, organizer, local leader, and eventually national union president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.\(^{35}\) Such a biographical approach has a long tradition in American labor historiography. As Nick Salvatore has noted, biography “creates the possibility of a broader understanding of the interplay between an individual and social forces beyond one’s control.”\(^{36}\) Done properly, it allows the author to combine the advantages of institutional and social history, bridging the chasm between Old and New Labor History and highlighting the multiple and sometimes conflicting roles of the union leader.\(^{37}\)

Wurf’s particular value as a biographical subject is two-fold: first, his union leadership runs parallel to the emergence of AFSCME as a significant force within the labor movement and illuminates that rise from both local and national perspectives; second, his career as an active

\(^{35}\) To the extent the two can be separated, the emphasis of this project is less on the question of “who he was” than “what he did,” to employ David Stebenne’s methodology; the personal life is subordinate to the professional, the private to the public. Stebenne, \textit{Arthur J. Goldberg: New Deal Liberal} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), vii.


participant within the left-wing of the Democratic Party spanned the postwar era, from the late 1940s through Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980.

Wurf was perhaps the most important figure in the rise of public sector unionism in the postwar era. Like John L. Lewis and the industrial union movement of the 1930s, Wurf neither created the movement nor caused the surge in public sector militancy. He was as much a creature as creator of the “the new world of trade unionism,” his influence relied on the individual and collective actions of millions of rank-and-file workers and local activists, and his successes (and failures) owed as much to broader, uncontrollable elements of the political and social landscape as they did to his own decisions and actions. Wurf personified the new public sector labor militancy. He was the public face of the new labor movement, profiled by major newspapers and magazines, frequent guest on Sunday morning news shows, vocal counselor and critic to mayors, governors, and presidents, and de facto voice of public employees within the AFL-CIO. Wurf pioneered a vision of unionism that blended militant rhetoric and direct action and stressed the primacy of the collective bargaining agreement as a mechanism to lift the pay, benefits, and status of public workers.

Wurf’s wider political activism within the left wing of American politics offers a window into the evolution of liberalism in the postwar era. The social democratic perspective cultivated in his youth melded naturally with the institutional imperatives of the public sector labor movement to produce a politics that favored an expansive vision of the state. Between 1972 and

38 Despite his importance, Wurf has yet to be subject to an academic biography. The most significant work to date remains Joseph Goulden’s 1982 book, which was largely drawn from contemporary interviews (since deposited at Wayne State University’s Walter P. Reuther Library) and secondary sources. This project represents an effort to build on Goulden’s work by putting both public sector unionism and Wurf into a broader historical perspective. Joseph Goulden, Jerry Wurf: Labor’s Last Angry Man (New York: Atheneum, 1982).

39 Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, “John L. Lewis and the Triumph of Mass-Production Unionism,” in Labor Leaders in America, Dubofsky and Van Tine, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 186. Wurf was never so well known as Lewis, nor did the public sector labor movement penetrate the core of American culture the way that the CIO did; on the other hand, the influence of Wurf and AFSCME on American politics has perhaps been deeper and longer-felt.
1976, Wurf played a key role within the Democratic Party, first as a leader of the pro-George McGovern faction of the labor movement, then as a sympathetic critic of the New Politics segment of the Democratic Party, and eventually as a key early supporter of Jimmy Carter’s presidential campaign. Yet for all the union’s institutional success, and despite Wurf’s growing national profile, he consistently proved unable to alter the Democratic Party’s drift toward a “new” liberalism—with its attendant skepticism toward expansive government initiatives and easy praise of the private sector.

His outspokenness and his union’s success drew the ire of conservative critics, and, by the mid-1970s, Wurf was a key bête noire of the emerging anti-public sector union Right. Wurf’s brash, outspoken defense of public sector militancy provided nascent groups like the PSRC with useful material for their fund-raising appeals, but the concern ran deeper than the threat posed by public sector strikes. Opposition to public sector unionization also was also rooted in the fear that organized public workers were the most effective advocates for expanded government services; that through a combination of political action and collective bargaining, unions would inflate public payrolls and suffocate the free enterprise system with ever-proliferating bureaucracy. Though the PSRC and other similar groups made only a modest imprint on national politics through the mid-1970s, they pioneered critiques of the public sector labor movement that became central to the success of anti-tax activists like Howard Jarvis after 1978.

Wurf’s public life serves as the narrative framework for this dissertation. Each of the nine chapters covers a period in Wurf’s life that paralleled a key development in the history of public sector unionism. The first chapter examines Wurf’s early life and activism. Born in 1919 to what he later remembered as a “distinctly middle-class” family, Wurf was nonetheless deeply affected by the radical-Jewish milieu of Depression-era Brighton Beach, where he first became active in
the Young People’s Socialist League (YPSL) and Socialist Party, contacts that led to his first job in the labor movement, as an organizer for the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union, in the early 1940s. Organizing cafeteria workers broke Wurf from the relative comfort of his youth and college years, and while only marginally successfully, won him the attention of an associate of AFSCME President Arnold Zander, who hired Wurf as an organizer in 1947.

Chapters two and three explore Wurf’s leadership of AFSCME’s District Council 37 as it developed into the leading public employee union in New York City during the 1950s and early 1960s. Wurf entered the public sector labor movement at a critical juncture. The relative success of unionized private sector workers in the booming postwar economy brought into relief the shortcomings of the labor relations systems prevailing in the public sector. Riddled by internal divisions, lacking financial resources or a natural organizing base, and marginalized within a city labor movement that showed only passing interest in the plight of city workers, AFSCME initially seemed an unlikely agent for a revolution in public sector labor relations. Initially eschewing the much large white-collar clerical sector, Wurf rebuilt District Council 37 during the early 1950s by focusing on the organization of blue-collar workers, who seemed particularly drawn to Wurf’s militant rhetoric and tactics and his vision of an “industrial union” for government workers. Overcoming the general indifference (and, at times, outright opposition) of the city’s private-sector labor movement, AFSCME made substantial gains among general city workers, particularly in the Parks Department, and played a key role in forcing the reluctant Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr. to implement one of the country’s first formal collective bargaining systems for government employees. Creatively blending public demonstrations and back room politicking with on-the-ground organizing and direct action at the workplace, District Council 37 swelled from a few hundred members in the late 1940s to more than 20,000 by the early 1960s.
Chapter four focuses on Wurf’s campaign for the union’s national presidency between 1960 and 1964, casting the contest as a proxy battle between competing visions for the nascent public sector union movement. The growth of District Council 37 departed markedly from AFSCME’s genteel brand of civil service unionism and its traditional base in rural, white-collar, and administrative sectors. Between 1961 and 1964, Wurf and his caucus, the Committee on Union Responsibility (COUR), evolved from reformist bloc to outright opposition, blending demands for a more confrontational and militant model of public sector unionism with indictments of the administration’s handling of internal union democracy. Cobbling together a geographically and politically diverse slate of supporters, Wurf managed to successfully unseat Zander in 1964, a rare feat in national union elections in the postwar era.

Chapter five traces the evolution Wurf’s vision of public sector unionism as he sought to apply it on a national scale. The transition was difficult. Despite widespread skepticism toward public sector unions, the presence of a well-established labor movement and deeply-engrained liberal tradition made New York City a suitable landscape for Wurf’s blend of militant rhetoric and pressure politics. The three pillars of Wurf’s vision of public sector unionism—a proletarian appeal to government employees as workers, a willingness to engage in direct action (including strikes) to secure recognition and benefits, and a preference for collective bargaining over legislative lobbying as the best means to address workplace concerns—proved less transferable to other parts of the country, despite the explosion of public sector militancy nationwide. It was in the late 1960s that AFSCME first emerged as a force within the national labor movement, a status tragically accelerated in 1968, when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated while supporting a union strike in Memphis. A turning point for Wurf personally and AFSCME as an institution, the Memphis strike thrust AFSCME into the national spotlight, challenging what had
previously been a relatively narrow- and inward-looking institution to direct its resources and energies toward broader social and political concerns.

Chapter six explores Wurf’s early activism as a national labor leader. Despite some considerable setbacks, Wurf emerged as the leading national spokesman for public employees by the late 1960s, when he was named to the AFL-CIO’s Executive Council. Wurf used his position to push for a fundamental realignment in the labor movement that would have increased the influence of the growing public and service-sector organizations, presenting radical proposals to restructure the labor movement through mergers and calling on the AFL-CIO to reach out to non-affiliated organization like the National Education Association. Following Walter Reuther’s death in 1970, Wurf emerged as the chief dissident and foremost advocate of labor liberal politics within the AFL-CIO. With its basic institutional status secure, Wurf pressed for a broader deployment of AFSCME’s resources, particularly in those policy areas where AFSCME’s institutional concerns overlapped with a broader social democratic impulse: welfare, healthcare, and social services. Neither the institutional reforms nor the expansive vision of labor politics won much support within the AFL-CIO, forcing AFSCME to devote a greater and greater share of its energies to alliances and organizations outside the House of Labor.

Chapter seven treats the implications of this isolation in the context of the Democratic Party’s crisis during the early 1970s. The period between 1972 and 1974 marked, in some respects, the height of AFSCME’s postwar power and influence. After the AFL-CIO declined to back Democratic nominee George McGovern in 1972, AFSCME played a key role in organizing union support. Following Nixon’s landslide victory over McGovern in the 1972 presidential election, Wurf sought to use this newfound position of influence to press for a grand bargain that would address both the party’s processes and representational issues and provide an expansive,
substantive policy agenda to address mounting concerns over taxes, public services, and urban
development. Finding few allies among either reformers or regulars, AFSCME’s grander
ambitions went unfulfilled, particularly at the Democratic Party’s 1974 midterm conference.
These failures left AFSCME and other public sector unions vulnerable with the onset of the
urban fiscal crisis the following year, a crisis that was punctuated by the near-bankruptcy of New
York City in 1975. The two developments left many in the union disenchanted with the course of
the mainstream Democratic Party, which explains, perhaps, why Wurf and others were willing to

The decision to back Carter was a mark of desperation, understandable only in the
context of the growing influence of a coherent anti-public-sector union movement, which is
examined in chapter eight. The earliest organized opposition to public sector unions dated from
1973, but it was not until after the New York City fiscal crisis that groups like the PSRC began
to gain credibility in the press, and it was not until they managed to link their critique of public
sector union power with concerns over tax issues that they gained a wider popular audience.
Once so fused, though, the anti-tax, anti-union appeal posed a major threat to AFSCME, not
simply because it emboldened public officials to take a harder line in negotiations, but also
because it threatened the union’s broader political agenda. Initially dismissive of anti-union
groups, AFSCME struggled to respond to the reformulated critique, in part because Wurf and
others in AFSCME continued to assume that middle-class taxpayers would never risk valued
public services by cutting revenues. The union’s early response to the tax revolt centered on a
multi-million dollar advertising campaign designed to established AFSCME as “The Union That
Works For You”—designed to defend public workers by defending the services they performed.
It was only after the success of Proposition 13 that AFSCME adopted a more elaborate response
to anti-tax politics, one that sought to preempt draconian tax cuts by substituting progressively-structured alternatives. The campaign successfully insulated most of the union’s membership from the worst onslaught, but did little to effectively challenge the core message of conservative critics.

The final chapter considers the relationship between the defensive posture that AFSCME was forced to embrace in the late 1970s and broader changes in liberal politics. As an early supporter of the Carter campaign, Wurf expected substantial influence on the administration. The union was particularly keen to win larger federal subsidies for state and local government to ward off the sharp cuts of austerity politics. As late as 1979, Wurf remained committed to Carter, and he was one of a handful of labor leaders brought to Camp David in July 1979 in an effort to get the administration back on course. When Carter’s fiscal conservatism became an insurmountable obstacle to AFSCME’s agenda, the union reluctantly threw its support behind the challenge of Senator Edward Kennedy, who ultimately proved disappointingly incapable of effectively updating traditional Democratic ideas. While AFSCME fell unenthusiastically in line behind the incumbent in the 1980 presidential election, the entire cycle served to underscore the limits of labor liberalism in the late 1970s.

A brief epilogue considers the final year of Wurf’s life, from Reagan’s election in November 1980 through the AFL-CIO’s Solidarity Day in 1981, ending with Wurf’s death in December of the same year. Consumed by reflection about the state and future of the labor liberalism Wurf had done much to craft over the preceding two decades, the year was unexpectedly punctuated by the disastrous failure of a strike by the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). Signaling a landmark shift in American labor relations, the PATCO debacle ironically brought Wurf’s original vision full circle; thereafter, developments in
the private sector tended to follow those of the public sector, as more and more employers followed Reagan’s politically popular hard-line stance against strikes. Already under pressure from the Tax Revolt, the destruction of PATCO chastened public sector unions like AFSCME, forcing them to further rein in their broader political ambitions as they retreated to defend the modest gains of the preceding two decades.
Part I: Rise, 1919-1964
CHAPTER ONE

“A Professional Agitator Without a Cause”:

Early Life and Activism in New York City, 1919-1947

Looking back at his own early life, Irving Kristol once likened youthful radicalism to young love: “The girl may turn out to be rotten,” he wrote, “but the experience of love is so valuable it can never be entirely undone by the ultimate disenchantment.”

So it was for Jerry Wurf. When he died in 1981, he had spent the better part of four decades in the American labor movement—more than half his life. But in his early years, a different movement commanded his energy, the American socialist movement. In fact, the two phases were inextricably linked. Born into the lower reaches of the urban middle class, Wurf came to the labor movement through his activism in the Young People’s Socialist League (YPSL) and the American Socialist Party. Raised just above the social devastation of the decade, Wurf’s experience of the Depression was as much intellectual and psychological as it was social or economic. Stricken by polio at a young age, he became a prodigious reader, a habit that hastened his break from the relatively conservative worldview of his parents. Sporadically associated with the political left through his teenage years, Wurf became more involved in YPSL after entering New York University in 1936. More attentive to activism than academics, he relished the factional in-fighting and political debate that pervaded college life during the late 1930s, but found greater satisfaction in organizational activities, in collecting signatures for Norman Thomas's presidential campaigns, mimeographing party leaflets, and working briefly in the Socialist Party's Brooklyn office.

Never as fervent or reliable an ideologue as many of his contemporaries, Wurf left the party within a decade, but the experience was both crucial and long lasting. Though Wurf later abandoned the ideological commitments of his youth, the socialist movement played an essential role in both cultivating the social democratic principles that would shape his future politics and providing the practical skills and personal connections pivotal to his success as a union leader.

“Beginnings”

In many respects, Wurf was an unlikely leftist—he would later admit that he “certainly didn’t have proletarian beginnings.”2 Jerome Wurf—Jerry from the start—was born on May 18, 1919 in Manhattan, the elder of two sons in what he described an “upper blue collar-lower middle class” immigrant family.3 His father, Sigmund, came from a successful Austro-German Jewish family, emigrating from Vienna around the age of thirty with enough money and expertise to establish himself as a small-time textile jobber. Tall and gray with a carefully manicured mustache and goatee, Sigmund was aloof and autocratic at home—at least according to Al Wurf, Jerry’s younger brother. Modestly successful at first, Sigmund eventually acquired small investments in nearby Paterson, New Jersey during the 1920s, though, like many middlemen of the era, his fortunes were at best inconsistent. At times, the family was quite well off—the brothers later recalled the feel and smell of the fine leather seats of an early-model La Salle, second only to the Cadillac in terms of luxury automobiles of the era, and Sigmund later financed the passage of his three elder brothers to the United States. But he was demoralized, if

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not wholly ruined, by the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the Depression that followed. He attempted suicide at least once, only to be discovered by Al in a bathroom of the family’s home. When he died in 1930 or 1931, ostensibly from a bout with pneumonia, their mother quickly disposed of his photographs and discouraged any discussion of him, leading the sons to harbor doubts about the true cause of death.\footnote{On Sigmund Wurf, see Joseph C. Goulden, \textit{Jerry Wurf, Labor’s Last Angry Man} (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 5-6; Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; Typed Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.}

Wurf’s mother came from less established roots. Born around 1895, Lena Tannenbaum came to the United States in steerage from a small town in the Polish-speaking region of Galicia, part of a mass emigration from the northern-most province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Short, dark, and not particularly attractive, Lena found work as a dressmaker, and met her future husband while employed in one of his businesses. Born into a strict Jewish family—her mother wore a \textit{sheitel} until her death and required strict adherence to kosher dietary rules—Tannenbaum fulfilled the requirements of her faith less than consistently during Jerry’s childhood, and infrequently as she grew older. She forced Wurf to endure what he dismissed as “a phony Bar Mitzvah”—the only evidence of Jewish faith in Wurf’s early life is a single photograph from the event. In retrospect, Wurf eschewed any ethnic or religious identification—“I believed in the universality of man, that cleavages and ethnic prejudices were wrong”—and though his extended family suffered badly during the Holocaust, the event does not appear to have rekindled any particular Jewish identification.\footnote{Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, n.d., Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers. Despite Wurf’s personal decision to distance himself from both Judaism as a religion and Jewishness as an ethnic-immigrant identity, he still resided within an overwhelming Jewish social and political milieu. Irving Howe’s recollection that “The Jewish community was an enclosed one, not through choice as much as through experience and instinct, and often not very gently or with the most refined manners. What you believed, or said you believed, did not matter nearly as much as what you were, and what you were was not nearly so much a matter of choice as you might care to suppose. If you found a job, it was likely to be in a ‘Jewish industry’ and if you went to college it was still within}
Tannenbaum’s own drift from the Jewish faith appears part of a broader process of self-conscious Americanization. Illiterate when she arrived in New York City, Tannenbaum eventually managed not just to learn English, but also to eliminate any trace of her native accent. After several years of living modestly off Sigmund’s life insurance policy, Lena married Samuel Baron, an attractive, educated, and American-born businessman who further nurtured what Wurf called his mother’s “distinctly middle-class thinking.” Lena was at times both unpleasant and domineering, and until her death in 1971, she resented the career choices of her two sons. On one occasion, Jerry and Al were startled to discover their mother watching them on a union picket line; when they confronted her, she explained that she was fascinated to learn what “Bolsheviks” did in their free time. “She was most uncomfortable with the fact that I became a labor organizer,” an uncharacteristically understated Wurf later recalled. “She would have preferred my becoming a doctor or lawyer, or at least an accountant.”

Lacking, as he later put it dryly, “the socialist influences at home that many of my contemporaries had,” Wurf’s political identity was the product of an odd coincidence of time, place, and personal circumstance—particularly, his contraction of polio. Jerry developed the disease around age four, and he was confined to a wheelchair for much of the decade that followed. On the insistence of Wurf’s mother, the family eschewed the usual leather and metal braces for a riskier surgical course, and the boy endured three or four unsuccessful operations by

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6 On Lena Tannenbaum Wurf, see Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; and Typed Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
7 “Once They Join This Damn Union, We Protect Their Rights,” 109.
8 Typed Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
9 “Once They Join This Damn Union, We Protect Their Rights,” 109.
his mid-teens. The surgeries left Wurf with a shortened leg, maimed foot and a pronounced, painful limp, none of them cured by the thick, customized shoe that the doctors eventually prescribed.  

This illness was the central development of Wurf’s youth. The “sick one” growing up, Jerry “became an adult . . . because he never had a childhood,” as Al later put it. “To understand Jerry Wurf,” future staffer and civil rights leader James Farmer later wrote, “one had to know what it was like to be an undersize[d], polio-crippled Jewish boy growing up on the Lower East Side, fighting to survive.” Biographer Joseph Goulden later noted that despite ample reason for personal misanthropy, Wurf not only accepted his condition, but arguably became more fiercely competitive and determined because of it.

Confined to a wheelchair, Jerry was unable to participate in the range of normal leisure activities available to city children. Instead, he spent much of his youth reading, dispatching his mother on sometimes-daily trips to the public library. Stowing the books in a conveniently placed pocket at the side of his wheelchair, Wurf spent many warm afternoons parked along the Brighton Beach boardwalk, occasionally glancing out at the Atlantic Ocean to momentarily disrupt his hunched study of the day’s selection in politics or economics.

The books offered an anchor for Wurf in an otherwise unstable childhood. Like many families of the era, the Wurfs moved frequently, seizing on a concession system that offered a

12 Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 7.
free month’s rent upon signing a new one-year lease.\textsuperscript{14} Until his mid-forties, Wurf assumed that he had been born in the Bronx; it was only when the City Department of Health mailed him a replacement birth certificate that he learned that he had actually been born in a Manhattan hospital.\textsuperscript{15} Though his parents listed an apartment on Avenue St. John in the Bronx as the family’s residence at the time of his birth, both Jerry and Al remembered growing up along Jerome Avenue. Though Jerry received much of his primary education at P.S. 100 in the Bronx, the family settled in Brooklyn’s Brighton Beach neighborhood sometime before Wurf began his secondary education at James Madison High School. By the time he graduated in 1936, his family had moved out of the city entirely, to Floral Park, a small town in Nassau County.\textsuperscript{16}

Of all the places Wurf lived during his childhood, Brighton Beach left the strongest impression. Upwardly mobile and disproportionately Jewish, Brighton Beach lay between the deep-fried foods and iridescent attractions of Coney Island and the yachts and gardens of Manhattan Beach. Social critic Milton Klonsky, who lived there around the same time as Wurf, once likened the neighborhood to “the middle-class axis of [a] seesaw, sometimes tipping its families up and sometimes down.”\textsuperscript{17} It was a likely stopping place for the Wurf family, the terminal point on a migratory path that took New York’s Jewish families from Staten Island to Brooklyn by way of the Lower East Side or the Bronx.\textsuperscript{18} Though the incomes of its residents lagged behind the plusher neighborhoods of Flatbush and Washington Heights, Brighton Beach

\textsuperscript{14} Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
\textsuperscript{15} Letter from Lester J. Rosner, Administrative Assistant Commissioner, New York City Department of Health, to Jerry Wurf, 8 September 1965, Box 7, Folder 4, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
\textsuperscript{16} Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers
\textsuperscript{17} Milton Klonsky, “The Trojans of Brighton Beach: Life on the Old Block,” \textit{Commentary} 3 (May, 1947), 462.
was a considerable step above the old immigrant neighborhoods of Manhattan and the East Bronx.  

It was this marginal comfort that gave the Depression its particular effect on the neighborhood. Howe, whose childhood in the East Bronx was marked by significantly more poverty than Wurf ever recalled, noted that his family was “never really hungry, but almost always anxious,” while Klonsky remembered a palpable anxiety pervading a neighborhood where everyone scrambled “to keep his place on the balance.” As Beth Wenger and others have shown, the city’s Jews, particularly those outside the Lower East Side tenements, fared better than most New Yorkers because of their concentration in white-collar and professional jobs, which were less susceptible to changes in the broader economy. Most saw their status diminish considerably during the Depression—and they could not help but note the Hoovervilles, panhandlers, and other tangible signs of poverty all around them—but few truly wanted for basic necessities like food and housing. Though Al later remembered stealing fruit for food and furniture for heat, and though there were at least a few periods when family meals consisted of pumpernickel bread and sweet butter, the family’s status recovered well enough by 1936 that Wurf could attend NYU, which, unlike City College, charged tuition.  

The effect was to make the psychological impact of the Depression more acute: the gap between the success of the past and the uncertainty of the future combined with basic material security to provide both opportunity and incentive to critique the system of industrial capitalism.

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21 By 1930, more than half of the city’s Jewish population worked in white collar jobs, and the number was rising. In 1935, a NY Welfare Council survey found that 47% of families were white-collar, and only 3% of heads of households worked as laborers (compared to 18% for non-Jews). Trends were more dramatic for second generation Jews: one-third of the city’s workforce, they represented 56% of the city’s proprietors and managers. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 15-17.
Because of its unique position in the socio-economic structure of the city, these patterns of social and political thought had a particularly strong impact on parts of New York’s Jewish community. That community was, in turn, particularly receptive to the critique, pre-programmed, it seemed, to “indulge one’s cranks, eccentrics, idealists, and extremists” and extend a “protective aura” to left-wing movements, making New York the “party center” for radical movements even while disguising “how small and futile we really were,” as Howe later recalled.23

Political Activist in Depression-era New York City

“The neighborhood where I grew up . . . nurtured plenty of leftist movements,” Wurf recalled of Brighton Beach. “I suspect there were as many voters there for the Communist Party or one of its fronts [as] for the Democratic or Republican parties.”24

Wurf’s interest in the political left began in high school. A middling, disinterested student by his own admission, he later became quite proud of having once failed an English class because of his shortcomings as a public speaker.25 He showed little enthusiasm for organized extracurricular activities—though he listed “making radios and taking photographs” as his hobbies in his high school yearbook and claimed regular participation in the Stamp Club.26

Most of his energy was spent outside of traditional school activities. One year, he and a handful of “rather scrawny, introverted” boys, inspired by the Nye Committee’s investigations of

23 Howe credited both a general communal commitment to “tolerance and permissiveness” and the historic connection between the city’s Jewish community and its garment workers’ unions as driving forces in shaping the political landscape. Howe, Steady Work, 351-352. This framework departs somewhat from the classic explanation of Jewish predisposition to social democratic thought offered by D. D. Moore, which emphasized the intersection of a religiously infused value set at home and an internationalist outlook abroad. Moore, At Home in America, 203-230. Henry Feingold drew on a similar framework in casting Jewish radicalism as a reaction to the nativism of the 1920s. Feingold, A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920-1945 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 193. Both explanations have merit, but neither adequately accounts for the impact of the Depression nor explains how Jews like Wurf, with no identifiable religious identification arrived, at the same political positions.

24 “Once They Join This Damn Union, We Protect Their Rights,” 109.


26 The Totem: Sewanhaka High School Yearbook, 1936, Box 7, Folder 1, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
the wartime munitions industry, organized a “Peace Day” rally to coincide with the anniversary of the American entrance into World War I—much to the chagrin of the hyper-patriotic members of the football team, who took exception to the demonstration, prompting a standoff that earned Wurf a trip to the principal’s office and a stern rebuke from his embarrassed mother. It was, he later boasted, his “first step as a militant activist.”

He experimented with Brighton Beach Marxist clubs while at James Madison, but never found himself quite as drawn to the intricacies of doctrine as his colleagues—he later recalled the hours spent in “silly” and “muddled” study of Russian history and German social theory. His strongest memories from his high school years were the days spent with his friends at Columbus Circle seeking out fascists or communists for soapbox debates.

It was through those experiences that Wurf eventually found his way into YPSL. First founded in 1907 as a means to bring together disparate young socialists in Chicago, YPSL later merged with New York City’s Young People’s Socialist Federation (YPSF) to create the national organization. Each blended educational and social goals. The purpose of YPSF, organizer and activist Louis Weitz wrote in 1911, was to “erase the false teachings of both our public and private institutions of learning” and satisfy the desire of “Socialist youths and maidens” for “sociability with their own kind.”

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Party in 1913, and benefited from the growth of the national movement during the 1910s, reaching 100 chapters and 10,000 members by 1917. Like many leftist organizations, YPSL suffered during World War I, and it fractured in 1919, after the national convention adopted a Constitution that committed the group to the “overthrow of the capitalist system” and the creation of a “worldwide socialistic cooperative commonwealth.” Though it retained its social and educational missions, the YPSL of the 1920s was more committed than earlier iterations to supporting the national party’s political activity, though the National Committee and National Secretary exerted only inconsistent control over the loose federation of state-based bodies. The organization waned in strength during the 1920s, only to be revived by the turmoil of the Depression. By the end of 1932, YPSL had perhaps 2,500 members—a fraction of its pre-war height, but a marked improvement over much of the previous decade. Many of the new “Yipsels” were native-born and college-educated, a departure from the League’s previous base in working-class and immigrant communities, and a shift which only exacerbated long-simmering tensions between the youth affiliate and the adult wings of the movement.

Wurf entered YSPL when the factional cleavages were particularly sharp. His formative experiences with the political left came during the tail end of the so-called “Third period,” when the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), on orders from Moscow, denounced key elements of the New Deal as a “fascist slave program” and identified socialists as a greater threat than either Fascists or Nazis. While the formal party line changed with the announcement of the Popular Front strategy in 1935, personified in the United States in the rise of Earl Browder and punctuated by the influx of hundreds of CP members into ascendant

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30 Constitution of the Young People’s Socialist League, Adopted by 1st National Convention, Chicago, 1-4 May 1919, Published in The Young Socialists’ Magazine 13, no. 6 (June, 1919): 13-14, Edited by Tim Davenport and available at marxisthistory.org [accessed September 11, 2012].

31 On the evolution of YPSL, see Maurice Isserman, If I Had a Hammer….: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
industrial unions of the CIO, the personal and institutional rivalries remained sharper at the local level, particularly in New York City, which housed perhaps one-third of the party membership.32

It is not clear how much of this Wurf would have recognized at the time. Without a strong background in the political left at home, he was forced to absorb much of the complicated political geography through trial, error, and experimentation. Despite his exceptionally wide reading, Wurf considered himself more of a practical than theoretical leftist—he claimed never to have read *Das Kapital* or most of the rest of the leftist canon—and beyond general references to the “lower middle class milieu” and a few particular events like the Nye Committee hearings, he never really articulated what first drew him to the political left. Though he certainly became aware of the various ideological fault lines—he later described his political background as “left wing New York politics where the Communists hated the Yipsels, the Yipsels hated the Trotskyites, and the Trotskyites hated everyone else”—his own political identity was, at least initially, more the product of visceral feeling and personal loyalty than doctrinal conviction.”33

Before becoming involved in YPSL, for example, Wurf briefly flirted with the Young Communist League (YCL) because, he later said, it drew prettier girls and featured plusher meeting places.34 His first sustained activity came during the Spanish Civil War, when he

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33 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Harry Fleishman Oral History Collection; Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, Office at Planned Parenthood and the Apple Tree Restaurant, Washington, DC, 31 December 1981, Folder 2, Joseph Goulden Collection; Typed Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers. That he did not even try to seriously wrap himself in the traditional staples of Marxism may have made Wurf somewhat unusual among self-avowed leftists. However, as Howe remembered, most of those radical youth that did claim the mantle of Marxist intellectual never managed to master the material. “Only the more ambitious among us really tried to master the intricacies of Marxist economics or Trotsky’s critique of Soviet industrial policy . . . For a young Marxist in the thirties, the greatest ploy was a claim to be learned in economics, the science we faithfully praised as basic and secretly regarded as dismal.” Howe, *Steady Work*, 357.

34 Typed Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
participated in pickets and demonstrations protesting the Roosevelt administration’s embargo policy (a key factor in his youthful skepticism toward the Democratic Party. He later claimed to have been deeply influenced by Trotsky’s critique of Soviet communism in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937), and he remembered delivering a long-winded and self-indulgent soapbox speech proclaiming the Hitler-Stalin Pact (1939) as the “natural development” of international communism. In later years, he would remember the Soviet repression of Polish dissidents Victor Alter and Henryk Ehrlich during the 1940s as key turning points, but each happened after he had become an active member of YPSL.  

In truth, the young Wurf simply found the YCL and CP unduly calculating and controlling. “There were so many goddamn things and institutions and people that they hated,” Wurf later remembered.  

In contrast, as Wurf later explained, the socialists seemed “sort of starry-eyed”—if not particularly powerful. He joined YPSL around 1935, right as the broader Socialist movement “was going down the drain.” Despite winning more than a million votes for its presidential ticket in 1932, the Socialist Party faired poorly during the mid-1930s, losing a significant share of its working-class support to the New Deal Democratic Party, and suffering through a series of defections and splits. The “Old Guard,” led through much of the interwar years by Morris Hillquit and heavily influenced by Austrian theorist Karl Kautsky, included veterans and supporters of the Jewish garment unions, who had clung to a reform-oriented socialism through

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35 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 1, Side B, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories; Typed Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.  
36 Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.  
37 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection.  
38 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection.  
the difficult 1920s and who came to embrace much of the New Deal for the tangible benefits and improvements that it afforded to the American working class.\footnote{For an accessible introduction to the background and evolution of the Jewish socialism-Jewish labor relationship, see Howe, World of Our Fathers, 292-314. For a more academic account of the influence of the Bund on the American labor movement, see Steven Fraser, Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor (New York: Free Press, 1991), 1-20.} The younger, more militant generation of activists, which at least initially included Wurf, was far more skeptical of the “gradualist” approach and less reflexively critical of the Soviet Union.\footnote{This short survey of the geography of the political left draws on Isserman, The Other American, 110; Howe, A Margin of Hope; and Harry Fleischman, Norman Thomas, A Biography (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), 128-129.} Bowing to pressure from the growing younger and more militant cohort, Norman Thomas agreed in 1934 to support a Declaration of Principles, that, among other things, announced the party’s intention to meet any “capitalist war” with both armed resistance and a general strike—a marked departure from his past and future pacifism. Lewis Waldman, who, following Hillquit’s death in 1933 became the principle spokesman for the Old Guard, denounced the two positions as “anarchistic, illegal, and communist.”\footnote{Fleischman, Norman Thomas, 163-181} When the party’s Executive Committee adopted a more “inclusive” membership policy a few months later—signaling a willingness to embrace disaffected Communists and Trotskyites—it proved too much for most of the trade union veterans, many of whom left the party following its 1936 convention to join the American Labor Party or Liberal Party.\footnote{James P. Cannon, “The Socialist Party Convention,” New International 1, no. 1 (8 July 1934): 12-13, 32; Fleischman, Norman Thomas, 163-181.}

The defection of the Old Guard did little to end factional infighting within party. Instead, the young Militants split into two distinctive camps, with some, like Jack Atlman, arguing for limited collaboration with the American Labor Party and other liberal elements, and others, led by Gus Tyler, then-editor of the\emph{Jewish Daily Forward}, who advocated for a more radical, revolutionary (and non-collaborationist) approach. Also lingering, at least between 1936 and August 1937, when Trotsky himself ordered his own disciples out, were Trotskyites, who had
reintegrated themselves into the Socialist Party as a cohesive, dissident caucus. The political differences between Trotskyites and the left wing, Tyler-oriented socialists were, even at the time, comprehensible only to an expert or partisan. But the Trotskyites had greater appeal to the most intellectually ambitious young radicals because of their overt sense of being located at the vanguard of a historical movement. When they left the Socialist Party in 1937, they took a few hundred socialists with them, including Howe—“enchanted captives heading straight into the hermetic box of a left-wing sect.” Between the defection of the Old Guard in 1936, the expulsion of the Trotskyites in 1937, and a general drift of many less ideologically charged members toward Roosevelt’s Democratic Party, the Socialists dwindled to perhaps 7,000 members by the late 1930s.

This fluid, dynamic political landscape echoed in and around New York University, where Wurf matriculated in 1936. It was not his first choice. First inclined toward medicine, an ambition with an obvious connection to his childhood bouts with polio, Wurf settled on the law as his preferred profession by the mid-1930s. He had initially intended to leave the city, perhaps to attend Tufts University in Massachusetts, but Lena, ever worried about her son’s health, insisted that he remain closer to home. Wurf eventually settled on NYU, commuting daily by subway to Greenwich Village.

His college years were not marked by academic achievement—he later admitted that he had “spent more time being a radical than a student” and “kind of crapped out” before

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46 As Howe later recognized with considerably insight, the Trotskyites and left-wing socialists were something of ideological neighbors, the former moving rightward from Leninism, the latter leftward from social democracy. Howe, *A Margin of Hope*, 33.
47 Isserman, *The Other American*, 110-120.
graduation.\textsuperscript{50} For Wurf, like many students, the educational process was inextricably linked to political participation. Kristol once reflected that he was better educated at City College than more prestigious universities because “my involvement in radical politics put me in touch with people and ideas that promoted me to read and think and argue with a furious energy.”\textsuperscript{51} The disproportionate share of left-leaning Jews at New York colleges made the schools incubators for radical thought, an inclination reinforced by the harsh reality of the post-collegiate job search for young, would-be professionals.\textsuperscript{52}

“Going to school was a vehicle for getting involved,” Wurf later reflected.\textsuperscript{53} The “terribly exciting days” were filled with daily exchanges over politics and social issues, debates that instilled a self-confidence that Wurf had lacked just a few years earlier. By his second year at NYU, Wurf had mastered the art of public oratory through constant practice around the Washington Square campus and nearby Union Square, which contemporary Sidney Lens called “the mecca of revolutionary soapboxing.”\textsuperscript{54} Wurf split his time among various radical causes—raising funds for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, debating fascist sympathizers of Hitler and Mussolini, and volunteering at the Socialist Party’s Brooklyn headquarters on Ocean

\textsuperscript{50} “‘Once They Join This Damn Union, We Protect Their Rights,’” 110.
\textsuperscript{51} Kristol, “Memoirs of a Trotskyist.” Howe recalled a similar utility to the experience: participation in radical movements provided “a language of response and gesture, the security of a set orientation—perhaps impossible to a political tendency that lacked an ideology but not quite to be identified with ideology as such. It felt good ‘to know.’ One reveled in the innocence and arrogance of knowledge, for even in our inexpert hands Marxism could be a powerful analytic tool and we could nurture the feeling that, whether other people realized it or not, we enjoyed a privileged relationship to history.” Howe, \textit{Steady Work}, 357-358.
\textsuperscript{52} NYU actually had a higher percentage of Jewish students that CCNY in the 1920s, but because it charged tuition, it featured a slightly stronger middle-class bent. Feingold, \textit{A Time for Searching}, 15. On the psychological impact of the Depression, see Wenger, \textit{New York Jews and the Great Depression}, 63-65, 70-72. On the link between city colleges and radical leftist politics, see Robert Cohen, \textit{When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America’s First Student Movement, 1929-1941} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
\textsuperscript{53} Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 1, Side B, n.d. [1973], Greenya and Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
Parkway and Coney Island Avenue—where he first learned to use a mimeograph machine.\textsuperscript{55}

“Our searchless [sic] movement was very small,” he remembered, “and if we didn’t have enough trouble with Communists we had to argue with the [Trotskyites].”\textsuperscript{56} While the socialists were busy denouncing the excesses of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party, at least in New York, basically ignored its smaller counterpart, relegating it, as Wurf remembered, “to the ashcans of history.” All the Yipsels could hope to do was convince fellow leftists of the evils of Soviet communism, which proved unsurprisingly ineffective as an organizational strategy.\textsuperscript{57} Yet much of the recognition of YPSL’s limits came only later. At the time, as M. M. Chambers, head of the American Youth Commission in the early 1930s, noted, groups like YPSL and the YCL, despite their small membership and modest finances, “demonstrate sustained zeal and disciplined organization, such as to put to shame the relatively nebulous and evanescent youth clubs periodically sponsored in preelection seasons by the major political parties.”\textsuperscript{58}

Wurf was a difficult but diligent party member, an “impossible” foot soldier who was not above walking into the organization’s headquarters and announcing “what was wrong with the Party line.”\textsuperscript{59} Like many of his generation, he initially identified himself with the left wing of the Socialist Party, harboring, he later admitted, both a “subliminal hope . . . that the Soviet Union would really turn into a Workers’ State” and genuine faith in the prospects of a global socialist revolution. He claimed “ardent” membership in the Socialist Party’s “Clarity Caucus,” which denounced the army and bureaucracy as “the backbone of the capitalist state,” declared its own commitment to a military defense of the Soviet Union, and opposed all forms of “class

\textsuperscript{55} Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Harry Fleishman Oral History Collection.
\textsuperscript{56} Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 1, Side B, n.d. [1973], Greenya and Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
\textsuperscript{57} Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection.
\textsuperscript{58} M. M. Chambers, “Organized Youth in America,” \textit{Journal of Educational Sociology} 11, no. 6 (Feb. 1938): 356-357.
\textsuperscript{59} Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection.
collaboration” and “Popular Frontism.” Initially quite skeptical Norman Thomas’s moderation, Wurf relished denouncing “sewer socialists” who wanted to “brew municipal government” whenever he had the chance. His own agenda was more ambitious: “we wanted to change the world in a few days, democratically.”

But, flourishes aside, Wurf never reveled in the factional infighting as much as many of his contemporaries did, foreshadowing, perhaps, the relative ease with which he would move from socialism to a socialist-infused liberalism in the years after World War II. Certainly Wurf took part in what Howe called “charades of struggle,” the theatrical debates between advocates of the various political orthodoxies that defined so much of youthful radicalism in the era. These exercises certainly increased Wurf’s self-confidence, sharpened his argument, and brought clarity to his politics. But they weakened rather than strengthened his attachment to political dogma. His radical mind was either broader or less disciplined than those of the other young partisans, which left him both more willing and better prepared to revise his political beliefs later.

60 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection; “Where We Stand: A Program for Revolutionary Socialism,” Socialist Clarity, 1 March, 1937, 1-6.
62 Howe’s reflection on these political debates is worth quoting at greater length: “Once these dialectical tournaments began, the opposing factions would line up their squads of speakers, like knights arrayed at both ends of the field. They would then batter away at each other to the point of exhaustion and hoarseness, and continue to enact the whole combat-pageant even after everyone had firmly taken his stand.” If someone wished to speak who did not identify with one of the two camps, he would be given the floor—while everyone else waited impatiently so that “the orderly buffeting of dispute could be resumed quite as if he had never spoken at all.” They were, he remembers, almost like “classical plays,” where each character played his part, predictably, to perfection. The whole exercise would later be repeated, with decreasing skill and clarity, on the local and youth levels of organizations. There was in the whole thing, to use Alfred Kazin’s phrase, a “sodden brilliance”—something that Howe came to appreciate only many years later. “The debates were frequently brilliant,” he remembered, but “there was also a heavy-handed sarcasm, a nasty and unexamined personal violence, and a lumbering scholasticism that would warrant the qualifying ‘sodden.’” Howe, Steady Work, 359-361.
63 Again, the contrast with Howe is instructive. “What passed for thought among us was often no more than facility: we were clever and fast in responding to familiar cues, especially in arguments with Communists, but had little capacity for turning back with a critical eye upon our own assumptions. Against opponents who shared our essential beliefs we could argue well—too often confusing arguing well with thinking well—but against those who dared question our essential beliefs we were not nearly so effective. We were trained in agility rather than reflection, dialectic rather than investigation. We had a strong sense of intellectual honor, but only a feeble appetite for
This transformation owed much to the influence of Thomas, to whom Wurf remained personally faithful even after he had begun to abandon his pursuit of “drastic change in the political and economic system.” Wurf had first heard Thomas speak as a high school student in Brighton Beach around 1935, but was initially unimpressed by “the lack of class struggle content in his statements.” It was not an uncommon complaint among younger activists—Harry Fleischman, who would go on to chair Thomas’s presidential campaigns in 1944 and 1948 and author his biography, recalled dismissing his future candidate in the mid-1930s as “a petty-bourgeois opportunistic humanitarian Socialist.”

Over time, however, Wurf grew more open to Thomas’s brand of reform socialism. It was at least in part Thomas’s style that Wurf found appealing. Thomas, Fleischman later wrote, became “bored and irritated” by the factional infighting, eschewed the doctrinal style in his own oratory for what even critics acknowledged was a compelling combination of lecture and sermon. “As he shambled up to the podium,” Howe recalled of a Thomas event, “he would pull together the segments of his body that seemed to move on different planes of space, he would laugh along with us when he needled opponents, those sardonic thrusts being, we knew, the mere sharp edge of his fundamentally good nature; and then he would lose himself, either from craft or passion, in rapid stammering perorations.” Wurf later admitted that he had tried to emulate this speaking style only to find his imitation considerably “shriller” than the original.

intellectual risk. And that is why we seldom became disturbed when a member questioned a tactical or strategic ‘line’ of the Movement, but felt uneasy, as if sensing the threat of heresy, when he began to wonder about the more abstract and fundamental Marxist tenets.” Howe, Steady Work, 361-363.

65 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection; Fleischman, Norman Thomas, 11. From the opposite side of the factional spectrum, Hillquit denounced the Thomas camp as delusional advocates of a “Socialism of steam-heated sidewalks and overhead sewers.” Quoted in Fleischman, Norman Thomas, 130.
66 Fleischman, Norman Thomas, 82.
67 Howe, A Margin of Hope, 19-22.
68 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection.
On an intellectual level, Wurf appreciated Thomas’s ability, like Eugene Debs before him, to “[translate] the harshness of European dogma and [relate] it to the U.S. scene.” He credited Thomas with bringing “a concern for the democratic process” to American radicalism and an emphasis on “the critical importance of non-violence,” while also lending the political left a legitimacy and relevance that it came to lack in the postwar era.

A highlight of Wurf’s early political life came in 1940, when he served as a YPSL delegate to the Socialist Party convention in Washington, D.C. After leveraging a strong anti-war platform out of the convention, Thomas received his fourth nomination for president, announced by a highly-orchestrated demonstration of “several score” members of YPSL, likely including Wurf—“carrying red Socialist Banners and wearing red and white arm bands,” while leading the conventioneers in renditions of the “Internationale,” “Solidarity Forever,” and a custom variant on “Battle Hymn of the Republic” that began:

You can search the country over
but you know you’ll never find
any man with half the qualities of the one we have in mind.
He’s a fighter for the things that count
to better all mankind
Thomas for President”

and closed with the syllabically-awkward “We’ll campaign for Norman Thomas” in place of the traditional “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!”

69 Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers. For an influential and similar interpretation of Debs, see Nick Salvatore, Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

70 “Once They Join This Damn Union,” 109; Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection.

71 Among those active at the convention were Chairman Leonard Woodcock, Harry Fleishman, who nominated Maynard Krueger, a professor from the University of Chicago who had previously served three terms as a Vice President of the American Federation of Teachers. Louis Stark, “Thomas Again Head of Socialist Ticket,” New York Times, 8 April 1940, 1, 5; Edward T. Folliard, “Thomas Named by Socialists,” The Washington Post, 9 April 1940, 1, 2. Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 11-13. For an insightful account of the politics of war and peace at the 1940 Socialist Party convention, see Fleishman, Norman Thomas, 192-202
Wurf remained actively involved in the movement through 1948, when he diligently worked to collect signatures for the Trade Union Branch to get Thomas on the city’s election ballot. A single, undated “Dear Comrade” letter dubbing the campaign “this most vital of Socialist tasks” is the sole tangible evidence of Wurf’s participation in the movement evident in his personal papers, hinting at the pride he felt in that particular part of his activism.\(^{72}\) “I organized a sort of group of dissident Trotskyites or some kind of god damn thing like that,” he recalled, “and made them a committee for the election of Thomas in that dreadful year.”\(^{73}\)

Later, Wurf would credit YPSL and the Socialist Party with helping him “build a set of ethics . . . and social concerns” and with forcing him to “get away from the standard 4\(^{th}\) of July goals and practices.” The experience inspired a greater faith in the capacity of political minorities to effectively solve social and economic problems in a democratic society, and a keener sense of the need for principled compromise.\(^{74}\) “They were good days,” he recalled. “They were useful, on a selfish basis, in terms of stretching my mind, and making me think reasonably about the world we were in, developing a sensitivity to social dynamics of the society we were in.”\(^{75}\)

But the 1948 campaign was Wurf’s last as a member of the Socialist Party. Frustrated by the lack of tangible results—“I was impotent,” he bluntly recollected—Wurf came to recognize that the Socialist Party, even infused with the charisma and pragmatism of Thomas, was an ineffective political vehicle.\(^{76}\) In hindsight, Wurf believed that the failure of socialism in the United States owed much to the broadly-defined left’s refusal to heed Thomas’s efforts to “Americanize” the movement, to make it appealing in a society where, as Wurf put it, farmers

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\(^{72}\) Letter to Socialist Party Members from Jerry Wurf, n.d. [1947 or 1948], Box 7, Folder 2, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
\(^{73}\) Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection.
\(^{74}\) Typed Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
\(^{75}\) Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection.
\(^{76}\) Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 1, Side B, n.d. [1973], Greenya and Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
did not identify as peasants and wage-earners did not identify as workers. The opportunity had come and gone in the 1930s, before Wurf was ever aware of it. “We were caught up with this European crap,” he lamented, “[and] we destroyed the Socialist movement in America.”

Wurf became convinced by the mid-1940s that social change would only likely ever be achieved in the United States within the two-party political system. The conversion from radical to reformist was not unlike that of many of his contemporaries, but what was unusual for someone of Wurf’s background and age was his conscious selection of the labor movement as the best vehicle to achieve those goals.

“The Only Institution That Could Impact Society”

Wurf embraced the labor movement at the very moment that many radicals, and even some liberals, were losing faith in unions. The audacity of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the inspirational sit-down strikes of the 1930s had given way to a more stable, but less dynamic, set of institutional arrangements during World War II. The subsequent failure of the CIO’s southern organizing drive, Operation Dixie, the anti-Communist purging of eleven industrial unions, and the CIO’s merger with the American Federation of Labor in 1955, seemed to validate critics’ dismissal of the American labor movement as an agent of social change.

77 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection.
78 Typed Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
79 Of course, plenty of young unionists were inspired by the socialist movement and hundreds of former activists found their way into the labor movement as organizers. Fleischman recalled that one of the major reasons for the party’s weakness in the postwar period was the defection of its younger generation to the labor movement. “What hurt the Socialist Party was not so much the loss of a few hundred members, but the debilitating effects of the many wasted months of internal party struggle when the Party might have been active as an organized force in aiding the drive for industrial unionism sparked by John L. Lewis, the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the militant sit-down strikers. Faced with the choice between endless and often fruitless wrangling within the Party and inspiring and rewarding activity within the burgeoning labor movement, many of the Party’s most able, courageous and vigorous members assumed active roles in the unions and drifted away from Party meetings.” Fleischman, Norman Thomas, 163-181.
Wurf shared many of these concerns. Resigned to its reluctance to challenge the capitalist system and critical of its strong support for American imperial activities abroad, Wurf nonetheless looked with optimism at the more progressive elements of the labor movement and hoped that they might provide the basis for a more ambitious agenda. Mostly, though, at the dawn of the postwar era, the labor movement presented the best, and perhaps only, option. Wurf later remembered his time in the Socialist Party as “the ultimate experience in my life” precisely because it was where he was “awakened to what the role of a trade union movement is” and “what it’s capable of achieving.”\(^81\) “If we couldn’t really change the system regarding the exploitation of workers [and] imperialism,” Wurf decided, “the only institution that could impact . . . society was the trade union.”\(^82\)

Wurf’s first experience with the labor movement came while he was a student at NYU, when he became involved in what he later dismissively characterized as the Socialist Party’s “cockamamie” Industrial Committee.\(^83\) Established around the height of industrial labor militancy in the mid-1930s, Wurf and other student radicals were tasked with circulating among the various cafeterias on Fourteenth Street and stirring the onlookers to social revolution through soapbox speeches about the evils of capitalism. On other occasions, Wurf and other Yipsels would run into neighborhood cafeterias and grab trays of silverware to distract the manager, allowing one of them to lecture the workers on the benefits of unionism—spectacles that drew curious crowds, but few recruits.\(^84\) When Wurf and several other Yipsels tried to join a formal union picket line during a dispute between NYU and the Painters Union over the use of spray

\(^80\) Typed Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
\(^81\) Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection.
\(^82\) Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
\(^83\) Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection.
\(^84\) Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 14.
guns and rollers (rather than labor-intensive brushes), “the painters chased us away like we were bringing malaria,” he remembered. “They didn’t want radicals in their job action.”

Wurf’s early tactics reflected the influence of his perceptions about the CIO, which he initially believed “could do no wrong.” Over time, and under the influence of critics like McAlister Coleman, Wurf came to a more critical view, particularly when it came to the handling of internal union democracy and minority rights. Wurf’s perception of Walter Reuther was particularly conflicted. He lauded Reuther’s attempts to fight Communist influence within the United Auto Workers, for espousing a vision that stretched “beyond bread and butter” and recognized labor’s obligation to “the poor, the helpless, the old and so on in our society,” and for pushing the labor movement toward a broader conception of the role of government “in the arena of social responsibility.” But he was distressed by Reuther’s unwillingness to acknowledge his own debt to the Socialist Party—the source of a resentment that Wurf harbored for decades after. On the whole, Wurf had a complicated view of the CIO, crediting it with “revitalizing trade unionism” at a time when new energy was badly needed, but eventually sacrificing internal democracy and minority rights for the sake of a more efficient, bureaucratic institution—though he later admitted that both his “starry” conceptions about the CIO and his jaded assumptions about the AFL were overdrawn.

By the early 1940s, though, Wurf could no longer afford to allow his choices to be dictated purely by political considerations. In the summer of 1940, Wurf had met Sylvia Spinrad, daughter of an active radical family and occasional YCL activist. A year later, Spinad became

85 “Once They Join This Damn Union,” 110.
86 Wurf became particularly suspicious of John L. Lewis’s often autocratic and dictatorial governance within the union, a view which tracked closely with Coleman’s portrayal in his Men and Coal (New York: Farrar and Reinhart, 1943).
88 Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Harry Fleischman Oral History Collection.
his first wife, and three years later, the young couple welcomed a daughter, Linda Susan. These new family obligations forced Wurf to find a stable source of income. Having never graduated from NYU, the law—or any other profession—was out of reach.  

It was at this juncture that Wurf turned to an old contact from the socialist movement, Max Siegel, who had been impressed by Wurf’s crude raids while in YPSL. Siegel found him a job as a part-time organizer for the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union (HREU), probably in late 1940. If hardly as glamorous as the industrial labor struggles of the mid-1930s, the cafeteria scene in New York City was important, and, for Wurf, fulfilling. “Cafeterias were a big industry in those early days because you could get food cheap and you could hang around and talk,” he later remembered, likening them to “the place that coffee houses serve in Europe.”

As Joseph Goulden has suggested, the job also forced Wurf to break free of the relatively comfortable lifestyle he had enjoyed in Brighton Beach and at NYU. Previously, Wurf’s circle of contacts had been marked by ideological and political diversity, but bounded to middle class Jews of an activist bent. Working as a cashier for up to 12 hours a day, Wurf came into sustained contact with a whole range of ethnic and racial minorities, many of whom spoke broken or no English.

The demographic and occupational diversity of the cafeteria workforce compelled Wurf to think seriously about what it meant to be an organizer, and many of the strategies and tactics he later used in AFSCME had their roots in the HREU campaigns. Wurf and Siegel took turns distributing union cards to cafeteria workers during breaks in their own shifts as cashiers. Eventually, they signed up enough members to form Local 448, Food Checkers and Cashiers.

89 Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 18-20.
Union, housed unpretentiously in a small, rented space above a “shitty cafeteria” on Court St. in Brooklyn. The union eventually spread from Brooklyn into Manhattan, where Wurf targeted the famous Garden Cafeteria on the Lower East Side. Just down the block from the Jewish Daily Forward newspaper, Wurf and Siegel hoped that the mostly Jewish clientele would be unwilling to cross the pickets, which were their central mechanisms for forcing hostile employers to recognize the union. Wurf combined the public pressure of pickets with well-timed direct action, particularly after he became the union’s sole paid organizer. After scouting a location, Wurf would cultivate relationships with a handful of would-be activists, pushing them to identify the most pressing issues at the workplace, usually basic material concerns of pay, breaks, meal money, and the like. Once a substantial base of support existed, he would approach the manager or owner, who almost invariably responded with hostility. From there, the organizing drive could go one of two ways, either Wurf could use the pressure of pickets and indirect actions to embarrass the proprietor into offering better pay, benefits, or working conditions, or he could organize a “spontaneous” walk-out during the lunch-hour rush. The former strategy, it seems, was employed in the absence of a single, unifying grievance, or when the clientele was perceived to be particularly supportive of unionization; the latter tactic, though liberally employed, was reserved for particularly intransigent owners or a pressing grievance. In either case, Wurf used the resolution to build further support for the union.

Though often only modestly successful at building a last organization, Wurf nonetheless fashioned a strong reputation, both among the rank-and-file cafeteria workers, and the mostly Yiddish-speaking cafeteria owners, who dubbed the young organized “mal’ach hamaves,” or

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93 Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 14-18.
94 This summary is drawn from Wurf’s recollections in Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 14-18.
“Angel of Death.” Though the membership gains were small, and generally driven by basic bread-and-butter concerns, Wurf felt like he was part of a crusade-like movement to give “dignity and status” to the exploited worker, who, with the collective strength provided by the union, “no longer [had] to grovel, no longer [had] to run.”

Wurf was eventually elected president of Local 448, but his first stint in the labor movement was short-lived. By early 1942, the international union merged Local 448 into another, larger organization, Local 325. At first, Wurf found the expansion appealing, though it cost him his local office. “We became an industrial union which appealed to me intellectually,” he remembered, organizing “cooks, countermen, busboys, dishwaters, everything.” Wurf was tasked with running the union’s welfare fund and political operations, but he soon fell out of favor with the larger local leadership, who were unimpressed with the crusading approach. “To them, being a union officials was a means to escape working at a cafeteria coffee station,” Wurf later remembered, “and I was always talking about human wage slavery.” A combination of idealism and naivety—or, as Wurf later put it, “being a dumb bastard”—drove Wurf to challenge the financial administration of the local, which he later came to believe had ties to the Brooklyn underworld. The requests, ostensibly routine, only further alienated the local leadership. In retaliation, the union leadership bypassed Wurf for the part-time cashiering jobs necessary to supplement his meager union salary. Locked out of the normal work-assignment channels, Wurf

95 Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 14-18.
96 “Voice of City Drivers: Jerry Wurf,” New York Times, 4 December 1962, 44. Unlike food service unions in the more personal “waiting” sector of the food service industry, the cafeteria workers that Wurf organized were not overwhelmingly female and did not necessarily respond to gendered, neo-craftist appeals. Rather than the “occupational unionism” that Dorothy Sue Cobble has highlighted in her excellent history of waitressing, Wurf and his colleagues relied on something approaching a service-sector variant on “worksite unionism.” Dorothy Sue Cobble, Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
97 Molleson, “Jerry Wurf, Unionist.”
99 “Once They Join This Damn Union, We Protect Their Rights,” 110.
100 For corruption in the union, see Matthew Josephson, Union House, Union Bar: The History of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union, AFL-CIO (New York: Random House, 1956).
drew on the support of a few key shop stewards at the cafeterias originally organized by Local 448 to find enough work as a “relief cashier” to provide for his family. Eventually, the arrangement was uncovered, and Wurf was fired.\(^\text{101}\)

The history in the years that follow is murky. It is not immediately clear how Wurf supported the young family during the war years—Wurf may have worked briefly at a local tire factory—but when Al got out of the army in 1946, the two brothers launched a short-lived experiment as small businessmen, opening a delicatessen in Freeport, just outside the city on Long Island. They were poor entrepreneurs: Jerry, in particular, struggled to profitably distribute pastrami or charge friends and acquaintances. The relationship between the two brothers suffered from the experiment, which folded soon after it started.\(^\text{102}\)

Wurf tried to return to cafeteria cashiering, but was blocked by his old enemies in Local 325.\(^\text{103}\) Wurf’s persistence in the union owed more to desperation than organizational loyalty. “You [have] got to understand,” he later explained to interviewers John Greenya and Richard Billings, “I had no skills . . . I had no abilities . . . I was a professional agitator without a cause.”\(^\text{104}\)

It was around this time, late in 1947, that Wurf caught his second break in the labor movement. An old contact from his Socialist Party days, William Becker, who was then serving as the party’s Labor Secretary, got a call from Arnold Zander, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. AFSCME needed an organizer for their New York City operations, and Becker had been impressed with Wurf’s efforts both within and

\(^{101}\) Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 1, Side B, n.d. [1973], Greenya and Billings AFSCME Oral Histories; Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 18.

\(^{102}\) Notes and Transcript, Interview with Al Wurf, 18 January 1982, Folder 10, Joseph Goulden Collection; Typed Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 21.

\(^{103}\) Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 22-24.

against the Local 325 leadership. He arranged for Zander and Wurf to meet at a dinner of the Workers’ Defense League in New York City.\footnote{Goulden, \textit{Jerry Wurf}, 22-24; Bellush and Bellush, \textit{Union Power and New York}, 10-14.} By coincidence, or as a means of dealings with nerves, Wurf, who rarely drank, met a few friends before the meeting, and downed a trio of martinis, showing up for the meeting with the teetotaling AFSCME president in a “half-stupefied” state of inebriation.\footnote{Goulden, \textit{Jerry Wurf}, 23-24.}

It did not prove disqualifying. Zander, impressed with Becker’s reference and eager to gain ground in New York City, offered Wurf a six-week contract, at the rate of sixty dollars a week plus expenses, a significant raise on his meager, inconsistent income as a cashier.

On March 6, 1948, a 28-year-old Jerry Wurf went to work for AFSCME.\footnote{“‘Once They Join This Damn Union, We Protect Their Rights,’” 110.}

\textit{Coda: End of an Era}

The late 1940s marked a period of transition in Wurf’s life. As he readied himself to engage in what would turn into a life-long commitment to AFSCME, he also formally drew to a close his long relationship with the Socialist movement.

The end of this relationship was long in coming, and it was the product of a combination of practical and intellectual considerations. Practically, the late 1940s were a dire time for the American left, as early Cold War anti-radical sentiment reached deep into both national politics and the labor movement. But even before the scope of the postwar backlash became evident, Wurf had resigned himself intellectually to the limits of American radicalism. If the American capitalist system could not be overthrown peacefully and democratically, then the only responsible course was to work to get “the most we can for workers, for farmers, for the have-nots . . . who [were] prayed upon in an extraordinarily outrageous way by the have-nots.” Though he
would, for the rest of his life, regard himself as “somebody who wants to drastically change the system,” as he put it to Harry Fleischman, he was, from that point forward, devoted to doing so through programs and policies that were politically viable, as well as reformist. Like many other converts to pragmatic liberalism, Wurf committed himself to “trying to bring about change within the parameters of the capitalist system.”

Wurf never forgot or denied the centrality of the movement to his personal and political development; in fact, a picture of Eugene Debs featured prominently in his office at AFSCME’s Washington, D.C. headquarters many years later. But he would not call himself a socialist. It was a narrow distinction, but one he drew regularly and adamantly. He refused to mimic the “bullshit” of labor leaders like Alex Rose, president of the Hatters’ Union and co-founder of the American Labor Party, who proclaimed themselves socialists while constantly working within political parties devoted to capitalism. “I think it’s a form of nonsense,” he said, that such people proclaimed themselves Socialists on Monday and Democratic Party members on Tuesday. “My mind has been too disciplined by the Socialist Party to play those kinds of gymnastics.” “The word Socialist carries with it a commitment to a social and economic system,” he reasoned, and “if you are not carrying out the struggle, at least against class

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108 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection. Maurice Isserman has written that Daniel Bell, who had also joined YPSL in the 1930s, “abandoned the theological enthusiasm of his youth for a pragmatic liberalism.” He has also noted that the Socialist Party “had a long, and from its perspective, unfortunate tradition of serving as the training ground for bright young men who, as soon as they began to make their mark in society, stopped paying their dues to the party,” holding out Walter Reuther as a prime example. Isserman, The Other American, 105, 207.

109 In this sense, Wurf took a more traditional, even dogmatic view than Thomas, who, after the disastrous 1948 election, publicly encouraged the party to abandon electoral action and to move toward a Fabian, educationally-oriented role. Thomas retained his socialist identity but refused to run again. Fleischman, who had run Thomas’s campaigns in the 1940s, resigned from the party when it refused to heed Thomas’s advice to redirect its political activities toward working within the major parties. The party disagreed, at least for some time, and ran tickets in 1952 and 1956, with decreasing success. Fleischman, Norman Thomas, 238-239.

110 Wurf was just as troubled by people like Walter Reuther, who denied entirely the role that the movement had played in their life. “Everything I am and was I acknowledge came out of the S.P.,” he told Bernard and Jewel Bellush. “I was not Walter Reuther who would deny what the SP meant to me and what it did for me.” Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, n.d., Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
collaboration, then you have no right to call yourself a socialist.” To claim the title was “a crock of shit,” Wurf concluded, “because I haven’t done a damn thing to bring about the Socialist commonwealth except to point out the shortcomings of capitalism.”

Wurf’s conversion experience was archetypical of what historian Steven M. Gillon has noted as a common pattern among those who came of age during the 1930s, reacted to the Depression with varying degrees of political radicalism, only to enter the postwar era convinced of the need “to strike a balance between their commitment to abstract ideals of social justice and their sense of the politically possible.”

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111 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Fleishman Oral History Collection. Wurf was also unwilling to identify with the democratic radicalism espoused by Howe and the other writers of Dissent magazine, founded in 1954, which increasingly was defined by a set of values rather than a coherent plan of action. Edward Alexander, Irving Howe: Socialist, Critic, Jew (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 92, 111.

112 Steven M. Gillon, Politics and Vision: The ADA and American Liberalism, 1947-1985 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), x. Of course not everyone who came out of the broadly defined Depression-era left ended up in the left wing of the Democratic Party. Irving Kristol later became one of the architects of neo-conservatism in the 1950s and 1960s. As Justin Vaisse has suggested, Kristol and others are best understood as a camp of their own, one dominated by former Communists and Trotskyites who made anti-communism the central issue in their postwar politics, and who were far more likely to move to the political right than those, like Wurf and other “vital center” liberals, who put equal weight on the expansion of the welfare state. Justin Vaisse, Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 30. Of course, a small but vocal cadre of veteran young leftists retained at least some of their radicalism. Isserman, If I Had a Hammer.
“We believe that You Can Fight City Hall,” an editorial in *Spotlight*, District Council 37’s sporadically published newspaper, boldly declared in March 1958, as the union readied itself for New York City’s annual budget hearings. “We’ve done it before and, with the support and participation of our members, we can do it again.”

Four years after first winning formal organizing rights for city workers, Wurf and the other leaders of District Council 37 still found that direct action was their most effective vehicle. Lacking access to formal collective bargaining, marginalized by the local Democratic Party, and ignored by much of the city’s private sector labor movement, District Council 37 relied on mass meetings, public demonstrations, workplace actions, and public relations to draw attention to the plight of city workers and exert public pressure on oft-stubborn city officials. Fusing basic material concerns with a critique of the city’s informal system of labor relations, Wurf fashioned a vision of militant, independent public sector unionism that drew generously from his reading of American labor history and downplayed the uniqueness of government employment.

Though only modestly successful at first at improving the status of city employees, this basic set of premises proved critical in District Council 37’s transformation from a small, ineffective coalition of disparate locals with a few hundred members into the most powerful union in the city, laying the foundation for a revolution in public sector labor relations and the construction of a national public sector labor movement.

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“The early history of public employee unions can be boiled down to a few words: They tried, and they did not get very far.”[^2] This is how Joseph Goulden, Wurf’s first biographer, summarized the history of public sector unionism through the early 1950s. Albeit simplistic, this generalization nonetheless contains a grain of truth, for until the late 1940s, strong, independent unions were almost completely absent from the public sector, a underdeveloped status that owed much to two sets of legacies: the monumental failure of the 1919 Boston Police Strike and the strength and persistence of urban political machines.

The Boston Police Strike of 1919 did more to define the limits of public sector labor relations during the first half of the twentieth century than any other single event. Sparked by the dismissal of 19 officers who refused to comply with an order prohibiting membership in the Boston Police Union after it affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, the strike eventually included more than 1,100 of the city’s police force. As Boston collapsed into chaos, then-Governor Calvin Coolidge called in the state militia, proclaiming that there was “no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, anytime.” Under pressure from the AFL, the Boston Central Labor Union refused to order a general strike in support of the walkout, assuring its failure. Despite pleas for leniency from Mayor James Peters, Police Commissioner Edwin Curtis hired 1,500 replacement officers (at pay scales significantly above those of the displaced officers) effectively breaking the union, and turning the national labor movement against police unionization for decades to follow.[^3]

[^3]: For the best history of the strike, see Joseph E. Slater, *Public Workers: Government Employee Unions, the Law, and the State, 1900-1962* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2004), 14-38. For near-contemporary account that was later reissued in
The impact of the failed strike transcended the protective services and the city of Boston. Until the end of World War II, politicians of all ideological and partisan stripes drew on Coolidge’s stubborn maxim as a substitute for a genuine labor relations policy in the public sector. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, strongly identified with the unionization of the private sector, expressed typical ambivalence about the organization of government employees, writing in 1937 that “militant tactics have no place in the functions of any organization of government employees” and that “a strike of public employees manifests nothing less than an attempt on their part to prevent or obstruct the operations of government until their demands are satisfied,” which he deemed “unthinkable and intolerable.”

Prevailing legal opinion bolstered went even further, holding that collective bargaining constituted an illegitimate infringement on state sovereignty—a theory that hindered the development of public sector unions even in non-uniformed services, where there were no direct implications for public safety.

Government employees organized despite these limitations. Joseph Slater estimates that public sector union density ran only a few points below the private sector until the mid-1930s, when, spurred by the militancy of the Depression decade and the legal legitimacy conferred by the National Labor Relations Act, private sector union membership exploded ahead. By the mid-1930s, nine states featured some form of statewide association for government employees in response to growing public sector militancy, see Francis Russell, A City in Terror: Calvin Coolidge and the 1919 Boston Policy Strike (New York: Viking Press, 1975) [orig. 1930].


Quoted in Spero, Government as Employer, 1-2. Less often quoted is the first part of Roosevelt’s statement on the subject, which read in whole: “The desire of government employees for fair and adequate pay, reasonable hours of work, safe and suitable working conditions, development of opportunities for advancement, facilities for fair and impartial consideration and review of grievances, and other objectives of a proper employee relations policy, is basically no different form that of employees in private industry. Organization on their part to present their views on such matters is both natural and logical, but meticulous attention should be paid to the special relationships and obligations of public servants to the public itself and to the government...”

Slater, Public Workers, 72-88; Spero, Government as Employer, 8-9.

Slater, Public Workers, 3.
and municipal organizations were firmly established in most major cities. By 1948, more than one million government workers belonged to some form of employee organization, though only a handful of the groups were affiliated with the labor movement. Many were modeled on the traditional benevolent or mutual benefit association, though others were simply social clubs. Perhaps the most well developed organization was the Civil Service Forum (CSF), founded in New York in 1909. Opposing both strikes and collective bargaining, the CSF focused instead on promoting the expansion of the civil service system. For organizations like the CSF, the goal was to work cooperatively with elected officials to expand the political rights and job protections of its members, not to challenge the authority of employers at the workplace.

Founded in Madison, Wisconsin in 1932, AFSCME’s initial agenda differed little from organizations like the CSF. The Wisconsin State Administrative Employees Association (soon-after shortened to the Wisconsin State Employees Association, WSEA) was formed in early 1932, after State Director of Personnel A. E. Garey and Wisconsin Federation of Labor President Henry Ohl, Jr. secured the assent of Republican Governor Phillip LaFollette to create an organization for administrative, clerical, and technical workers employed at the State Capitol. The first meeting took place in a hearing room at the Capitol in early May, and early gains were made by asking the heads of key departments and agencies to recruit interested employees. By early June, the organization had 53 paying members, a slate of temporary officers, and an inconsistently-published set of leaflets and pamphlets which, one future union official would

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10 Through its history, the organization was, at various points, also known as the Civil Service Association and Civil Service Society. Spero, *Government as Employer*, 205-212; Spero and Capozzola, *The Urban Community and Its Unionized Bureaucracies*, 15.
later note, “reflected its mild tone and general objectives which, although noble, were too broad to rally workers.”

Though the WSEA differed from civil service bodies like the CSF in immediately seeking an affiliation with the AFL (it was chartered as Federal Labor Union 18213 on May 16, 1932), it shared few characteristics with the rest of the labor movement. Founded by high-paid and well-educated administrators, the WSEA leadership was dominated by supervisors, not general employees. Garey, who became the WSEA’s first member on April 7, 1932, declined nomination for office, but played an important and influential role in shaping the WSEA-AFSCME agenda well into the late 1950s. E. E. Gunn Jr., a member of the state’s Board of Vocational Education, was elected the WSEA’s interim President, while other officers came from the Real Estate Brokers’ Board, the Board of Health, the Tax Commission, the Department of Agriculture and Markets, and the Free Library Commission. Another early member was Arnold Zander, Garey’s chief assistant and Senior Personnel Examiner, who held a Ph.D. in Public Administration from the University of Wisconsin. The WSEA’s modest early growth owed much to LaFollette’s support, which reflected his belief that the organization was a safe extension of the Progressive Era-civil service system.

It was in response to threats to that system that the WSEA expanded beyond its small early base. In November 1932, Albert G. Schmederman, riding the political coattails of Franklin Roosevelt, defeated Walter J. Kohler to become Wisconsin’s first Democratic governor since the 1890s. Already eager to fill the state’s payroll with supporters after nearly a half-century of

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11 For an overview of AFSCME’s early history in Wisconsin, see Leo Kramer, Labor’s Paradox: The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1962), 1-7. Kramer became a key and controversial advisor to Zander during the early 1960s, and his book was actually part of the incumbent’s campaign against Wurf, so the portions dealing with those later years must be read with a great deal of caution. However, Kramer’s account of the union’s early history is the most complete record to date.

12 Kramer, Labor’s Paradox, 1-7.
Republican dominance, Schmederman and other elected Democrats came under unrelenting pressure from unemployed job-seekers, who began demonstrating around the State Capitol. Two days before Christmas, the Milwaukee Sentinel reported that Democratic leaders were prepared to push for a complete repeal of the nation’s second-oldest civil service system, which they dismissed as a Republican political machine, “in order to give the state a completely Democratic administration for the next two years.” On January 17, 1933, State Senator W. D. Carroll introduced a bill to that effect.\footnote{Kramer, Labor’s Paradox, 4-6.}

Under direct threat of massive job loss, the state’s administrative employees rallied behind and through the WSEA, which swelled to more than 700 members by mid-1933, roughly 40 percent of the state’s administrative workforce. Zander, hired as the Association’s first employee in December (paid part-time, while retaining his position in the state’s personnel office), worked closely with Garey to rally a broad coalition of good-government groups and traditional Progressive reform organizations in defense of the state’s civil service system. Drawing on the strong support of the state’s newspaper editorial boards, which nearly universally condemned the Carroll proposal, the WSEA secured enough legislative support to delay, and eventually block, the bill. Declaring victory in August 1933, the Wisconsin State Employee boasted that the WSEA had “Proved Its Worth.”\footnote{Kramer, Labor’s Paradox, 6-7.}

The victory raised the WSEA’s profile, solidified its membership, and provided the foundation for the construction of a national organization. Between 1932 and 1935, similar organizations were founded in California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, and Massachusetts, but the WSEA was initially the only organization affiliated with the broader labor movement.\footnote{Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Sector,” 1-3.} The WSEA’s leadership dispatched Zander to the AFL convention in Washington, D.C. in October
1933 to seek a charter for a national organization. AFL President William Green was slow to commit, though he encouraged Zander to pursue a national association of state employee groups. Zander began traveling the country to court other state-level groups for the national federation, which he referred to for the first time as the “American Federation of Public Employees” in 1935. But despite repeated assurances from both Green and AFL Secretary-Treasurer Frank Morrison that the jurisdiction over state and local government employees was open, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), a union of federal workers, claimed jurisdiction over their state and local counterparts in September 1935. Zander traveled to the 1935 AFL convention in Atlantic City to contest the decision, only to find the meeting overwhelmed by the birth of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO). As a modest concession, and likely under pressure from Green, AFGE President E. Claude Babcock agreed to allow the state and local affiliates to become an autonomous department, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), within the federal workers’ union.  

Zander presented the formal plan to a special convention called in Chicago in December 1935, where thirty-two delegates from more than a dozen state bodies voted both to temporarily accept the arrangement while continuing to press for an independent AFL charter. Meanwhile, Babcock, suffering his own internal political crisis (brought on, in part, by a barroom altercation that kept him from addressing AFSCME’s meeting in Chicago), struck a deal with private sector union leaders on the AFL Executive Council to accept a narrowed jurisdiction that included only white-collar employees, which would have left a broad section of blue-collar workers outside of AFGE-AFSCME. When the AFGE board forced Babcock out in mid-summer, several officials openly invited Zander to accept office as the international union’s president. Zander declined,

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16 Kramer, Labor’s Paradox, 12-21.
affirming his belief that separate organizations were necessary to deal with the complexities of a fractured state and local government landscape. Wary that the state and local employees would soon overrun the federal jurisdiction and thus threaten their tenuous control, AFGE’s leadership relented, formally asking the AFL to separate the two organizations in September. With some reluctance, the Executive Council reversed its earlier decision, granting AFSCME jurisdiction over state and local government workers in October 1936.\(^\text{17}\)

The AFL’s hesitancy to charter a second national public sector organization was rooted in part in the fierce jealousy of the old craft unions, many of which had members who worked on government projects, and who thus claimed at least partial jurisdiction. Before the Executive Council would formally charter AFSCME, Zander had to persuade them that there would be no raiding of existing union memberships, and at least one AFL Vice President left the discussion with the impression that the charter would allow for dual membership, with AFSCME responsible for “legislative purposes” and the craft union for “organization.”\(^\text{18}\)

AFSCME’s charter reflected these tensions, granting a jurisdiction that was both among the most expansive in the AFL-CIO and one of the few defined largely in negative terms: all state and local government employees not already subject to the jurisdiction of another AFL union as of 1936.\(^\text{19}\) Problematic from the start, the jurisdictional charge became more troublesome as the union inched beyond its original white-collar base. In April 1940, for

\(^{17}\) Kramer, *Labor’s Paradox*, 21-23.
\(^{19}\) In March 1947, Zander described AFSCME’s scope as follows: “Our jurisdiction is all state and local government employees except those over whom jurisdiction was granted to other unions prior to October 1936. Therefore our jurisdiction determined from jurisdictions of unions still affiliated and as they were in 1936. Extensions of other union jurisdictions since 1936 do not affect ours. Claims of other unions beyond actual grants made them prior 1936 do not affect us. Other jurisdictions as of 1936 are strictly interpreted and not expandable by local interpretation.” Telegram from Arnold S. Zander to Elmer F. Vickers, Secretary-Treasurer of the Arizona State Federation of Labor, 25 March 1947, Box 13, Folder 16, Arnold S. Zander Collection, AFSCME Office of the President, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [Hereafter cited as Arnold S. Zander Collection]
instance, Zander wrote to Green to protest raiding by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and AFL federal locals on blue-collar public workers in Chicago, warning that their actions threatened to stunt the union’s growth. Green advised Zander to guide his organization toward a narrower base to avoid such conflict. “There are millions of white collar workers employed by state, county and municipal governments who are clearly eligible to membership in your union,” Green wrote. “Why waste time and energy . . . in a bitter conflict over a few people employed on highways as teamsters, engineers, and other workers of that kind? It occurs to me that if your organizers would confine themselves more definitively toward the organization of . . . white collar workers, that you could avoid conflict and make progress.”20 The constant raiding hindered the early union, forcing it into a narrower base and blocking early progress in most major cities (where private sector unions were strongest). By one estimate, the claims of other AFL unions left only 60 percent of AFSCME’s potential jurisdictional available for organizing by the late 1940s.21

AFSCME’s distinctive brand of civil service unionism provided its own set of challenges. Through much of the 1930s, one observer later noted, the union’s leadership saw itself “as part

20 Letter from William Green to Arnold S. Zander, 11 May 1940, Box 41, Folder 14, Arnold S. Zander Collection. Much to his dismay, Zander found that Green’s successor, George Meany, held a similarly narrow view of AFSCME’s jurisdiction, at least when it came to conflicts with the powerful Building Trades Department. Report by Arnold S. Zander to the Members of the International Executive Board, 8 July 1953, Box 56, Folder 8, Arnold S. Zander Collection.
21 Spero, Government as Employer, 212-216. As early as 1937, the narrow jurisdiction afforded AFSCME played a key role in the driving some its most active locals in New York City’s Department of Welfare to form a new organization, the State, County and Municipal Workers of America (SCMWA) affiliated with the CIO. Abram Flaxer, the leader of the SCMWA, argued that the AFL’s craft union structure forced AFSCME to cede too many potential members to other organizations, in contrast to the CIO’s industrial model, which assured the SCMWA total control of the sector. The SCMWA eventually merged with the United Federal Workers to form the United Public Workers of America. The CIO leaders were also suspect of public sector unionization. Upon issuing a charter to SCWA in July 1937, for instance, John L. Lewis declared that strikes and picketing by government employees was contrary to CIO policy and that the chief tools available to the new union were those of “legislation and education.” It was only in the early 1940s, under Philip Murray, that the CIO began to adopt a more expansive view of public sector union action. Even then, though, the primary concern was that hybrid public-private partnerships would fall prey to what Murray believed was an increasingly anti-union civil service system. Murray touted a new kind of unionism, one that accepted civil service but sought to build a more traditional trade union on top of it. Joshua B. Freeman, In Transit: The Transportation Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 183, 216.
of a great movement to reform government.” The 1937 convention adopted “the extension of the merit system” as its primary objective. Through much of the next two decades, the union retained this focus, pursuing a three-pronged agenda of securing civil service legislation where it did not exist, strengthening it where it did, and lending political support to civil service administrators to improve and protect the existing systems. Heeding the oft-ignored recommendations of turn-of-the-century Progressive reformers like George Waring and John R. Commons, AFSCME insisted that employee organization was an important tool to thwart undue political interference by elected officials in the administration of government services.

AFSCME sought to meet these goals, according to its constitution, “by petitioning, by creating and fostering sentiment favorable to reforms, by cooperation with state and local officials, by promoting legislation, and by other lawful means.”

Considering its relatively narrow profile and jurisdiction, AFSCME’s early growth was impressive: a few dozen members at the founding of the WSEA in 1932, it claimed nearly 10,000 when it received its charter in 1936. Driven by Depression-era threats to the civil service system, AFSCME grew to more than 30,000 members by the early 1940s and nearly 70,000 by the end of World War II.

If the civil service model worked fairly well for the white-collar employees in the good-government states of the upper Midwest, it was less easily translated to urban centers like

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22 Kramer, Labor’s Paradox, 27.
23 Kramer, Labor’s Paradox, 27.
Philadelphia and New York, where city workers had long served as the foundation of local political machines. As veteran *New York Times* reporter A. H. Raskin later put it, “municipal jobs were a payoff for political allegiance—votes, campaign manpower, ballot stuffing, cash kickbacks to the party overlords”—through much of the early 20th century.\(^{27}\) The arrangement played a key role in helping to integrate ethnic immigrant groups into urban power structures, but it also left public workers vulnerable to autocratic and abusive treatment, providing the nascent public sector labor movement with both a potential opportunity—and a powerful obstacle. As Francis Ryan has shown, blue-collar city workers in Depression-era Philadelphia functioned as a kind of “urban serf,” utterly dependent on the Republican political machine for their jobs and obliged to perform both occupational and political services for their paychecks. These political grievances, as much as workplace concerns, played a key role in building support for AFSCME among Philadelphia’s city workers during the 1930s, culminating in a successful 1938 strike that produced the first formal recognition of the union as a bargaining agent for city employees.

Through much of its early history, Ryan argues, District Council 33 had a “centaur-like status—half a civil service organization dedicated to nothing less than the overthrow of the spoils system, half a product of America’s most notorious urban political machine.”\(^{28}\)

The situation was even more complicated in New York City, home to one of the oldest and strongest political machines in the United States, Tammany Hall. After dominating city politics through a combination of graft and patronage during much of the late 19th and early 20th century, Tammany’s tactics evolved under the leadership of Charles Francis Murphy, who led the machine from 1902 until his death in 1924. Under Murphy, Tammany abandoned the simple


vote-for-job exchange model and embraced an ambitious program of expanded social services—between 1918 and 1932, the city workforce more than doubled and its payroll more than tripled. When the Depression struck, the machine had no way to shed these costs without alienating supporters, creating a fiscal-political trap that eased the election of reformer Fiorello La Guardia in 1933. Despite his pro-labor credentials, La Guardia, like many urban reformers, saw little role for collective organization in municipal government, casting civil service as a sufficient remedy to political corruption and governmental inefficiency.29

La Guardia’s attitude did much to inform his response to the growth of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) in the transit system during the 1930s, and in turn to set important precedents for dealing with other city employees.30 Formed in the 1920s in the city’s then-privately owned subway lines, the TWU initially held little appeal to the workers on the publicly-owned parts of the transit system. In 1940, though, the city took over the struggling private lines, converting some 25,000 employees who had previously been afforded formal organizing and bargaining rights to an ambiguous class that had protection from neither the National Labor Relations Act nor the state’s civil service code. When LaGuardia announced the labor policy for the newly unified system in March 1941, it included only soft “meet and confer” rights for city


30 Freeman argues that by securing exclusive bargaining rights and formal collective bargaining, the TWU “paved the way for the unionization of other government workers in New York and throughout the country.” Freeman, In Transit, 318-319. To the extent that the TWU was the municipal union to grapple in a sustained way with the benefits and drawbacks of traditional strikes, and to navigate the complicated political structure of state and city politics, this point is well taken. On the other hand, as a formally private enterprise, the subway system must be regarded somewhat differently from the rest of the city workforce, particularly given the strength of the union tradition in transit. More importantly, most of the TWU’s workers were excluded from the civil service system, unlike most other city employees.
employees, allowing them to present their grievances, but not assuring them bilateral negotiation or a written agreement, let alone union security.  

Because of its size and position in the city, the TWU had far more success than other early municipal unions. AFSCME’s history in the city extended back to the early 1930s, when Abram Flaxer had organized the Emergency Relief Bureau and the Department of Public Welfare. When Flaxer departed AFSCME for the CIO’s rival State, County, and Municipal Workers of America (SCMWA) in 1936, AFSCME was left with a highly fragmented membership scattered across the city departments until 1941, when some 2,000 sanitation workers, led by John DeLury, left the CSF to join AFSCME, followed soon after by the defection of Henry Feinstein’s CSF Council 209 (Manhattan-based auto-enginemen and drivers). The two groups provided AFSCME with a foothold in the city, though growth was slow in the years that followed. When it was officially chartered in October 1944, District Council 37 had just 20 locals, some with only a few dozen members.  

But buoyed by the early success of District Council 33 in Philadelphia, moved by a national surge in public sector militancy, and tempted by the potential of the nation’s largest urban center, AFSCME’s national leadership committed to a campaign in New York City.  

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31 The TWU was left in this vulnerable legal position for more than a decade, though it did manage to use a combination of militant threats, personal alliances, and political action to win some benefits for its members and institutionalize itself as the spokesman for the city’s transit workers by the early 1950s. Freeman, In Transit; Slater, Public Workers, 125-156.  
33 In 1946 alone there were 43 strikes by public workers. Surveying the excited landscape in 1948, Sterling Spero found an underlying similarity between the public sector actions and the larger private sector strikes, noting that higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions, and union recognition were the most common demands. These actions precipitated a concerted backlash in state legislatures, many of which passed anti-strike laws during 1946 and 1947, including New York. Spero, Government as Employer, 219. As of October 1946, New York City employed 180,000 workers—25,00 skilled, 35,000 semi- or unskilled, 40,000 white collar, and 45,000 protective through the Board of Estimate, and 42,000 through the Board of Education. Spero, Government as Employer, 71-76.
circumvent the cautious Feinstein, who had become District Council 37’s first president in November 1944, Zander hired Walter Pasnick, a veteran of the Aluminum Workers of America from Pennsylvania who had moved to the New York hospital system during World War II to avoid military service, as AFSCME’s general representative for the city in 1946.\(^\text{34}\) Pasnick hired John Boer, a Swiss-born socialist and former paid official for SCMWA Local 171, who launched an organizing drive in the city hospital system, which was dominated by the United Public Workers of America (UPWA), the CIO successor to the SCMWA.\(^\text{35}\)

The campaigns were only marginally successful—most of the gains in membership came later—but they drew the attention of AFL leaders eager to undercut the CIO unions in other areas, as well as AFSCME’s national office. In late 1947, local AFL leaders in New York City encouraged Zander to expand AFSCME’s organizing efforts to the city’s transit system.

“To Melt an Iceberg with a Matchstick”

Hired on a six-week contract, Wurf was initially unaware of the background to his mission—he learned only several weeks later that the push against the TWU was an AFL idea—and he initially resented the assignment. Though innately skeptical of the Communist Party and convinced of the veracity of the charges about influence within the TWU, Wurf appreciated Quill’s efforts to bring some semblance of collective bargaining to city workers and was troubled by the ease with which the federation rationalized the raid. Charged with building an alternative to one of the strongest organizations in the city from a small group of politically motivated

\(^{34}\) “New York City District Council,” Memorandum from Ellis Ranen, General Representative, to Arnold S. Zander, 10 November 1944, Box 110, Folder 2, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection; “New York City District Council # 37 of the A.F.S.C. and M. E. Municipal Local Unions,” Memorandum from Gordon Chapman to Ellis Ranen, International Representative, 17 November 1944, Box 110, Folder 2, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection.

\(^{35}\) Notes, Interview with John Boer, 5 December 1978, Box 4, Folder 38, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; Notes, Interview with John Boer, 21 August 1980, Box 4, Folder 38, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; Bellush and Bellush, *Union Power and New York*, 9-10.
dissidents—perhaps a thousand of the nearly forty thousand employed in the system—Wurf also thought the assignment impossible. “They used to open the meeting,” he later recalled, by pledging their allegiance to the American flag and singing the Star-Spangled Banner. “It was a very patriotic occasion,” he remembered, but not one conducive to building a genuine trade union for city workers. Distilling the mission in his more characteristically colorful manner, Wurf later quipped, “I had this fucking mandate to put Mike Quill out of business, which was like trying to melt an iceberg with a matchstick.”

Early returns were far from promising. The District Council 37 headquarters was a mess—sometimes literally: Pasnick was ineffective, Feinstein uninterested; whiskey was more prevalent than organizers; and AFSCME held only two percent of its potential jurisdiction. The transit campaign was soon abandoned—AFSCME never again seriously challenged the TWU in New York City—and by the summer of 1948, Wurf ready to quit the union.

While he later claimed that his persistence in AFSCME stemmed from his sense that the public sector was a reservoir of untapped potential—a “golden opportunity . . . to be involved in the pioneering of a whole new thing”—practical considerations played an important role. “I wanted out, but . . . I had no fucking place to go,” he later admitted, “I sure didn’t want to go back to being a cashier in the fucking restaurant worker’s union . . . I didn’t know if I could get

38 At the inaugural meeting of the new District Council 37, Wurf estimated that Council 37 had only about 500 regular members at its founding in 1943, out of a potential jurisdiction of 80,000. Minutes, First Meeting of the Reconstituted District Council 37, 15 April 1952, Box 110, Folder 3, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection].
another job, . . . and I wasn’t ready to peddle my ass.”

The sixty dollars a week that he was paid by AFSCME was a considerable improvement over his previous salary, and despite the failure of the campaign in transit, AFSCME was willing to keep Wurf on staff.

An odd assortment of ambition and luck soon validated the choice. During the summer of 1948, Wurf traveled to the union’s national headquarters in Madison. Occasioned by his recurrent threat to quite AFSCME, the trip became a key turning point in his early professional career. Met at the airport by Zander, Wurf returned to the union president’s home for dinner, where the two discussed the state of AFSCME in New York City. Indicting the council’s reliance on small, disjointed locals and backroom political deal-making, Wurf persuaded Zander and the union’s small national staff that a stronger, more centralized council and aggressive commitment to organizing new, larger locals would thrust AFSCME into a leading place in the city. Taken by the energy of the presentation, Zander named Wurf a special representative, effectively giving him a position independent of Feinstein’s authority. When Pasnick left the union in 1949, Wurf was left as the only national union representative in the country’s largest city. Shortly thereafter, he was given a fifty percent raise and put on a monthly (as opposed to weekly) salary, solidifying his personal position.

Wurf inherited a council riddled with divisions. As of late 1948, half of AFSCME’s New York City membership was in the Sanitation Department, unaffiliated with District Council 37.

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40 Memorandum from Gordon W. Chapman to Martin W. Helz, 2 December 1948, Box 91, Folder 9, Arnold S. Zander Collection.

41 Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 3 April 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; Telegram from Gordon W. Chapman to Jerry Wurf, 20 October 1949, Box 4, Folder 17, AFSCME Central Files Department Records, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as AFSCME Central Files Department Records]; Memorandum from Gordon W. Chapman to Martin W. Helz, 30 June 1949, Box 4, Folder 17, AFSCME Central Files Department Records. Mark H. Maier, City Unions: Managing Discontent in New York City (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 25-26. Pasnick was terminated after it was discovered that he was engaged in backroom negotiations with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).
because DeLury had insisted on a direct charter.\textsuperscript{42} Running the local union out of an office in the city’s Department of Sanitation building, chief John DeLury relied heavily on backroom politics and personal connections to secure gains for the city’s sanitationmen. A somewhat reluctant convert to AFSCME, DeLury considered himself a serious trade unionist and he admired the political power of the city’s private sector labor movement, particularly Central Trades and Labor Council (CTLC) chief Martin Lacey. Lacey’s stature peaked in 1950-51 after he successfully orchestrated a CTLC-led third-party effort to reelect Mayor Vincent Impellitteri over the objections the local Democratic Party leadership.\textsuperscript{43} Impressed by the audacity of the campaign, DeLury secretly entered into negotiations to take his five thousand members (eighty percent of AFSCME’s total membership in New York City) into the Teamsters.\textsuperscript{44} As Jack Bigel, a former UPWA activist who later worked for the Teamsters, remembered, DeLury “concluded that an apathetic AFSCME in New York, and elsewhere in the nation, could not supply him with the organization, finance, and political support which could be rendered by Lacey and the Teamsters.”\textsuperscript{45}

Feinstein soon followed DeLury. A long-time ally of then-Manhattan Borough President Robert F. Wagner Jr. and Democratic Party boss Carmine DeSapio, Feinstein shared some of DeLury’s reservations about AFSCME’s lack of visibility and influence in the city.\textsuperscript{46} Having taken his city drivers from the CSF in hope of securing a degree of autonomy and independence,
Feinstein was annoyed by what he perceived as the national union’s encroachment into council affairs, a sentiment only exacerbated by Wurf’s appointment.

For his part, Wurf believed that Feinstein represented the core of the council’s problems, complaining in early 1951 that Feinstein saw AFSCME as a set of “political clubs” dependent on “delivering political favors for a few” and “representing nothing more than those who have [political] sinecures or those attempting to get them.” With Zander’s blessing, Wurf began bypassing the old Feinstein organizations in the late 1940s by creating a series of new locals—some overlapping with existing bodies. Feinstein (correctly) read the new organizing drives as an effort by AFSCME’s national office to undercut his position as elected head of District Council 37, suspicions deepened when the union’s International Executive Board ruled that all AFSCME locals in New York City would have to affiliate with the council, ending the long-standing practice of independent charters and further eroding Feinstein’s political position within the union.

Sensing his position was tenuous, Feinstein reached out to the Teamsters to request affiliation. Wurf pounced, reporting to Zander that Feinstein was ‘playing footsie” wit the rival

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47 “Council 37,” Memorandum from Jerry Wurf to Arnold S. Zander, 1 March 1951, Box 2, Folder 6, Gordon W. Chapman Collection Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Gordon W. Chapman Collection Papers]. Wurf was not alone in voicing these concerns. In late January 1952, Henry Weiss, Secretary-Treasurer of Local 506 (hospital administrators), requested that the national office intervene and reorganize the council. Weiss’s critique of the Council under Feinstein’s leadership tracked closely with the grievances Wurf aired in private. Weiss claimed that the council was “undemocratic in its organization and control by a small clique of opportunists who unconscionably exploit it in true bureaucratic fashion and ‘play ball’ with the local corrupt political machine . . . for their personal gain.” “For small favors thus obtained for a few,” he continued, “they bargain away the economic interests of the many.” The existing leadership, he concluded, was “entirely lacking in sound trade union principles and healthy orientation in the labor movement.” Letter from Henry Weiss, Secretary-Treasurer of Hospital Administrative Employees, Local 506, 23 January 1952, Box 110, Folder 2, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer, Gordon W. Chapman Collection.

48 Notes, Interview with John Boer, 29 January 1979, Box 4, Folder 38, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; “Jan. 3 Phone Call with Jerry Wurf,” Memorandum from Arnold S. Zander to Files, 7 January 1952, Box 112, Folder 3, Arnold S. Zander Collection; Letter from Arnold S. Zander to Henry Feinstein, President, New York City District Council 37, 28 January 1952, Box 110, Folder 2, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer, Gordon W. Chapman Collection.

49 Barry Feinstein, Henry’s son and later long-time leader of Local 237, recalled the origins of the split differently. He remembered that his father and DeLury had left the Council because of ongoing fights with Zander over the
and promising to bring the bulk of AFSCME’s membership with him in a defection.\textsuperscript{50} Though Zander had likely already decided to move against Feinstein, the report forced his hand. On February 13, Zander authorized Wurf to “directly accost” Feinstein about the rumors and announced his own plan to personally visit the city to investigate the charge.\textsuperscript{51} Two weeks later, he suspended Feinstein and appointed Wurf as trustee for the District Council 37.\textsuperscript{52} The tensions came to a head in early March, when Wurf convened a disciplinary hearing in New York City to consider the charges against Feinstein. Faced with allegations that he had sought to defect and encouraged raiding, Feinstein argued that he had neither “conclusively [asked] for affiliation” nor encouraged anyone to defect, only counseled that disaffiliation from AFSCME might be the best path to material improvement.\textsuperscript{53} Perhaps most tellingly, when pressed on whether AFSCME or the Teamsters had proper jurisdiction over city laborers, Feinstein refused to answer.\textsuperscript{54}

Expelled from AFSCME, Feinstein was soon after introduced as President of the newly formed Teamsters Local 237, City Employees’ Union. He penned an open letter touting “Team up with the Teamsters” as the new organizing slogan for all city workers: “It doesn’t matter whether you’re a doctor, engineer, accountant, or rank and file worker, you belong in a union that has its eyes fixed on a sound objective—to better your standard of living by increasing your earnings and reducing the hardship of your labors.” Dismissing the “idle promises” of “Johnny-come-Latelies” (i.e., Wurf), Feinstein blasted AFSCME’s national leadership for its ineffective

designation of a Vice President to represent New York. Notes, Interview with Barry Feinstein, Local 237 Headquarters, 22 April 1981, Box 4, Folder 42, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
\textsuperscript{52} Telegram from Arnold S. Zander to Jerry Wurf, 29 February 1952, Box 110, Folder 2, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection.
\textsuperscript{53} Memorandum from Arnold S. Zander to Files, 10 March 1952, Box 110, Folder 2, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection.
\textsuperscript{54} Letter from Arnold S. Zander to Henry Feinstein, 19 March 1952, Box 110, Folder 2, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection.
interference in local affairs, concluding that he had “no alternative but to repudiate [Zander] and his international” and join “the most powerful union in the world.”

The defections of DeLury and Feinstein left Wurf with uncontested power in a union with just four hundred paying members. They only exacerbated AFSCME’s isolation in the city’s broader labor movement. Shortly after, Lacey announced at a CTLC meeting that Teamsters Local 237 was assuming responsibility for organizing municipal workers in the Parks and Hospital Departments, citing a declaration by national union president Dave Beck. Lacey then prevented Wurf from formally addressing the CTLC until 1953, claiming that labor councils (as opposed to union locals) were traditionally bared from representation. It was only after Wurf was elected president of AFSCME Local 924 that he managed to secure access to the CTLC, and many other AFSMCE locals were denied representation because their jurisdictions overlapped with the (oft-illegitimate) claims of existing private sector unions. While DeLury was named to the Civil Service Subcommittee almost immediately upon defecting to the Teamsters, AFSCME

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56 Joshua Freeman has observed that the postwar New York City labor movement was bound together by “a spirit of camaraderie and class solidarity,” but this attitude of cooperation rarely extended to public employee unions like AFSCME during the 1950s. Freeman, Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II (New York: The New Press), 25. Nor was this isolation limited to New York City. Nationally, historian Martin Halpern has noted, the AFL-CIO “rendered inconsequential support to public employee unions until the late 1960s.” Martin Halpern, Unions, Radicals, and Democratic Presidents: Seeking Social Change in the Twentieth Century (New York: Praeger, 2003), 84.

57 Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 3 April 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers. I have not been able to verify this recollection in the CTLC records. Bellush and Bellush, Union Power and New York, 16-20. Lacey (or at least Beck) was apparently strong enough to force William Green to contradict his earlier verdict that public sanitation lay squarely in AFSCME’s jurisdiction. In January 1950, Green wrote to DeLury, then of AFSCME, that the 1936 charter had granted the union “jurisdiction over garbage workers employed in the different cities . . . No other national union chartered by the American Federation of Labor is recognized as having jurisdiction over garbage workers in New York City or in any other city throughout the nation.” Letter from William Green to John DeLury, President, Uniformed Sanitation Men’s Association, Local 308, AFSCME, 9 January 1950, Box 65, Folder 7, Arnold S. Zander Collection.


59 “Laborers Local Becomes One of the Largest Among Municipals in U.S.; Officers Sworn In,” Spotlight, 16 March 1953, 1, 9.
was not granted representation until 1956. The pattern continued for much of the next decade: AFSCME was not afforded a seat on the CTLC Executive Council until the early 1960s, long after it had established its position as the leading public sector union in the city.  

The CTLC showed little interested in fostering the development of an independent public sector labor movement, consigning any effort to bring the political power of the city unions to bare on municipal labor issues to a five-person Civil Service Subcommittee. When Mayor O’Dwyer announced the formation of a relatively toothless study commission for the city’s labor system in 1948, AFSCME asked for the CTLC to demand union representation. The CTLC demurred, announcing that it preferred to deal directly with the mayor. Beyond voicing general support for higher wages and lower hours for city workers, the CTLC showed little interest in challenging the city’s complicated and politicized labor relations system through the mid-1950s. At one point in the early 1950s, Wurf became so frustrated with the conduct of the CTLC that he actively encouraged Zander to considering pulling AFSCME out of the AFL entirely, going so

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60 Executive Board Minutes, 24 May 1948, New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Microfilm Version; Regular Meeting Minutes, 15 January 1953, Box 3, Folder 3, New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Microfilm Version; Executive Board Minutes, 2 February 1953, Box 3, Folder 4, New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Microfilm Version; Regular Meeting Minutes, March 4, 1954, Box 3, Folder 4, New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Microfilm Version. Wurf’s main ally within the New York City labor movement was Paul Hall, head of the local Seafarers’ Union, whom Wurf had met in the late 1940s during a short-lived effort to organize stock market employees. The Seafarers chief rival on the waterfront was the International Longshoremen’s Association, which was allied with Lacey and the Teamsters on the CTLC, making Hall sympathetic to AFSCME’s marginalized position. Under his instructions, the Seafarers’ lent AFSCME timely financial support (and bulky additions to their picket lines) during the early 1950s. As Wurf put it, “it was us against the fucking world from time to time.” Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 2, Side A, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.

61 In May 1948, Feinstein requested that the CTLC back AFSCME’s demand that cost-of-living increases be folded permanently into the base salary of city workers. The CTLC refused to act, delegating the matter to the Civil Service Committee. Executive Board Minutes, 24 May 1948, Box 2, Folder 8, New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Microfilm Version 43, George Meany Memorial Archives, National Labor College, Silver Spring, Maryland [hereafter cited as New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Microfilm Version]. In early 1950, Feinstein requested that the CTLC Board grant AFSCME time to discuss its ongoing difficulties securing either pay increases or a 40-hour workweek, but was referred to the Civil Service Committee. Executive Board Minutes, 30 January 1950, Box 2, Folder 10, New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Microfilm Version. Executive Board Minutes, 14 May 1956, Box 3, Folder 6, New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Microfilm Version.

62 Regular Meeting Minutes, 6 January 1949; Executive Board Minutes, January 17, 1949, Box 2, Folder 9, New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Microfilm Version; Executive Board Minutes, 10 September 1951, Box 3, Folder 1, New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Microfilm Version.
far as to set up a meeting between Zander and CIO president Philip Murray. Initially intrigued, Zander found little support among the members of the union’s International Executive Board, and the proposed move soon stalled, leading Wurf to wistfully reflect that the missed “marvelous opportunity” set the union back a decade and a half.\textsuperscript{63}

For the rest of his life, Wurf claimed that the early factional infighting hinged on divergent visions of the public sector labor movement, often contrasting his pursuit of a purer and simpler brand of trade unionism with the narrower, more politicized activism that marked the Feinstein Council. Yet, to an important extent, this vision was a product rather than cause of these early developments. Left politically powerless by its isolation from the rest of the city’s labor movement, AFSCME had little choice but to adopt a more confrontational model.\textsuperscript{64} Wurf later recalled that his main goal in his first years at the head of District Council 37 was “to build a sound trade union base” for AFSCME in New York City. “I believed we should not act as lobbyists, or try and pick winners at the polls,” he told the \textit{New York Herald Tribune} a decade after taking charge, “but should deal . . . as collective bargainers with the city.”\textsuperscript{65}

It was a radical and ambitious vision, one that broke from both the previous history of public employee organization and the national union’s agenda and which promised to revolutionize the relationship between city workers and their bosses.

\textit{“The Liability of Being Genteel”}

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\textsuperscript{63} Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, n.d., Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
\textsuperscript{64} This argument draws on the interpretation of Bernard and Jewel Bellush, who noted that the limited political capacities of District Council 37 forced AFSCME to embrace a more overt emphasis on collective bargaining. Bellush and Bellush, \textit{Union Power and New York}, 27.
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On April 15, 1952, representatives from 26 local unions gathered for the first meeting of the reconstituted AFSCME District Council 37. In the aftermath of the Feinstein debacle, Zander suspended the original Council to give Wurf an opportunity to consolidate control. Some of the remaining groups had only token memberships, while the two largest concentrations, in Bellevue Hospital and the city’s Finance Department, had little in common. Lacking a strong foothold in any city department, Wurf cobbled together an ethnically, religiously, and occupationally balanced slate of officers to hold together the disparate groups. He relayed a pledge from AFSCME’s national headquarters to subsidize the council until it was in a position to function independently.\textsuperscript{66} Three months later, new Council President Nicholas DeProspero announced an ambitious goal: organize the 150,000 city workers within the union’s jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{67}

Although an obvious exaggeration, there were reasons for DeProspero’s optimism. The general indifference of the CTLC, the inactivity of the CSF, and the retreat of the old UPWA after its expulsion from the CIO left the overwhelming majority of civil service employees unorganized in the city. DeLury focused on expanding his foothold in the large sanitation department, which District Council 37 never seriously challenged, leaving only Feinstein’s IBT Local 237 as a serious rival for the majority of city workers. Though the Teamster affiliate started with far greater resources and the backing of the powerful CTLC, and though it later gained an experienced cadre of organizers by absorbing the remnants of the UPWA, it still had a narrow base in city hospitals and the city Housing Authority in the early 1950s.\textsuperscript{68}

One of the first things that Wurf did after reconstituting District Council 37 was narrow its focus. Though theoretically entitled to claim everyone but firefighters and teachers, Wurf

\textsuperscript{66} Minutes, First Meeting of the Reconstituted District Council 37, 15 April 1952, Box 110, Folder 3, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection; Bellush and Bellush, \textit{Union Power and New York}, 22-24.

\textsuperscript{67} “District Council 37 Hailed as Gain for City-Wide Unity,” \textit{Spotlight} (August 1952): 3

\textsuperscript{68} Bellush and Bellush, \textit{Union Power and New York}, 20-21.
announced at the first meeting that AFSCME would target only the departments controlled directly by the Board of Estimate, excluding transit and non-teaching school employees.\(^6^9\) Left, then, was a diverse, disjointed, but largely unorganized field of more than 80,000 potential members.

Many were white-collar clerical workers, who presented a unique set of challenges. As Marjorie Murphy has shown in her pioneering study of teachers' unions, the “ideology of professionalism” played an important role in redirecting organizations like the National Education Association away from traditional trade union models and toward more genteel forms of political activism and lobbying during the first half of the twentieth century. While not unique to white-collar work—Transportation Workers Union officials were astounded at the depth of what Joshua Freeman has called the “ethos of service” among transit workers that “discouraged disrupting passenger service” during the 1930s—cultural antagonism to unionism ran strongest in some of the city departments where AFSCME initially had the bulk of its membership.\(^7^0\)

Through much of the early 1950s, AFSCME sought to reach these workers by insisting that material concerns and collective organization were compatible with professional identities. In early 1953, for example, Spotlight, the union’s newspaper, linked the anxiety felt by many clerical workers to their reluctance to embrace the union model as “the Liability of Being Genteel.” “The white collar workers,” the editorial observed, “seem to feel that they would be losing some shreds of their shabby gentility by joining a union that would improve their lot,” as

\(6^9\) Minutes, First Meeting of the Reconstituted District Council 37, 15 April 1952, Box 110, Folder 3, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection. AFSCME also made no serious effort to organize police officers in New York, though it did elsewhere.

\(7^0\) Marjorie B. Murphy, Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Freeman, In Transit, 119.
if it “will somehow demean them.” Story after story detailed the declining relative status of clerical employees—“ever since union organization has become strong,” a May 1953 survey noted, “factory workers have been winning vacations, paid holidays, pensions, health benefits, and all the other advantages that used to be part of only white collar jobs.” A particularly pointed March 1952 editorial pronounced that “White collar workers can get just as hungry as blue collar ones.” A March 1954 editorial cartoon depicted a vest-clad, visor-wearing civil service employee unshackling himself from the “white collar” chains that bound him to a “dead promotion list,” “low wages,” “job insecurity,” and “hollow prestige,” while carrying his union card toward a sun-lit horizon.

Wurf later came to believe that the civil service system was useful and legitimate only as a tool for hiring and promotion, not for governing labor relations, but this was clearer in retrospect than in the early 1950s. At the start, at least, Wurf recognized that the notion of civil service was deeply imbedded in the mentality of many government employees, particularly those who entered the sector prior during the Great Depression, which strengthened their appreciation

71 “Editorial: The Liability of Being Genteel,” Spotlight, January 1953, 2, 3. The title of the editorial was inspired by (and opened with) a quote from a 1555 letter from William Cecil: “A man can buy nothing in the market with gentility.”
72 Salary information published by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York showed that for the year ending in Feb. 1953, production and manufacturing workers increased their pay by an average of 6.4%, whereas those for clerical and professional employees grew by only 3.9%—which Spotlight used as an affirmation of the power of collective bargaining. “The same story has been repeated year after year. It is not surprising in view of the strong union organization among production workers compared to the growing, but relatively weaker, unions among white-collar workers.” The article also includes a table analyzing the increase in weekly earnings since 1939 among various sectors: construction up by 206%, mining up by 204%, manufacturing up by 198%, public utilities by 127%, and clerical and professional workers by 112%. “District Council 37 Launches ‘Twin’ Drive,” Spotlight, 1 May 1953, 4. Traditional disparities between the uniformed protective services and non-uniformed general workforce also left police officers and fire fighters significantly better off in terms of pay and benefits than general employees. Like the general private-public sector gap, Wurf used the pension discrepancy as an organizing tool, emphasizing that the “good fortune” of the uniformed workers sprang from their long history of collective organization. “They are and have been highly organized,” he wrote, in October 1952, “while the other employees in the city’s service have only just begun to fight on a united organizational level.”  “50-50 Means a Square Deal,” Spotlight, October 1952, 2. Many of the columns in Spotlight are unsigned, making authorship of any particular piece is difficult to establish. At this early date, however, the funding for Spotlight came from the International headquarters through Wurf, so the content can reasonably be assumed to reflect his views.
for government employment’s superior job security. “Collective bargaining,” Bernard and Jewel Bellush later recalled Wurf telling them, “had to be superimposed upon the civil service system and not offered as an alternative.”

From the start, however, Wurf believed that AFSCME’s future in New York City had to be rooted in blue-collar workers, despite the fact that the union’s chief rival, the Teamsters, targeted many of the same groups. AFSCME’s early focus on the more marginal occupational groups reflected both Wurf’s personal preferences and his broader visions of the public sector movement. His background as an organizer in the city’s service industry made him more comfortable with the racial and occupational diversity of the city’s laborers, street cleaners, and other blue-collar groups. Wurf later admitted that he was initially “fascinated” by the less prestigious groups and desperately wanted to relate to them—to the point that he began to speak, as he recalled, “ungrammatically,” adopting a sometimes awkward form of “street language” to hide his own relatively comfortable background and superior education. Ida Klaus, adviser to Wagner and architect of the city’s landmark labor relations system, later told biographer Joseph Goulden that Wurf was particularly “good” with blue-collar workers and “really concerned with their problems.”

Wurf also believed that the lowest-paid city employees provided a sounder foundation for breaking from the council’s older, politicized model of operations, that, as he later put it, “the blue collar workers understood the meaning of the trade union movement far more clearly than their white collar counterparts.” They were also more drawn to his oft-clumsy early appeals—that “government is no goddamn different from industry” and “civil service selection and

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75 Typed Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 8 February 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
76 Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, n.d., Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
77 Quoted in Goulden, *Jerry Wurf*, 53.
78 Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, n.d., Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
promotion standards are no substitute for workers having a real voice in determining their wages and working conditions.”

Yet, outside of the small group of hospital employees, AFSCME lacked a foothold among the city’s blue-collar groups until the summer of 1952, when Wurf and the council’s miniscule staff stumbled upon an obscure provision of New York State’s Labor Law of 1921, which required government employees be paid the “prevailing rate” for similar jobs in the private sector. Inconsistently enforced in the city during the 1940s, the issue emerged as a more pressing grievance in the early 1950s, as private sector compensation soared above the $33 a week that the average laborer or mechanic took home. Labor lawyers periodically took up the claims, which had to be filed with the City Comptroller’s office annually—Wurf later charged them with making a racket out of the issue, quick to file but slow to settle, running up huge legal fees in the process. Urged on by Bill Evans, a veteran of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists and the first staffer Wurf hired after taking over the council, Wurf approached the laborers, promising to secure the settlement without the contingent fees by leveraging (in a considered exaggeration) “the muscle of the whole American Federation of Labor.”

Meanwhile, and over the strong objections of Lacey and the CTLC, Wurf approached City Comptroller Lazarus Joseph, who was eager to find a less cumbersome process for addressing the issue. By early summer, the two reached a tentative agreement that set aside $5 million to

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80 According to a report Wurf filed with Zander in June 1950, a prevailing rate claim was settled in the Sanitation Department by freezing in previous adjustments amounting to an average of $350 per employee. With DeLury’s blessing, Wurf wrote to Zander, the lawyer in the case had taken a 10 percent contingency fee from each employee, amounting to something near $50,000 for the group. Memorandum from Arnold S. Zander to Files, 20 June 1950, Box 2, Folder 6, Gordon W. Chapman Collection Papers.
meet existing prevailing rate claims and simplify the process for workers in the future.\textsuperscript{82} In early July, Wurf presented the complicated settlement to an overflow crowd at Werdermann’s Hall, two blocks east of Union Square Park. After explaining the various options available to the employees, a necktie-less Wurf promised that AFSCME would handle the submission of individual claims regardless of union membership, while also allowing those interested in joining the union to pay their dues out of their future paychecks. The scheme was a stroke of genius for the fledgling union; hundreds of workers signed membership cards at the meeting, providing the base of Local 924, which became the bedrock of the reconstituted Council, representing nearly half of all its workers by early 1953.\textsuperscript{83}

Buoyed by the gains made from the prevailing rate settlement, Wurf became more interested in forcing the city to implement some formal system of union recognition. In the early 1950s, the best that union leaders could offer their members was a presence at the Board of Estimate budget meetings or representation in backroom deal-making and grievance adjustment. The limited arrangement posted two sets of problems for AFSCME: Following the defections of Feinstein and DeLury, the union lacked the political influence necessary to secure gains through the informal networks—one of the main reasons that the CTLC and the city’s private sector unions showed little interest in formalizing the labor relations system—while the union’s modest membership was often overwhelmed at the Board of Estimate hearings where, as the union’s newspapers later sarcastically put it, time was freely allotted to “groups [which] could establish a quorum in a phone booth.” Moreover, even when general pay increases and other benefits were

\textsuperscript{82} “City Laborers End 9-Year Pay Dispute: $4,000,000 Settlement Slated for $13,000,000 Claim,” \textit{New York Times}, 1 July 1952, 31; Executive Board Minutes, 16 June 1952, Box 3, Folder 2, New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Microfilm Version. Much to DeLury’s dismay, the issue was dispatched a Prevailing Rate subcommittee. When Wurf brought the issue to the CTLC again in 1955, though, the Executive Board voted to oppose placing all laborers under the law, preferring the more political backroom process. Executive Board Minutes, 28 November 1955, Box 3, Folder 5, New York Central Trades & Labor Council Records, Microfilm Version.

\textsuperscript{83} Bellush and Bellush, \textit{Union Power and New York}, 33-38.
secured in though the Board of Estimate, it was often difficult for Wurf and the union staff to win credit for AFSCME in the eyes of potential members.\textsuperscript{84}

The push for a more formal process of representation betrayed AFSCME’s need to institutionalize its tenuous membership gains. Lacking the financial or political resources of many of its rivals, AFSCME relied on a decentralized, bottom-up model of organizing, leaning heavily on the efforts of individual members to augment its miniscule staff. While the union tried to put a philosophical spin on the approach—ridiculing other unions that looked “to the top brass . . . for leadership, for organizing, for the conduct of negotiation, and the settling of grievances”—the more organic organizing mode marked a pragmatic concession to the limited capacities of the overworked staff, which, as of July 1953, numbered only four full-time organizers for a potential membership of over 200,000 in the metropolitan area.\textsuperscript{85}

As a result, the union lent only a modicum of support and guidance to many early organizing drives. Most campaigns began with clandestine meetings between Wurf and a small group of rank-and-file activists, many of whom had entered government employment during the Depression decade, providing a strong pool of volunteer and part-time organizers of a liberal-left bent. Wurf would then turn the department over to one of the paid union staff (who often had only sporadic contact with the employees) while the District Council 37 office set about

\textsuperscript{84} Jerry Wurf, “Random Reckonings,” \textit{Spotlight}, October 1952, 1, 2. When the annual budget came up for consideration in the spring of 1953, for instance, the Teamsters and IAFF played the leading roles in organizing demonstrations. Wurf’s claim that low pay would lead to strikes and service disruptions was quoted by the \textit{New York Times}, but otherwise AFSCME was absent from much of the news coverage, despite its efforts to rally the membership. Charles G. Bennett, “City Workers Fight Budget at Hearing; Threaten Strikes,” \textit{New York Times}, 14 April 1953, 1, 24.

\textsuperscript{85} “Editorial: Who Organizes Whom?” \textit{Spotlight}, November 1952, 2. Bernard and Jewel Bellush, \textit{Union Power and New York}, 27. Dick Mitchell was assigned to New Jersey. The other three split the New York City workforce as follows: Gene Schwartz covered the white-collar, semi-professional, and hospital employees, Bill Evans was assigned to unskilled and semi-skilled workers, and Bruno Piscitello was tasked with consolidating the union’s hold “reasonably established jurisdictions”—Parks, Water Supply, etc. “Current Activities of the New York Office,” Memorandum from Jerry Wurf to Arnold S. Zander, 21 July 1952, Arnold S. Zander Collection.
incorporating the new members’ concerns into its presentations before the Board of Estimate and other city agencies.  

Between 1952 and 1957, the Council launched 55 new locals or organizing committees. The absence of a dues check-off system required the union to direct its limited resources and personnel to the time-consuming process of collecting members’ monthly levies, further incentive toward the decentralized pattern of small-scale and narrowly-drawn campaigns. The council’s operations were fluid and chaotic—as was the office at 321 Broadway. When national Secretary-Treasurer Gordon Chapman visited New York City in 1955, he reported that the staff juggled overlapping functions that “rarely followed the easy organizing, research, and administrative categories” and included “a great deal of work that is normally expected of and done by local unions.” Wurf, never an eager or capable administrator, relished the work of organizing campaigns and public demonstrations, but exerted little control over a convoluted filing system at a headquarters that Chapman lamented was uncomfortable in the summer and “not a particularly healthy place to work during cold weather.”  

Though the climate later improved with the Council’s relocation to 68 Trinity Place, the disorganized style followed—in the early 1960s, one reporter, setting the scene for his interview with Wurf, described the office “cluttered with notes, correspondence, cigarette-strewn ashtrays, and cardboard containers holding the dregs of coffee and tomato soup.”  

District Council 37’s early operations were almost wholly dependent on the financial support of the national office, and much of Wurf’s time and energy was spent pleading with the

86 Beginning in November 1952, Council 37 held a one-day “educational institute” to “as a means of making people aware of the role of their local and intentional unions, of the organizational tools at their disposal, and of building a sense of responsibility at ever level in the organization to the union.” “Educational Institute,” Memorandum from Jerry Wurf to Arnold Zander, 28 November 1952, Box 112, Folder 5, Arnold S. Zander Collection  
87 Memorandum from Gordon W. Chapman to Arnold S. Zander, 4 April 1955, Box 110, Folder 6, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection.  
88 Molleson, “Jerry Wurf, Unionist.”
Madison headquarters for additional resources. Wurf often began by touting the nearly unlimited membership potential that city departments held—in February 1953, for instance, he sent a memorandum to the national office boasting that AFSCME “could probably have almost every laborer in the city . . . if we had the manpower to go out and get them in the next couple months,” “conservatively” estimating that the union could win at least a thousand members “if we can go after them now” and that another thousand were available “if enough hard work were put in on it.” He regularly reminded Zander of the unique challenges facing the union in New York City, claiming that, unlike other areas of the country, the locals were basically incapable of servicing their own members because of the complexity of the city government. “In order to settle the simplest grievance,” he complained, “it sometimes takes as many as half-a-dozen visits to . . . public officials . . . [and] politicians,” requiring a much larger Council staff. Wurf also cautioned that the union faced a “competitive situation” in the city that required a more sustained and aggressive approach to organizing, lest the union lose its delicate foothold. “The members are turned into shoppers,” he complained, “and must be convinced a dozen times a year.”

Despite the prevailing rate settlement and the regular (if rarely unquestioned) support of the national office, District Council 37 made little progress in winning a formal system of labor relations from the city through mid-1953. While the political power of the CTLC gave the Teamsters an informal avenue to exert pressure for wage and benefit increases in the departments it organized, AFSCME was forced to focus on the more modest goal of adjudicating individual

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89 “Organizational Possibilities In New York Area Which Would Bring Immediate Results if Exploited Now,” Memorandum from Jerry Wurf to AFSCME Headquarters, 27 February 1953, Box 112, Folder 6, Arnold S. Zander Collection.

90 Zander’s replies were often cautious, warning of the need for economy at the Council office. In one representative exchange in January 1952, Zander urged Wurf to curb the use of photographs in the union newspaper and cease distributing Christmas cards around local officers and business to reduce expenses. Memorandum from Arnold S. Zander to Files, 23 January 1952, Box 112, Folder 3, Arnold S. Zander Collection. Through at least the mid-1950s, the national union paid perhaps two-thirds of the rent on the Council 37 office, owing in part to financial difficulties of the city locals prior to the establishment of dues checkoff. Memorandum from Arnold S. Zander to Files, 2 October 1952, Box 46, Folder 13, Arnold S. Zander Collection.
grievances and lobbying for general pay raises at the convoluted Board of Estimate hearings. While the union’s staff remained cynical about the political promises of elected leaders—in 1952, Spotlight sarcastically praised the election-year attentiveness of city leaders, noting that “no little service has been too much to ask” and “we would hardly be surprised at this point to see them turn up to tuck us in our little trundle beds, inquiring gently whether we’re really comfy”—Wurf was forced to concede by mid-1952 that the union’s future in the city hinged in large part on having “the right kind of administration in City Hall.”

The 1953 mayoral election marked the first time that AFSCME had to seriously consider the role it would play in municipal politics. Desperate to secure an alternative to “Impy”—who Wurf privately dismissed as “a stooge” for the CTLC—Wurf arranged for City Council President Rudolph Halley and Manhattan Borough President Robert F. Wagner, Jr., the Liberal and Democratic nominees for mayor, to address a group of shop stewards and local union officers in late October. Both Wagner and Halley pledged to overhaul of the city’s civil service system, to implement a five day-forty hour work week, to fold previous cost-of-living adjustments into permanent salaries, and to establish a labor relations board for city workers, but only Wagner agreed to include collective bargaining, grievance procedures, and union recognition—consistent with his earlier pledge to imitate “the enlightened labor relations machinery of private industry.”

The promise struck a cord with Wurf. Exhausted by chronic ad hoc arrangements and eager to consolidate the union’s position, Wurf also came to believe by the mid-1950s that public

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employees were entitled to the same basic rights as their private sector counterparts and to systems and procedures for making those rights meaningful. As he later put it to one biographer, albeit with the benefit of hindsight and three decades of organizational success:

All workers should have the right for form, join, and assist in the management of organizations of their own choosing. They should be able to do this without interference, coercion, or reprisal: to bargain collectively with their employers in the determination of their wages, hours, and conditions of work; to be protected by written, signed agreements; to be able to participate in elections to determine whether they want such representation; to be able to handle grievances in a reasonable fashion; to obtain that kind of dignity which has not characterized the public employee.95

AFSCME backed Wagner—“we went out and knocked up the city,” Evans later remembered—and claimed credit for his victory in November.96

Wagner’s election came at an inauspicious moment for the public sector labor movement in New York City: municipal unionism was at a twenty-year low, and only the Police Benevolent Association (PBA), the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), and the Teamsters had a visible presence in city affairs.97 The labor relations system in New York City was highly decentralized—decisions about wages and job classifications were made at several politicized levels (including the Board of Estimate, the Bureau of the Budget, the City Council, the Municipal Civil Service Commission, and the Mayor’s office), while day-to-day work policy determined by the 100-plus city departments and agencies. Wagner promised a more formal system, but only in vague terms. Formulating the new labor relations system took time—eight frustrating months, as it turned out.

95 Quoted in full from Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 52.
96 Wurf, Jerry Wurf, 53. On the significance of Wagner’s pledge in earning labor support, see Freeman, Working-Class New York, 101-102. As Freeman notes, though, labor’s support for Wagner reflected a range of issues that cannot be reduced to public sector collective bargaining.
97 Maier, City Unions, 44-45.
Until Wagner’s Interim Order was issued in July 1954, AFSCME was forced to rely on an organizational strategy based on an inflated public profile. In July 1953, Wurf boasted to Zander that “a few victories and good exploitation of same public relations-wise” had made AFSCME “the ‘leading’ employee organization in town.”\(^98\) The strikingly presumptuous assessment of the union’s position, necessary to perpetuate the flow of national union aid to the city’s operations, revealed much about Wurf’s reading of the landscape in New York City in the years before the creation of a formal collective bargaining system: until mid-1954, AFSCME’s ability to organize depended in large part on maintaining the perception that it could make a difference in the politicized arenas of city budget making, so it maximized the publicity attached to any union meeting or demonstration.

The Board of Estimate hearings became a central forum for this strategy—both as the center for budget decisions and as a venue for public spectacle. In March 1954, District Council 37 released a plan to replace “the crazy-quilt of pay schedules now in use with a modern, logical system” by reducing the number of job and pay classifications from 130 to 21, calling for the implementation of annual raises and the elimination of special job designations used to reward “cronies and favorites of the supervisor.”\(^99\)

Though the 1954 plan was more detailed than previous demands, the real change was in the way in which the council presented its demands. Though Wurf had raised the possibility of a formal strike in 1953—claiming in the course of a somewhat exaggerated presentation to the Board of Estimate that regardless of legality, “vital services will not be functioning” without some movement on pay and collective bargaining rights—the discussion of such actions became


both more common and more expansive in the year that followed.\textsuperscript{100} “What would happen,” a March editorial asked, “if employees would say just once: ‘We can’t get around to provide water, hospital, fire and police protection, public health, or other vital services until those who were elected by the people to solve the city’s problems knuckle down and do something about solving those problems.”\textsuperscript{101} The more militant language coincided with more elaborate demonstrations.\textsuperscript{102} On March 25, 1954, hundreds of laborers from Local 924 turned out at City Hall to protest the city’s failure to follow through on wage and benefit promises made the previous year—winning AFSCME a meeting with Mayor Wagner and city Budget Director Abraham Beame, though not any immediate action on its grievances.\textsuperscript{103}

The March 24 turnout persuaded Wurf and the rest of the Council leadership to call another rally on April 8, to coincide with the release of Wagner’s first budget. “We can all get a decent wage increase this year, if 120,000 city workers and their families show up at City Hall on April 8,” the union promised, demanding a flat raise of $750 and dismissing the administration’s preliminary offer of a $150-$250 pay increase as fit for some “never-never land” and “completely out of touch with everyday realities of everyday prices.” More than two thousand municipal employees turned out at the rally to “dispel, once and for all, the old chestnut that they would rather sit around and bemoan their plight than do something about changing the conditions that make them among the poorest paid in the land”—though only a portion of those

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Charles G. Bennett, “City Workers Fight Budget at Hearing; Threaten Strikes: 2,500 Picket Session as Their Leaders Denounce Mayor’s Fiscal Plans for Year,” \textit{New York Times}, 14 April 1953, 1, 24.}
\footnote{“Editorial: Do It Right, Mr. Mayor, Do It Now, Mr. Governor,” \textit{Spotlight}, 20 March 1954. In September 1953, for instance, \textit{Spotlight} reprinted excerpts from an open letter from Wurf that warned that unless the city agreed to meet the union’s “requests” on pay and benefit grievances AFSCME would “have to seek a more dramatic manner in which to take our case to the public.” “Bid City Act on Pay, Hours, Bonus Before Election,” \textit{Spotlight}, 15 September 1953, 1, 2.}
\footnote{In April 1953, for example, AFSCME planned a mass demonstration to coincide with the budget hearings—only be preempted by a last-minute schedule change that moved the issue up two days on the calendar, which Wurf optimistically pronounced as evidence of “the effectiveness of our campaign and the Administration’s reluctance to face its outraged employees.” “SCME Hits Imply Budget: Calls for Huge Turnout,” \textit{Spotlight}, 15 April 1953, 3, 6.}
\footnote{“3,000 Laborers Demand Pact at City Hall Rally,” \textit{Spotlight}, 7 April 1954, 1, 3.}
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present were from AFSCME, since several other unions conducted (uncoordinated) events that day. The increasingly militant rhetoric was intended in part to draw a contrast between AFSCME and the rest of the city labor movement—Wurf used his rally remarks to blast the “vest-pocket unions and sell-out artists” who “quit the fight without striking a blow” and “scurried around back doors, hats in hand, willing to accept any kind of handout” from their political allies.

Although the initial rally was focused narrowly on the proposed pay increase—to dramatize their point, AFSCME activists distributed free bags of peanuts at the rally, “compliments of the Board of Estimate”—Wurf used his presentation to the Board of Estimate five days later to blast the lack of a formal collective bargaining process. Echoing the militant tone of his rally remarks, Wurf pleaded that he was “at [his] limit in restraining our loyal union members from ceasing to perform essential services,” strategically masking the implicit threat with powerlessness.

Frustrated with Wagner’s delay in implementing a meaningful system of bilateral negotiation, Wurf dismissed the public budget hearings as farcical, charging that “no more than two commas, three decimal points and four parentheses” would be changed from the preliminary plan drafted in the backrooms of Gracie Mansion and City Hall. Proclaiming that the city operated on “an odious feudal basis,” each department and agency head “like the baron of his own estate,” Wurf praised collective bargaining as “the only just and equitable method of adjudicating working conditions and salaries.” Turning his rhetoric on the absent mayor, Wurf outlined a five-point plan that included union recognition, grievance machinery, dues check-off, 

104 “SCME Asks $750 Raise at April 8 Mass Rally,” Spotlight, 7 April 1954, 1, 2.
105 “SCME’s City Hall Rally Starts Battle Against ‘Peanut Raises’,” Spotlight 24 April 1954, 2.
third-party arbitration, and formal contracts—“not... a little Wagner Act but a Big Wagner Act, which would enable the city employee to take his place along-side his brothers in industry.”

When the 1954 budget was released in early May, Wurf was again disappointed. There were some improvements, the byzantine 130-plus pay schedule steps had been reduced to 31, but the starting salary for city workers remained more than 50% lower than District Council 37 had demanded ($2,000 rather than $3,100) and the pay increments between steps remained smallest at the bottom of the ladder, making it difficult for low-paid city workers to keep up with inflation. Spotlight’s editorial captured the union’s ambivalence: “We are glad the city has, at long last, made these first steps towards a salary plan, but the steps are feeble, halting and, in many instances, backwards rather than forward.”

In the years before formal collective bargaining, though, AFSCME’s rejection of the salary plan had no practical significance. The new pay schedule offered by the mayor and Board of Estimate did not have to be accepted by the workers, only the Civil Service Commission.

In the weeks that followed, Wurf tried to use the 1954 budget to underscore the need for a formal system of labor relations in the city. In this effort, the union was blessed by the timely resolution of a long-standing dispute over the wages and hours of the city laborers of Local 924. As part of the settlement, all city laborers received a $155 raise and a forty-hour week, and the prevailing wage adjustments were permanently folded into the city pay schedule—translated to raises of up to $655 a year for some of the lowest-paid laborers. On May 21, the membership of Local 924 voted overwhelmingly to accept the package, a pointed contrast to the powerlessness with which the union had had to abide the general budget a few weeks earlier. In endorsing the

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110 “SCME Rejects Pay Plan, Calls It ‘Unfair to Labor’,” Spotlight, 17 May 1954, 1, 3.
agreement, Wurf vowed that it was “only the beginning . . . of a new day for laborers employed by the City of New York.”

The breakthrough came soon after. On July 21, 1954, Robert F. Wagner issued an Interim Order proclaiming “the basic policy of the City of New York to assure its employees full freedom of association and designation of bona fide and responsible representatives of their own choosing for the purpose of the orderly presentation and adjustment of their grievances and, at appropriate times, their proposals concerning the terms and conditions of their employment.”

The action built on the mayor’s January 1954 creation of a city Department of Labor, which included a civil service division to arbitrate the grievances of government employees and an informational division to ensure compliance with prevailing rate requirements, by guaranteeing the right of city workers to join unions and providing a formal role for those unions in discipline and grievance hearings.

District Council 37 greeted Wagner’s new labor policy as “the coming of age of the City of New York in the shouldering of its obligations to its employees”—promising that it would “establish order out of the long-standing chaos in labor relations between employees and the city.”

The measure had its limits: Though it specifically barred Communist and Fascist organizations—which the union supported—it made no effort to prohibit ineffective company union-like groups; it lacked a mechanism for dues deduction, which was of critical importance to the still financially vulnerable Council; most importantly, it did nothing to alter the unilateral

111 “Local 924 Okays New Wage Offer,” Spotlight, June 1954, 1, 3.
112 “SCME Hails Department as ‘First Step’ to Humane Policy,” Spotlight, 15 January 1954, 3. The grievance process laid down by the order involved four steps: 1) complaints were made verbally or in writing by the worker or the union to a supervisor; if it wasn’t resolved within 2 days, the process moved on; 2) complaints were submitted in writing within 5 days of step 1, and subsequently acted upon by a representative of the Department of Agency; 3) within 5 working days of the Step 2 decision, the worker could appeal to the Commissioner or Department and Agency head, who had 5 days to render a decision; 4) if the grievance was still not resolved, it could be pursued through the Department of Labor (and, eventually, the mayor). “SCME Hails Edict: Interim Order on Labor Relations Guarantees Right to Join Unions,” Spotlight, August 1954, 2.
character of pay and benefit determination, and fell far short of the system of collective bargaining prevailing in the private sector.

Whatever its shortcomings, however, the Interim Order conferred a sort of legitimacy on the still-nascent project of public sector unionization. “The City of New York has, at long last, officially proclaimed the right of city employees to join labor unions of their own choosing . . . but it is up to employees to exercise these rights,” the union paper warned in September 1954. “Rights are not self-operating nor does grievance machinery work for employees who will not use it.” By embracing the rhetoric of the private sector model, in a sense, the apparently simple (and relatively toothless) Interim Order unintentionally validated and even encouraged a confrontational mode of representation, setting the stage for a decade of breakthroughs in New York and laying the foundation for a national revolution in public sector labor relations.

“Clean, Militant, Anti-Communist Unionism in the Civil Service”

The Interim Order came at a key juncture for Wurf. The patience of the national union leadership was waning by the mid-1950s. Zander, who had gone further than civil service purists like Garey might have wanted in expanding AFSCME’s investments in New York City, pressed Wurf to institutionalize the union’s gains and put the council on a surer financial footing. When Wurf asked for more aid in November 1953, Zander agreed only reluctantly. “As we have a greater measure of success in our campaign in New York City,” Zander reminded Wurf, “the proportionate position of the international union and the absolute expenditures made by the international union should decrease.” The concerns persisted through 1954, and in early November, Zander dispatched Director of Organizing Thomas Morgan to investigate the

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Council’s progress. Morgan reported that while AFSCME had successfully created “a big front with the city officials and other unions giving the impression that we have a membership of from 15 to 20 thousand members,” the real paying membership was much lower and less stable.  

Ten days later, Zander traveled to New York to communicate the national union’s concerns, warning that AFSCME feared a “financially losing situation” in the city. Wurf countered that the union would have “a handsome and paying situation” once it reached its goal of 20,000-25,000 employees, and pleaded for more time and resources. Upon his return, Zander confided in an internal memorandum that his pleas for cutbacks “brought some signs of resentment as well as questioning and doubt about our actions,” adding that he believed “most everyone in New York is working very hard and feeling pressure.”

It was in this context of both national union impatience and increasing anxiety about AFSCME’s position that Wurf launched, and Zander sanctioned, a string of anti-Communist attacks on the Teamsters union. The SCMWA and its successor, the UPWA, developed strong Communist contingents during the 1940s until it was purged from the CIO in 1947. While the purge effectively killed the UPWA, many of its activists eventually made their way into other organizations, and Feinstein’s IBT Local 237 proved particularly accommodating toward the experienced and capable organizers. Wurf believed the influx of former Communists was a potentially explosive development, one that threatened to split the Teamsters from City Hall, but

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116 Memorandum from Thomas Morgan to Arnold Zander, 5 November 1954, Box 110, Folder 5, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection.
119 The Teamsters were hardly alone. Communists dominated at least part of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, the Transit Workers Union, the National Maritime Union, the Furriers, the American Communication Association, the United Office and Professional Workers of America, the United Public Workers, the Shoeworkers, the Furniture Workers, and the RWDSU, as well as a host of individual AFL craft unions. Freeman, Working-Class New York, 60.
Zander was initially wary. For one thing, AFSCME had its own connections with the radical left in other states, most notably California—Wurf later remembered once inquiring at headquarters after hearing rumors of Communist-led locals on the West Coast, only to be told that “their politics may be red, but their per capita dues are green.” Wurf continued to press the issue through early 1953, repeatedly urging Zander to reach out to the Teamsters’ national office and protest Local 237’s harboring of “the hardcore leadership of the Communist-led, CIO-expelled United Public Workers.” In April, Zander finally complied, drafting a letter to Teamster president Dave Beck expressing his “grave concern” that a “hard core of communists [and] fellow travelers” was using Local 237 “as a Trojan horse in order to gain access to the House of Labor.” A separate editorial in Spotlight claimed that the “die-hard adherents of Soviet policy” threatened to discredit all public sector unions. “The presence of these verminous creatures in an organization jeopardizes the gains and job security of all members,” particularly those committed to AFSCME’s project of “clean, militant anti-Communist unionism in civil service.”

At Zander’s urging, Wurf held out going public with the charges for almost another year. While he continued to press the case in his reports to the national office—dismissing Local 237 as a “party-line clique” legitimised by a “Democratic Party hack”—Zander ordered patience.

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120 Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, 3 April 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
121 “Teamster Local Branded Red,” Spotlight, 1 April 1953, 3.
122 “Editorial: Boot Them Out?” Spotlight, 1 April 1953, 2. It is worth noting that Wurf and AFSCME were at least consistent on this point. For instance, they asked the Supreme Court of New York to enjoin the use of an Employee Security Questionnaire, citing its “responsibility as a union to zealously protect the rights, privileges and other emoluments of city employees who are innocent of any disloyalty.” But the union also proclaimed its support for the “objectives and spirit of the Security Risk Law,” fearing only that it was poorly executed, unduly broad and lacking in due process protections in the determination of subversive groups. District Council 37 wanted the law tweaked, but did not object to its basic premise. “A Trap for the Innocent: Loyalty Quiz Seen as Job Threat,” Spotlight, 24 December 1953, 3.
through early 1955, confiding in a private self-address memorandum that “Jerry will have to wait a little longer before blasting this New York City Teamster local.”

Zander claimed that his loyalty to the broader labor movement prevented him from unleashing Wurf’s attacks, but it is also likely that he hoped the Teamsters might withdraw its support from Local 237, leaving it more vulnerable to AFSCME without exacerbating the tensions between the two national unions. In February 1955, he issued another letter to the Teamsters regional office, reminding them that AFSCME had “carefully avoided using the Communist orientation of the real leadership of [Local 237]” despite pressure from its own people, who felt it “the most effective weapon for defense for our organization.” Zander closed the letter by cautioning that he had “an impelling responsibility” to his union, and that he could not “properly deny too long the use of the information we have at hand.”

A few weeks later, Zander and Wurf traveled to the Teamster’s national headquarters in Washington, making an appointment with Thomas Flynn, Eastern Regional Director, only to be kept in a waiting room for hours. With New York City scheduled to begin a series of public hearings on a broader labor relations program, Zander finally authorized Wurf to go public with his charges. “I felt we could

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123 Memorandum from Arnold S. Zander to Files, 30 December 1954, Box 110, Folder 7, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection; Memorandum from Arnold S. Zander to Files, 20 January 1955, Box 65, Folder 10, Arnold S. Zander Collection.
124 Letter from Arnold S. Zander to Thomas Flynn, Easter Conference, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, 17 February 1955, Box 65, Folder 10, Arnold S. Zander Collection. It is worth noting that AFSCME was not alone in using the issue as a tool of jurisdictional warfare. In 1957, after one of the activists in question had left the Teamsters, Local 237 published a pamphlet accusing AFSCME of harboring communist sympathizers. Henry Feins of Local 237 urged Wagner to initiate an investigation into District Council 37, charging that Elliot Godoff, a former Local 237 official dismissed in Feb. 1957 because of alleged ties to left-wing organizations, had attempted to convince members of Local 237 to switch allegiances to AFSCME. Six affidavits testified to Godoff’s “activities on behalf of the State, County and Municipal Employees—the same union, ironically, that had initiated charges of left-wing associations against him in the first place and that had put pressure upon the City Administration earlier in the year to withdraw recognition from Local 237.” An affidavit by Reuben E. Jackson, housekeeping aide at Bellevue Hospital, testified to being present at a meeting in June 1957 with Godoff and Wurf in which plans to “destroy Local 237” were discussed. (All of the affidavits spoke to actions by Godoff, none by Wurf). “City Administration to Investigate State, County and Municipal Employees Union: Withdrawal of Recognition Likely If Charges Found to be Correct,” Pamphlet, City Employees Union, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, n.d., Box 1, Folder 2, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers].
no longer hold back,” he told AFSCME Secretary-Treasurer Gordon Chapman a few days later.

“Any further delay on our part was giving the communists further opportunity to strengthen their hold on city employees in New York City.”

On March 23, during a public hearing called by the Department of Labor, Wurf demanded that any new system bar subversive groups, but was preempted in addressing the Local 237 issue by an official from the Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU), which was equally eager to discredit the Teamsters. A few days later, though, Wurf raised the issue in a telephone call with Joseph O’Grady, city Commissioner of Labor. Blending genuine concern with thinly-veiled blackmail, Wurf warned that “a public attack on Local 237 might bring an onus on many other IBT locals about whose loyalty there is no question” and “might give fuel to those who are opposed to the city administration because of the close connection that Feinstein has with a number of leading members.” “Mayor Wagner himself,” Wurf insincerely worried, “could be smeared for not taking any steps to cope with the situation.”

The gambit failed. When the administration refused to put pressure on its allies in the Teamsters, Wurf was forced to finally go public with the charges in the second Department of Labor hearing on April 18—only to find that the revelations were both less explosive and less effective than he had hoped, in part because he ended up publicly “outing” only Jack Bigel,

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125 Memorandum from Gordon Chapman to Arnold Zander, 5 April 1955, Box 112, Folder 11, Arnold S. Zander Collection. This memorandum provided Zander’s contemporary recollection, presumably given to Chapman over the phone for dictation.
126 “SCME Proclaims Union Rights of ‘Every Single City Employee,’” Spotlight, 1 April 1955, 1, 11.
whose affiliation was already a matter of public record due to a Senate Judiciary hearing.\footnote{Memorandum from Jerry Wurf to Arnold Zander, 18 April 1955, Box 112, Folder 11, Arnold S. Zander Collection; Text of Statement by Jerry Wurf, General Representative, AFSCME, Presented at Public Hearing on ‘Recognition of Organized Groups of Public Employees,’ Held Monday, April 18, 1955, Box 112, Folder 11, Arnold S. Zander Collection. The decision to name Bigel, Boer later recalled, was also rooted in Wurf’s concern that the former UPWA was the Teamsters’ most effective voice among the Parks Department employees and general laborers. Notes, Interview with John Boer, 28 August 1980, Box 4, Folder 38, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.\footnote{That said, Wurf was sincere in his concern about the Communist Party, “very sensitive” about the issue, as John Boer later recalled, “want[ing] no staff member who had any tinge . . . especially in the 1950s.” Notes, Interview with John Boer, 28 August 1980, Box 4, Folder 38, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.}}

From this point forward, the red baiting became less pronounced: the Teamsters exhibited little interest in expelling their tainted members, while Wagner showed less sensitivity than Wurf had expected to the issue. Though the whole string of developments did raise Wurf’s profile in the press, it further isolated the union from the rest of the city labor movement and did little to inspire rank-and-file support for AFSCME.

It was, in some sense, a desperate move—strikingly at odds with Wurf’s own reluctance to accept the raid on Quill’s TWU five years earlier. Perhaps Wurf genuinely believed that the Communists in Local 237, unlike those in Quill’s TWU, were compromising the union’s effectiveness by elevating their own political agenda above the interest of the rank-and-file worker—but that seems unlikely, since the tactics Wurf ridiculed Local 237 for employing (backroom politicking and deal-making) were hardly strengthened by the presence of politically controversial organizers.\footnote{Memorandum from Jerry Wurf to Arnold Zander, 18 April 1955, Box 112, Folder 11, Arnold S. Zander Collection; Text of Statement by Jerry Wurf, General Representative, AFSCME, Presented at Public Hearing on ‘Recognition of Organized Groups of Public Employees,’ Held Monday, April 18, 1955, Box 112, Folder 11, Arnold S. Zander Collection. The decision to name Bigel, Boer later recalled, was also rooted in Wurf’s concern that the former UPWA was the Teamsters’ most effective voice among the Parks Department employees and general laborers. Notes, Interview with John Boer, 28 August 1980, Box 4, Folder 38, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.\footnote{That said, Wurf was sincere in his concern about the Communist Party, “very sensitive” about the issue, as John Boer later recalled, “want[ing] no staff member who had any tinge . . . especially in the 1950s.” Notes, Interview with John Boer, 28 August 1980, Box 4, Folder 38, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.}}

Rather, the whole affair seems better understood in the opportunistic context of a means-to-an-end, for by the early 1950s, Wurf was thoroughly convinced that the public sector organization should be limited to exclusively public sector groups. Beginning in mid-1954, the union launched a series of organizing drives. In each case, AFSCME presented a similar three-pronged argument: it was the only union chartered by the AFL-CIO for city workers; it was the only organization focused solely on the organization of government employees, and it had more
public sector members than any other organization. Wurf made this point explicitly in his March 23 testimony on the city’s labor relations system, demanding that the recognition be limited to “exclusively public employee membership unions,” on the logic that “catch-all organizations cannot properly or wholeheartedly represent public employees.” Obviously self-serving, Wurf was at least consistent on this point throughout the rest of his career: he was deeply suspicious of the motives and capacity of primarily private sector unions operating in the public sector, even as he pursued a labor relations system based on the private sector model.

For all the union’s posturing at public hearings and its efforts to discredit its rivals, AFSCME still lacked a signature victory that could vindicate Wurf’s vision of a genuine union movement in the public sector in the mid-1950. At least part of the fervor with which Wurf approached the Communism issue must be understood as a response to a fear that the union was losing momentum among city workers. The union picked up substantial momentum with a huge one-day demonstration at City Hall in May 1955 that drew some 4,000 blue-collar workers, but the subsequent budget yielded only a few modest concessions.

The Parks Department provided the best opportunity for such a victory, since it was the primary home to the Council’s largest affiliate, Local 924. But the department also posed a unique challenge for the union: Robert Moses.

Autocratic, secretive, and immensely powerful, Moses had entered city government during the 1930s. He became a controversial figure in the city in the 1940s and 1950s because of his dominant control over major public projects, using the independent comment of Triborough

132 “SCME Proclaims Union Rights of ‘Every Single City Employee,’” Spotlight, 1 April 1955, 1, 11.
Bri
gage and Tunnel Authority to insulate himself from the pressure of city politicians. A staunch
opponent of patronage politics, Moses had advocated previously called for the implementation of
a civil service system which would have subjected all employees to what biographer Robert Caro
described as a “Calvinistic . . . efficiency rating system,” and as Commissioner of the Parks
Department, Moses imposed a six-day, 72-hour week, though it had been cut to a more
manageable 48 hours by the early 1950s.\textsuperscript{134} Strongly opposed to public sector unionization,
Moses dispatched spies throughout his departments to protect against organization and allowed
his deputies to act as “little tyrants in their own bailiwicks,” imposing harsh, arbitrary discipline
on the vulnerable laborers and gardeners, many of whom were seasonal or part-time, and thus
excluded from normal civil service protections.\textsuperscript{135}

The Teamsters launched an early effort at unionization, but the local was almost wholly
ineffective. In 1950, two activists from the department, Patty O’Connell and Ernie Zandel,
approached Wurf about building “a genuine trade union” for the city’s parks employees, and
with their help, Wurf launched a covert organizing drive in the Department, meeting with
activists and potential members at four or five in the morning to avoid the watchful eye of
Moses’ deputies.\textsuperscript{136} By December 1953, the effort was well-developed enough for AFSCME to
formally create the Parks Policy Committee to coordinate their efforts and challenge the
department’s complicated job classification system—after years of submitting individual and
departmental grievances to the Board of Estimate without effect.\textsuperscript{137} Many of the workers were
organized into Local 924 and benefited much from the prevailing rate campaign, and by the mid-

\textsuperscript{135} Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 3 April 1953, Box
5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; Caro, \textit{The Power Broker}, 740.
\textsuperscript{136} Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, DC, 3 April 1953, Box
5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
\textsuperscript{137} “To Dispel Official Smog: Parks Policy Committee Ready for Joint Action on Problems,” \textit{Spotlight}, 24
December 1953, 2.
1950s, most laborers earned a 40- or 48-hour week, though pay and promotion rates continued to lag behind other city workers. By 1955, the Parks Department union was one of the strongest affiliates in the city, even though AFSCME had no formal recognition.138

Wurf targeted the Parks as a test of the new Wagner labor policy, which Moses openly flouted. Through the summer and fall of 1955, Wurf became increasingly militant in denouncing the indignities and inequities in the department, culminating on November 3 when some 2,000 parks employees, refusing to show at their normal workplaces, reported instead to the Parks Department headquarters at the Arsenal in Central Park. In the union’s first quasi-strike in the city, the workers picketed the Arsenal, imprisoning themselves in rented steel cages painted “Bob Moses’s Zoo” and signs that described the Park Worker “species” as one which

Resembles Normal American Worker BUT
Has No Collective Bargaining
Has No Grievance Machinery
Has No Dignity On the Job
Workers for Absentee Owner

When it turned out that Moses was at his office at the on Randall’s Island, Wurf arranged to have the workers march the four miles down 5th Avenue to City Hall, ridiculing Wagner all along for failing to force Moses to heed his Interim Order (“which Bob is Boss?”). The stunt drew the attention of the press, particularly young, liberal reporters like A. H. Raskin, who were growing critical of Moses’s urban reform schemes. Eventually, city officials arranged for Wurf and other union representatives to meet with the mayor.139 Wagner, suffering through a political crisis

139 Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, n.d., Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; A. H. Raskin, “Tilt with Moses is Won by Mayor: City Hall ‘Request’ that Park Head Negotiate with Union of His Workers is Heeded,” *New York Times*, 4 November 1955, 60.
brought on by the defection of the old Tammany machine and unwilling to appear weak in the face of a (theoretical) subordinate, ordered Moses to meet with representatives from the union.¹⁴⁰

Reluctantly, Moses agreed to sit down with Wurf the following Monday. Wurf then called Zander and asked him to come to New York City to sit in on the meeting, promising that it was “something that will change the union.” Wurf bought a new suit for the occasion, remarking later that “Meeting the mayor was one thing. . . but Moses didn’t meet with anyone but God.”¹⁴¹

On November 7, Wurf walked into the meeting at the Arsenal, the first but not last time in his career that the press and cameramen were waiting for him. He was prepared for a volatile negotiating session, and was thrown off when Moses greeted him “like a long lost brother.” Moses spoke warmly (if condescendingly) of Wurf in front of the cameras as “my friend . . . who does things in this dramatic fashion” and pledged his concern with the “well-being of the workers.” Then the two disappeared into Moses’s private office. “As soon as the door closed he started cussing me out,” Wurf later remembered, adding, “I replied in kind.” Wurf offered to bring in a federal expert to work out a labor relations system for the Parks Service, but Moses was none too interested in even the appearance of split authority. When Wurf demanded exclusive recognition and bargaining rights for AFSCME, Moses requested proof that the union represented the majority of workers in the department—at which point Wurf offered to “bring them back in front of the Arsenal.” Moses laughed off the suggestion of “mob rule,” and instead offered to accept a representation election. Wurf happily agreed to take the offer back to the workers, along with promises that annual civil service ratings would not be used “for coercive purposes” and that workers would be allowed to designate a union representative at grievance

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¹⁴⁰ On the public relations and political crises of Moses and Wagner respectively, see Bellush and Bellush, *Union Power and New York*, 53-61.
¹⁴¹ Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
hearings on transfers, vacation, promotion, pay appeals, and disciplinary hearings.\textsuperscript{142}

“Nobody claims a victory,” Wurf said, with uncharacteristic diplomacy as he left the meeting. “We have a working relationship with the department for the first time and we are very happy about it. We think the agreement to hold an election sets a healthy precedent for other municipal agencies.”\textsuperscript{143}

The union was confident as it approached the election, so much so that Wurf easily agreed to the city’s request that the Teamsters be added to the union ballot.\textsuperscript{144} On the eve of the election, Teamsters president Dave Beck tried, unsuccessfully, to get the city to delay the vote to give his union more time to undermine Council 37’s position.\textsuperscript{145} On the morning of January 27, 1956, workers from more than a dozen job titles cast their votes at polling places throughout the five boroughs. With more than 95 percent of the eligible workers voting, the results were overwhelming: AFSCME won 4,097 out of 4,270 cast.\textsuperscript{146}

“Ritual without Meaning”

The Parks Department victory established AFSCME District Council 37 as the vanguard of the new public sector labor movement in New York City. Through a combination of mass demonstration, creative public relations, and timely political pressure, the union had forced the most recalcitrant agency boss in the city to accept the first union representation election in the

\textsuperscript{142} Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
\textsuperscript{144} Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
\textsuperscript{145} “Telephone Call with Jerry Wurf,” Memorandum from Arnold S. Zander to Files, 30 January 1956, Box 99, Folder 11, Arnold S. Zander Collection.
\textsuperscript{146} “SCME Wins, 4097 to 173,” \textit{Spotlight}, 1 February 1956, 1. Only 70 votes went to other unions. The remainder went to “no union.” Wurf later found Moses to be a fairly useful partner, in part because his unquestioned authority made him easier to deal with, and in part because his political influence proved useful. After organizing the Triborough Bridge toll takers, AFSCME reached an agreement with Moses that raised the wages above the baseline pay for city police offices. The police, Wurf later recalled, “raised a furor” with the Civil Service Commission, which refused to sanction the agreement until Moses pushed Wagner to give both a raise. Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, n.d., Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
city’s history, and then had won the election over its most energetic rival by an overwhelming margin. It was a striking validation of the confrontational brand of public sector organization, and the victory, Wurf later remembered, became “the premise for a whole new set of relationships” in the city, the first sign that the old politicized system of backroom deal-making would give way to a system of meaningful bilateral participation. That transformation occurred not because of political favoritism, but rather, as Wurf later colorfully judged, “because we had the power to kick the fucking politician in the ass to a degree that he was unwilling to take pain.”

Much of the two years that followed were spent dealing with the practical implications of this new status. The most dramatic change within the Council during these years was the entrance of thousands of members from the CIO Government and Civic Employees Organizing Committee (GCEOC), the successor to the expelled UPWA. The potential threat posed by private sector unions was a powerful incentive to unification for AFSCME, which officially merged with GCOEC on July 29, 1956, making it the first AFL union to successfully unite with its CIO counterpart following the 1955 AFL-CIO merger. "One Big Union," *Spotlight* trumpeted the development as the birth of “‘one big union’ of public employees” fit to launch “a gigantic organizing drive among two million public employees across the land.” Locally, the unification initially exacerbated tensions within the council. Wurf dismissed the new GCEOC converts as self-interested seekers “power, status, and pork chops,” while Boer cast the GCEOC

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147 Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, n.d., Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
148 In early March 1956, Zander wrote to Milton Murray, head of the GCEOC, arguing that “much good should come to both members and potential members of our organizations if we can quickly reach accord and join forces in order to bring about more rapid organization of public employees.” Letter form Arnold Zander to Milton Murray, 2 March 1956, Box 2, Folder 15, Government and Civic Employees Organizing Committee Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Government and Civil Employees Organizing Committee Collection].
leaders as “Civil Service Forum people with a CIO label”

“They are not unionists,” Boer wrote to Zander in October 1956, warning that the new members, who pressed for smaller, more focused locals, would undercut the union’s progress. “Let me remind you,” he warned Zander, “Compromise can kill us.”

Ironically, the council’s continued financial reliance on the national union undercut the threat, preserving for Wurf, Boer, and others the freedom to pursue the more militant organizational model. Though AFSCME inducted its 25,000th member in the city in late 1957, its average paid membership for the first nine months of 1956 was only 8,200. This probably reflected the absence of a proper dues deduction system as much as union inflation of its strength, but even after the city created a mechanism for voluntary dues check-off in late 1956, the Council continued to operate at a deficit, despite raising its dues in October 1957. The International union pumped as much as $5,000 a month into the Council though early 1958, bringing the total debt to more than $130,000.

When several GCEOC officials suggested that the appointed Wurf be replaced by an elected Executive Director, Zander threatened to pull the financial support, stating that AFSCME was “not willing to risk our already very heavy investment and increase it by large advances without continuing to direct it”—a promise that, he later recalled, ended “the discussion about local autonomy.”

150 “Merger Meeting,” Memorandum from Jerry Wurf to Thomas Morgan, 5 October 1956, Box 110, Folder 8, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon W. Chapman Collection.
151 Letter from John Boer to Arnold Zander, 7 October 1956, Box 1, Folder 11, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
152 Minutes, General Meeting, District Council 37, 10 October 1957, Box 1, Folder 3, District Council 37 Records, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter cited as District Council 37 Records]; Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, District Council 37, 23 October 1957, Box 1, Folder 17, District Council 37 Records; Memorandum from Gordon W. Chapman to Jerry Wurf, 9 January 1958, Box 110, Folder 11, Office of the Secretary Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection; “New York District Council # 37 Financial Operations,” Memorandum from Gordon W. Chapman to Files, 9 January 1958, Box 110, Folder 11, Office of the Secretary-Treasurer: Gordon Chapman Collection
153 “Merger Meeting in New York City, December 1-2, 1956,” Memorandum from Arnold S. Zander to Files, Dictated January 23, 1957, Box 1, Folder 2, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers. Disputes over representation and the distribution of dues, as well as personality clashes, delayed final unification on the local level until May 1957.
Yet despite the relative freedom given by the national union, District Council 37 was frustrated by its inability to force a fundamental shift in the relationship between the city and its employees. The union submitted a “Bill of Rights” for consideration during the 1956-1957 budget cycle that reiterated long-standing demands for a forty-hour, five-day week, general pay increases, overtime and weekend and holiday differentials, easy access to dues deduction, elimination of favoritism and out-of-title work, prompt and transparent promotion procedures, and meaningful collective bargaining for all city employees. “Adoption of these basic guarantees would serve to reinforce and revitalize the merit system and remove forever the stigma of second class citizenship from city employees,” an accompanying statement suggested. “The guiding principle in the creation of this bill of rights was to incorporate into the civil service those same high standards that prevail in private industry with reference to wages, hours, conditions of employment and labor relations.”

It was a compelling and revealing list of demands—but one that spoke as much to the unfinished business of the council as to its achievements. A year later, neither Wurf nor the rest of the union’s leadership were consulted prior to the release of the preliminary budget by the mayor’s office. Furious that the plan offered raises to some groups of city workers but nothing for blue-collar laborers, Wurf was nevertheless forced to admit when pressed by increasingly impatient local union officials that despite its growing size and visibility, it was still reliant on the Board of Estimate hearings. The Council leadership dispatched Wurf with a list of demands that included a $500 across-the-board increase, differential pay for weekend and overnight work, and a high starting salary for all city workers. Unmentioned at the meeting, apparently, was another part of the union’s plan for the hearings, a “filibuster for fair pay,” which called for some

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154 “SCME to Submit Bill of Rights to Board at Budget Hearings,” Spotlight, 1 April 1956, 1.
155 Minutes, Special Emergency Meeting of Shop Stewards and Local Officers, Wedermann Hall, 4 April 1957, Box 1, Folder 3, District Council 37 Records.
900 union activists to disrupt the proceedings until “some arrangement was made for collective bargaining on the union’s request for a $500 pay rise”—only to be called off when Deputy Mayor John J. Theobald agreed to meet with the leadership. Later, Wurf praised the shop stewards for staying until the end of the hearing to conduct the operation, counseling “The hardest part of fighting the city is the waiting it takes.”

But Wurf’s patience was waning. In his comments before the Board of Estimate in April 1957, he blasted Wagner for flouting his promise to implement a system of genuine collective bargaining in the city. “There is no reason, either moral legal, why the best examples from both private industry and governmental employees cannot be used to build a sensible and productive collective bargaining relationship between the employee representatives and the City,” he argued. In its absence, city workers were forced to endure “a nonsensical atmosphere of supplications” and a budgetary process that was “a shame and deceit against which the employees are rightfully aroused.” Without a “changed attitude on the party of the City,” Wurf argued, the various concessions made over the past few years—the formal organizing rights, the dues checkoff system, the grievance machinery—amounted to a “ritual without meaning.”

Three months later, District Council 37 decided, on Wurf’s recommendation, “to withhold endorsement of the Mayor until such time as he had demonstrated by his actions that he is deserving of our support.” The move came more than a year after the administration had released a preliminary outline of a full labor relations program that included exclusive recognition. Wurf praised the “Felix Report” upon its release, and remained positive about the proposal as late as the summer of 1957, promising that it would finally end the domination of

159 Minutes, General Meeting, District Council 37, 8 August 1957, Box 1, Folder 3, District Council 37 Records.
“the splinter groups, vest-pocket and paper locals, and marching-and-chowder societies, whose sole exclusive for existence was to provide soft berths for a handful of individuals.” But by August 1957 the Wagner administration had still made no move to implement the plan, and Wurf and AFSCME were growing concerned that political considerations, particularly the indifference of the CTLC, might undercut the plan if it was left until after the 1957 mayoral election.\footnote{Charles G. Bennett, “New Labor Code for City Pressed: Some Groups Ask Move Now For ‘Little Wagner Act’—Others Condemn Plan,” \textit{New York Times} 29 September 1957, 66.}

The neutrality decision was designed to pressure the administration into immediate action, but it made little difference: Wagner won reelection handily, and six more months passed with no further movement by the administration. Meanwhile, pressure mounted within the union, as local union officials continued to press for tangible progress on both material and process issues. In late January 1958, Local 271 President Frank Petrocelli of Local 371 introduced a motion calling on the council to demand that Wagner and the Board of Estimate implement meaningful collective bargaining over wage issues and authorize mass demonstrations and a publicity campaign against the city if it failed to do so.\footnote{Minutes, General Meeting, District Council 37, 28 January 1958, Box 1, Folder 4, District Council 37 Records.} A week later, Wurf used a \textit{New York Times} column to further press the case, arguing that “the time has now come” for the “preliminary relationship” created by the Interim Order to be “expanded into a full-fledged recognition of the right of city employees to bargain collectively on wages, hours, and conditions of employment, and to designate through democratic procedures an exclusive representation for this purpose.” Hailing the previously leaked proposal as “a giant step toward conferring first-class citizenship upon city employes who have not enjoyed the rights and privileges of employees in private industry in the areas of labor relations and job dignity,” Wurf strategically hailed the mayor’s potential legacy:
It is fitting that, when issued, the name of Wagner will be engrossed upon this order, which in so many ways is modeled after the Wagner Act authored by Senator Robert F. Wagner Sr. The Mayor’s signature will be honored by the labor movement as adding to his father’s ‘Magna Charta of Labor’ a ‘Magna Charta for Public Employees.’

When an AFSCME official took the position to the Wagner administration a few weeks later, however, the mayor informed the union that raises were unlikely for the fiscal year that followed due to “shrinking in the city’s income.” AFSCME responded by taking out thirty minutes of television time—the first event in a month-long “action calendar” leading up to the annual budget hearings that included radio and television spots, published advertisements, and mass demonstrations. “We Believe that You Can Fight City Hall,” the council announced on March 15. “We’ve done it before and, with the support and participation of our members, we can do it again.”

On March 27, more than 4,000 AFSCME members turned out at a meeting to demand full union rights. Four days later, Robert Wagner issued Executive Order 49, opening the door to a revolution that, within the space of a decade, would transform public sector labor relations not only in New York, but also across the nation.

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163 Minutes, General Meeting, District Council 37, 25 February 1958, Box 1, Folder 4, District Council 37 Records.
CHAPTER THREE


On March 31, 1958, in response to years of mounting pressure from city workers, Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr. issued Executive Order 49, creating both the legal basis for formal collective bargaining in New York City and crucial precedents for future laws on both the state and federal level. The new city labor relations system was similar in purpose and structure to the model dominant in the private sector at the time, the roots of which extended back to the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, whose principle sponsor was Robert F. Wagner, Sr., the mayor’s father.¹ Like the “big” Wagner Act, the “Little Wagner Act” was a response to workplace agitation as well as an effort to create formal structures through which the demands of city workers could be channeled and controlled. Also like the national labor law, Executive Order 49 unintentionally spurred further militancy and stronger demands. It “was put into being to put us out of business,” Wurf recalled, but “We made the Executive Order much more than Wagner had bargained for.”²

From the time it was issued in 1958 until May 1964, when Wurf departed New York City to take office as the national president of AFSCME, Executive Order 49 was a contested achievement for District Council 37, a mark of its progress, a limit on its power, and an impetus for further action. Its very existence was evidence of the gains made by public sector unions

¹ As Mark Maier has noted, the proper historical comparison for Executive Order 49 is not the National Labor Relations Act, but rather the Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932 or the National Industrial Recovery Act Section 7(a)—affirming the right of workers to join unions but without procedures or mechanisms for implementing and realizing that right. Mark H. Maier, City Unions: Managing Discontent in New York City (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 77.
since the late 1940s in altering the relationship between city workers and city officials, but it required constant pressure, through demonstrations and job actions, to become the basis for a real collective bargaining regime.

The developments in New York City between 1958 and 1964 presaged what would become a national revolution in the public sector that realigned the labor-management relationship, politicized public services, and sparked the emergence of tax-based opposition to public sector union power. Blending militant direct action, creative public relations, engagement with the Black Freedom struggle, and, eventually, political mobilization, District Council 37 emerged as the leading public sector union in what historian Nelson Lichtenstein has deemed “the birthplace of modern public employee unionism . . . the Akron and Flint of a new labor movement.” In this sense, New York was, Wurf later told Richard Billings and John Greenya, an “incubator” for that national revolution—an “incubator for ideas and action.”

“A Monumental Forward Step?”

Executive Order 49 was remarkably simple. It committed the City of New York to “the practice and procedures of collective bargaining” with the “duly chosen majority representatives” of its own employees; within the boundaries imposed by law, it aimed “to

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further and promote in so far as possible the practices and procedures of collective bargaining prevailing in private sector labor relations.”

The order marked the culmination of a half decade-long process of legalizing collective bargaining for public employees in New York City. Its roots extended back to 1953, when a commission created by then-Mayor William O’Dwyer characterized the city’s civil service system as “so outgrown that it defeats its own objectives” and recommended a new labor relations regime based in part on “the successful experience of well-managed private business enterprises.” Shortly after taking office, Wagner ordered the newly-created Department of Labor to commission a study in preparation for such a system. The “Preliminary Report” was published in June 1954, and became the basis for Wagner’s Interim Order of 1954, which granted some city workers the right to join unions but stopped short of collective bargaining. Shortly thereafter, in September 1954, Wagner hired Ida Klaus, a veteran labor lawyer with more than a decade of experience at the National War Labor Board and National Labor Relations Board, to oversee a more extensive study of the issue. Under Klaus’s leadership, the Department

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5 Executive Order No. 49, 31 March 1958, Box 1, Folder 15, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers. The full order was reprinted as “Labor Relations Program for Employees of the City of New York,” Industrial and Labor Relations Review 12, no. 4 (July, 1959), 618-625.
8 Public sector collective bargaining was given a huge boost in legitimacy in August 1955 by the release of a report by the American Bar Association’s Committee on Labor Relations of Government Employees that concluded that legal restrictions neither improved government services nor prevented labor strife. The ABA argued that sound management, effective grievance machinery, and recognition of employee organizations were all more effective than restrictive statutes: “A government which imposes upon other employers certain obligations in dealing with their employees may not in good faith refuse to deal with its own public servants on a reasonable similar favorable basis.” Instead, government “should set the example for industry by being perhaps more considerate than the law requires of private enterprise.” The report also asserted that “public employees have an inherent and justifiable right to organize among themselves to serve their own best interests and welfare” and that a “government which denies to its employee the right to strike against the people, no matter how just might be the grievance, owes to its public servants an obligation to provide working conditions and standards of management-employee relationships which would make unnecessary and unwarranted any need for such employees to resort to stoppage of public business.” It went on to judge that “Promises of well meaning public officials imbued with a sense of high authority who resort to the pretense of alleged limitations on their powers to avoid dealing forthrightly with representatives of their
of Labor surveyed city workers, conducted public hearings, and gathered information from other municipal governments. The 200-page report, which called for a system of exclusive recognition and collective bargaining that closely approximated the private sector model, was finished by mid-1956, but Commission of Labor Harold A. Felix, whose name it bore, withheld it for more than a year, finally releasing the report in June 1957.9

Despite pressure from AFSCME and other city unions, Wagner initially refused to act on the Felix report recommendations, ordering the study back to city departments for additional comment in June.10 “Months of behind the scenes conflict” followed, the New York Times later reported, as administration officials debated the “political and budgetary consequences” of the new policy, weighing the promise of stable labor relations with warnings of budget-busting wage and benefit demands.11 When the order was eventually issued, it was justified in this traditional industrial pluralist framework, explaining in its Declaration of Policy that “labor disputes between the City and its employees will be minimized, and that effective operation of the City’s affairs in the public interest will be safeguarded, by permitting employees to participate . . . in the determination of the terms and conditions of their employment.”12

subordinate employees can only aggravate grievances.” The report concluded that public employees “should not be expected to make any non-essential sacrifices in their conditions of employment.” It was issued by the ten-person committee and approved at the Association’s August meeting. “ABA Report Raps Restrictions on Rights of Public Employees,” Spotlight, 15 September 1955, 12.


Wurf hailed the order as “a monumental forward step” in the *New York Times* and predicted that AFSCME’s membership would double within a year, but within the union, the initial reaction was far more cautious, reflecting the experiences of the previous four years, when landmark achievements (the Interim Order, the Parks Department election, and the creation of a dues-checkoff system) were followed by meager results, leaving AFSCME in a precarious position. AFSCME also felt the “Little Wagner Act” system deficient on several fronts—it left the scope of bargaining vague, lacked a third-party mechanism for grievance appeals, allowed the Commission of Labor to determine bargaining units, and required that unions secure a majority in a given job title across the city (rather than in a particular department) before negotiating over broader issues like pension benefits—the latter requirement inadvertently encouraged further organizing drives by forcing unions like AFSCME to expand into departments that previously had little union presence. Spotlight’s editorial captured the measured and qualified reaction to Wagner’s breakthrough: “Properly implemented, fairly administered and with necessary procedural modifications, the new labor code can pave the way for city employees to achieve, at long last, first class citizenship in the area of labor relations.”

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14 In the case of some classes, like assistant gardeners, this was fairly easy, since most were confined to the Parks Department, but in larger job titles, like laborers and clerical workers, the requirement posed a significant challenge to the union, preventing AFSCME from addressing city-wide issues like pensions until the late 1960s. Jewel Bellush and Bernard Bellush, *Union Power and New York: Victor Gotbaum and District Council 37* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984), 63-71. Over the next decade, the Department of Labor certified few large units, leaving in the highly decentralized system and spurring another half-decade of jurisdictional infighting. Morris, *The Cost of Good Intentions*, 87-90. One scholar has gone as far as to suggest that the Wagner-era union certification process was a new form of patronage. Chris McNickle, *To Be Mayor of New York: Ethnic Politics in the City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 157.
15 “Council Hails Order on Bargaining Rights,” *Spotlight*, 15 April 1958, 2. This was strikingly similar to Wurf’s response to the initial Felix Report, suggesting that he saw no progress in the intervening nine months: “Adequately implemented and with procedural modifications, the new plan can serve to eliminate politics from employee relations and clear up the jungle of public irresponsibility and private deals that have too often in the past impeded the progress of harmonious and progressive labor relations.” “SCME Hails City Proposal on Sole Bargaining Rights,” *Spotlight*, July 1957, 3.
But despite these deficiencies, Executive Order 49 lent legitimacy to the idea of collective bargaining in the public sector, and in that sense, it was a landmark achievement in the history of public sector unionism in the United States. As Joseph Slater has noted, the 1950s was a “decade of heightened contradictions” for public sector labor relations, when the older anti-union legal regime began to break down and academic and public acceptance of government employee organization increased. Formal law tended to lag behind actual practice; AFSCME had more than 400 bilateral agreements in effect by 1957—involving nearly one-third of its local organizations. Philadelphia’s District Council 33 made significant gains in legal status during the 1950s by partnering with the city’s political reform movement, culminating in Mayor Richard Dilworth’s 1957 recognition of AFSCME as the official bargaining agent for non-uniformed city workers. The critical breakthrough in New York City accelerated the trend, laying the foundation for a wider-spread legalization on the local, state, and eventually federal level during the 1960s.

But what kind of breakthrough was it? Executive Order 49 marked a philosophical shift in the city’s approach to its employees, Wurf later recalled, codifying “the premise of a legitimate union, operating within the framework of the American labor movement, with all of its shortcomings and all of its strengths, to represent its workers in an environment of equality and reasonableness, as opposed to being beggars.” The June 1958 issue of Spotlight praised

18 Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers. With considerable exaggeration, he later declared it his “most significant achievement in New York,” and claimed that AFSCME secured it “with little assistance from the organized labor movement.” Joseph C. Goulden, *Jerry Wurf, Labor’s Last Angry Man* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 54; Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; Jerry Wurf and Mary L. Hennessy, “The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees,” in *Collective Bargaining in Government* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 61-62. Wurf exaggerated the degree to which the union had actually shaped the order—which he acknowledged elsewhere. “We didn’t lobby it... We
Wagner’s Executive Order as “the road to our dream . . . to build a trade union for public employees that would replace collective begging with collective bargaining.” Expanding on a tradition begun two years earlier, AFSCME organized an educational conference in October 1958, with the theme “Making Collective Bargaining Work,” later explaining that the theme reflected the primacy of bilateral negotiation—“part and parcel of the nature of labor unions and their reason for existence.”

The city’s willingness to adopt many of the features of private sector labor relations unintentionally legitimized traditional union tactics. Militant action had been central to AFSCME’s success in New York City since Wurf’s entrance into the union in the late 1940s, but until the late 1950s, confrontation was generally confined to pickets and public demonstrations, despite Wurf’s frequently fiery oratory. On the rare occasion that the union had resorted to a work stoppage, such as the Parks Department in 1955, it was carefully orchestrated to avoid running afoul of the New York state’s anti-strike law, the Condin-Wadlin Act of 1947, which mandated termination for any public employee engaged in a strike. In the famous confrontation with Robert Moses, for example, the Parks Department employees did not technically refuse to work, but rather refused to report to their normal posts.

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Mark Maier has pointed out that the new system shifted inter-union competition, previously confined to backroom deal-making, out into the public eye, as unions were forced to out-do one another in public demonstrations. Maier, City Unions, 78-91.

Passed in 1947 after a strike by Buffalo school teachers, the legislation was cast broadly to apply to all state and local government employees in New York. Sterling D. Spero, Government as Employer (New York: Remsen Press, 1948), 16-43
Between 1958 and 1964, however, AFSCME’s tactics moved closer to those used by
unions in the private sector. Initially energized by the promise of genuine collective bargaining
offered by Executive Order 49, Wurf and others in AFSCME became frustrated by their inability
to translate the enhanced legal status into tangible benefits for city workers during the summer of
1958. On June 10, several hundred members of AFSCME employed at cultural and tourist
attractions including the Bronx Zoo, the Hayden Planetarium, the Coney Island Aquarium, the
Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the American Museum of Natural History organized a one-day
picket of City Hall to protest inequities in the city’s occupational classification system, which
subjected the workers to the city’s wage schedule but excluded them from its civil service
system. Echoing the sort of tactics employed against Moses a few years earlier, AFSCME
arranged to have caged monkeys present at the demonstrations, with painted signs beseeching the
city to “Stop Monkeying Around with Our Pay.” Plans to use a pair of baby elephants (“The City
Pays Me Peanuts, Too”) were jettisoned because of “hazards to both pedestrians and traffic,” but
they managed a brief appearance, the union newspaper noted, “for their television debut.”

Despite the inventive use of mammalian props, the one-day demonstration failed to draw
a response from City Hall, and three days later, members from AFSCME locals met at
Manhattan Center and voted to authorize a job action by a margin of 399 to 1. On June 14,
AFSCME launched its first formal strike in New York City. Except for a few small crews of
maintenance workers who fed and cared for the zoo animals, the institutions were closed. Those
arriving at the venues were greeted by the visual of picketing employees bearing the traditional
“on strike” signs—another symbolic breakthrough—and Wurf was actually arrested for his

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23 “SCME Wins Strike in Museums & Zoos,” Spotlight, July 1958, 3, 4. The dispute stemmed from the odd
relationship between the city and its cultural institutions—the workers were hired and paid by the individual
institutions, which were in turn reimbursed by the city government.
overzealous defense of the picket lines at the Bronx Zoo.\textsuperscript{24} The strike continued for three days, as the union’s membership repeatedly rejected the city’s calls to return to work. On June 16, Wurf addressed a group of striking workers, vowing that AFSCME had “every intention of treating the city in the same miserable way they have treated us” and suggested that the stoppage could soon spread to other city agencies.\textsuperscript{25} The next day, the strike spread to the New York Public Library and the Bronx Botanical Gardens, bringing the total number of strikers to more than 900. Early in the evening of June 17, Wagner convened a meeting of union leaders and other city labor leaders at Gracie Mansion. Perhaps under pressure from his labor allies, Wagner offered to personally broker a compromise settlement, though only after AFSCME dropped its demand for third-party arbitration. The union leadership endorsed the offer, which was officially approved by the membership in time for the institutions to reopen on June 18.\textsuperscript{26}

Though the settlement of the 1958 strike was not particularly memorable, it nonetheless marked a key turning point in the union’s history in the city. Eschewing the particulars of the settlement, \textit{Spotlight} lauded the effectiveness of direct action. “The strike ended through trade union negotiations some four years of delay and entanglement of the issues,” a July editorial declared, “knif[ing] through the bureaucratic procedures which had tied the issues in knots of red tape and interminably delayed a solution.”\textsuperscript{27} Critics, most notably Louis Perrine, a local officer in the Civil Service Forum, complained that AFSCME’s “staged demonstrations” differed little from the old, informal backroom political process and charged that the “Monkeyshines at City Hall” simply enhanced Wurf’s personal publicity.\textsuperscript{28} Wurf, though, was defiant in arguing that

\textsuperscript{28} Louis Perrine, “Demonstration Pre-Fab, Hey Says,” \textit{Staten Island Advance}, 1 July 1958. Fred Q. Wednt, president of the Civil Service Forum, had greeted the issuance of Executive Order 49 as a “Wagner Slave Labor Act” that
both the demonstrations and the subsequent settlement were well within the boundaries of traditional union tactics. “When city officials refuse to sit down across the bargaining table,” Wurf wrote in an open letter to the *Staten Island Advance*, the newspaper that had published Perrine’s critique, “the trade union way is to take the kind of action [needed] to compel them to negotiate.”

Yet Perrine’s critique revealed a deeper uncertainty about what “real” collective bargaining meant in the public sector context—a question that continued to haunt District Council 37 through the early 1960s. The lead editorial in the Labor Day issue of *Spotlight* in September 1958 emphasized the precariousness of the experiment—“Collective bargaining can only work if we make it work,” the piece suggested. “It can be taken for granted that there will continue to be virulent opposition from the powers-that-be who will be trying to keep collective bargaining just a theory.”

The persistence of the older unilateral system proved a constant challenge for the union. As early as May 1958, just a few weeks after the Executive Order had been issued, AFSCME had to appeal to Wagner to order a representation election in city hospitals, where Local 420 had a strong (but by no means majority) status, to ward off a decision on wage issues by the Salary Appeals Board (SAB), the existence of which AFSCME argued ran counter to Executive Order 49’s endorsement of bilateral negotiation.

“Continuation of the Salary Appeals Board amounted to practicing a species of farce and fraud upon city employees and gives a strange Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde twist to the labor relations policy of the city,” Wurf

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29 Draft Letter from Jerry Wurf to the Editor of the *Staten Island Advance*, dated 14 July 1958, Box 45, Folder 6, District Council 37 Records, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter cited as District Council 37 Records]. Wurf also mocked the CSF’s claim to relevance, writing that “while SCME has several thousand members living and working on Staten Island, an intensive investigation has failed to show where Mr. Perrine represents a single employee.” I have not been able to verify whether this was ever printed as a response to the Perrine piece.

30 “Editorial: A Look Ahead,” *Spotlight*, September 1958, 2, 16

charged in open letter published in Spotlight. “If Executive Order no. 49 means anything it means the right of city workers to sit down at the bargaining table and bargain collectively on wages, not be subject, like declassed citizens, to the decree of the Budget Office.”

The union also struggled within the confines of the new system. In late August 1958, AFSCME appealed for recognition in the Youth House, Inc., which was a semi-public, non-civil service body responsible for juveniles awaiting criminal proceedings. When the agency refused to recognize the union, Wurf ordered a strike, which the Youth House director, Ethel Wise, tried to use to vacate the union’s claim to bargaining, telling the press that “Any union that shows as little regard for the health and welfare of 350 delinquent and disturbed children as to endanger their well-being by such action as the union took has clearly forfeited the right to recognition.”

While the agency eventually relented four days later—offering a settlement that included union recognition, grievance arbitration, and a liberalization of promotion procedures—the strike was indicative of the kinds of actions that AFSCME was repeatedly forced to launch by the city’s sluggish implementation of its own system. One-day job actions—formal or informal—proved far more effective at securing recognition than the city’s ballyhooed but laborious representational process.

While the spike in militancy stemmed from frustrations with the limits of the new system, the increasing willingness of District Council 37 to sanction the actions betrayed its concern about the proliferation of potential rivals. While jurisdictional tensions had played an important role in shaping the union’s early history in New York City, Executive Order 49 exacerbated them

by requiring citywide majorities in occupational titles to bargain over global issues like pay, pensions, and benefits—as opposed to departmental concerns or salary grade classifications.

Though the Teamsters had challenged AFSCME’s hold on city workers since the late 1940s, the late 1950s saw the emergence of new groups like Local 1199, originally affiliated with the Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union (RWDSU) and later with the Service Employees International Union. Originally formed in the early 1930s as an organization of drug store clerks, 1199 had perhaps 5,000 members by the mid-1950s, when it had essentially exhausted its original jurisdiction. Beginning in 1957, the union, led by Leon Davis and organizer Elliott Godoff—who had been expelled from Teamsters Local 237 following Wurf’s red-baiting campaign—launched a series of organizing drives in the city’s non-profit hospitals, beginning with Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx. Blending a traditional union organizing drive with a special emphasis on civil rights unionism, 1199 gained a strong foothold in the predominantly nonwhite housekeeping and food service departments. By mid-1958, the union had signed up a majority of the hospital’s nine hundred or so members, but because the workers were excluded from state and federal labor laws, 1199 had no mechanism to force a representation election.35

At this critical juncture, support from the civil rights community, liberal establishment, and city labor movement lent 1199 credibility and resources to push the hospital administration to recognize the union. The support from the city’s private sector unions was particularly noteworthy, given the Central Trades and Labor Council’s record of relative indifference to the plight of city workers during the previous decade. According to historians Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, the strong support offered by the city labor movement stemmed in part from an

eagerness to address long-standing concerns about the racial practices of city unions. Harry Van Arsdale, who had succeeded Martin Lacey as head of the CTLC following Lacey’s death in 1957, “seized on the hospital drive as the dramatic test of organized labor’s good intentions with regard to the city’s rapidly expanding nonwhite working population.”36 Labor’s support proved critical for the fledgling hospital workers’ union. When 1199 threatened to strike Montefiore in December 1958, Van Arsdale intervened with Wagner to force the hospital administration to accept a settlement that guaranteed a representation election and collective bargaining rights, greatly boosting the visibility of the hospital workers’ union.37 When Davis and Godoff’s enthusiastic response to the settlement led 1199 into an ill-fated strike of five other hospitals in May 1959, the city labor movement intervened with “a massive infusion of outside support” to save the action from almost certain defeat. David Dubinsky’s International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) supplied more than $25,000 to 1199 and threatened to cut off their contributions to the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, a key source of support for the hospitals, while Van Arsdale arranged for a $28,000 contribution to the union, an additional $50,000 in loans from International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3, and urged the building trades to halt construction projects at three of the hospitals in recognition of the picket lines.38 On May 9, the day the strike commenced, Van Arsdale pushed a resolution through the CTLC Executive Board pledging support for the strike “so that it will become that of

37 Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 38-41; Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 135-137.
38 Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 74-78; Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 136-137.
the labor movement in New York City and not Local 1199 itself.” One AFL-CIO official called the support for 1199 “the finest display of labor unity in the City’s history.”

AFSCME was not among those pledging support to Local 1199, and in fact the union resented the public posture of Van Arsdale and the CTLC. While AFSCME had no clear jurisdictional claim to the voluntary hospitals and had only a small presence at the public hospital system, Wurf feared that 1199’s success might provide it a foothold that would block future operations and encourage other unions to enter the hospital sector. When the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department contacted AFSCME’s national headquarters on behalf of Local 1199 in December 1958 to request information about the Council 37’s organizing activities in the hospital system, Wurf pleaded with Zander to intervene, and the AFSCME president subsequently dispatched a sharply-worded missive to Van Arsdale warning that any move by 1199 into hospitals would be considered “a raid on [our] jurisdiction.” But, as in the late 1940s, the union lacked sufficient clout within the CTLC to force a stricter reading of jurisdictional boundaries, and effectively surrendered control of the quasi-public hospitals to its rival.


40 Fink and Greenberg, Upheaval in the Quiet Zone, 78. Labor’s support helped 1199 avert a disastrous defeat, but the eventual settlement to the 46-day strike consisted of a simple guarantee that the workers would be brought back without reprisal and that the hospitals would implement some form of grievance machinery. Far short of union recognition, both Wagner and Van Arsdale urged Local 1199 to accept the offer, which it did. The legal right to organize in private hospitals was guaranteed only later, in 1963, when Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, under pressure from civil rights leaders and the city labor movement, signed legislation amending the state’s labor code to expand union protections to private hospitals. Fink and Greenberg, Upheaval in the Quiet Zone, 84-87, 104-111.


While AFSCME’s response to the rise of 1199 was primarily driven by concern over union jurisdiction, Wurf also feared that the settlement arranged by Wagner and Van Arsdale was a dangerous precedent that might institutionalize a narrow form of second-class unionism in the city—concerns amplified during the 1959 budget negotiations.\textsuperscript{43}

The union entered the 1959 budget cycle, the first since the implementation of the new labor relations system, determined to make meaningful material gains.\textsuperscript{44} The stakes were particularly high for the union. The recession of the late 1950s strained municipal budgets across the country, but was particularly vexing in New York City. On the eve of the budget hearings, the Citizens Budget Commission reported the city was one of eighteen urban centers experiencing significant fiscal pressures, “squeezed between growing populations, including daily commuters, and too few sources of additional revenue.” The report placed much of the blame on structural and legal limitations imposed on localities by state governments, but also called for steps to improve the efficiency of government services.\textsuperscript{45}

The fiscal restrictions uncovered by the CBC stood in tension with the increasingly ambitious demands of AFSCME and other city unions. As early as July 1958, just a few months into the fiscal year and nearly nine months before hearings commenced, Wurf sent a telegram to

\textsuperscript{43} The union also grew concerned about the narrower implications of the 1199 precedent. In the aftermath of the 1199 strike, AFSCME Local 302 launched an walkout against Brooklyn Hospital after the facility refused to grant full union recognition and bargaining rights, citing the precedent established by the 1199 strike Ralph Katz. Lacking the support of the broader labor movement, the effort made little headway in the hospital, and AFSCME ended the strike after just a few days, effectively accepting the limited scope of bargaining established by Local 1199. “Struck Hospital Gets Offer of Aid,” \textit{New York Times}, 27 June 1959; “Hospital Strike Ends,” \textit{New York Times}, 2 July 1959, 4.

\textsuperscript{44} The issuance of Executive Order 49 in March 1958 effectively preempted the most ambitious union demands during the 1958 budget hearings. Wurf and other city union leaders had maintained a militant posture at the previous years budget hearings, but, pleased with the issuance of Executive Order 49, had reigned in their demands. “In general,” the \textit{New York Times} reported in mid-April, “the spokesmen for the employee organizations read their pleas from prepared texts in tones that appeared to reflect a realization that general salary increases were not likely . . . in a year of business recession.” Charles G. Bennett, “New Taxes Asked to Raise Salaries of City Workers,” \textit{New York Times}, 15 April 1958, 1, 28.

more than a dozen city officials demanding “immediate favorable action” on a pension plan for blue-collar city workers that would include an option for retirement at half-pay after twenty years’ work and an increase in the city’s pension contribution, vowing that the Council was prepared to back the program with “the kind of action which brings positive results.” Two months later, Wurf called for a general pay raise, citing a 1958 study by the Community Council of Greater New York found that a family of four needed $4,500 annually to “maintain current standards of consumption” and noting that wages for public hospitals, non-teaching educational employees, and many other occupational classes started at barely half that total. When presented with AFSCME’s agenda, though, Wagner was unenthusiastic, refusing to commit to any significant increase in pay or benefits at a March 19 meeting and eventually announcing that the city’s budget would include no new money for pay raises.

For the union, Wagner’s actions betrayed the limits of the administration’s commitment to real collective bargaining for city employees. AFSCME called a mass membership meeting at Manhattan Center on March 23 and began planning for a demonstration at City Hall on March 31 “to inform the mayor personally of our determination that he must deal with us in good faith.” The union created a Committee on Vital Services to sanction limited services in key (and politically sensitive) areas like the zoos, aquariums, and art museums, but otherwise announced what amounted to a one-day stoppage to protest both the particulars of the administration’s budget and the absence of a system of bilateral negotiation for basic pay issues.

46 Telegram from Jerry Wurf to City Officials, 10 July 1958, Box 45, Folder 6, District Council 37 Records.
48 Motion Passed by Executive Board, District Council 37, 23 March 1959, Box 1, Folder 19, District Council 37 Records; “SCME Takes Pay Raise Fight to City Hall Tuesday, March 31,” Spotlight, 1 April 1959, 1.
49 Transcript, AFSCME’s Presentation to a Membership Meeting, n.d. [March 30, 1959], Box 1, Folder 6, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers; Minutes, General Meeting, District Council 37, 24 March 1959, Box 1, Folder 5, District Council 37 Records. The March 31 demonstration was not a formal strike, if a strike is defined as the organized withdrawal of labor from a workplace or workplaces without the permission of employers. In 1957, as part of a series of measures building up to the landmark Executive Order 49, Wagner had issued another order, Executive
The threatened action drew a condescending response for the administration. City Budget Director Abraham Beame vowed that the city had “no intention of yielding to misstatements or threats” by city workers. Reached in Bermuda, where he was vacationing, Wagner said that AFSCME’s threat of a one-day action was “no way to win friendship, either of city officials or of the people of the city” and was “bound to be resented even by the mass of union members.” “I am sure Mr. Wurf knows,” Wagner added, “we are willing at all times to sit down and listen to him and his people.”

Wagner’s pledge to “listen” only redoubled AFSCME’s commitment to the March 31 demonstration, and in hindsight it marked the beginning of the break between the mayor and the union. It also prompted Wurf’s first elaboration on the purposes of direct action in the public sector. The weekend before the scheduled action, Wurf was profiled by the New York Post and asked about the use of militant tactics. Wurf began the interview by insisting that public employees would no longer function as “involuntary philanthropists,” subsidizing the city’s operations with sub-standard pay and benefits. Strikes in the private sector were recognized as legitimate union weapons in “economic contests,” Wurf suggested, but in the public sector, they were primarily about political power, because public spending decisions were inseparable from political considerations. The key for unions like AFSCME was to hit elected officials on this disconnect, particularly when they styled themselves reformers or liberals. “It’s more a question

Order 38, that allowed workers leave from their regular shifts to present their grievances to the Board of Estimate or mayor’s office. An information sheet circulated ahead of the action instructed AFSMCE members to formally write to their supervisors requesting time off for the morning of March 31, specifically citing Order 38. The workers were told to use any reason except as a grievance except “sick leave,” which would have cost them days from their own private leave times. The city contested this interpretation, circulating a legal memorandum that suggested that any participating worker did so on his own time, either by forfeiting vacation days or by docking pay from the week’s paycheck. However, the city did not call the action a strike, sparing itself and the workers from the consequences imposed by Condon-Wadlin. “Instruct Sheet on Demonstration,” Flyer for the March 31 “Mass Meeting,” n.d., Box 1, Folder 6, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers; Charles G. Bennett, “City Sets Penalty for Strike Today: Loss in Day’s Pay or Cut in Time Off Ordered,” New York Times, 31 March 1959, 1, 19.

of political capital, of which politicians are naturally very jealous,” he told the paper. “There is a public pose they want to assume and they’re sensitive about organized challenges to it.”

Thousands of city workers rallied for “Fair Play and Fair Pay” at City Hall on the rainy morning of March 31. Estimates of the attendance varied, the union claimed 8,000, while the police estimated perhaps one-third of that. City records suggested that around 4,000 workers were off work with or without permission, though how many of them were attending the demonstration is unclear. The New York Times reported that the workers “seemed good-natured, well-behaved and in holiday mood,” though they jeered Wagner as “Bermuda Bob” when he arrived. The rally broke up around 2 p.m., after Wurf reported that Wagner had promised to “negotiate their demands and problems in the American way—through genuine collective bargaining.” Wurf considered the event a huge success, boasting that the impressive turnout “should convince everyone that city workers are fed up with phony promises and that they want pay raises and implementation of collective bargaining,” and later telling the Council Executive Board that the union had been inundated with inquiries about affiliation.

The Mayor’s Office denied making such a promise, and in fact took to the press to strengthen the city’s position against the union’s demand. Wagner estimated that the proposed wage increased would cost the city $85 million, far more than the city could afford unless it adopted “taxes so onerous that they would hurt the economy of the city,” and he reminding the

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54 “9,000 SCME Members Picket City Hall in Fight for Raises,” Spotlight, 15 April 1959, 2; Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, District Council 37, 8 April 1959, Box 1, Folder 19, District Council 37 Records. Privately, Wurf expressed satisfaction with the turnout but concern about the failure of some of the locals to deliver on their pledged contributions. As a result, the demonstration operated at a deficit, putting the Council into even greater debt to the national union. Minutes, General Meeting, District Council 37, 28 April 1959, Box 1, Folder 5, District Council 37 Records.
press that he had to “to think of all the citizens,” implicitly casting the union’s demands as those of a narrow constituency.\textsuperscript{55}

In the game of public posturing, Wagner held a stronger hand and played it more effectively. The city press praised the mayor for his principled stand against the workers’ demands, while the unions in general, and Wurf in particular, were subject to editorial scorn. Citing Associated Press reports that no city services were disrupted during the stoppage, the \textit{New York Times} cynically suggested that demonstration was proof that the workforce had already grown too large. “Is efficiency already so low that a slight worsening is hardly noticeable?,” the Times asked. “Or were the departments overmanned, with employees getting in each other’s way?”\textsuperscript{56}

When the administration’s budget was released a week later, Wagner blamed the city’s fiscal constraints on the state legislature and Governor Nelson Rockefeller, noting in an interview on WCBS that because the city bore the burden of more than half of the $200 million in new state taxes but received only about $32 million in new benefits, “We’ve had to cut out some of the things we had hoped to do for the city and we’ve had to reduce some of the salary increases we had hoped to give to our policemen, our firemen, our correction officers, and our teachers.” When Wurf appeared later the same evening on WNYC, he renewed his demand for a general pay increase, claiming that the city possessed “adequate taxing power and funds” to

\textsuperscript{55} Bennett, “City Hall Pickets Denounce Budget and Jeer Wagner,” 1, 30.
\textsuperscript{56} “What the Pickets Proved,” \textit{New York Times}, 1 April 1959, 36. Five days later, a reporter from the \textit{Times} lamented that Wagner’s budget fell short of the middle-class standard of “a modern, safe, clean city with well-lighted and policed streets and competent, adequately paid employees”—leaving open the implicit question of whether the city’s workers were over- or under-compensated. Paul Crowell, “Mayor Says G.O.P. Forced Governor to Cut Aid to City,” \textit{New York Times}, 6 April 1959, 1, 30.
absorb the costs, a position he reiterated (unsuccessfully) when the public hearings opened in mid-April.57

Bested in its efforts to secure a general, across-the-board pay raise through the city budget, AFSCME scored a significant victory in June 1959, when it secured substantial improvements in the base city salary scale for more than 40 occupational titles through negotiations with Beame. The increases ranged from $250 to $800, representing an increase of up to twenty percent in take-home pay.58 “What has been achieved in these negotiations certainly does not satisfy all of our demands,” Wurf acknowledged in the Council’s newly renamed paper, the Public Employee Press, “but it clearly shows the superiority of collective bargaining to any other method of fighting for salary increases.”59

The union lauded the agreement as a landmark breakthrough in the history of public sector collective bargaining. Without significant attention from the public or press, the Press editorialized, the city had undergone “a quiet revolution,” and city workers had made a transition to “real trade unionists.” “City employees and their employers were proceeding to deal in the manner long established in private industry—as equals and in a dignified, responsible fashion.” “Collective bargaining,” it concluded, “had replaced individual begging.”60

In truth, the change was far more limited, and AFSCME remained deeply frustrated with the Wagner labor relations system, but the 1959 budget fight set a pattern that would mark AFSCME’s efforts for the next five years. The two-tier approach used the new collective bargaining process to secure increases by pressuring the city to advance key occupational titles

up the grading scale in the Career and Service Plan system, while employing demonstrations and political pressure around the budget process to secure general, across-the-board pay increases and general improvements for all city workers.

The hybrid approach was neither a pure adaptation of the private sector union model applied nor a more assertive variant on traditional patterns of lobbying and petition, but rather a unique, militant brand of civil service unionism.

“Effective Collective Bargaining Through Effective Political Action”

Infused with the rhetoric and modeled on the tactics of industrial labor, the modern District Council 37 had originally aspired to an activism that transcended political activity, in part to draw a contrast with the operations of the Feinstein-DeLury era. Wurf used his 1952 Labor Day column in Spotlight to indirectly indict the Council’s traditional reliance on personal politicking. Calling the public worker “the forgotten man in the electorate,” Wurf suggested that the unions had no one to blame by themselves for their own marginalization. “All too many of us have tied ourselves to the coattails of individual politicians in seeking an individual favor,” Wurf wrote, suggesting that the situation would persist until public employees embraced the traditional political philosophy associated with Samuel Gompers and the early AFL: “Reward our friends and defeat our enemies.” “Once they’re aware that we will use political action to make our demands felt,” Wurf concluded, “the holders of public office will stop treating public employees as forgotten men.”

Through much of the 1950s, the council’s political operations were safe and narrow—when they existed at all. At its initial reorganization, District Council 37 did not include a separate political affairs department among its six major committees—Organizing, Publicity and

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Education, Grievance, Welfare, Legal Affairs, and Finance—nor were political goals included in its early agenda.\(^6^2\) When the union created a Legislative Committee a few years later, it was mostly a mechanism for increasing rank-and-file awareness of issues in Albany. It met only once a month at the council headquarters, and basically limited its operations to ineffective letter-writing campaigns.\(^6^3\) On the rare occasion that the early council ventured into electoral politics, it was on unobjectionable terms, such as its 1952 announcement of support for the state federation’s campaign to target Senator William F. Condon, co-architect of the Condon-Wadlin Act, for defeat.\(^6^4\)

While the endorsement of Wagner marked a modest break in 1953, the pattern largely continued through the middle years of the decade, despite District Council 37’s well-earned reputation for supporting the civil rights struggle. Wurf, an early participant in the New York City chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), channeled most of his activism through the Socialist Party, learning of the Montgomery bus boycott while sitting in A. Philip Randolph’s office with Norman Thomas, and responded by teaming with Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, and others to raise funds for the Southern campaigns through a group called “In Friendship.”\(^6^5\)

While District Council 37 lent active support to the movement, contributing early participants to the local boycotts and demonstrations as well as the first Freedom Rides, subsidizing its members’ participation in the March on Washington in 1963, and regularly featuring stories about both


\(^6^3\) District Council 37, Legislative Committee Flyer, n.d., Box 1, Folder 5, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.

\(^6^4\) “Random Reckonings,” Spotlight, August 1952, 1, 2, 10.

national and local civil rights struggles in the union’s newspaper, it was slower to fold issues of racial and social justice into its political agenda.  

In part, this reflected the racial and ethnic tensions that constantly threatened the council’s delicate early stature. Wurf later recalled that the Council’s avowed support for the civil rights movement sometimes fostered resentment among its primarily white-ethnic membership, and that he had to persuade the Irish and Italian membership of the essential role of the civil rights struggle in the union’s strategy. In the years before formal collective bargaining, Wurf remembered, all AFSCME had was “force majeure, strength of numbers” and the ability to challenge the enlightened self-definition of its elected officials. “We were dealing with an employer . . . who was interested not in production or profit but in its public image and its ability to progress politically,” Wurf later recalled of his early years in the union. A visual of a mass, interracial challenge to the city’s image as a model employer was an incredibly useful tool. “So we sold strength, and in the course of building that strength, we sold racial brotherhood.” 


67 Local 924 was the lynchpin in the interracial organizing strategy—the Council’s most visible new local was also home to the to the most diverse membership, and it was the one which Wurf had the most direct influence on, in his capacity as local president. Uneasily at first, Wurf eventually crafted an ethnically, racially, and gender-balanced slate of officers, including an African American woman as local treasurer. Summary, Interview with Jerry Wurf, AFSCME International Headquarters, Washington, D.C., 3 April 1979, Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.

68 “‘Once They Join This Damn Union, We Protect Their Rights’: Conversation with Labor Leader Jerry Wurf,” The Civil Liberties Review 2 (1975), 120-121.
On the rare occasions that District Council explicitly promoted a political agenda during the 1950s, it tended to be narrow and institutional, particularly compared to the broad social movement unionism later associated with Wurf at the national level.⁶⁹

Plagued by repeated disappointments and regularly frustrated by the slow progress with which the celebrated new labor relations system was implemented, AFSCME could no longer afford to neglect the electoral politics by the late 1950s. Whatever his initial vision of the public sector labor movement, Wurf came to see political action as an inherent part of public sector collective bargaining—a necessary complement, but not alternative, to direct action, necessary to make the politicized promises of candidates and elected officials meaningful.

The recurrent disappointments in the budget finally pushed District Council 37 into sustained political activity, and the 1960 budget cycle proved a breaking point. Wurf initially demanded a flat $500 raise for the city’s 100,000 Career and Salary employees, but settled for Wagner’s commitment to extend a minimum $200 raise to all city workers. When the final budget was published, however, Wurf was startled to learn that a full two-thirds of the money

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was allocated to the uniformed services, leaving little for the city’s 35,000 lowest paid workers.\textsuperscript{70}

The union had laid the groundwork for a more ambitious political program the previous October, when it made the “Effective Collective Bargaining Through Effective Political Action” the theme of its 4\textsuperscript{th} annual Fall Conference, inviting AFL-CIO political chief strategist Alexander Barkan to address its officers and staff and setting up a debate between Carmine DeSapio and Bernard Newman, the Democratic and Republican leaders in New York County.\textsuperscript{71} In April 1960, Wurf asked the Council leadership to authorize a program of “year-round activity” rather than concentrating its political and lobbying efforts on the budget hearings.\textsuperscript{72} Five months later, after the union again failed to win an general pay raise, Wurf used a report to an Executive Council meeting to denounce the Wagner collective bargaining system as “fraught with deceit, ineptness, and stalling” and urge District Council 37 to turn toward “political action” as a better way to address its grievances.\textsuperscript{73} Two months later, Wurf announced a public relations campaign geared toward the new strategy: November and December would be spent dramatizing the every-day plight of city workers, while January through April was to devoted to drawing particular attention to the limits of the city’s labor relations system and the absence of true collective bargaining. The remainder of the year was set aside political action.\textsuperscript{74}


\textsuperscript{72}Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, District Council 37, 13 April 1960, Folder 1, AFSCME District Council 37 Minutes, Microfilm Version Micro 48, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland [hereafter cited as District Council 37 Minutes, Microfilm Version]

\textsuperscript{73}Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, District Council 37, 14 September 1960, District Council 37 Minutes, Microfilm Version.

\textsuperscript{74}Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, District Council 37, 9 November 1960, Box 1, Folder 20, District Council 37 Records.
District Council 37’s renewed commitment to political action centered on the 1961 mayoral election. Wagner had entered office in 1953 with the backing of the aging Tammany machine and retained that support during his reelection campaign in 1957. As he approached the 1961 election, however, he became concerned that the ties to Tammany were undercutting his popularity among upper-class liberals and reformers, many of whom blamed Tammany boss Carmine DeSapio for Averell Harriman’s loss to Rockefeller in 1958. At first, Wagner tried to straddle the split between party regulars and reformers, but by early 1961, it was evident that his own political fortunes were best served by a public break with the party bosses. On February 3, 1961, Wagner publicly called for the New York County Democratic Party chairman to resign. DeSapio, not easily displaced, charged that Wagner was exploiting divisions within the party to distract from his own meager record as mayor and set about looking for an alternative, finally settling on State Comptroller Arthur Levitt. An accountant by training, Levitt was a capable, competent bureaucrat who had had managed to survive the Rockefeller landslide in 1958. He was also Jewish, a key consideration in trying to undermine Wagner’s appeal among the urban reformers. After initially refusing to challenge the mayor, Levitt finally bowed to pressure from party leaders in his native Brooklyn and announced his candidacy in June 1961.\(^75\)

The DeSapio-Wagner split threatened further political isolation for AFSCME. As Wagner moved away from the old party establishment, he became more reliant on liberal labor leaders like David Dubinsky and Alex Rose, two key figures in the Liberal Party, and Van Arsdale and the CTLC.\(^76\) Though Wurf was not personally close to DeSapio, he could ill afford any shift that would further increase the political clout of other city labor leaders at his expense. After initially declining to wade into the “muddled” fight in mid-June (the Council Executive

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\(^75\) McNickle, *To Be Mayor of New York*, 102-165.

\(^76\) McNickle, *To Be Mayor of New York*, 144-158.
Board declared its intent to “await developments to get a clearer picture” on June 14, perhaps in the hope of using its limited political clout at a key juncture for maximum effect) the threat of either candidate winning without AFSCME’s support proved too much. This consideration, combined with long-standing grievances over limits to the Wagner labor program, led District Council 37 to back Levitt in mid-July.78

The challenger’s campaign got off to a promising start, but soon crumbled. Tammany garnered some 280,000 votes to qualify the candidate for the ballot—five-times what the Liberal Party was able to muster for Wagner—and Levitt’s early criticism of Wagner’s record on education, crime, and other city issues won some plaudits in the press. Wagner responded to the challenge by transforming his reelection into a crusade against “bossism,” at one point going as far as to explain all the city’s problems, from crime and corrupt to poverty and pollution, as “a direct outgrowth . . . of boss rule of the . . . Democratic Party”—directly targeting the process that had put him in office just a few years earlier—and cruising to a comfortable victory in the September primary.79 Wurf took solace in the union’s brief performance in the election, optimistically boasting at a September 25 Council meeting that the union had “proved it has muscle and . . . gained the respect of local politicians” by challenging the incumbent administration. On Wurf’s recommendation, the Council voted to stay neutral in the November general election, which Wagner won handily.80

77 Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, District Council 37, 14 June 1961, District Council 37 Minutes, Microfilm Version.
78 Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, District Council 37, 19 July 1961, District Council 37 Minutes, Microfilm Version.
79 McNickle, To Be Mayor of New York, 169.
80 Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, District Council 37, 25 September 1961, District Council 37 Minutes, Microfilm Version; Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, District Council 37, 8 November 1961, District Council 37 Minutes, Microfilm Version
Wagner’s easy reelection left Wurf with even less access to City Hall and a badly strained relationship with the mayor.\textsuperscript{81} During Wagner’s first two terms, Wurf directed criticism toward the “Wagner administration,” but rarely at the mayor himself. This changed after the 1961 election. When the mayor was slow to back an extension of a pension and pay fix for blue-collar workers in early 1962, for example, AFSCME issued a statement claiming that Wagner “demonstrated total irresponsibility towards all of the city’s civil servants.”\textsuperscript{82} In private, Wurf was even more critical, co-authoring a lengthy memorandum in July 1962 entitled “Collective Bargaining in the New York City Public Service: Some Critical Observations.” The central problem with the Wagner labor relations system, Wurf and aide Charles Taibi charged, was that it forced the union to boost city workers’ pay by manipulating job titles in the salary grade scale rather than negotiating for across-the-board raises, spurring dissatisfaction among the membership and creating “difficulties for both the City and the Union leadership.” Moreover, the narrow scope of bargaining put more pressure on the union to deliver on general pay increases, which required more political capital and benefited union members and non-members equally. If the labor relations system was no longer the “ritual without meaning” that Wurf had denounced in 1957, it still fell short of his vision of true collective bargaining. City leaders still possessed “a predilection for unilateralism in labor relations and personnel relations,” Wurf and Taibi wrote. “They think in terms of managerial prerogatives much more than is conducive to a meaningful bilateral relationship” all too often exhibiting “a feeling of superior ability to deal with personnel

\textsuperscript{81} Bellush and Bellush, \textit{Union Power and New York}, 74.
\textsuperscript{82} “Mayor Wagner Charged by Union Leader with Failure to Halt Wage Cut for City Employees,” Press Release, District Council 37, 16 March 1962, Box 1, Folder 4, Gilbert Jonas Papers; The issue was resolved only late in the year, after a one-day demonstration by city workers. “Edith Evans Asbury, “City to Negotiate on Labor Wages,” \textit{New York Times}, 8 November 1962, 41.
problems” and a reluctance to engage “what appear to be ‘uninformed’ or ‘ignorant’ opinions of employees and employee organizations.”  

While Wurf would continue to insist that bilateral negotiation was “patently superior to any other procedures in bringing about improvements in wages and conditions for city employees,” as he put it in a New York Times piece in July 1963, he became increasingly disenchanted with the way the system functioned in New York City. These concerns were amplified in the years that followed, as Wagner began taking a harder and more politicized line against city workers.  

“Hogs Fattening at the Public Trough”  
The modern public sector labor movement emerged at a particularly hospitable juncture in postwar history. The publication of John Kenneth Galbraith’s Affluent Society (1958) captured the mood of many urban liberals in the late 1950s. Based on the premise that economic prosperity was a more-or-less permanent condition, Galbraith urged society to recommit itself to social welfare, using the success of the private sector to strengthen and expand the public sector. If other liberals like Leon Keyserling and more radical critics like Michael Harrington believed that Galbraith had understated the extent of poverty in America, they nonetheless shared his commitment to fiscal liberalism and his positivist belief in the capacity of government programs.  

The favorable fiscal climate provided a crucial context for the early emergence of public sector unionism. For Wurf, in particular, much of the early development of AFSCME in New York City was conditioned by presumptions about the limitless fiscal capacity of the state and city governments. “There’s always money for new buildings, memorials, and wings,” Wurf complained to the *New York Post* in late March 1959, “It’s about time better wages were budgeted too.”

Yet despite the presumption that economic growth was sufficient to underwrite public sector wage and benefit gains, Wurf was cognizant of the political and fiscal implications of the union’s demands. As early as 1952, Wurf warned about the potential political appeal of attacks on public workers, casting the elections of political outsiders Dwight Eisenhower and Vincent Impellitteri as signs of a broader perception that “city, state and national governments are not performing at the peak of their capacity.” “The people feel they’re paying too much for government,” Wurf continued, and “are inclined to lay a portion of this blame at the door of the public employee,” a perception “abetted by the seekers for political office” who found political advantage in casting “public employees as hogs fattening at the public trough.”

The tension over the fiscal implications of public sector union success would later emerge as the most important challenge that Wurf faced during his career in AFSCME, but though much of the 1950s, District Council 37 proved fairly adept at managing the tax issue, carefully balancing calls for expanded state assistance, greater efficiency, and targeted increases with a regular insistence that fiscal responsibility was not incompatible with improved pay and

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86 Montague, “He Speaks for the City Workers,” M2.
87 Jerry Wurf, “Random Reckonings,” *Spotlight*, December 1952, 1, 2. Wurf went on to suggest the creation of a Civil Service Party to promote discussion of government reform issues in elections. “We believe that people—in and out of government—can live better with and under clean government than they can under corruption. We believe that we have the biggest stake in a clean, intelligent administration and we feel that to get it we shall have to go out and sell good government to the people.”
benefits for public workers. Though at times the result seemed insincere and contradictory. A March 1953 Spotlight editorial called on city leaders to “to balance our budget… give vital services the necessary financial assistance they so desperately lack…[and] give our employees a decent living wage in line with the cost of living,” all while insisting that “there’s no need to clamp more nuisance taxes … nor … increase subway fares,” only “more courage and imagination on the part of the men who run our town.” Through much of the decade, the peculiar relationship between city and state provided AFSCME an unobjectionable foil. 88 Wurf used a February 1953 column in Spotlight to blast the “annual joust” between Albany and the city: “this corny routine has become the raison d’être for holding down salaries and other working conditions for New York City Employees.” 89 “Year in and year out, the excuses of the politicians get bigger and bigger and the crocodile tears flow with the force of Niagara Falls,” an editorial declared in May 1953. “Due to the screwball relationship between this municipality and the state, we find that the more money New York pours into state coffers, the less money there is to pay the employees of the city.” 90

When pressed to offer revenue-increasing proposals, Wurf generally favored those that insulated middle- and working-class voters and, if possible, city residents. District Council 37 criticized Governor Thomas Dewey’s 1953 proposal for a city payroll tax, condemning the plan

90 “Editorial: A Plague on Both Your Budgets,” Spotlight, 1 May 1953, 2. For his part, Wagner proved remarkably adept at manipulating the city-state division, regularly insisting that his support for expansive social spending and pay increases was foiled by the machinations of “up state” Republicans. In December 1953, just before taking office, Wagner released a proposal to raise more than $150 million in new taxes, specifically real estate taxes, and pledged to direct 40% of the money to raises for city workers. All of the significant revenue sources required action by the Republican state legislature and Dewey, which was not likely (raising the question of how serious the proposal was). The plan was predictably defeated by Dewey’s opposition, prompting Wagner to publicly (and preemptively) lament his own inability to extend raises or increase public services. “‘We won’t close up shop,’ he said. ‘We will just run a less effective one, a less productive one, a shop in which our employees may still have to work at two jobs in order to support their families in our inflated economy, a shop in which we will have equipment as antiquated as our century-old schools.’” Paul Crowell, “City Pay Rise Lost in State Aid Fight,” New York Times, 4 March 1954, 1, 21.
as “the most viciously repressive and discretionary income levy ever proposed in this state.”  
(AFSCME was not alone in its opposition—the president of the local Firemen’s Association denounced Dewey as “an icicle with a mustache.”) In 1954, Wurf used the budget hearings to call for more than $100 million in automobile-use, overnight street parking, alcohol-, and amusement taxes, all of which targeted commuters and tourists rather than city residents.

The break from Wagner following upset the delicate arrangement. With less access to City Hall, District Council 37 was forced to rely more heavily on direct appeals to the public, a tactic that meshed poorly with the mounting militancy of its own membership and changing perception of city employees.

Of course the union had always been aware of the importance of public relations, particularly in the days when well-covered demonstrations were its only recourse. During strikes and job actions, for instance, AFSCME had long gone out of its way to assure the public that it was acting responsibly—thus the emphasis that the union placed on caring for the animals during stoppages at zoos and aquariums. In 1958, AFSCME produced a thirty-minute television spot featuring testimonials by a range of city workers, and in 1959, Wurf retained a public relations firm. Both moves were designed with the dual purpose of drawing sympathy to the plight of city workers and underscoring their essential role in the delivery of public services.

But there was always the potential for backlash, particularly as strikes, stoppages, and demonstrations became more frequent during the early 1960s. Designed to put public pressure on elected officials, the actions could just as easily recoil against the workers. If they were primarily political weapons, as Wurf himself admitted, then they were effective only insofar as they

91 “SCME Hits Sell Out; Launched Wages Drive,” Spotlight, 1 April 1953, 1, 3.
94 Minutes, Executive Board Meeting, District Council 37, 11 March 1959, Box 1, Folder 19, District Council 37 Records; “You Can Fight City Hall,” Spotlight, 1 April 1958, 3, 4, 12.
affected the general public—a certain amount of inconvenience and public outcry being prerequisite to an official response. As a result, the union tended to target the busiest days for its actions, particularly when they involved cultural and tourist centers. When officials at the Hayden Planetarium and American Museum of Natural History failed to recognize the union and implement grievance machinery in 1960, for example, the union launched a one-day strike, selecting February 22, George Washington’s birthday, because, the public school holiday was historically one of the busier days at both centers. To lessen the backlash, the union arranged to have some of its members dress up in costume and hand out candy to disappointed children and it allowed some twenty cadets from West Point to use the Planetarium’s laboratory.\(^{95}\)

As the union began to expand beyond its initial blue-collar base, shaping public perception became both more important and more difficult. It had been relatively easy for the union to craft a campaign to make the laborers of the Parks Department and city zoos look sympathetic to the public eye, but winning the same public support for better paid blue-collar workers and white-collar clerical and professional employees proved more challenging. District Council 37 hired Gilbert Jonas in February 1962. Jonas had recently founded his own public relations firm after six years of service at the P.R. firm of Harold L. Ryan, where he handled the public profiles of several unions, including the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. When Wurf arranged to meet Jonas on February 21, he charged him with improving the union’s position ahead of the annual budget hearings, but also specifically asked for help in what he called “the Welfare situation.”\(^{96}\)

A hotbed of union activism since the late 1940s, the Welfare Department was home to AFSCME Local 371, which claimed 2,000 members, mostly caseworkers. The profile could

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\(^{96}\) Letter from Gilbert Jonas to Jerry Wurf, 21 February 1962, Box 1, Folder 21, Gilbert Jonas Papers.
hardly have been more different from the Parks Department workers that had bested Robert Moses. Many of the workers held college degrees, and the starting salary was just under $5,000, among the highest in the union at the time. But pay was not the primary grievance for the welfare workers. As early as 1952, AFSCME had warned that the department staff was overwhelmed, a crunch exacerbated by the subsequent growth of the city’s welfare rolls. By 1962, each investigator was responsible for 75 cases, though the union claimed that some carried up to 100. This “crushing caseload,” the union charged, led to a startling annual turnover rate approaching 60 percent. On September 20, 1962, AFSCME announced that the caseworkers would strike in October unless their loads were significantly reduced.

Jonas was charged with constructing a public relations campaign to support the action, and he began long before the union went public with its threat. In July, Jonas prepared a memorandum outlining strategies for securing both favorable media coverage of the Local 371 campaign and public support for an anticipated action. The four-point plan called for the union to reach out to more than 500 labor, civic, and political leaders, as well as community and religious organizations to garner support for the union’s cause by emphasizing the benefits of reduced caseloads on the welfare system itself.

98 “Welfare Attack Declared ‘Cheap’: McCarthy Hits Union Charge of Inefficiency, Overwork, and Underpayment,” New York Times, 27 May 1952, 32. The Welfare Department was only one example of what District Council 37 privately bemoaned as a mounting trend in the city. Rejecting a 1953 proposal by an Impellitteri administration advisory committee for a 5-10 percent across-the-board reduction in personnel, Wurf argued that under-staffing and over-work ran rampant in city departments, citing the proliferation of mandatory overtime in the Comptroller’s Office, the Finance Department’s inability to keep up with collections, the 25 percent vacancy rate in the city Health Department, and the hundreds of open positions in the hospital, housing, and public education systems as evidence that the city needed to hire more workers rather than laying them off. Letter from Jerry Wurf, General Representative, to Lazaras Joseph, Comptroller, 5 April 1953, Box 1, Folder 1, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
100 “Outline of Plan to Obtain Support for Local 371’s Program,” Memorandum from Gilbert Jonas to Frank Petrocelli, President, Local 371, Box 1, Folder 29, Gilbert Jonas Papers.
On the eve of the strike, the city offered the workers a $500 increase and a reduction to 65 cases per investigator. In a letter to Telford Taylor, chair of the Advisory Board of Public Welfare, subsequently leaked to the *New York Times*, Wagner promised that the city “cannot and will not tolerate strike action or anything of that nature” and defiantly declared that “the public interest must at all times be protected.” Despite the mayor’s warning, the membership of Local 371 overwhelmingly approved the strike on October 3. The *New York Times* cast the stand-off as the first significant test of the new labor relations system. Fearing a public backlash and facing a recalcitrant Wagner, the union eventually backed down, accepting a slightly improved offer on October 10. The settlement averted a strike, but sparked resentment among some social service workers, who eventually split off into a rival organization, the Social Service Employees Union (SSEU).

The welfare strike epitomized AFSCME’s problems with other white-collar workers. Like other occupational groups, AFSCME’s clerical and administration workers became more militant during the early 1960s. Initially, the union struggled to define a narrative for these workers. In September 1962, for example, the union filed a salary appeal for a group of clerical workers, arguing that as a self-styled model employer, the city owed the clerical and administration employees a boost in the salary scale because it had created an educational requirement (a high school diploma) for the first time in 1957. But the same brief also stressed the effect that the “degraded” status afforded the workers had on morale and performance, arguing that the union’s proposals were designed to address “grossly mistaken stereotypes about the functions and importance of this service in a viable municipal government.” These workers,

it insisted, were responsible for implementing and adjusting new policies and procedures, developing in the process from “the Clerical-Administrative force . . . into hard-to-replace specialists within their various departments and agencies.” More than just the backbone of the city bureaucracy, it concluded, this class was also a recruiting ground for higher-paying positions, an “incubator for future administrators.”¹⁰⁵ AFSCME pitched the new appeal with a one-day rally at Manhattan Center in late November 1962, but Wagner showed little interest in the campaign.¹⁰⁶

Wurf sensed a deeper meaning in the city’s reluctance to meet the clerical workers’ demands, charging Wagner with engaging in “a quiet but insidious effort to reduce municipal costs at the expense of the City’s dedicated workers.”¹⁰⁷ A disingenuous claim—Wurf later admitted that the organizing drive had been spurred by the success of other city workers at securing wage and benefit gains from the administration—the accusation nonetheless reflected AFSCME’s belief that the city’s harder line reflected concerns over the financial ramifications of public sector unionization, particularly if expanded to the clerical and administrative employees. “If we can do for 20,000 people what we have done for smaller groups,” Taibi wrote to Jonas, “the city will be in a real hole financially.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ “Established personnel practice recognizes that an employer cannot demand more highly qualified workers without simultaneously adjusting the remuneration [sic] afforded,” the union argued. “So influential an employer as the City of New York must conform to this most elemental of all personnel practices to an appropriate extent.” Salary Appeal Brief Submitted on Behalf of Titles in the Clerical-Administrative, Stenographic and Typing, Telephone Operator, Office Appliance Operator, and Shorthand Reporter Occupational Groups throughout the City of New York’s Departments, Agencies, and Public Authorities by Various Locals, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (SCME), AFL-CIO, September 1962, Box 1, Folder 1, Gilbert Jonas Papers.

¹⁰⁶ “Clerical Employee Situation,” Memorandum from Charles Taibi to Gilbert Jonas, 6 November 1962, Box 1, Folder 1, Gilbert Jonas Papers.

¹⁰⁷ “Massive Rally of City Clerks, Administrators Begins Union Drive to Organize, Raise Wages,” Press Release, District Council 37, 29 November 1962, Box 1, Folder 4, Gilbert Jonas Papers. Wurf admitted that the organizing drive had been spurred by the recent gains of other city workers. Letter from Gilbert Jonas to Ed Zeltner, New York Mirror, 8 November 1962, Box 1, Folder 1, Gilbert Jonas Papers.

¹⁰⁸ “Clerical Employee Situation,” Memorandum from Charles Taibi to Gilbert Jonas, 6 November 1962, Box 1, Folder 1, Gilbert Jonas Papers.
These two trends—the union’s growing awareness of the importance of public perception and the city’s increasing resistance to union demands—came together in late 1962 in Wagner’s response to a ten-day strike by city drivers. In late November, the New York Times reported that two thousand Motor Vehicle Operators (MVOs) in Local 983 were poised to strike after negotiations over wage issues broke down. The MVO strike marked a shift in the media coverage of public sector labor issues in the city. In previous demonstrations, reporters had extended a largely sympathetic airing of AFSCME’s positions, in part because Wurf’s colorful rhetoric provided good copy for their stories. But by late 1962, many in the city’s press were growing weary of the militant posturing of city workers, and this attitude apparently filtered down into news coverage of the strikes and demonstrations. The first story on the city drivers’ strike in the New York Times, for instance, reminded readership that the Condon-Wadlin Law barred such actions and questioned the wisdom of the city’s unofficial policy of non-enforcement.109

The union probably expected the city to hold firm against the pay raises, only to have Wagner intervene personally at the last minute and negotiate a settlement—a pattern established during previous stoppages. But on the first day of the strike, Police Commissioner Michael J. Murphy fired five civilian operators of prison vans for participating in the walkout. When the stoppage continued another day, Murphy fired eight more, bringing the two-day total to thirteen. Channeling the famous Calvin Coolidge quote, Murphy claimed that there was “no right—legal or moral—to strike against the safety of the people of this city by any employee of this

department.” A spokesman for Wagner announced the mayor’s support for Murphy, while reiterating his personal opposition to the Condon-Wadlin Law.110

Wurf denounced what he called a “crude attempt at strike-breaking” and vowed “no member will return to his job until all members return without reprisals.”111 In response to the second round of terminations, Wurf threatened a general strike of municipal workers.112 He denounced Wagner’s refusal to condemn Murphy’s actions as “irrational and unreasonable,” claiming that the situation had developed into “a full-blown effort to break a strike by a so-called pro-labor administration.”113

But in spite of Wurf’s protests, Wagner played the strike well in the eyes of the public. Since city chauffeurs were among those involved in the stoppage, the mayor opted to have a bodyguard drive him around the city in his wife’s station wagon, even though his own driver had reported to work as usual.114 Asked about the union’s threat of a general strike, Wagner coolly responded that he “hoped that Mr. Wurf carefully examines his own conscience before taking any further steps that would imperil the health and welfare of the people of this city.”115

Wagner erred in one respect, however. By sanctioning Murphy’s reprisals against the strikers, the mayor alienated even his own supporters in the city labor movement, shocking many of the city’s private sector union leaders out of their studied indifference to AFSCME and other public sector unions and temporarily alleviating many of the long-standing jurisdictional tensions between District Council 37 and other unions. The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists

112 A union spokesman offered a non-denial denial of the Associated Press report that Wurf had threatened to expand the action. Denying that the union had any intent to launch a massive strike, it nonetheless stood by its militant posture: “Did Jerry really say that he would pull out selected locals unless the city made a reasonable offer? . . . He certainly did.” Levey, “Murphy Dismissed 8 More for Joining Drivers’ Strike,” 1, 32.
113 Levey, “Murphy Dismisses 8 More for Joining Drivers’ Strike,” 1, 32.
114 Levey, “Police Dismiss 5 as City’s Drivers Strike Over Pay,” 1, 52.
115 Levey, “Murphy Dismissed 8 More for Joining Drivers’ Strike,” 1, 32.
issued a statement condemning the reprisals and demanding that the city resume “good faith” bargaining with the union.  

When Wurf called a meeting of the city labor movement on the evening of November 29, more than 200 local union leaders and officials showed, including representatives from the Teamsters, AFSCME’s oldest rival. “A strong current of anger ran though the meeting,” the New York Times reported. “It was directed mainly against Police Commissioner Michael J. Murphy . . . but it was also clear that the union leaders were annoyed with Mayor Wagner for his support of Commissioner Murphy.” Some openly denounced Wagner for “using some of his lackey’s as strikebreakers,” while more strident criticism came from Paul Hall, Wurf’s long-time ally from the Seafarers, who accused Wagner of using “police-state tactics . . . in a true cop and Gestapo fashion.” The press reported that the surprising turnout reflected the unions’ sense that there was an “increasing anti-labor atmosphere” in the city, underscored by their pledge to join AFSCME in picketing City Hall the following Monday.  

The Mayor’s Office scrambled to defend Wagner’s record—“a proven friend of labor, one of the best friends labor ever had, and all those concerned might well remember it,” a testy spokesman told the press. Wagner also seemed to retreat somewhat from his support for Murphy, suggesting that the 13 (soon to be 14) drivers had only been suspended, pending a hearing to determine whether they had participated in the strike (which was never in question).  

But on the strike itself, Wagner was intransigent. He rejected Local 983’s public offer to restore limited activity to vital services, and took to the press to personally denounce the union’s leadership. “This walkout called by Mr. Wurf is directly against the people of this city,” Wagner  

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116 Press Release, ACTU, 4 December 1962, Box 1, Folder 2, Gilbert Jonas Papers.  
118 Levey, “200 Labor Chiefs Order Picketing to Back Drivers,” New York Times, 30 November 1962, 1, 23. Murphy was defiant, and pushed back at Wagner’s claims that there was ambiguity in the decision. “The men are dismissed when they abandon or terminate their employment,” he told the press. Though they did have a right to appeal their participation in the strike, he admitted, they did not have a right to appeal the punishment. Ralph Katz, “Murphy Dismisses 14th City Striker,” New York Times, 1 December 1962, 1, 29.
argued. “He has been attempting . . . to interrupt or halt the flow of vital drugs and other supplies to hospitals; he is attempting to interfere with the orderly procedures of law enforcement; he is attempting to shut down the program that provides hot lunches to the school children of this city.” Calling on Wurf to “face up to the consequences of his own irresponsibility,” Wagner vowed to stand firm against the union as long as the stoppage persisted: “I want to make it unalterably clear that I will not under any circumstances negotiate with Mr. Wurf regarding a settlement of this walkout,” regardless of whether the stoppage lasted “a week, a month or a year.”

The strike lasted for another week, though the outlines of a settlement were evident as early as December 5. Using Van Arsdale as an intermediary in order to hold to his pledge not to negotiate with AFSCME while the stoppage continued, Wagner released a statement promising to appoint a three-person citizens’ committee to investigate the grievances if the strikers agreed to return to work. Convinced that the mayor’s resolve was genuine, Van Arsdale urged AFSCME to accept the offer of a public panel to end the stoppage. Wagner later suggested, and the New York Times apparently concurred, that a more pressing factor might have been the pressure of “an economic pinch that was beginning to tell on low-income workers.” In either case, the city drivers voted to approve the settlement, without reinstatement of the fired workers, on December 6, bringing the ten-day strike to a close.

The New York Times declared the resolution a magnificent victory for the mayor, running the headline “Striking Drivers Vote to Return on City’s Terms.” “Mayor Wagner has never before taken such an adamant position in a city labor dispute,” the paper informed its readers.

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119 “Striking Drivers Offer Aid to City; Mayor Rejects It,” New York Times, 3 December 1962, 1, 35.
“While he refused to follow Commissioner Murphy’s lead in invoking the Condon-Wadlin Act, he succeeded in ending the walkout on his terms and without weakening the collective bargaining machinery he has set up for the unions of city employees.”

District Council 37 took solace in the fact that most of the discharged employees were eventually rehired and that the final settlement was more than double the city’s last pre-strike offer—in fact, the resolution of the stoppage only strengthened Wurf’s conviction that anti-strike laws were ineffective and unenforceable, a position that would inform his approach for the two decades that followed.

But the MVO strike exemplified the growing resistance to public sector militancy in the city. While he had had previously qualified his support for unionization by underscoring the need for “maximum efficiency in government with the least possible burden on taxpayer,” never before had Wagner taken such a strong stand against city unions, not wielded that opposition to such political effect. As early as 1957, though, Wagner’s pollster, Louis Harris, found that the mayor’s support among white ethnic voters was flagging in part because of concerns that the administration’s elaborate housing, education, and welfare policies would lead to higher tax rates. Two years later, Harris’s survey found that racial division were only the tenth most pressing concern for voters in municipal elections; taxes ranked first, and questions over other municipal services, including schools, subways, welfare system, and street and road repair all ranked higher. These tensions only grew during the early 1960s, as demands for social services inflated the city payroll.

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122 Levey, “Striking Drivers Vote to Return on City’s Terms,” 1, 30.
123 Bellush and Bellush, *Union Power and New York*, 75-78.
125 McNickle, *To Be Mayor of New York*, 119-120.
127 Between 1958 and 1968, the city workforce grew from 247,000 to 400,000, far out-pacing the general population. Bellush and Bellush, *Union Power and New York*, 51-53.
There was, then, a natural constituency in New York politics for anti-tax appeals, even in the relatively liberal late 1950s. The extent of popular anxiety was evident in the state’s growing conservative movement. In late 1961, a pair of young Wall Street attorneys named Kieran O’Doherty and J. Daniel Mahoney circulated a “Conservative Party Prospectus” to 50,000 likely supporters across the state, including New York City. Launched in response to Governor Rockefeller’s efforts to moderate the GOP platform in 1960 to improve Nixon’s chances in New York, O’Doherty and Mahoney blasted the Party Establishment for “leading the party in an unabating march to the left.” They conceived of their new Conservative Party as a counterpart to the Liberal Party—a political vehicle to force mainstream two-party candidates to bend toward the political poles to get elected in statewide contests. The party platform blended anti-communism with free market economics, but also included an explicit anti-statism that presaged future attacks on government programs and government workers.128

The direct anti-tax appeals were initially somewhat limited in New York City by the unique demographic and housing structure of the city—the working and middle-classes were far less likely to own their homes than to rent than in other major urban centers, mitigating their concern about property tax issues—and to the extent that the Conservative Party managed to gain traction in the city, it tended to be on the basis of other issues.129 Immediately outside of the city, though, there was a growing suburban constituency sensitive about the encroachment of “urban” problems. The wider New York City metropolitan region was in flux, as more than two million city residents shifted to the suburbs in the first two decades of the postwar era, mostly to

129 In 1950, only about eight percent of housing units in the city were detached, single-family homes, half the rate of Chicago, and one-fifth that of Detroit and Los Angeles. As a result, there was middle- and working-class interest in property and real estate tax issues, and homeowner groups played a far less influential role in the city than in other parts of the country. Freeman, Working-Class New York, 30.
suburban and exurban communities around the city. Commuters had always been a key feature of the city workforce, but prior to the 1950s, the phenomenon tended to be limited to high-paid executives. By the early 1960s, the ranks of commuters included a growing number of professional and clerical workers. Within the city, a growing number of working-class whites were relocating to redeveloped areas of the East Queens and the North Bronx—areas previously considered middle-class enclaves in the city. In both cases, as Joshua Freeman has observed, the physical relocation brought a psychological realignment, as new homeowners cast a skeptical and anxious eye on anything that seemed to threaten their new-found status, from racial integration to higher taxes.¹³⁰

The harder line culminated in Wagner’s response to one of the most politically controversial strikes in the city’s history, a 1965 action launched jointly by AFSCME Local 371 and SSEU, the organization of mostly young, white caseworkers which had split from clerical- and supervisor-dominated Local 371 in 1964.¹³¹ When mounting complaints about pay and caseloads sparked calls for action within the department, Wagner offered to appoint a five-person panel to arbitrate the issues.¹³² SSEU rejected the settlement immediately, while Local 371 briefly considered the proposal before ultimately voting it down as well, in part because it feared being displaced by SSEU.¹³³ On January 1, 1965, more than 8,000 employees struck the city Welfare Department, forcing the city to close many welfare centers, halt home visits, and cease considering new welfare cases. The city continued mailing regular checks, requesting that the

¹³⁰ Municipal workers were limited in their mobility by the Depression-era Lyons Law, which required three years of city residency to qualify for a government job and continued residency to retain the job. For them, Eastern Queens, Jamaica Bay, and the northern Bronx, all areas of inner-city redevelopment that featured semi-suburban patterns of housing. Freeman, Working-Class New York, 172-174.
recipients voluntarily return the money if they were no longer eligible, but it pulled some 5,400 investigators and clerical workers off the payroll, the first time that it had taken steps to enforce the provisions of Condon-Wadlin on such a scale.\textsuperscript{134} Leaders of both unions were arrested for violating a court injunction against the stoppage, leading Wurf to denounce Wagner as “a strikebreaker who has forfeited the support of organized labor.”\textsuperscript{135}

The strike was eventually settled when Wagner, under pressure from the rest of the city labor movement, agreed to appoint a “blue-ribbon Citizens Task Force” to mediate, but it marked the end of an era in labor relations in the city.\textsuperscript{136} As Joshua Freeman has noted, for more than a decade after he first came into office, Wagner had been able to prevent serious disruptions though “a combination of gradualism, personalism, and political machination.”\textsuperscript{137} By bringing the city welfare system to a halt, the 1965 strike ruptured this delicate peace, while also betraying the impracticability of anti-strike laws.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{135} Emanuel Perlmutter, “City Obtains Writ in Welfare Tie-Up,” \textit{New York Times}, 19 January, 1, 30. Like the MVO strike two years earlier, Wagner’s response unintentionally united the city labor movement behind public workers. Van Arsdale’s IBEW and Paul Hall’s Seafarers were particularly supportive, gifting $5,000 each to the strike fund. “Relief Strikers Call for Protest,” \textit{New York Times}, 25 January 1965, 19. There were limits to even this temporary solidarity: other city unions rejected calls for a one-day protest by all city workers in support of the Welfare Department strike.
\textsuperscript{137} Freeman, \textit{Working-Class New York}, 206-207.
\textsuperscript{138} The welfare strike gave additional credence to efforts to reform the Condon-Wadlin Act. Long criticized by editorial boards as unworkable because it imposed penalties so stiff that few elected officials were willing to bear the political cost of enforcement, the mounting militancy of New York’s public workers forced a reconsideration of the law following a one-day strike by the United Federation of Teachers in 1963. Governor Nelson Rockefeller created a commission to consider revision, and eventually proposed a reform package that shortened the probationary period for strikers, but docked two days’ pay for each day out. Wurf, who had long called for the repeal of the act, was troubled by Rockefeller’s perpetuation of what he called “the punitive approach” to public sector labor relations and by the absence of an alternative system of dispute resolution, and AFSCME instead backed an alternative proposal which would have created something approximating the federal labor relations system instead, with a neutral third-party referee and organizing and bargaining rights. “Assembly Relaxes Condon-Wadlin Act by Vote of 85 to 65,” \textit{New York Times}, 4 April 1963, 36; Telegram from Jerry Wurf to Raymond Corbett, 22 March
Wagner opted not to stand for election for a fourth term in 1965, but his conduct of city labor relations was a prominent issue in the three-way contest between liberal Republican John V. Lindsay, Democratic City Comptroller Abraham Beame, and Conservative intellectual William F. Buckley. Counterintuitively attacking the Wagner administration both for conducting municipal bargaining in the backrooms of City Hall and for his frequent (and costly) last-minute interventions to avert strikes, Lindsay struck a posture that promised to take a stronger, commanding line against public employee unions.\textsuperscript{139} Unchallenged in the Republican primary, Lindsay’s general election campaign featured a fierce, unrelenting attack on the Democratic Party’s stewardship of New York City, playing on concerns that ranged from traffic and sanitation to crime and education, leaving the impression, as one keen observer put it, “that the quality of life in New York, and the ability of the government to improve it, was declining.”\textsuperscript{140} A public relations blitz from the campaign blasted “dirty streets, polluted air and broken down schools,” while Lindsey dismissively cast municipal employees as an inefficient, faceless bureaucracy, piecing together and unlikely coalition of old-line Protestants, Irish- and Italian-Catholics, and liberal Jews.\textsuperscript{141}

Ironically, the end of Wagner’s system, ridiculed at times by the press and reformers, unleashed a flurry of militancy and, eventually, spending in the city. While Wagner’s personal approach had managed to hold down settlements through the 1950s and early 1960s, Lindsay’s technocratic system encouraged unions to out-do one another in militancy and demands, beginning with a strike by the TWU on January 1, 1966, Lindsay’s Inauguration Day. Despite vowing to take a harder line against city unions during the campaign, Lindsay capitulated after

\textsuperscript{139} Morris, \textit{The Cost of Good Intentions}, 27-28.
\textsuperscript{140} McNickle, \textit{To Be Mayor of New York}, 193.
\textsuperscript{141} McNickle, \textit{To Be Mayor of New York}, 204-209.
twelve days, setting off an explosive and costly cycle of militant job actions and ground-breaking pay, benefit, and pension settlements. The rising militancy of public sector unions fueled a growing public opposition to city employees’ demand that culminated in a 1968 sanitation strike, when Lindsay paired with the state legislature to block a settlement supported by Rockefeller in what *New York Times* labor reporter A. H. Raskin dubbed “the tocsin of a fundamental shift in the public’s willingness to tolerate tieups in which it is the chief victim.”

“Pacesetters for the Rest of the Nation”

In February 1963, Gilbert Jonas wrote to the lead editors of a dozen or so leading news magazines touting “one of the most significant—but as yet untold—stories concerning the American labor movement”: the growth of public sector unions. AFSCME in general, and District Council 37 in particular, Jonas argued, were “almost always the pacesetters for the rest of the nation.” “The militant style established by Wurf,” he wrote in another profile memorandum, “has since spread like a prairie fire across the country to other major metropolitan areas,” a welcome tonic to the “tepid, almost apologetic approach” of other employee organizations.

Jonas’ profile was self-serving, but by the mid-1960s, many in the media were coming to share similar views. In November 1962, the *New York Post* ran its second full profile of the District Council 37 leader, proclaiming that Wurf had been “threatening, cajoling and reasoning”

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143 Morris, *The Cost of Good Intentions*, 90-106; McNickle, *To Be Mayor of New York*, 213. Van Arsdale grew concerned about the emerging “lynch labor” atmosphere in the city and warned that the “strike fever” of city unions would lead to a massive public backlash if not curbed or redirected. Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 227
144 Letter from Gilbert Jonas to Alfred S. Dashiell, Managing Editor, *Readers Digest*, 28 February 1963, Box 1, Folder 3, Gilbert Jonas Papers.
145 “Union With a Future - The Municipal Workers of New York City,” Memorandum Prepared by District Council 37, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, 10 February 1963, Box 1, Folder 3, Gilbert Jonas Papers.
on behalf of public employees “since the days when they were supplicants rather than union members with any real sense of their own strength.” Through the countless strikes and demonstrations against the city, the piece continued, Wurf had made himself an “expert” in the militant civil service unionism—the “peculiar and relatively new act of labor bargaining with the New York City government.” A month later, the New York Herald Tribune similarly claimed that Wurf was “a union leader whose career is devoted to disproving the ancient municipal adage ‘You Can’t Fight City Hall.’”

During his decade and a half at the head of AFSCME in New York City, Jerry Wurf oversaw both the growth of an organization and a revolution in public sector labor relations. Playing in part on the widespread frustration with the Wagner labor relations system, District Council 37 strung together an impressive series of organizing drives during the mid-1960s—including 6,200 school lunch employees in February 1962, 5,000 engineers and architects in July 1963, and 6,000 non-teaching school aides in December 1965. The victories culminated later in December 1965, when AFSCME defeated the Teamsters in a massive representation in the Department of Hospitals, securing bargaining rights over nurses aids and hospital clerical employees, making AFSCME the majority representative for both the 102,000 Career and Salary employees and giving the union the right to engage in citywide negotiations for the first time. By the mid-1960s, District Council 37 bargained on behalf of more than 50,000 workers in the city, and held the largest single share of members in the national union. The union’s most important victory came late in 1965, when it bested Feinstein’s Local 237 in a massive representation election for city hospital employees, setting off a string of victories that gave

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148 Untitled Timeline, n.d. [1967], Box 45, Folder 13, District Council 37 Records.
AFSCME the majority of all executive department employees by early 1967. In February 1969, the union reached an agreement with the city that established a range of occupation and overtime bonuses, provided for eleven fully-paid holidays, and instituted a 20 year-50 percent pension system that allowed all city workers to retire on terms similar to those long granted the protective services.\footnote{Bellush and Bellush, Union Power and New York, 191; Freeman, Working-Class New York, 207-208.}

Yet in an odd way, success altered Wurf’s original conception of the public sector labor movement. Initially asserting a purer, simpler vision of organization dedicated to the transfer of the private sector model into government employment, by the mid-1960s, Wurf was forced to concede certain differences in the public sector landscape. The most obvious manifestation of the shift was the union’s increasing awareness of the importance of political action, but there were other signs as well. Perhaps the most notable was Wurf’s slight turn against his own previously unabashed embrace of the private sector model and rank-and-file militancy. In a late 1963 letter to the New York Times, Wurf declared that “no one—certainly not this organization—has ever suggested that the collective bargaining process in public service is the same as that which exists in private industry,” citing public reaction to work stoppages as a major difference.\footnote{Jerry Wurf, “Aiding Public Employes: Collective Bargaining Process Is Defended by Union Director,” New York Times, 5 July 1963, 17.} While his insistence that an effectively designed labor relations system “would obviate the necessity of strikes” was consistent with his earlier position—after all, both the threat and use of mass actions had always tended to focus more on the absence or ineffectiveness of the labor relations machinery than on simpler material concerns—it was a public concession that Wurf would not have made a decade earlier. In part a nod to the growing public angst over the militancy of government workers, it also genuinely reflected Wurf’s reading of a decade of developments in
New York City which vindicated his earlier belief in the capacity of bilateral negotiation to empower and enrich public workers.

But perhaps the statement was also designed to soften Wurf’s image, to portray himself less as the rabble-rousing pioneer from early public sector organizing drives and more as an established statesmen of a national movement. Wurf missed the culmination of the revolution in public sector labor relations in New York City during the mid-1960s. Parlaying the meteoric rise of the District Council 37 into a successful challenge of one-time mentor Arnold Zander, Wurf left the city in which he had been born and raised in May 1964 to take office as national president of AFSCME, bringing the model he had developed in New York to the rest of the nation.
Part II: (Unfinished) Revolution: 1961-1972
CHAPTER FOUR

“A Hell of A Lot More to An Election Than Just Tallying the Votes”:

Union Presidential Politics and the Transformation of AFSCME, 1958-1964

“Look at the official photographs of those early conventions, 1948, ’50, ’52 and so on,” an early AFSCME organizer recalled in the mid-1970s. “All you see is the same square-faced, crewcut, hayseed, blue-eyed Norwegian, state-level worker from Minnesota.”

By the late 1950s, this characterization no longer adequately described the profile of AFSCME. The professional and administrative employees central to the union since its founding in the mid-1930s remained its bedrock in many rural locales, but they were increasingly joined by a diverse range of laborers and service-sector workers from large urban governments in cities like Philadelphia and New York City. The demographic shift combined with a growing spirit of militancy among government employees to disrupt long-standing modes of operation in the union, sparking conflicts over institutional governance, structure, and priorities, plunging AFSCME into a half-decade of dissent and division, and culminating in the rarest of things in union politics: a successful challenge to a sitting national president.

The contest between Zander and Wurf embodied divergent and competing visions for the union. Embodying the respectable progressive reformism of the Upper Midwest, Zander believed in preserving the traditional dominance of white-collar workers and focus on the expansion and preservation of the civil service system. Wurf, in contrast, advocated aggressive organizing among blue- and gray-collar sectors and the empowerment and material improvement of public workers through militant trade unionism. Evident as early as the mid-1950s, these differences became more pronounced after 1958 and took on a more sustained and organized form after

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1 Richard N. Billings and John Greenya, Power to the Public Worker (New York: Robert B. Luce, 1974), 43.
1961, when Wurf formally announced his candidacy for the union’s national presidency. But sustaining a successful political challenge to the incumbent national leadership required more than simply presenting an alternative vision for the union; it also had to engage in national organization and movement-building within a union that was by design a loose collection of fragmented locals and councils. As it evolved between 1961 and 1964 from a modest effort to win reform and transparency to a concerted crusade to topple Zander, the campaign came to encompass a whole range of grievances—personal and local, institutional and philosophical—fused together more as a critique of the status quo than a coherent program for the future.

Uniting the insurgents’ program was a simple notion, rooted in Wurf’s previous experience in New York City. “Jerry believed only through confrontation could you have a movement,” Al Wurf later recalled, that the purpose of a union was nothing more or less than a vehicle “to take on the boss.”

“Syndromes of Discontent and Unhappiness”

In May 1962, a staff writer for Business Week magazine observed that the conflicts evident at the most recent AFSCME convention stemmed from “growing pains”—the cost of success. “Growth generates conflict,” the magazine proclaimed in one of the earliest national profiles of the union. “AFSCME members are determining now—as the auto and steelworkers did a generation ago—what shape their union will take.”

Through the first two decades of its existence, AFSCME’s growth was steady, if rarely impressive, increasing every year save one between 1936 and 1955, when it topped 100,000 for

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the first time. Over the next five years, this rate of growth more than tripled, with the most intense growth falling between 1955 and 1958, when around 70,000 new members came into the union, nearly doubling its size. Though about 30,000 came through the 1956 merger with the CIO’s Government and Civic Employee Organizing Committee (GCEOC), the rest came through new organization, much of it in urban centers like Philadelphia and New York City.\footnote{Richard Allen Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Sector, 1960-1970: A Case Study,” M.A. Thesis, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1971, 4-8. Though this pattern slowed somewhat during the recession-plagued late 1950s, the union picked up more than 50,000 additional members by 1964.}

Yet despite the impressive growth, AFSCME continued to lag behind its jurisdictional potential. In 1947, the union had organized only about 2 percent of the 3.5 million non-uniformed, non-educational state and local employees it was entitled to represent under the terms of its charter. Despite the intervening growth and GCEOC merger, thirteen years later, AFSCME’s share of the same workforce had risen to only 4 percent.\footnote{Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Sector,” 4-8.} To critics, the failure to maximize its membership left AFSCME incapable of challenging an emerging pay gap between public and private employees. The average compensation of factory workers matched that of government employees for the first time in the mid-1940s and moved decisively ahead around 1952.\footnote{Stanley Aronowitz, From the Ashes of the Old: American Labor and America’s Future (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 60.} By decade’s end, the International Executive Board (IEB) calculated that “the average public employee is earning $32 a month less than the worker in private employment” and that the longstanding advantage in fringe benefits was “being rapidly narrowed.”\footnote{Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Sector,” 9-13.}

The two trends combined to undermine the union’s traditional civil service-centered model. In 1954, the national convention voted to officially add written agreements to civil service as authorized tools for the union. The following year, Zander hired John Caldwell, former Director of Labor Research and Education at the University of Chicago and a strong
advocate of collective bargaining, to the union’s national staff. In 1956, the IEB formally acknowledged for the first time that bilateral “working agreements” offered “a greater degree of protection . . . to the employee than is afforded under many administrations of formalized civil service.” Though the Board stopped short of embracing formal contracts as superior to civil service protections, it did suggest that the process of collective bargaining conveyed a sense of empowerment not necessarily found in traditional merit systems. “The employees through their union discuss almost every phase of the bilateral agreement” and “feel that it is something which they helped to bring into existence,” the IEB report suggested. “It is much more nearly a part of their thinking than are parts of an overall civil service system.”

At the 1956 convention, the IEB admitted that one of the “uncompleted jobs” of the union was “gaining recognition of the right of public employees to bargain collectively.”

For a new generation of union activists, though, the concessions toward collective bargaining only served to bring into relief the deficiencies of a national organization still structurally oriented toward the older agenda. Zander remained committed to a pattern of growth predicated on the proliferation of small, narrowly based locals, and the national office directed few resources to organizing drives. Zander tried to raise the union’s per capita dues, which, at $.65 per member per month, were among the lowest in the labor movement, at the 1956 convention, claiming that more money was needed to seize on the “vast potentialities for union

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8 Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Service,” 7-8. The contradictory statement also suggested: “Although there appears to be little reason for using contracts where there is good civil service coverage, yet, because of the adaptability of a contract to particular situations and because there can be incorporated in it details of administration including valuable grievance procedures, there are a number of jurisdictions possessing reasonably good civil service coverage in which our members still and in addition thereto have working agreements with their employer.”

9 Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Service,” 42. The number of written agreements (a precursor to formal bargaining contracts) bore out this trend. At the 1956 convention, 120 locals had a bi-lateral written agreement; two years later, that number had grown to 160. In 1960, 268 locals reported having a formal bilateral agreement.
growth” and meet the “gigantic tasks confronting us.” “We cannot fight a modern war,” he warned with uncharacteristic militancy, “without the proper weapons.”

The proposal failed, in part because critics worried that additional resources would simply be redirected into Zander’s myriad pet projects and peripheral concerns. Under his direction, AFSCME invested millions in a public housing program and was deeply involved in the Public Service International, the global coalition of public employee unions. Zander was proud of both initiatives, which frequently took him away from the national office—Wurf later cynically declared that the president believed he was “leading the working class toward the better life,” while fellow dissident Bob Hastings remembered that his initial interest in the reform caucus was born of a belief that Zander was transforming AFSCME into “a goddamn housing corporation and a second State Department.”

The union’s governing structure only exacerbated these frustrations. The low per capita dues and miniscule national staff gave Zander unchallenged authority at the national office, while the composition of the International Executive Board rendered it ineffective as a check on the chief executive. After 1946, AFSCME used an at-large system of convention voting to elect the union’s vice-presidents (who made up the IEB), a change from its early history, when it used a regional system. Proponents of the change, including Zander, argued the national system made for a more cohesive and united board. For detractors, though, the IEB structure precluded it

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10 “SCME Convention Sets Sights on ‘Giant Organizing Job Ahead’,” Spotlight, May 1956, 1, 16.
12 This position was confirmed by economist John T. Dunlop in an administration-commissioned study in 1961 in which Dunlop warned that a regional system “would tend to make the Board more responsive to the interests of particular regions, while the present arrangement tends toward a Board that places greater interest in the international union and its members as a whole.” John D. Dunlop, “Report on the Proposal to Elect the International Executive Board on a Regional Basis,” Draft Manuscript, 10 March 1961, Box 8, Folder 1, Leo Kramer Papers, Part
from adequately representing the growing proportion of eastern, urban members, those most
committed to a more militant, trade union-style agenda. Though representation on the Board was
geographically distributed by tradition (with no more than one person from each state), the
system of election allowed Zander to tightly control membership by strategically composing a
slate at the national conventions. The result was the election of a large number of former union
staff members and administration allies and the over-representation of rural and state locals
(New York’s traditional seat was held through the 1950s by a representative of the statewide
Council 50, rather than New York City’s District Council 37), while those urban officials who
did make it onto the IEB, like William McEntee from Philadelphia, tended to be staunchly loyal
to Zander. Reformers pushed for the implementation of a district system that divided the Board
into regional units, with each seat subject to election by the appropriate delegates at the annual
convention, resulting in Board more responsive to the needs of rank-and-file member and less
deferential to the national union president.13

The perceived absence of accountability at the national office heightened sensitivity
toward “special arrangements,” an expansive category of processes whereby extra resources or
services were extended to locals or councils in exchange for greater supervision from the
national office.14 Wurf’s appointment by Zander as an international representative in New York
City was perhaps the most visible and successful example of the practice, providing critical

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Unpublished Manuscript, n.d. [1986?], Box 7, Folder 4, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers, Tamiment Library &
Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter cited as Bernard and
Jewel Bellush Papers].

14 The policy got its name from the provision in the union constitution, first created at the 1950 national convention.
The initial resolution read simply that “whenever all the local unions in any council pay a higher per capita tax, the
international president is authorized to enter into arrangements with such councils for the joint developments of
special organization or other service activities.” In most cases, however, the local or council ended up being
financially subsidized, rather than paying a higher share. Leo Kramer, Labor’s Paradox: The American Federation
of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1962), 82.
financial assistance that sustained the struggling council during its early years. During the late 1950s, though, “special arrangements” came under attack from opponents on three points: First, advocates of a more militant brand of unionism claimed that financial and logistical support for organizing campaigns should flow more freely from both the national office; second, a broader section of reformers argued that there was insufficient transparency in the agreements, the details, conditions, and terms of which were often unknown even to the members of the IEB or the general membership of the affected local or council; third, and most controversial during the early 1960s, critics charged that special arrangements undermined union democracy by allowing the national office to dominate convention delegations. “Special arrangements,” Wurf later recalled, became the “bête noir” of the dissident caucus. “It became the real aggravating thing in the union that 60 percent of the union had given up its autonomy in exchange for assistance from the union.”

These various complaints over AFSCME’s agenda, governance, and structure—what Wurf later termed the “syndromes of discontent and unhappiness”—first cohered around the union’s 1958 convention in Long Beach, California, when a small opposition emerged to protest the administration’s policy of credentialing union organizers as delegates for locals and councils under special arrangements. The core of the dissident caucus consisted of young, well-educated leaders of prominent locals and councils, “college kids with an intellectual background,” as Wurf recalled. Though many came from urban-industrial states like Illinois, Missouri, Ohio, and New York, the opposition also drew support from places as far flung as California, Florida, and Minnesota. At least four of the early critics—Joseph Ames, Al Bilik, Robert Hastings, and Norm

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17 Billings and Greenya, *Power to the Public Worker*, 69.
Schut—would later play important roles in Wurf’s campaign. Ames had grown up around St. Louis and worked as an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and Teamsters before joining AFSCME’s staff around 1954, eventually becoming the Secretary-Treasurer for Local 401. Bilik was born in New York City and earned a graduate degree in political science before joining AFSCME as an organizer in the early 1950s. After a brief time, he left the union to work for the United Auto Workers, before returning to work for the union as a business agent for District Council 51 in Cincinnati, where he eventually rose to head the local Central Labor Council. Hastings, a lawyer by training, was active in Council 8 in Columbus, Ohio, and Schut was a key figure in the Washington state council, and perhaps, other than Wurf, the most influential figure within the union. Victor Gotbaum and Lillian Roberts, both of whom became critical to the campaign, followed similar paths through the union in Chicago.

There was a basic similarity in the career trajectories of the COUR activists that did much to inform their reformist impulse. All were prominent figures in local organizations with some experience as national union staff who had come into the union in the years after World War II. Most had experience with the private sector labor movement, which made them more likely to criticize the shortcomings of the civil service model. Each became disenchanted with Zander because of what they saw as anti-democratic policies. It was not a rank-and-file rebellion, but rather led by mid-level union officers who, at least initially, were more interested in reforming the union than challenging its leadership.

20 In an unpublished manuscript, Bernard and Jewel Bellush argued that COUR represented “a broadly representative, grass-roots network of highly-skilled, democratically-oriented lieutenants,” an apt description that
In fact, for two years after the opposition first emerged in 1958, it was not clear that the dissidents would ever cohere into an oppositional caucus. When Hastings hosted an early organizing session in Columbus in 1959, the principle push was for regional reform of the IEB and an overhaul of convention voting strength. At one point, it seems, Zander tried to fire Gotbaum in retaliation for his role in the early dissident caucus, which Wurf warned was like “throwing a torch in an a barrel of gasoline.” Allied with Zander through the 1958 convention, Wurf agreed to “handle the red-hots.”\textsuperscript{21} Attending the early dissident meetings, by his own recollection and apparently without contradiction, as both “Arnold’s guy” and “an honest broker,” Wurf found himself increasingly sympathetic toward the reform program.\textsuperscript{22}

After the fourth or fifth meeting, Wurf was dispatched to meet with Zander to pitch a program of union reforms ahead of the 1960 convention.\textsuperscript{23} The plan would have traded the opposition’s support for the administration’s plan to increase per capita dues for Zander’s acceptance of a regionally elected Board—a bargain that almost certainly would have neutralized the emergence of an organized opposition later. The dissident group readily acknowledged that the national union needed more money, but believed that the new Board was necessary to ensure that the revenues were directed into organizing drives. On the Sunday before the convention opened, Wurf and Schut believed that they had won the union president’s assent to the deal only to find, a few days later, that Zander had reversed his position, likely in response to advice from Leo Kramer, his increasingly powerful Executive Assistant who believed that the administration conveys something of the tension in distinguishing “rank-and-file” rebellions from internal political contests. Bellush and Bellush, “Grass Roots Insurgency.”

\textsuperscript{21} Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, no. 2, Side B, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
\textsuperscript{23} Ames later claimed that the group was unaware that Wurf was briefing Zander after each meeting. Notes and Transcript, Interview with Joseph Ames, 7 December 1981, Folder 4, Joseph Goulden Collection. At other points, Ames suggested that the group knew all long that Wurf was meeting with Zander. Handwritten notes, Interview with Joseph Ames, 26 October 1981, Box 4, Folder 34, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
could win its per capita dues from the delegates without trading away control over the IEB.\textsuperscript{24} Kramer was the upwardly mobile son of Polish immigrants who had been educated at Harvard before entering the union in the late 1940s in Rhode Island. By the early 1950s, he had risen to regional director for New England, and in 1959 he was elevated to Zander’s chief assistant.\textsuperscript{25} Kramer functioned as the chief intermediary between local and council officers and the national union staff, and vehemently supported Zander’s efforts to exert greater control in local affairs. As such, he became a sort of unifying figure for the opposition, who, in 1960 at least, tended to level blame on the national staff rather than Zander himself.\textsuperscript{26} Bilik later quipped that if Zander had simply “disposed of Kramer” he would have remained president until his death.\textsuperscript{27} When the union’s constitutional committee began meeting on the following Tuesday, Zander denied any “deal” and, at his urging, the committee voted down the opposition’s proposals for the IEB, stunning Schut and Wurf.\textsuperscript{28}

When Zander tried to push through the dues increase on the convention floor, though, the opposition summoned the one-third margin necessary to block the measure by teaming with a rural bloc that had historically opposed any measure to increase the power of the national union

\textsuperscript{24} Four versions of regionally-defined district maps survived in Leo Kramer’s personal papers from the 1960 convention, suggesting that a deal was likely reached either before or at the convention. Various Regional Maps, n.d. [1960], Box 7, Folder 29, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Leo Kramer Papers].

\textsuperscript{25} Notes, Interview with Leo Kramer, 8 September 1982, Box 4, Folder 51, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; “Letter from Leo Kramer to Boelden H. Schaffer, Director, Institute of Public Services, University of Connecticut,” 22 September 1960, Box 37, Folder 5, Arnold S. Zander Collection, AFSCME Office of the President, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Arnold S. Zander Collection]; Kramer, Labor’s Paradox, 111-114.

\textsuperscript{26} Bellush and Bellush, “Grass Roots Insurgency.”

\textsuperscript{27} Notes, Interview with Al Bilik, 21 October 1981, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.

\textsuperscript{28} Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 2, Side B, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories. Kramer later claimed that Wurf had pledged to back a $.15 increase regardless of the fate of the other reform proposals, but bowed to the pressure of other administration opponents to tie the two issues together. When the reformers were defeated, he used his influence on Council 37 to force the New York delegation to block the per capita dues increase. Kramer, “An Innocent Defrocked: A non-literary account of a neophyte at the 1960 AFSCME, AFL-CIO Convention with an emphasis on one or two outstanding events,” Unpublished Manuscript, n.d., Box 7, Folder 31, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I.
office.\textsuperscript{29} But the reformers found little support for the rest of their program, which included the creation of a permanent organizing department, the publication of the union budget, regularized IEB meetings, the regional election of union vice presidents, and, most controversially, an overhaul of the convention voting system which would have replaced the tiered system of voting with one of strict proportionality.\textsuperscript{30} Wurf, increasingly aligned with the reformers, took to the floor to denounce the ease with which international staffers to “walk in here with a pocketful of stuff and sit down with 40, 50, and 200-member locals and dominate the convention.” In a rare direct exchange, Zander responded by warning that the measure would lead to “the domination of the organization by a certain few centers of membership”—the softest variant on an anti-urban sentiment that ran through much of his upper-Midwestern base. For their part, COUR often demonstrated similarly divisive attitudes—one Michigan delegate claimed that he had overheard Wurf complaining about Zander’s reliance on the votes of “county bumpkins.”\textsuperscript{31}

Despite the open disagreement over major policy issues, Wurf later admitted, “there wasn’t even a subtle hint in anybody’s mind that this was the beginning of a split over leadership.”\textsuperscript{32} There was ample justification for this judgment—Zander was reelected without opposition, and the administration slate again swept the IEB.\textsuperscript{33}

Yet the meeting did mark a major break in Wurf’s relationship with Zander. His reaction to what he perceived as Zander’s betrayal was deeply emotional, even by his volatile standards,

\textsuperscript{29} Proceedings of the 12\textsuperscript{th} International Convention, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, Hotel Sheraton, Philadelphia, PA, April 25-29, 1960; Kramer, Labor’s Paradox, 140-153.
\textsuperscript{30} The existing system offered one vote per 100 members up to 1,000, but progressively less afterward, up through 4,100, above which there was no additional representation.
\textsuperscript{31} Proceedings of the 12\textsuperscript{th} International Convention, 239-243.
\textsuperscript{32} Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 3, Side 1, 18 June 1973, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
\textsuperscript{33} The dissidents offered a hastily constructed slate for the IEB, arguing that the existing leadership was too beholden to Zander. Only two of the eleven were elected, Leon Hayes and William McEntee, both of whom also had the backing of the administration. “No Deal,” Convention Flyer, n.d. [1960], Box 7, Folder 29, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I.
shouting “I don’t know what has happened to you” from the convention floor. Zander complained in his diary that several late night meetings were derailed by “Jerry’s histrionics,” and Wurf later remembered his mixed emotions at the whole series of developments—his sense of loyalty to Zander for having given him his “great opportunity” in New York City and an unshakeable sense that the union was headed in the wrong direction, ignoring its potential, and thus risking irrelevance. Wurf even took some steps toward reconciliation after the convention, meeting with Kramer and inviting Zander to address District Council 37’s Executive Board, where Zander patronizingly promised to “forgive” the dissidents “for the dreadful things they had done to the union in the last convention.

The unrelenting stance ensured the survival of the insurgency and pushed Wurf further toward an open break.

“A Very Substantive Struggle”

Between the end of the 1960 convention and the summer of 1961, AFSCME’s dissidents evolved from a reform-oriented caucus into a genuine opposition. It was only after the reformers

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34 Proceedings of the 12th International Convention, 243.
36 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 3, Side 1, 18 June 1973, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories. Arnold S. Zander, Datebook and Dairy, 1960, Box 10, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I. Kramer later claimed that Wurf went so far as to promise to “blow up the convention” and disaffiliate from the union, though there is nothing in the union record to suggest such a threat was made. Leo Kramer, “An Innocent Defrocked: A non-literary account of a neophyte at the 1960 AFSCME, AFL-CIO convention with an emphasis on one or two outstanding events,” Undated Manuscript, n.d. [1960], Box 7, Folder 31, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I.
37 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 3, Side 1, 18 June 1973, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories. In their otherwise strong account of the interunion battles, Richard Billing and John Greenya suggest that Wurf left the 1960 convention “completely disenchanted with Zander” and ready to lead the anti-Zander forces. Billings and Greenya, Power to the Public Worker, 79. The disenchantment is probably accurate, but the summary judgment that the break was permanent ignores key developments in 1960 and 1961, when Wurf still sought compromise and internal reform.
became convinced that changes could not be won within the boundaries of the existing arrangement that there was a serious move to challenge the incumbent administration.

The transition from reform to opposition was largely a product of Zander’s intransigence. Shortly after the 1960 convention, he wrote an editorial in the union’s national newspaper that denounced the dissidents, with characteristic moral outrage, as the “forces of evil,” which the dissidents subsequently adopted as their first moniker (FOE). More tangible reprisals followed, as the administration liberally imposed trusteeships and “special arrangements” in areas that had been “disloyal” at the recent convention. The national office threatened to withdraw aid from New York City locals, sparking a strong reaction within District Council 37 that only further strengthened Wurf’s position. In late July Ames, Bilik, Hastings, and Wurf each met with the IEB Subcommittee on Finance, urging it to expand funding for organizing drives, only to see the body slash funding for organizing and shift it instead to union publications, national union staff, international programs, and a consultant for the housing program. After the decision was announced, Zander aides recovered all copies of the budget, refusing to allow the reformers to take the documents out into the field. At the same meeting, the dissidents requested use of the union newspaper and mailing list to respond to Zander’s attacks at the 1960 convention, only to have the IEB vote to give the sitting president discretion on the matter.

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38 Zander had similarly cast the effort to overhaul the IEB at the 1958 meeting as the product of “evildoers.” Zander later defended the column by noting that he had softened the original draft, which dismissed the critics as “evil people” because he did not want to impugn their personal character. Report, International Executive Board Meeting, 19-22 July 1960, Box 57, Folder 10, Arnold S. Zander Collection.

39 Letter from John Boer to Gordon Chapman, 29 June 1960, Box 57, Folder 10, Arnold S. Zander Collection; The Arnold Zander papers are filled with examples of the requests from July 1960. For an example, see Letter from Ann O. Seaman, Secretary-Treasurer, Local 374, to Gordon W. Chapman, 6 July 1960; Letter from Harry Levine, AFSCME Local 299, to Gordon Chapman, July 1960; Letter from Frank Petrocelli, Nicholas Baccina, and John Scott, Officers of AFSCME Welfare Local 371, to Gordon W. Chapman, 6 July 1960; Letter from George Watson, President, AFSCME Local 1505, to Gordon W. Chapman, 30 June 1960; Letter from Jerry Wurf to Gordon Chapman, 29 June 1960; Letter from Herb Dun Brook, President, Cincinnati District Council 51, to Gordon Chapman, 27 June 1960; all Box 57, Folder 10, Arnold S. Zander Collection.

40 Report, International Executive Board Meeting, 19-22 July 1960, Box 57, Folder 10, Arnold S. Zander Collection. In April 1961, Kramer issued a memorandum on Zander’s orders that prohibited the list of locals and councils from...
With few prospects for securing even conciliatory reforms, FOE escalated its campaign, organizing a two-day Conference on Union Responsibility reform in May 1961. The meeting drew more than 200 union officials to Milwaukee, where they could engage with panel discussions on the regional election of union vice presidents, the convention voting system, the restoration of local and council autonomy, or workshop ideas for organizing campaigns. Wurf was again conciliatory in his opening address to the conference, framing the meeting as an effort to formulate “a constructive solution” to the union’s problems, particularly those caused by its recent growth. “It is not our intention to state here that we have absolute answers, that we are right and others are wrong,” he told the group, only to initiate an open, frank, and “adult” discussion of the union’s problems.

While in some way a repetition of the debates from the Long Beach and Philadelphia conventions, the Milwaukee meeting gave the reformers the opportunity to fold their individual complaints regarding the IEB, convention voting strength, organizing resources, and national intervention in local affairs into a coherent program for the first time. At the core of this new program was the growing division between the union’s traditional base in small, mostly rural locals and the newer large, urban organizations and the related philosophical split between an older commitment to civil service reform and newer belief in collective bargaining. During a

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42 Notes, Conference on Union Responsibility, Milwaukee, WI, 13-14 May 1961, Box 45, Folder 3, AFSCME, District Council 37 Records, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter cited as District Council 37 Records]. Throughout his presentation—and much of the subsequent campaign—Wurf took special care to convey a statesmanlike approach, in part to convey the reputation for volatility and vulgarity that was both well-deserved and propagated by Zander allies. Bellush and Bellush, “Grass Roots Insurgency: Jerry Wurf versus Arnold Zander.”
panel on the role of the IEB, for instance, Hastings and Schut articulated a vision of the Board as a policymaking body and emphasized the potential regional election to strengthen the vice-presidents and make them more accountable to the rank-and-file. When Wurf took up the issue of organizing, he emphasized the centrality of targeted assistance from the national organization, where resources were turned over to local organizers, who better knew both the grievances and the political landscape. Gotbaum built on this message in the final panel on union structure, asserting that Council autonomy was crucial since it was most attentive to local needs.43

In contrast, the administration’s defense seemed stale, reactionary, and anti-democratic, at least to those who already disagreed. AFSCME Vice President Steve Clark’s warned that regionalism would lead to the domination of “large metropolitan areas.” Zander defended tiered convention voting by touting the union’s traditional roots in small, rural bodies. Whereas Wurf pressed for a more assertive commitment to organizing, Zander advised avoiding messy and expensive campaigns by limiting activity to areas “definitely in our jurisdiction”—a striking reversal of his earlier efforts to defend the union’s broad claims on state and local government employees. During his formal address to the group, Zander touted the strength of the union, defending both the housing program and the union’s international commitments as legitimate concerns. Any problems, he concluded, were solely the consequence of inadequate resources at the national union office, correctable through the administration’s proposed increase in per capita dues.44

The reformers considered the Milwaukee conference a massive success. The turnout as well as the tone of discussion convinced the group to formalize its opposition in the summer of 1961. The first matter was a name. The group had operated informally as the “Forces of Evil”

43 Notes, Conference on Union Responsibility, District Council 37 Records.
44 Notes, Conference on Union Responsibility, District Council 37 Records.
since the 1960 convention, but it seemed too amateurish for a sustained challenge to the
administration. Ames suggested the Committee on Union Problems (COUP), but this was
dismissed because of its undemocratic implications. Sometime between the May conference and
July, the group settled on the Committee on Union Responsibility (COUR), a play on the
Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the civil rights organization in which many of the
reformers were active.\textsuperscript{45}

COUR was officially launched at a meeting in mid-July 1961 in Columbus, Ohio.
It began as a small group—perhaps a dozen union officials attended. The caucus named Ames as
its chairman and Hastings as its secretary. Wurf, never a particularly skilled administrator, could
not have effectively guided the campaign from the hectic District Council 37 office, but the
elevation of Ames and Hastings was also done in an attempt to, as Wurf later put it, “assuage the
anti-New York thing,” the general anti-urban sentiment that ran rampant through parts of
AFSCME.\textsuperscript{46} Though COUR solicited donations from individual union members, most of its
initial funding came from the home councils of the caucus leadership, including fully one-third
from District Council 37.\textsuperscript{47}

Once the basic organizational structure was in place, COUR turned its attention to the
union presidency. Though some, including Gotbaum, expressed concerns that the union’s
convention voting system, disproportionately weighted toward small, mostly rural locals, created

\textsuperscript{45} Billings and Greenya, \textit{Power to the Public Worker}, 79.
\textsuperscript{46} Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 3, Side 1, 18 June 1973, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME
Oral Histories.
\textsuperscript{47} Handwritten,Untitled Notes from a Preliminary COUR Meeting, n.d. [July, 1961], Box 2, Folder 14, Chapman /
Ames--AFSCME: Office of the Secretary-Treasurer, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne
State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Chapman-Ames Collection]. Minutes, Committee on Union
Responsibility Meeting, Columbus, OH, 18 July 1961, Box 2, Folder 14, Chapman-Ames Collection. The remainder
would come largely from Ohio, Washington, Missouri, and Minnesota, with smaller contributions from Florida,
Wisconsin, and Michigan. Paul Hall’s Seafarers’ International Union was probably the largest outside contributor to
the campaign, underlining the important Wurf’s New York connections. Bellush and Bellush, “Grass Roots
Insurgency.”.

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an anti-urban, anti-ethnic bias insurmountable to a New York-born Jew, Wurf was selected to head COUR’s ticket. Wurf’s District Council 37 held nearly one-sixth of the union’s total national membership in 1961, giving him a strong independent base of support. Moreover, Wurf was already well known within the union, in part because the Council’s *Public Employee Press* was distributed nationally. His previous support for Zander gave him a degree of credibility when it came to challenging the administration, though it also complicated his criticism of special arrangements. Mostly, though, the success of Wurf’s militant model of public sector unionism forged in New York City provided a powerful counterpoint to Zander’s traditional model of civil service unionism.\footnote{Though nearly all the participants in COUR acknowledged that Wurf was the best, and likely the only viable candidate, Al Bilik later suggested that Wurf personally insisted on his own selection, effectively pledging to side with Zander in the subsequent contest if he was not the candidate. Notes and Transcript, Interview with Al Bilik, 19 January 1982, Joseph Goulden Collection.} The first edition of COUR’s newsletter was mailed in early August 1961. Targeting local and council officers, its four pages featured short accounts of the May conference and a synopsis of COUR’s program for the union.

COUR was initially unsure how much support it would draw. Their ranks rarely numbered more than a few dozen active members in its early months, and many of the caucus’s leaders were uncertain whether the effort would garner interest beyond its footholds in large urban centers. Lacking access to the national union mailing list or newspaper or financial resources of the national headquarters, COUR relied on regional mini-conferences on the model of the Milwaukee meeting to publicize its agenda. For example, COUR convened a platform conference in St. Paul, Minnesota in October 1961, featuring panels that put forward the caucus’ positions on issues ranging from the role of the IEB (“a creative and legislative capacity”) to convention voting (“one member, one vote”). The sessions blended educational and political goals—the St. Paul session, for example, featured an extended discussion of organizing
strategies designed to convey the impracticability of the top-down organizing model used by unions which could cover the bulk of its membership through a handful of nation-wide contracts. AFSCME could not utilize national agreements “without first repealing the Constitution of the United States,” the conference program explained, and instead had to negotiate with “fifty separate state governments, 3,000 separate county governments, and countless number of municipal and special district governing bodies”—none of which could be done “by a staff working under the exclusive direction of the International office” because it required knowledge of the local context—the political dynamics, the fiscal climate, the legal landscape, and even the personalities of elected officials. The national union’s job, COUR suggested, was to direct resources to areas of greatest opportunity and provide technical support when requested, not actually try to run the organizing drive or subsequent negotiation.49

These summits were important in clarifying the philosophical differences between COUR and the incumbent, but they also allowed the group to connect to potentially sympathetic local and council officers, who in turn could cultivate support among shop stewards and rank-and-file members.50 The COUR Newsletter, published and distributed from Hasting’s District Council 8 in Ohio, continued to serve as the main vehicle for distributing information and promoting COUR’s position, but the campaign relied mostly on interpersonal connections.51 In August 1961, for example, Hastings wrote to Lee Tafel, a union official from South Florida, encouraging him to “make as many contacts as you can in the south to build support for our program,” specifically suggesting that he cultivate connections in Louisiana and Tennessee.52

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51 “Let Our Choice by Wise” and “Ethics and Responsibility,” COUR Newsletter 4 (January 1962), Box 2, Folder 12, Chapman / Ames Collection.
52 Letter from Robert Hastings to Lee A. Tafel, 3 August 1961, Box 2, Folder 24, Chapman / Ames Collection.
Wurf traveled constantly from mid-1961 through 1964 to cultivate these networks, meeting with local union leaders, promoting COUR’s reform platform, and challenging Zander’s stewardship of AFSCME. Mildred Kiefer, a former District Council 37 staffer whom Wurf had remarried in 1960, proved indispensible on the trips—not simply for the support, but also by providing access to a network of contacts from her days in the National Student Association.\(^{53}\)

Though hardly warm or charismatic, Wurf nonetheless had a gift for making national issues relevant to local organizations. He styled himself “a labor [history] buff,” and he made a conscious effort to learn something about each place that he visited, working it into his presentations, even if that had little to do with the AFSCME local. He talked about the Wobblies in Seattle, the Mooney-Billings case in San Francisco, and the Populists in Minneapolis and St. Paul. “The interesting thing that struck me,” he later recalled, “was that none of our people were aware of it—that the labor movement in recent years had forgotten.”\(^{54}\) Though the interest in local history was genuine, the approach also allowed Wurf to connect his vision for AFSCME to the traditions of the broader American labor movement.

Mostly, though, the trips were designed to give Wurf the opportunity to speak first hand about the failures of the traditional civil service approach and the successes of the militant trade union model of New York City. When he visited northern California in December 1961, Wurf touted the transformation of District Council 37 from “a small, struggling little union without any real significance” into one of AFSCME’s most powerful affiliates. The key to that success, he told an audience of perhaps fifty activists, was the transformation of the union’s membership. “We were able to carry on a very substantive struggle to prove that public employees were workers . . . entitled to all of the emoluments, and all of the advantages and disadvantages of

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\(^{54}\) Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 4, Side B, 2 July 1973, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
workers.” This change in attitude and expectations gave birth to COUR, he explained, a reform effort inspired by the “big, new visions” of a younger generation of union activists. Wurf concluded his lengthy prepared remarks by framing the election as a critical juncture in the emergence of a bona fide public sector labor movement:

In this great decade ahead of us with this whole new revolutionary change taking place in the role of a public employee as a worker in this country, the whole process of collective bargaining and certification procedures and what have you, [with] all of these dramatic changes are taking place one place [or] another around the country, just what does that International Union Administration have in store for you?55

Wurf proved far more adept at communicating with the growing ranks of blue-collar public workers than Zander. In a rare joint appearance, the two candidates both addressed Michigan’s District Council 7 in 1962. Zander, using the privilege of the union presidency to speak first, launched into an verbose discussion on the long development of American democratic society, culminating in an extended interpretation of 19th-century Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America. Wurf, fidgeting uneasily through most of Zander’s presentation and with no formal remarks prepared, was tempted to respond on the topic to prove his own erudition in the great tradition of his Socialist upbringing—“always a terrible temptation,” he later admitted when recalling the event, to prove “I had read a lot of books too”—but resisted. Scouting a room filled with blue-collar types, more than a few of whom had partaken at the banquet hall’s bar, Wurf retreated to a simple organizing speech, one that explained the role of the union, collective bargaining, and political education—“get[ting] down to pork chops,” as he later explained it—sprinkled throughout with potshots at the public employer and punctuated by more than a few vulgarities. When Wurf finished, his brief speech was greeted with an outburst of applause and a standing ovation—a sharp contrast to the polite

55 Untitled Transcript, AFSCME Meeting, Concord, CA, 3 December 1961, Box 112, 14, Arnold S. Zander Collection.
reception Zander had received. “No one cared who the fuck de Tocqueville was,” Wurf remembered, they wanted to enjoy their banquet, learn something about the union, believe that it could make a tangible difference in their lives, and have a few laughs at the expense of their employers. It was a dynamic Zander never understood or mastered, Wurf reflected. “Poor old Arnold, who isolated himself from the membership all of his life and always . . . considered himself a little superior and [it] bugged them.”

This sort of message resonated with a growing number of younger AFSCME members, people like Ernest Rewolinski, who had come into the union in the mid-1950s. After working at Allis-Chambers during the Korean War, Rewolinski secured a job with the city of Milwaukee. He reluctantly joined AFSCME around 1956, but was unimpressed. He met Wurf sometime around the 1960 convention, and remembered it as a key moment in his union career. “I really was trying to compare AFSCME to the UAW or the Machinists Union or the Teamsters,” he later recalled, “and by no comparison in my own mind could I see this union that I just joined as being on any equal footing with the rest of the labor movement.” He was moved by Wurf’s campaign, “talking about trade union concepts, talking about the rights of the public employees, talking about the rights to collective bargaining.” Rewolinski ran for office in his local union, and later joined the national union organizing staff. When Tom Gerber, a highway worker in Wisconsin and local union activist who later rose to national office as a regional vice president, could not arrange for time off to attend a COUR meeting in the state, Wurf arranged a roadside meeting with Gerber on his lunch break. James Hogwood, a North Carolina-born, sanitation truck driver, coordinated COUR’s activities in Philadelphia, organizing clandestine meetings

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57 Notes and Transcript, Interview with Ernest Rewolinski, 12 January 1982, Folder 6, Joseph Goudlen Collection.
where Wurf, Kiefer, and other District Council officials offered seminars on African American labor history, as well as addressing AFSCMCE issues. These informal networks, historian Francis Ryan has argued, fostered a far stronger identification with militant unionism, one that spread rapidly through the rest of AFSCME Local 427, not through mass meetings or formal presentations, but rather through lunchroom and bar-side conversations.59 Earl Stout, a West Philadelphia truck mechanic who later rose to the leadership of District Council 33, remembered Wurf as a “no bullshit guy” who “wanted to do something for folks like me who knew what it was to pick up a trash can and pitch it on the back of a truck.”60

The Zander administration initially did not consider COUR a serious challenge. Kramer and Zander suspected Wurf was simply using the reform caucus to position himself to win the Secretary-Treasurer position and install himself as Zander’s heir-apparent. At a meeting of national staffers in mid-July, Kramer ridiculed the recently formalized opposition as a “basically insignificant” challenge to the incumbent.61 Despite warnings from some Zander supporters about the growing sympathy for the insurgents, there was little sign that the threat was taken seriously at the national headquarters.62 It was only in late August that the national headquarters began sending national union staff to all of COUR’s events and making some effort to infiltrate the group. There was at least one leak by the end of the summer, and union Secretary-Treasurer Gordon Chapman, whom COUR was trying to recruit to run on a ticket with Wurf, complained that his mail was regularly opened and read at the national headquarters.63

60 Stout quoted in Goulden, *Jerry Wurf*, 92.
61 “Chicago Meeting Held by President Zander and Administrative Assistant Leo Kramer, July 12, 1961,” Memorandum to Executive Committee, Committee on Union Responsibility, 2 August 1961, Box 2, Folder 14, Chapman / Ames Collection.
63 “COUR,” Memorandum from Robert Hastings to Jerry Wurf, 11 August 1961, Box 2, Folder 14, Chapman / Ames Collection; General Report,” Memorandum from Robert Hastings to Jerry Wurf, 14 August 1961, Box 2,
Eager to prove his unconcern with the challenge, Zander pushed his own set of reforms in the run-up to the 1962 union convention, changes designed to further empower the national office. The most significant of these was to push for the abolition of the Secretary-Treasurer position, which would have left the president as the sole national elected official in the union. It was not a new position for the union president, who had long opposed the second national office, which AFSCME inherited from AFGE’s constitution, and Zander defended his proposal by citing the success of single-executive unions in Europe. But in the context of a nascent opposition, the move seemed strikingly tone-deaf, and the effect was to legitimize COUR’s charges of undemocratic “one-man rule” in AFSCME and give COUR a tangible issue to fight for that most union members could understand. 64

Zander also continued to refuse to make even the most modest concessions to COUR’s agenda. As late as the 1962 convention, Gotbaum later speculated, Zander probably could have defused the rebellion by firing Kramer and accepting some moderate reform on the IEB and convention voting issues. 65 Wurf admitted as much at a District Council 37 meeting on the eve of the convention, when he pledged that he would willingly sacrifice his own candidacy for some “honorable compromise” on the COUR program and some movement to open up the union’s publications to dissenting views. 66 In fact, COUR’s nineteen-point program was so elaborate that it almost seemed designed to allow the national president to concede on a handful of matters.

64 On the politics of the Secretary-Treasurer position in the union’s 1962 election, see Billings and Greenya, Power to the Public Worker, 89-90; COUR Newsletter 3 (November 1961), Box 2, Folder 12, Chapman / Ames Collection; Program for “A Conference on Union Responsibility,” Ryan Hotel, St. Paul, MN, 28 and 29 October 1961, Box 1, Folder 2, Al Bilik Papers.
65 Notes and Transcript, Interview with Al Bilik, 19 January 1982, Folder 5, Joseph Goulden Collection. To a certain extent, this judgment must be taken at something less than face-value, since it was rendered only in the early 1980s, after Wurf and Gotbaum had a significant falling out.
66 Minutes of a Meeting of Convention Delegates of District Council 37 Local Unions, Adelphi Hall, New York, NY, 8 March 1962, Box 1, Folder 1, Chapman / Ames Collection.
while holding a hard-line on others. If Zander was unlikely to give in on the regional election of the IEB, convention voting strength, or the elimination of special arrangements, he could have agreed to the regular publication of meeting minutes and budgets and disclosure of new union charters and international staff—which almost certainly would have been enough to blunt the reform movement in New York City, thus forestalling Wurf’s challenge.67

But instead, Zander and his allies adopted a moralistic line of attack against COUR in general and Wurf in particular. Urged on by Kramer, Zander supporters in upstate New York began circulating mailings critical of Wurf’s leadership of District Council 37. One highlighted his reliance on international support; another blasted his “unbelievable record of firings and resignations among his own staff” and claimed that COUR was seeking the same “Jerry-mandering” of the IEB that he had used to dominate District Council 37, designed to break the national union into “duchy after duchy, rigged to stretch the puny COUR votes as far as possible.”68

Zander remained mostly above the fray. Beyond dismissively referring to the opposition caucus as “COWARD” in his pre-convention speeches, Zander showed little interest in

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67 The final pre-convention version of COUR’s program was formalized in late March at a meeting in Columbus, Ohio. It was designed “to provide democratic procedures within the International Union and to end the monolithic paternalism which characterizes the present administration.” Its nineteen provisions included: 1) Regional election of vice-presidents; 2) voting strength; 3) strengthen the office of secretary treasurer; 4) Minimum meetings of IEB; 5) Election of delegates to AFL-CIO convention; 6) Succession by the Secretary-Treasurer to temporary vacancy of presidency; 7) Publication of IEB minutes; 8) Enactment of ethical practices code for AFSCME elections (equal access to mailing lists, etc.); 9) Program-type budget; 10) Elimination of special arrangements; 11) Provision of list of International staff and special arrangements ahead of convention; 12) Provision of the details of special arrangements ahead of the convention; 13) Provision of the details of local or council indebtedness to International; 14) Publication of quarterly financial statements; 15) Detailed accounting of International expenditures in excess of $1000; 16) Publication of list of new charters issued and revoked each month; only revoked by IEB after due hearing, not by the president; 17) Limit voting strength of international staff in convention to their home local; 18) Publication or provision of convention delegate list ahead of the convention; 19) No increase in per capita tax until full accounting is made of international expenditures. “COUR Will Press 19-Point Reform Program at AFSCME Convention,” COUR Newsletter 6 (April 1962), Box 2, Folder 11, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.

68 Dear AFSCME Leader,” Open Letter from Jean J. Couturier, Executive Director, District Council 50, 6 April 1962, Box 8, Folder 4, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I; “Dear AFSCME Leader,” Open Letter from Jean J. Couturier, Executive Director, New York State Employees, 19 April 1962, Box 8, Folder 4, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I.
addressing COUR’s campaign or Wurf’s personal challenge. Instead, Zander touted his past achievements, including the expansion of the controversial union housing program and the proliferation of the “special arrangements.” Only on the eve of the 1962 convention did the Kramer bother to create an alternative organization on the incumbent’s behalf, a hastily constructed Re-Elect Zander Unity Committee, to coordinate its operations. The Unity Committee put forward its own platform, calling for constitutional amendments to lengthen the presidential term and curtail the power of the Secretary-Treasurer (rather than eliminating the position). The Zander campaign also put forward a seven-point alternative to COUR’s program, calling for increases in the union’s organizing staff, expanding publicity and communications, grassroots education, a nationwide anti-discrimination campaign, additional legal and research staff, and a commitment to creating “a climate favorable to obtaining collective bargaining and favorable labor laws for public employees.”

Behind the scenes, though, Zander and Kramer were preparing for a contested convention. The 1962 meeting was originally scheduled for Kansas City, Missouri, but was moved to Milwaukee because of administration concerns about holding a potentially explosive meeting in a city where its control over the local unions was tenuous. He selected George Lima, an African American, as nominee for the Secretary-Treasurer, and arranged for the IEB to establish a union Civil Rights Committee shortly before the convention opened—both of which

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69 Letter from Lillian Roberts to Jerry Wurf, 16 April 1962, Box 1, Folder 3, Al Bilik Papers.
71 Meeting Minutes, AFSCME Unity Committee for Zander, Denver, CO, 20 March 1962, Box 8, Folder 4, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I. COUR initially dismissed the caucus, noting that the 22 delegates to the Denver meeting had fully endorsed Zander’s leadership “because he signs the checks for most of them.” “In the Shadow of Pikes Peak,” COUR Newsletter 5 (March 1962), Box 2, Folder 12, Chapman / Ames Collection.
COUR cast “window dressing” designed to court the union’s growing black membership.⁷³ In late March, a group of 54 national staffers met in Chicago to finalize the administration’s strategy for the biannual meeting. Kramer was naturally selected to lead the pro-Zander forced on the floor during the convention, and plans were made for a “hidden weapon” at the convention: a daily bulletin distributed from Kramer to Zander allies with the (constantly) revised convention schedule.⁷⁴ Administration allies arranged for high-level endorsements from both Robert Weaver, head of the Kennedy administration’s Housing and Home Finance Administration and future Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, and Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers.⁷⁵ The group compiled a list of all legal delegates “to be fine tooth-combed” in advance of the vote to determine “which delegates must be spoken to secure their positions as pro-administration” and “which delegates can be broken out of the COUR caucus openly or in private of the ballot booth.” A master list of the pliable delegates, they agreed, should be “kept under somebody’s pillow” during the convention, away from the prying eyes of the challengers. The group also arranged for the presence of an “able staff of sergeants-at-arms” (tripled in size from previous conventions) to supplement the floor leaders’ effort to “arrange mike work” and “handle parliamentary procedure.” The level of preparation marked a complete reversal of the inattention offered COUR a few months earlier: even the

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⁷³ For a Zander’s supporter’s affirmation of Lima’s record, see Letter from Bernice Fisher to Marzene Boler, 24 March 1962, Box 1, Folder 1, Al Bilik Papers. Victor Gotbaum responded to the aforementioned letter on Boler’s behalf: “Lima is a pathetic toady to Leo Kramer which is the main reason he was selected. That he happens to be Negro is an accident of birth and does not really interest any honest liberal.” Letter from Victor Gotbaum to Bernice Fisher, 10 April 1962, Box 1, Folder 1, Al Bilik Papers. “AFSCME Civil Rights Committee: Is It Only Window Dressing.” COUR Newsletter 7 (April 1962), Box 2, Folder 11, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
⁷⁴ Notes on the Chicago Conference of the Re-Elect Zander Unity Committee, Chicago, IL, 17 March 1962, Box 8, Folder 4, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I.
⁷⁵ “Weaver Praises AFSCME Housing,” Convention Daily, 3 May 1962, 2, 4, Box 2, Folder 9, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
The convention delegate seating arrangement had political implications, with careful instructions
made to “put JW in back.”

Next to these efforts, the COUR preparations were almost amateurish. Wurf later
reflected that COUR was naïve at the 1962 meeting—doing little to protect itself from the
manipulation of parliamentary rules or convention credentials. It boiled its 19-point program into
a four-point “Program of Progress,” but took few of the practical steps that the incumbent had.
The most visible sign of COUR was a $1 fish-fry and buy-your-own-beverage, held at a local
gymnasium after Zander had ensured that all of the local union halls were closed to the
reformers.

Expectations were thus modest when the convention opened on May 1, 1962. Despite
Wurf’s trips around the country, COUR had no sense of its popularity outside of strongholds in
New York, Ohio, and Missouri, and few in the group expected Wurf to poll more than 10 or 20
percent in a convention voting system that gave less weight to the 25,000 members of District
Council 37 than the 6,000 spread across the state of Michigan. Moreover, the national office, by
COUR’s calculation, directly controlled between 20 and 25 percent of the delegates through
“special arrangements.” As it had done through much of the previous year, COUR’s focused on

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76 Letter to Leo Kramer, Author Unknown, 27 March 1962, Box 8, Folder 4, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I; “In the
77 COUR offered the following four-point “Program of Progress” for consideration by the 1962 convention: 1)
“Organizational Assistance to Locals and Councils” through “cooperative planning of organizing campaigns, loans
when needed to finance programs, staff to assist but not dominate and take over”; 2) “Leadership Conference for
Local and Council Officers” through “planned conferences to discuss techniques of collective bargaining, handling
grievances, psychology of leadership, the economics of public employment, the importance of committee activity,
communication with members, handling a meeting, etc.”; 3) “Area Staff Conference” that would “Hold regular area-
wide conferences for local and council staff representatives to discuss mutual problems, new developments in
organizing and bargaining, etc.”; 4) “Adequate Research Data” through “The regular preparation of research
materials on wages and working conditions that is easily adaptable to local areas; sent regularly to councils, locals,
and staff representatives.” Resolution for Submission by COUR to the 1962 AFSCME Convention, n.d. [1962], Box
1, Folder 25, Gilbert Jonas Papers.
78 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 3, Side 1, 18 June 1973, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME
Oral Histories.
79 For a summary of the 1962 union convention, see Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 79-85.
its 19-point reform program, rather than Wurf’s electoral challenge to Zander. When Father Albert Blatz, a Chaplain at St. Peter Hospital in Minneapolis and officer in Local 624, stood to nominate the District Council 37 leader, he emphasized his “record of what can be accomplished with a program of bread and butter unionism” and gave only passing attention to his personal qualifications.  

Yet when the votes were tallied in the president election, Wurf mustered forty-three percent of the convention delegates, losing 1,490 to 1,085—a showing that shocked the challenger as much as the incumbent. Given that the administration directly controlled between 500 and 600 delegates, Wurf almost certainly bested the incumbent among those voting freely. The group also captured four out of the eleven vice presidencies in a volatile and unusually open election, giving them a substantial foothold on the IEB. Finally, COUR provided a crucial base of support for Gordon Chapman to return to the union and defeat Zander’s preferred candidate, George Lima, for Secretary-Treasurer, despite the Unity Committee’s please that “a vote against Lima is, in effect, a vote against the president.”

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81 In addition to Wurf and Morgan, COUR endorsed 11 candidates for VP: N. B. Crippen (Washington), Wm. “Bill” Richard (Ohio), James Broyer (Massachusetts), T. J. Ray (Louisiana), John Boer (NY), Albert Blatz (Minnesota), David Williams (Michigan), John P. Caldwell (Montana), Joe Ames (Missouri), Lillian Roberts (Illinois), William Higham (CA). “For Responsible Leadership,” COUR Ballot, n.d. [1962], Box 2, Folder 11, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers. Crippen, Broyer, Williams, and Caldwell were elected. - In addition to the Zander – Wurf and Lima – Morgan – Chapman contests, there were 35 candidates for the 11 vice presidential seats, far more than any previous point in the union’s history. “Nominations: Zander, Lima, 3 Others to Run,” Convention Daily, 3 May 1962, 1, Box 2, Folder 9, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.

82 Unity Committee for Zander Truth Letter, Vol. I, No. 4, 4 May 1962, Box 8, Folder 5, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I. The document continued: “If a delegate were to vote for either Chapman or Morgan, he would be doing his union a grave disservice. He would also, in effect, be casting his vote against Arnold Zander, who must have a well-knit
COUR proved much less successful on its reform agenda, losing votes on the regional election of vice presidents, but it blocked Zander’s efforts raise per capita dues from $.65 to $1.00. Zander claimed that the increase was needed to fund organizing drives and pay AFSCME’s debts to other AFL-CIO unions, but when he pushed it on the final day of the convention, it failed to secure the needed two-thirds majority. Stung by the defeat, Zander tried twice more, each time lowering the proposed increase, first to $.90 and then to $.80. Both measures were defeated, at which point Zander took the extraordinary step of calling on Wurf, who he had already defeated, to publicly support a change in the rate. Wurf was inclined to back a small increase, believing, that the national union was in genuine need of greater resources, but other COUR leaders vehemently opposed giving the administration even a marginal victory on a symbolically powerful issue. Wurf agreed, but worried that blocking any increase risked undermining his own credulity as well as the union’s ability to function, returned to the floor willing to accept a $.10 increase in the dues rate, only to be overwhelmed by a convention rapidly spinning out of control. Fearing that the emboldened dissidents might end up voting to reduce the per capita dues (and effectively bankrupt the national organization), Wurf moved to

organizational team to perform the union’s urgent task of organizing the unorganized.” Gordon W. Chapman had left the union in 1961 to take a job at the State Department. COUR initially put up its own candidate, Thomas Morgan, the union’s former Director of Organizing, up for the post after Chapman refused to run on a ticket with Wurf. But after Wurf’s defeat, and facing a run-off election, Morgan dropped out and the caucus threw its support Chapman. Unity Committee for Zander Truth Letter, Vol. I, No. 1, 30 April 1962, Box 8, Folder 5, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I; Unity Committee for Zander Truth Letter, Vol. I, No. 2, 1 May 1962, Box 8, Folder 5, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I; Unity Committee for Zander Truth Letter, Vol. I, No. 3, 2 May 1962, Box 8, Folder 5, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I; Proceedings of the 13th International Convention;

83 The administration had originally planned to push for a $1.25 per capita rate, with the idea of compromising down to $1.00, but abandoned after COUR’s strong showing in other areas. Notes on the Chicago Conference of the Re-Elect Zander Unity Committee.

84 “Regionalism’ Defeated,” Convention Daily, 4 May 1962, 4, Box 2, Folder 9, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers; “Tax Vote is Today’s Big Issue,” Convention Daily, 4 May 1962, 1, 3, 4, Box 2, Folder 9, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers; Notes, Interview with John Boer, 18 December 1978, Box 4, Folder 38, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
adjourn the meeting.\textsuperscript{85} Zander retreated to his hotel room, where he lamented in a diary entry that the “convention broke up in shambles.”\textsuperscript{86}

Chapman’s victory and the defeat of the per capita increase were, John Boer later suggested, more the product of an “anti-Zander” surge than a mark of Wurf’s strength as a candidate. The 1962 AFSCME convention demonstrated a significant depth of dissatisfaction Zander’s leadership of the union. The challenge for COUR, and for Wurf in particular, was to channel that general discontent into his presidential campaign.

\begin{center}\textit{“A Strong and Decent Union”}\end{center}

Before it could expand its national campaign, COUR had to survive the post-convention retaliation. Instead of recognizing the depth of reform sentiment and bowing to calls for moderate reform, Zander and Kramer launched a sustained counterattack against COUR. Zander again used the union newspaper to denigrate the opposition. Kramer used the opportunity to publish a history of the union to launch a sustained attack on COUR. After rendering a fairly balanced (and in fact quite well-researched) history of AFSCME’s early years, Kramer devoted nearly a third of his book, \textit{Labor’s Paradox}, to a discussion of the 1960 convention and its aftermath, deriding the dissidents as power-hungry opportunists bent on taking control of an ascendant AFSCME by any means necessary. “Had these men won control of the union,” Kramer wrote, “the effect on [the] organizing progress or judicial and democratic processes of the union cannot be predicted.”\textsuperscript{87}


\textsuperscript{86} Arnold S. Zander, Datebook and Diary, 1962, Box 10, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I.

\textsuperscript{87} Kramer, \textit{Labor’s Paradox}, 104. The New York-based publisher was later forced to recall some 2,000 copies of the book after it unwittingly reached out to AFSCME’s local headquarters for help in securing photos for the dust
Zander launched a concerted campaign to purge the dissidents from AFSCME in the months after the 1962 convention. Lillian Roberts, Victor Gotbaum, and Al Wurf were each targeted for expulsion, while District Council 8, Hastings’s base, was nearly brought under national control.\(^8\) The most audacious effort came in New York, where the administration backed the suit of a disgruntled former staffer named Julio Sabater, then tried (unsuccesfully) to seize jurisdiction over the case by claiming that District Council 37 could not fairly adjudicate the matter. The goal, COUR speculated, was less to push Wurf out of the union than to provoke District Council 37 into secession—a move that would have cost the union some 30,000 members but quashed the internal challenge to Zander.\(^9\)

The administration’s reprisals only further galvanized the opposition. The surprising showing in Milwaukee convinced COUR’s leadership to abandon its earlier focus on winning reforms and focus instead on the union elections. Not everyone in COUR believed that Wurf was best suited to level the challenge to Zander again in 1964. John Caldwell, a former Zander staffer elected as a vice-president on COUR’s slate in 1962, suggested that Wurf step aside for someone more electable (such as himself). The consensus within the small cadre of activists, though, was that the District Council 37 chief was still best positioned to challenge Zander, and it seems unlikely that dropping Wurf was ever seriously considered ahead of the 1964 convention.\(^10\)

If Wurf were to succeed, COUR needed to expand its profile and agenda. It had caught the administration off guard in 1962, and the group fully expected more resistance at the next

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\(^8\) On Zander’s post-convention reprisals, see Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 85-89; Billings and Greenya, Power to the Public Worker, 106-108; “Revenge or Responsibility?,” COUR Newsletter 8 (August 1962), Box 2, Folder 12, Chapman / Ames Collection.

\(^9\) “Zander Conspires in Slanderous Attacks on District Council 37 and Jerry Wurf,” COUR Newsletter 11 (February 1963), Box 2, Folder 12, Chapman / Ames Collection. The effort was blocked by the increasingly vocal reformist bloc on the IEB, which refused to take the case.

convention. Moreover, Wurf’s 43 percent showing had effectively exhausted the potential support among the caucus base in eastern urban centers and the industrial upper Midwest. Boer worried that the disproportionate share of paid union staffers on COUR’s Executive Committee made the caucus look like “the revolt of the local business agents” rather than a broad-based rebellion.  

Months later, Caldwell made a similar point, suggesting that COUR form a “Committee of 100 or 200” local union leaders who could attest to the threat posed by centralization and allow the caucus to better connect to the rank-and-file. “By conferring with such persons,” he reasoned, “we would also be ‘going to the members’ in a real sense . . . changing our strategy from the palace revolution . . . to the very wide, even majority segment of the membership.”

Gotbaum voiced a related concern, suggesting that to many members in the South, Midwest, and West, COUR still appeared New York-centered, a shortcoming exacerbated by Wurf’s natural tendency to revert to discussions of the District Council 37 experience on the campaign trail. “I think when we devote an almost entire newsletter defending a New York position or criticizing an International position on New York,” he wrote in a February 1963 letter, “we almost begin to make the opposition look like New York alone.”

But COUR’s most pressing challenge was finding a way to make its critique of the incumbent administration connect with the concerns of the rank-and-file. “Not more than 2% of our membership can be considered to be fully conversant with the complex struggle that is going on.”

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91 Letter from John Boer to Robert Hastings, 30 August 1963, Box 2, Folder 26, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.  
93 Letter from Victor Gotbaum to Jerry Wurf, 19 February 1963, Box 2, Folder 3, Al Bilik Papers. At least at the level of the Executive Board, COUR did expand between the 1962 and 1964 conventions. In what is labeled an August 1961 list (by hand, in the margins), the COUR Ex. Comm. Included Wesley Solomon (Detroit), Joe Ames (St. Louis), Al Bilik (Cincinnati), Victor Gotbaum (Chicago), Robert Hastings (Ohio), Norm Schut (Washington), Hildo Siff (New York), Joe Sperstad (Ohio), Donald McCuller (Texas), William Mirengoff (Maryland), Lee Tafel (Miami), John Boer (New York), and Charles Oldham (St. Louis). A longer, undated list includes Solomon, Ames, Bilik, Gotbaum, Hastings, Schut, Sperstad, Tafel, William Lynn (Cincinnati), Bill Richard (Cincinnati), Boer, Jerry Carroll (Denver), James Marshall (California), Blatz (Minnesota), William Higham (California), Tom Morgan (Ohio), Ruby Wicker (California), David Williams (Michigan), Don Drobec (Minnesota), and William Leider (Minnesota). The obvious difference is the proliferation of figures from the Midwest and Far West. Two Lists, Executive Committee, COUR, n.d., Box 2, Folder 26, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
on within AFSCME, and fewer still can be articulate about it,” Caldwell wrote in a letter to Hastings in May 1963. “That means, if correct, that there are 220 members fully conversant, and half that articulate and knowledgeable.” The “polemical” style employed by COUR in its newsletter and publications, he continued, presumed too knowledge by the average member and supplied Zander allies with grounds to cast the reformers’ campaign as “extremist.” Rather than focus on particular concerns or objectionable practices, Caldwell suggested, the group had to hone a broader message.94

COUR’s best argument, Caldwell argued in the same letter, was that the Zander administration “does not understand the union movement in general nor the changing nature of unionism in the public service.” Public sector collective bargaining was inherently local, Caldwell argued, neatly capturing a point that COUR had strained to make previously, subject to the variations and vicissitudes of municipal, county and state governments. COUR could reach the greatest possible range of supporters by contrasting Zander’s “drive for centralization, which implies a concentration of brains at the top,” with COUR’s position of “the absolutely imperative need for brains and local decision making where the collective bargaining function must take place.” Because Zander’s position antagonized local union leaders, he reasoned, COUR’s best approach was to “repeat over and over that this administration’s goal of centralization automatically destroys development of leadership at the council and local level; that its drive for absolute control creates conflicts within the organization that hamper or destroy collective bargaining and organization, and finally, create an image of a union . . . attempting to emulate the centralization of the Teamsters without the justification of nation-wide contracts.”95

94 Letter from Caldwell to Hastings, 7 May 1963.
95 Letter from Caldwell to Hastings, 7 May 1963.
Several months later, Boer came to a similar conclusion about the deficiencies of the COUR approach, arguing that the caucus had allowed a list of positions to take the place of “a real platform.” “We have not specified . . . our image of our union as we want it except in some pretty dry discussion translated into legally worded constitutional amendments,” he cautioned. “Essentially we are carrying on a revolution,” he continued, urging the group to move beyond “exposing Zander and Zanderism” by providing a broader vision for the union’s future. “We want to deepen the transformation of our Federation from an ‘association’ to a union, a check-off, a collective bargaining, a written contract union,” he argued. “We can’t just say that we are going to do what Zander has been doing, except that we will do it more honestly.”

Whether the two memoranda forced a revision of the group’s strategy, or whether they simply articulated a conviction widely held among COUR activists, there was a noticeable shift in Wurf’s rhetoric during the second half of 1963. At a late-May meeting in Chicago, Wurf led his remarks by blasting Zander for causing AFSCME to lose “its trade union orientation” and squandering the “greatest growth potential of any labor union in the nation.” The “authoritarian tendencies of the International president” stifled organizing drives, he continued, while the union shamefully wasted resources on peripheral projects. It was time, Wurf concluded, to move beyond simply chronicling the union’s problems. “What is needed now is the constructive participation of all AFSCME members to reorient our union toward the principles of the trade union movement.”

Over the next twelve months, an emphasis on organizing and collective bargaining displaced the previous focus on issues of union democracy and structure. In late 1963 or early 1964, COUR prepared a pamphlet titled This We Believe. The traditional campaign booklet

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96 Letter from John Boer to Robert Hastings, 3 October 1963, Box 3, Folder 3, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
97 Excerpts, Address by Jerry Wurf to the Chicago COUR Conference, 25-26 May 1963, Box 2, Folder 26, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
reiterated many of the same themes about the need for transparency and accountability in the national office, but it put these positions in the context of a broader, positive vision for the union. “Organizing for collective bargaining,” COUR declared, “must be the primary goal of our union.” The document went on to cite the recent issuance of President John F. Kennedy’s Executive Order 10988 as an incentive for further progress on the legalization of public sector unionism at the state and local level.98

The January 1964 edition of the *COUR Newsletter* was devoted to the same theme, but with a more explicit emphasis on material concerns. “The earlier orientation of our Union toward securing civil service status for public employees in order to guarantee job security, and the concentration on various kinds of appeal procedures to attempt to improve wages and working conditions is no longer adequate to meet the problems or provide for the needs of public employees,” the feature article proclaimed. “The advantage that public employees once had in terms of job security and fringe benefits over workers in private industry no longer exists,” COUR noted, while those locals and councils devoted to militant trade union tactics and collective bargaining to win “significant gains in wages and fringe benefits” and “unprecedented improvements in salaries and working conditions.” But the newsletter piece went further, arguing that local union autonomy was a prerequisite to successful collective bargaining, and thus to overcoming the growing wage and benefit gap between public and private workers. Local leaders were best attuned to the needs of their members and to the political and economic conditions in their regions, and thus were best suited to determine where and when resources should be allocated for organizing drives and what issues should be thrust to the center of bargaining sessions. The proper role of the national union office was not to interfere in these local affairs or

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dictate these decisions, COUR reasoned, but to “encourage organization through technical, educational, and financial assistance.”

The focus on a stronger assertion of union philosophy overlapped with the practical imperative of the campaign, securing local support by cultivating local grievances. This had long been a concern of COUR as far back as 1961, but became more urgent as the group moved closer to the 1964 convention. In mid-September 1963, for instance, Gotbaum traveled to Marquette, Wisconsin to meet with a group of two dozen local leaders. “As we discovered in most places,” Gotbaum reported back to Hastings, “the group was not so much concerned about principles and policies but rather the unbelievable lack of service they had been receiving.” The locals had received few communications from either side during the previous two years, he noted. They were unfamiliar with COUR but generally sympathetic to its grievances, at least insofar as “our opposition will help get them better service.” In short, he concluded, “if the International did a decent trade union job we would have difficulty with the group” but because it had failed them, they were potential supporters. Gotbaum’s report from northern Wisconsin was indicative of COUR’s efforts in other new footholds like Arizona and California. In both cases, support for Wurf stemmed almost wholly from dissatisfaction with either Zander or Zander’s local deputy. The principle purpose of the Bear Flag Caucus formed in September 1963 was to protest the lack of an IEB seat for California. Its sympathy for COUR had little to do with a broader philosophical agenda; it was about simpler questions of power and representation.

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99 “Organizing for Collective Bargaining: Strong Locals and Councils Are the Key to Organizing,” COUR Newsletter 17 (January 1964), Box 45, Folder 3, District Council 37 Records.
100 “Trip to Marquette,” Memorandum from Victor Gotbaum to Robert Hastings, 16 September 1963, Box 2, Folder 27, Chapman / Ames Collection.
101 Newsletter of the California Bear Flag Chapter of COUR, West Coast Edition, no. 1, November 1963, Box 2, Folder 20, Chapman / Ames Collection. The purely localist approach also helped chip away at the Zander’s base in traditional strongholds like Philadelphia, where COUR overlapped with an ongoing contest between the union’s growing ranks of African Americans workers and the traditional white Irish Catholic leadership. Ryan, AFSCME’s Philadelphia Story, 157-165.
By mid-1963, COUR had developed a two-tiered campaign: in its publications (and in Wurf’s own speeches and statements), the caucus focused increasingly on the big issues of organizing and collective bargaining, while its increasingly elaborate network of local supporters emphasized the “darker” critique of union governance and locally-based frustrations. Kramer later accused the group of taking the “high road” and “low road” at the same time—but it proved a remarkably effective blend for Wurf, who was able to elevate himself above the messier, more divisive matters and underscore the fundamental difference between himself and the incumbent, while simultaneously capitalizing on the myriad local grievances that often drove activists toward COUR.\(^{102}\) In September 1963, for instance, Wurf concluded a letter to a supporter in California whose council was struggling under an unwanted trusteeship by asserting that the practice was both “an infringement on their democratic rights” and “one of the major reasons why the council does not service its members and grow to the extent it should.” “It has been our experience,” he continued, “that effective Councils only prospect in a climate where the local union and its members have the opportunity to create and direct policy.” The growing support for COUR in California, he concluded, moving beyond the particular concerns and grievances, was a sign that the membership longed for “a strong and decent union.”\(^{103}\)

COUR also took several practical steps to improve its position heading into the 1964 convention—pairing its broader message with old-fashioned, backroom deal-making.\(^{104}\) The most important of these was securing Chapman’s commitment to run on a ticket with Wurf. Initially reluctant to support the reform caucus, Chapman was fairly certain that he would get the support of Wurf voters without further antagonizing Zander by running again as an independent.


\(^{103}\) Letter from Jerry Wurf to Cleo Pettis, 23 September 1963, Box 2, Folder 20, Chapman / Ames Collection.

\(^{104}\) Notes, Interview with John Boer, 16 July 1981, Box 4, Folder 38, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
But for COUR, the veteran union officer was a critical bridge to alienated traditionalists, particularly in the Upper Midwest. Without any real leverage—other than a loose promise that COUR would seek to strengthen the Secretary-Treasurer position and the ever-loom ing threat that Zander would seek to abolish it—Ames and Gotbaum traveled to Madison in June 1963 with an ultimatum—commit to the ticket by Labor Day, or else COUR would back a challenger.105 Faced with the prospect of losing the reformist support, Chapman relented, formalizing his break with Zander and his alliance with the dissidents. In early October, at a COUR conference in Milwaukee, some 250 union officers voted to nominate Wurf-Chapman as its ticket for the 1964 convention.106

Zander and his allies struggled to halt COUR’s gaining momentum, at times retreating into outright denial. In September 1963, Kramer wrote an open letter to supporters claiming that “Any thought of Zander losing the next election is non-sense” and that “his winning vote margin has been increasing ever since the last convention.”107 At a January 1964 meeting of national union staff, Kramer predicted that COUR would get no more than one-third of the convention delegates.108 As late as March 1964, Kramer boasted that an “Elmo Roper-type poll” had found that Zander enjoyed a forty-point lead.109 The administration also took to characterizing the opposition as radicals—Zander began referring to COUR as “the Birchers of AFSCME,”

105 “Meeting in Madison, Wisconsin on June 3,” Memorandum from Victor Gotbaum to Jerry Wurf, 10 June 1963, Box 1, Folder 33, Chapman / Ames Collection
106 “Milwaukee COUR Conference, October 5 and 6, 1963,” Memorandum from Robert Hastings to COUR Executive Committee, 9 October 1963, Box 1, Folder 40, Chapman / Ames Collection. It appears that some in COUR felt uncomfortable enough with Chapman’s soft commitment to prepare for the possibility that he would break from the group to get reelected with Zander at the 1964 convention. Hastings collected all of Chapman’s statements about Zander’s shortcomings and Wurf’s strengths in a document right before the convention opened. “Statements by Chapman Relative to Wurf Candidacy and His,” Memorandum from Robert Hastings to Charles Svenson, 1 April 1964, Box 1, Folder 33, Chapman / Ames Collection.
apparently embracing a line of argument pushed by Kramer, which sought to turn COUR’s endorsement of local autonomy into a charge of conservative backwardness.\(^{110}\) (With unrecognized irony, a pro-Zander mailing from around the same time opened by paraphrasing the great British conservative Edmund Burke, “Evil grows when good men do nothing.”\(^{111}\))

The political tricks used in 1962 were replicated two years later. Zander allies leaked COUR materials to employers in an effort to preoccupy locals and councils with problems in their home jurisdictions.\(^{112}\) Zander also arranged to move the presidential vote earlier in the convention, immediately after an endorsement by Walter Reuther, whose UAW had lent AFSCME more than $25,000 and whose staff dutifully forwarded copies of COUR materials and reports on their activities to AFSCME’s national office.\(^{113}\)

Zander also made some concessions to the “new” AFSCME, selecting William McEntee, head of Philadelphia Council 33, as his running mate ahead of the convention. One of the few figures respected by both sides, McEntee had played a key role in the construction of the union’s first strong urban council during the 1930s and 1940s, and was a frequent guest of District Council 37 during Wurf’s term. Though he was never as committed to formal collective

\(^{110}\) “Zander Key-Note Address--February 28, 1964 at California Conference Meeting,” Memorandum from Robert Hastings to Jerry Wurf, 4 March 1964, Box 2, Folder 17, Chapman / Ames Collection.


\(^{112}\) In September 1963, Schut complained that COUR bulletins were “falling into the hands of certain managerial people in State government who are opposed to the Union and in the hands of the association representatives, or their contents are becoming known to representatives of other Unions in competition with us.” Letter from Norm Schut to Robert Hastings, 17 September 1963, Box 1, Folder 40, Chapman / Ames Collection. In January 1964, a COUR article criticizing Zander’s housing program mysteriously turned up at several New York City government offices. “Mailings of COUR Material from Columbus Ohio to Heads of Departments in Governments Around the County by Persons Other than COUR Members,” Memorandum from Robert Hastings to Jerry Wurf, 23 January 1964, Box 2, Folder 17, Chapman / Ames Collection.

bargaining as Wurf, McEntee was a pioneer in urban public sector unionism. The Zander camp also adopted much of COUR’s rhetoric. When pro-Zander forces reorganized under the moniker “Members for Progress” in late 1963, they proclaimed their belief in “a militant, progressive union” that “understands the needs of adding collective bargaining to civil service; a union that will fight for justice within the union as well as justice from our employers.” When the group released its program a few months later, it was headlined by planks on “Organizing” and “Collective Bargaining,” identified as critical cogs in “building a dynamic union of public employees.” In contrast, Members for Progress dismissed COUR’s program as “half-indictment of the present AFSCME administration and half-blueprint to make sure COUR would stay in power if it ever got in,” laying out an “essentially negative” vision which “gives only lip service to such important union functions as organization, collective bargaining, research, education, legislation and communications.” The COUR vision of the union “smacks of the trade unionism of the 19th century,” the document concluded. “Members for Progress remember and honor Gompers and Green—but we now march with Meany and Reuther.”

It was an audacious reversal, one that simultaneously demonstrated the extent to which COUR had already won the philosophical battle but threatened the caucus’s fortunes as it entered the union’s 1964.

“Twenty-One Votes”

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114 On McEntee, see Ryan, AFSCME’s Philadelphia Story. Unlike Kramer and Zander, McEntee’s reputation survived the 1960-1964 period fairly well, despite the fact that he had denounced “the men of small minds who promote this campaign of disunity of purpose and direction” in the course of announcing his candidacy for the office of Secretary-Treasurer. “Dear AFSCME Member,” Open Letter from William McEntee, 6 April 1964, Box 2, Folder 4, Leo Kramer Papers, Part II.
115 Open Letter from Tony Fiorello, Chairman, Members for Progress, 13 November 1963, Box 3, Folder 6, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
116 Member’s Guide to AFSCME Politics (Washington, DC: Members for Progress, n.d. [1963 or 1964]), Box 3, Folder 6, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers. The other three categories were “Unity,” “Decency,” and “Dedication.”
Entering the Denver convention, COUR was still somewhat unsure of its strength. The group was encouraged by the strong and energetic turnout at its events and conferences, and Chapman’s decision to join the ticket bolstered Wurf’s candidacy among some of the union’s more traditionalist strongholds. As early as 1963, Gotbaum had predicted that the Wurf-Chapman ticket would win at least 60 percent of the vote. But there was still cause for concern. In the month leading up to the 1964 meeting, Hastings kept in constant contact with COUR deputies across the country, who in turn polled local and council leaders in their region. Key supporters like Lee Tafel in Florida reported that sympathy for COUR ran high, but warned that many delegates were wary of crossing Zander, lest he somehow win the election and subject them to reprisals.117 More importantly, nearly half of the union’s 68 councils were under some form of “special arrangement” and another dozen were directly controlled through trusteeships, while a final preconvention survey suggested that as much as 15 percent of the anticipated vote would be held by international representatives carrying delegate credentials 118

Still, the numbers were on COUR’s side. The broad demographic changes that had destabilized AFSCME during the 1950s only accelerated in the early 1960s. Between 1960 and 1963, for example, AFSCME’s membership grew from 182,000 members to 218,000, and more than half of the 36,000 new members came in three of COUR’s strongest states, New York, Illinois, and Ohio. Meanwhile, traditional Zander strongholds featured either much smaller increases (Wisconsin, Massachusetts) or actually lost members (Minnesota, Pennsylvania).119

117 “Long Distance Call to Al Bilik on Miami, FL and Lee Tafel,” Memorandum from Robert Hastings to Jerry Wurf, 31 March 1964, Box 2, Folder 17, Chapman / Ames Collection.
119 “Comparative Membership by State,” Internal Memorandum, n.d. [1963], Box 8, Folder 7, Jerry Wurf Collection, AFSCME Office of the President, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Jerry Wurf Collection]. The membership numbers in COUR’s internal documents match those in Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Sector,” 70.
But the unbalanced convention delegate system undermined some of this advantage—though New York state held nearly one-fifth of the union’s membership in 1964, it had only about 15 percent of the convention delegates; and while District Council 37 had perhaps one-seventh of the total national union membership, it received only about eight percent of the convention delegates. Recognizing all of this, Wurf later recalled, the caucus was cautious about its chances in the floor fight to come. “We really felt under-doggish all the way.”

In several respects, the dissidents were better prepared at the 1964 meeting. They brought their own mimeograph machine and stencil maker to counteract the expect barrage of pro-Zander literature and booked extra rooms for strategy sessions, knowing that the administration would block off most of the common areas. Cour also pressured Zander to reach out to the Election Institute, an impartial refereeing agency that used arbitrators, mediators, labor lawyers, and law students to supervise elections and count ballots, to supervise the election. Zander refused, fearing it would have signaled an admission of corruption, but later agreed to bring in another referee, the Honest Ballot Association, “to certify the fairness of procedures at critical points” and to give “the delegates the security of knowing that things are being handled properly.” Wurf and others had mixed feelings about the objectivity of the group, but were not in a place to refuse Zander’s suggestion and were reassured when Cour was allowed to name observers to

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124 Members for Progress Truth Letter, Vol. I, No. 4, April 1964, Box 2, Folder 4, Leo Kramer Papers, Part II.
the election committee, though Hastings secured the services of a Denver labor lawyer, just in case COUR wanted to challenge the election.125

Zander, meanwhile was rattled, confessing in a scribbled entry in his datebook that “Everyone’s restless” on the day he departed Washington for Denver.126 Despite Kramer’s bravado about Zander’s growing popularity in the union, the incumbent camp was clearly uneasy as it approached the Denver convention. Kramer knew that COUR had gained ground since the last convention and that the incumbent had little room for error at the convention. In late February, he circulated a memorandum suggesting that the group had to be subtler in its floor-level tactics. “Keeping in mind some criticism of the past,” he wrote, “we need men and women who can do the political job quietly and with finesse.” He was expecting little less than total fidelity to Zander’s cause. “No local problem, no personal quirk, no skin too thin, can be allowed to stand in the way of our final objective.”127

The 1964 AFSCME convention opened in Denver on April 27. Zander’s keynote address set the tone for the four-day meeting: “Evil is abroad in the organization.” Emphasizing the importance of unity, Zander referred to COUR and Wurf only indirectly, noting the presence of a group intent on transforming the union “into a body of regionally-elected agents or states’ rights legislatures” reminiscent of Senator Barry Goldwater’s vision for America and the 19th century American Confederacy, another “unholy little coalition” formed to “dismember the union.”

126 Arnold S. Zander, Datebook and Diary, 1964, Box 10, Leo Kramer Papers, Part I.
127 “To Caucus Leaders,” Memorandum from Leo Kramer, 24 February 1964, Box 1, Folder 5, Leo Kramer Papers, Part II.
"There is nothing wrong with our union," Zander concluded defiantly, "that some unity and a lot of hard work won’t take care of."  

Zander hoped that the combined strength of those genuinely devoted to a broader mission of political reform and those opposed to the “new” urban AFSCME, along with the carefully employed powers of incumbency, would be enough to ward off the COUR challenge. The reformers feared the same thing.

The group was encouraged by the promises of support once the convention arrived, but remained wary of being double-crossed. The COUR officers pleaded with the caucus supporters not to become over-confidant. But the caucus was comfortable enough to allow more than 100 national staffers carrying some 400 votes to be seated at the convention without seriously contesting their credentials. The move was a pragmatic tradeoff—leaving the votes in play allowed COUR to keep the issue, to remind the delegates that despite the presence of election referees, the incumbent administration was less than wholly reformed. The growing confidence of the caucus was also evident in the rhetoric employed by the reformers, which focused less on undemocratic abuses than on COUR’s positive vision for the union. Again responsible for nominating Wurf, Blatz cast Zander as a relic of a bygone era. “Past service can and should be rewarded,” he began, “not by perpetual reelection but by an adequate pension.”

128 Proceedings of the 14th International Convention, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, Denver, Colorado, April 27-May 1, 1964, 11-18. Aside from denigrating the opposition as evil, Zander tried to cast the COUR program as narrow and materialist, a betrayal of the broad, progressive traditions of AFSCME. “Within our union it is said that we should not concern ourselves about anything but our own wages and hours and conditions of employment,” he said. “A group wants to take over this union with that as a program . . . [but] this union was not conceived with such a narrow view.” Vice-President Steve Clark echoed the line in his nominating address, lauding Zander’s belief in the union as “a mechanism that should be used to promote the welfare of our people above and beyond just the normal activities of a trade union.” Proceedings of the 14th International Convention, 11, 48-49.

129 Minutes, Meeting of the Wurf-Chapman Coordinating Committee, 28 April 1964, Box 82, Folder 49, Jerry Wurf Collection.

130 “For Your Information,” COUR Campaign Flyer, Denver, CO, 27 April 1964, Box 1, Folder 33, Chapman / Ames Collection; Minutes of the Meeting of the COUR Steering Committee, 27 April 1964, Box 82, Folder 49, Jerry Wurf Collection;
His verbose address, filled with alliterations and clichés, climaxed in a call for a recognition that “new horizons are beckoning . . . new times are running . . . new winds are blowing,” that there was “a fresh movement growing within the union” that could “no longer be denied.”

The vote took place Wednesday afternoon. Out of either confidence or denial, Zander retired to his hotel room to rest from about 3:30 until 5:00. When he returned to the hotel’s main banquet hall, the news was initially promising. In fact, at one point, a Zander ally left the tightly controlled room designated for vote tabulation to tell Hastings that Chapman and Zander had split the election again, with COUR winning a narrow majority on the IEB. Hastings called Wurf, and bluntly broke the news that “You got dumped, Gordon made it.” Wurf informed the small group waiting in his hotel suite, and after some consideration, was prepared to accept the result and (he later claimed) return permanently to New York City. Reluctantly, the group moved downstairs to congratulate the incumbent, only to be met in the main lobby by Fanny Fine, COUR’s representative on the election committee, who announced that he had won the election.

In union politics, things are rarely simple. Almost immediately after the election results were announced, Kramer began angling to challenge the result. John Murphy, chairman of the Election Committee, warned Wurf that the Zander forces were trying to take custody of the ballots prior to demanding a recount. Wurf immediately found the largest laborers he could in the COUR caucus to serve as Murphy’s “protector” for the night. The main concern was that Zander would launch a final challenge the following day before the election committee could officially

131 “Address Nominating Jerry Wurf for International President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO,” Speech Delivered by Father Albert Blatz, State Hospital, St. Peter, Minnesota, Local 614, at the International Convention, on Tuesday Morning, Hilton Hotel, Denver, CO, 28 April 1964, Box 3, Folder 1, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
announce the results. With dubious legal authority, Wurf dispatched a pair of deputies on a midnight flight to Washington to take control of the union office and change the locks.\footnote{Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 4, Side B, 2 July 1973, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.}

The Election Committee was charged with making its formal report first thing Thursday morning, but the session initially proceeded as if no result had been on the contest that had wrought divisions in the union for three years. Zander stalled, refusing to order the election committee report, while Kramer scrambled to find a way to reverse the vote. COUR was reluctant to push the issue, fearful of creating a permanent rift in the union, but when the whole morning session passed without an announcement, they grew concerned. At one point, Schut took to the floor charging “hanky-panky” and noting that the HBA’s tabulation had already been certified by the committee the previous evening. A Zander supporter on the committee returned to the convention hall to defend the delay, claiming that “there is a hell of a lot more to an election than just tallying the votes.”\footnote{Proceedings of the 14th International Convention, 130.}

As it turned out, Zander was more interested in delaying the final outcome than challenging it. McEntee agreed to work as a sort of emissary to get Zander to accept the result in exchange for a promise that he be treated reasonably well. Several months earlier, a forward-thinking COUR activist had broached this possibility, suggesting that Zander be given some sort of emeritus position with a salary and pension.\footnote{Jerry Carroll, a COUR supporter in Denver, suggested in late February that COUR consider a resolution that would provide Zander early retirement and the title President emeritus if he was defeated. “Jerry’s feeling was that we had a number of older members in this Union, many of whom might be delegates to the convention, who would vote for Zander solely from the sympathy angle rather than on merit, but if there were something pending or introduced in the convenient that would provide him with a retirement income between the time that he was defeated as president and until he reached age 65, these older delegates would have less pangs about voting against Zander.” At the time, Hastings thought that the plan had merit, but that it might be opposed by some COUR activists because of their animosity toward Zander. “Possible Resolution on Retirement Pay for Zander,” Memorandum from Robert Hastings to Jerry Wurf, 28 February 1964, Box 2, Folder 17, Chapman / Ames Collection.} Zander held out for a chauffeured Cadillac, but
eventually accepted the deal. At the beginning of the afternoon session, Kramer announced his support for a motion to discharge the Election Committee report and finalize the result, sparking an eruption of cheers and chants of “We Want Wurf.”

The president-elect spoke only briefly. He referenced the “long, arduous and sometimes unpleasant campaign” and graciously praised Zander’s contribution to the history of the public sector labor movement. He then admitted that the union had “a multiplicity of problems” too complex to deal with in the one remaining day of convention voting. Despite the pleas from some in the caucus to push their advantage, he urged the convention to refer all remaining issues to the incoming Board and a special constitutional convention to consider structural changes to the union. The move sparked protests from Zander supporters, who were concerned what the COUR-dominated Board might do, but was ratified by McEntee, who was worried that the convention would devolve into chaos if pressed for another day. “They won the marbles,” he told the fractured body. “Give them the tools to work with and if they don’t do the job, give them hell two years from now.”

By a narrow margin of twenty-one votes, less than one percent of those cast, Wurf became the first challenger to successfully unseat a major union president since Walter Reuther defeated R. J. Thomas in 1946. The victory signaled a landmark shift for AFSCME, a formal embrace of the model of urban municipal trade unionism forged in New York City. It remained to be seen, however, whether that model could effectively be transferred to the national level.

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136 Wurf later claimed that the head of the Honest Ballot Association informed his wife Mildred that Wurf had actually won by several hundred votes, but that an avalanche of challenges from the Zander forces had brought the total down. Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 4, Side B, 2 July 1973, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
137 Proceedings of the 14th International Convention, 138-139.
138 Proceedings of the 14th International Convention, 139.
CHAPTER FIVE

“The Revolt of the Public Worker”: Militancy, Race, and the Making of a National Public Sector Labor Movement, 1964-1968

“Not since Spartacus have so many workers of ‘the State’ gone illegal,” columnist Victor Riesel quipped in March 1968. “Gentle school teachers jeer en masse . . . Garbage collectors march en masse . . . [and] whole police departments are beginning to resign.” “The ‘public sector’ is just beginning to roar,” Riesel warned. Unless something was done to curb its militancy, “the strikes will roll on, shutting schools, crippling police stations and fire houses and paralyzing garbage collection,” leaving the country as vulnerable as “a china shop.”

The late 1960s was a time of unprecedented upheaval in the public sector. Whether measured by the number of strikes and demonstrations or the explosive growth of public sector union membership, the decade between 1959 and 1969 coincided with a pronounced spike in militancy by government employees. Writing in 1970, Jerry Wurf cast the developments as “the Revolt of the Public Worker”—a period when long-standing grievances over pay and benefits were infused with both energy and urgency from contemporary social movements to spur disenchantment with “feckless professional societies” and spark a wholesale shift toward “militant unionism” among government employees. Their agitation and activism, Wurf argued, produced nothing less than a “revolution, both in theory and practice, establishing for the first

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time the basic rights of public employees to organize in unions of their own choosing, to bargain collectively, and to determine the conditions of their employment.\(^2\)

No union played a more important role in channeling the revolt of public workers into a revolution in public employee unionism than AFSCME, and no labor leader better personified that transition than Wurf. The chief architect and public face of the new labor movement, Wurf spent the half-decade following his election as national union president in 1964 transferring the model of public sector labor unionism crafted in New York City during the 1950s to the national level. This vision of public sector unionism had three core elements: first, a proletarian appeal to government employees as workers, rather than civil servants; second, a primary focus on the use of formal, bilateral processes of collective bargaining, rather than legislative lobbying, to address workplace concerns; and third, a willingness to use direct action, including strikes, to win both recognition and material benefits.

This approach defied a half-century’s worth of assumptions about the uniqueness of public sector labor relations, but it also challenged an emerging conventional wisdom about the limits of the American labor movement. At a time when many on the political left discounted the private sector labor relations model as a stale, narrow, and bureaucratic arrangement, Wurf, a former Socialist, embraced it as the only meaningful assurance of dignity and justice at the workplace. In this sense, the public sector union project was simultaneously revolutionary and conservative—a clear innovation in application but not fundamentals of a system crafted decades earlier.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) One of the great ironies of recent labor history, then, was that the significant outbursts of energy and activism was directed toward the achievement of a system of laws and procedures whose legitimacy was already coming into question in the private sector. For representative and influential examples of the legal critiques of the Wagner Act regime, see Richard Epstein, “A Common Law for Labor Relations: A Critique of the New Deal Legislation.” *The Yale Law Journal* 92, no. 8 (1983): 1357–1408; Karl Klare, “Judicial Deradicalization of the Wagner Act and the
The approach also thrust AFSCME deep into the broader turmoil of the decade. Taken together, these three elements conveyed a discourse of empowerment—“public worker” rather than “public servant,” “collective bargaining” rather than “collective begging”—that both reflected and amplified the spirit of “the Sixties.” This language combined with an organizing strategy that targeted the lowest-paying, least desirable jobs to draw hundreds of thousands of African Americans and women into the union, making AFSCME both one of the most diverse unions in the United States and an organization uniquely attuned to contemporary social movements.

By the late 1960s, AFSCME was widely regarded as the most vibrant and dynamic force within the labor movement—“the front lines of unionism,” as Wurf put it to the union’s 1968 convention. Yet as late as 1968, the union’s identity was primarily cast in terms of traditional trade union objectives.4 It was only after the tragic events of the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike that AFSCME embraced a broader, social movement union agenda.

“ Barely Controlled Anarchy”

Wurf faced a staggering array of challenges upon taking office in May 1964. AFSCME was “a sick, sick union,” he later remembered, both debt-ridden and divided. In quick order, he discovered that AFSCME’s published financial statements were “pure, unadulterated bullshit” and that the union had failed to pay its dues to the AFL-CIO for more than a year: Visiting the Federation headquarters shortly after his election, Wurf was asked by Director of Organizing

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Robert Livingston whether he came bearing “the same tin cup” as his predecessor. A third-party review found the union’s accounting department had neither “overall coordination of activities” nor “anyone with any great degree of ability.” Shortly after taking office, Wurf sold AFSCME’s Mount Vernon Square headquarters and moved its operations into a rented space in downtown Washington, D.C.

He also moved to cut off union funding for a much-maligned urban housing project, which a post-election audit determined was riddled with “chronic financial problems,” staggering “irregularities,” and “gross malpractices” that included kickback schemes and overpayments. It took more than two years—and hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional maintenance costs and legal fees—to finally unload the developments, which were surrendered to a charitable subsidiary of the American Baptist Church at a loss of untold millions from the union treasury. Curbing its peripheral expenditures allowed AFSCME to repay loans from the UAW and other unions, assuring the union’s financial autonomy, but budgetary problems persisted through much of Wurf’s term in office.

5 Letter from Raymond Buchbinder, C.P.A., to Jerry Wurf, 13 July 1964, Box 3, Folder 8, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
9 Letter from Gordon W. Chapman to Walter P. Reuther, 4 February 1966, box 351, Folder 10, UAW President’s Office: Walter P. Reuther Records, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Walter P. Reuther Records]. Wurf also moved to pare the union’s agenda in other areas. Upon arriving at the union’s headquarters in Washington a few days after his election, Wurf was startled
Extracting AFSCME from its peripheral commitments fulfilled a key campaign promise and freed resources for organizing, but making meaningful progress toward a “new” AFSCME also required significant changes in union staff and structure. Only a single Zander loyalist resigned immediately upon Wurf’s victory in May 1964, leaving dozens in place, many of whom had actively campaigned against COUR over the previous three years. This put Wurf in a difficult position: Taking office after a narrowly-won contest, he feared that a far-reaching purge risked deepening divisions within the union, but the persistence of the old guard posed a significant obstacle to the new administration’s agenda. Through several weeks of protracted and heated negotiations, Wurf was able to convince most of Zander’s chief lieutenants to leave AFSCME voluntarily, though several found their way into rival unions, laying the foundation for future problems within the labor movement.10

10 Leo Kramer and Henry Wilson, key advisers and deputies to former president Arnold Zander, bolted to the rival Laborers’ International Union—Wilson to become an associate counsel, Kramer to run the union’s new public sector organizing department. With their help, the Laborers soon became a key rival of AFSCME in the public sector. Billings and Greenya, *Power to the Public Worker*, 138-139.
Because few union organizers had public sector experience, Wurf turned to the private sector to recruit the new union staff.\footnote{11}{Richard Allen Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Sector, 1960-1970: A Case Study,” M.A. Thesis, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1971, 62-66.} He hired Elwood Taub, a twenty-year union veteran, from the International Woodworkers, to run the AFSCME’s revamped Education and Research Department and secured the services of two veterans of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, Marjorie Mueller and Jacob Schlitt, to serve as Taub’s deputies.\footnote{12}{“Reorganization of Education and Research Departments,” Memorandum from Jerry Wurf to All International Field Staff, Councils, and Local Unions, 12 July 1965, box 1, Folder 35, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.} As the union began to rebuild its organizing department after years of neglect by Zander, Wurf similarly relied on those with private sector backgrounds. P. J. Ciampa, formerly of the UAW, was appointed director of field staff, where Robert Klingensmith, a veteran of the International Union of Electrical Workers, joined him.\footnote{13}{“Robert Klingensmith Named SCME Assistant Director of Field Staff,” The Public Employee 32, no. 12 (Dec., 1967): 9.} Bringing decades of experience from some of the more difficult organizing campaigns in recent labor history, the new hires reinforced the union’s new commitment to a more militant brand of public sector union activity that was both more devoted to industrial organizing techniques and comfortable with employing the strategies and tactics of the private sector in government employment. The new focus was symbolically illustrated by staff’s tendency to refer to public employers as “companies” around AFSCME’s headquarters during the mid-1960s.\footnote{14}{Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Sector,” 62-66. This trend continued into the 1970s. In 1977, the union conducted a survey of its officers and staff, and fully 40 percent reported previous experience with another union, including an astounding 60 percent of the national union staff. “AFSCME Leaders: Attitudes and Opinions Toward the Union,” Report VI Prepared for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees by William R. Hamilton & Staff, Job 520A, October 1977, Box 133, Folder 34, Jerry Wurf Collection.} The pattern continued through the rest of the decade: Winn Newman, formerly of the United Steelworkers, became AFSCME’s in-house counsel in 1968, the same year that James Piece moved from the AFL-CIO’s Industrial Union Department to become AFSCME’s
southern area director. AFSCME augmented this meager staff with graduates from its Staff Intern Training Program and Local Union Training Programs, both of which allowed candidates nominated by local unions to come to Washington D.C. for an intensive education in union organizing.

The immediate transition culminated in May 1965 with a special constitutional convention. Wurf and the union’s International Executive Board called the meeting, the first in AFSCME’s history, after COUR opted not to push its reform proposals through the divided 1964 convention. Over the year that followed, a commission chaired by future union Secretary-Treasurer Joseph Ames traveled the country, holding town hall meetings with local officials and rank-and-file members to recommend changes to the union constitution. The revised document eventually included four sets of changes: an enlarged, regionally elected Executive Board; a quasi-proportional convention voting system; a Bill of Rights for union members; and a judicial panel to adjudicate grievances within the union. At Wurf’s urging, the new Constitution also included a preface that affirmed AFSCME’s new direction and purpose. “Workers,” it declared, organized both “to secure better wages and working conditions” and “to participate in the decisions which affect them at work,” and unions had a “solemn obligation to represent members forcefully and effectively in negotiations with management.”

17 Letter to Jerry Wurf, Gordon Chapman, and Members of the International Executive Board from the Constitutional Revision Commission, 25 January 1965, Box 2, Folder 1, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers. For overviews of the constitutional revision process in AFSCME, Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 103-09; Billings and Greinya, Power to the Public Worker, 149-154; and Dodd, “AFSCME, an Emerging Trade Union in the Public Sector,” 18. Prior to 1965, convention delegate strength was determined according to a formula that afforded one delegate to locals with 100 or fewer members, 2 for locals with 100-200 members, 3 for locals with 200-300 members, four to locals with 300-400 members, and five for locals with over 400 members. The revised formula retained proportionality, but offered an additional delegate for every 1,000 members over 400. In addition, every council was afforded one vote in convention. Richard Allen Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Sector, 1960-1970,” 20-21.
18 Letter from Eric Polisar to Joseph Ames, 4 August 1964, Box 3, Folder 8, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
A few months later, in July 1965, Wurf expanded on the new philosophy in an internal memorandum to all national and local staff. Ostensibly a brief on the union’s restructured national office, the document also outlined Wurf’s vision for “reorganizing and revitalizing” AFSCME. The “two great tasks” facing AFSCME, he wrote, were “to bring to our members collective bargaining” and “to build a union which makes the terms ‘Brotherhood’ and ‘Trade Union solidarity’ meaningful and significant.” He took a similar message to the 1965 AFL-CIO convention, where he briefly addressed the meeting from the floor, touting AFSCME’s commitment to “bring[ing] into the arena of public employment the same conditions of trade unionism that exist for workers in the private sector of the economy.” The union demanded that public officials deal with its members “in terms of the concepts we know as collective bargaining,” he continued. “Where we couldn’t get it by law, we got it through the picket line.”

By mid-1966, Wurf had solidified his hold on the leadership of AFSCME. A short-lived effort by former-COUR ally John Caldwell to organize a challenge behind Gordon W. Chapman failed to gain traction beyond a small cadre of disappointed Council directors, and Chapman ultimately decided to resign his post as Secretary-Treasurer following the 1966 convention, citing health concerns. Ames replaced Chapman, while a few former Zander allies, most notably William McEntee, were brought back into the International Executive Board, which formally affirmed AFSCME’s embrace of the private sector model of labor relations in a policy.

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19 “Reorganization of Education and Research Departments.”
20 Remarks by Jerry Wurf to the AFL-CIO Convention, 13 December 1965, Box 1, Folder 37, AFSCME Central Files Department Records. The AFL-CIO convention officially adopted a resolution committing the federation and its state and local affiliates to work toward “the enactment of law which permits workers to bargain collectively and makes it compulsory for public employees to bargain with representatives chosen by the workers.” “AFL-CIO Will Promote Laws for Bargaining in Government,” The Public Employee 31, no. 1 (Jan., 1966): 1, 3.
21 As early as December 1964, just seven months after Wurf’s election, Caldwell complained to a fellow union Vice President that Wurf was “traveling down a familiar road” and was “arbitrary, dictatorial, and high-handed.” Letter from John P. Caldwell to Don [McCuller], 31 December 1964, Box 3, Folder 2, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers; Open Letter from Gordon Chapman to AFSCME Membership, 4 August 1966, Box 4, Folder 34, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
statement in February 1966. Wurf was reelected without opposition at the 1966 convention, and even managed to secure a $0.35 increase in the per capita dues rate—an achievement that had escaped Zander at the 1962 and 1964 conventions.

When the Washington Daily News ran a profile of Wurf in early 1966, it cast him as the personification of “Labor’s New Breed.” “Mr. Wurf’s idea is that public workers want to solve their problems in the same way that workers in private industry handle theirs”—a vision, the piece noted, that was shared by a growing number and range of public employees. Asked about his future, Wurf told the paper “Hell, man, I’ve made it,” which the piece noted was “a mild expletive for him.” Characterizing Wurf as “fiercely and aggressively concentrating on building a huge and powerful and productive union,” the piece concluded that “Since Government is American’s biggest business, it almost seems he can’t miss.”

The feature was just part of a broader trend. Wurf’s national profile soared in the years after his election precisely because it coincided with a broader spike in public sector militancy. “Things are beginning to happen . . . attention is being paid to us . . . [and] I’m being invited to speak at substantial forums,” he later remembered of the mid-1960s. “Our union is becoming the spokesman, the pattern setter, the theoretician for the whole concept of the public employee, the organization of public employees, labor relations, and so on, which I must say I consciously wanted it to be.” Wurf’s ability to interpret and explain the broader developments in the public

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22 Billings and Greenya, Power to the Public Worker, 149-154. In response to the TWU strike, the IEB issued a six-point statement affirming the rights of public workers: 1) “right of all public employee to organize into labor unions”; 2) right to recognition as exclusive bargaining agent; 3) right of public employees to bargain collectively and connected obligation of employers to bargain; 4) right all public employees EXCEPT police and fire to strike, “for to forestall this right would be to nullify the free collective bargaining process”; 5) the right to engage in mediation and fact-finding to resolve disputes; 6) the right to reject compulsory arbitration but accept voluntary arbitration. “Executive Board Reaffirms AFSCME Policy Positions: Special Meeting Makes It Clear That Our Union Plans to Organize, Bargain in All Public Areas,” The Public Employee 31, no. 2 (Feb., 1966): 1, 6.
sector made him a sought-after comment for the national press—calls for comment became more common, and his quotes more frequently appeared in major national dailies. By the end of 1966, Wurf had emerged as a critical voice in public sector labor. In August 1966, Life magazine cast the forty-seven year old Wurf as the “Young Militant Out to Unionize City and County Employees.” In 1967, when AFSCME topped 350,000 members nationally for the first time, one official from the Department of Labor dubbed the union “Labor’s Hope for the Future.”

Wurf’s growing national profile came at a key juncture, when many in the national press were just beginning to take note of the militancy of government workers. The most important and visible example came in early 1966, when the Transport Workers Union (TWU) struck New York City, shutting down the subway system, and the city, for twelve days. Though rooted in local factors, the strike quickly attracted national attention as the highest profile public sector job action since the Boston Police Strike of 1919, particularly after TWU President Mike Quill was jailed for his role in the stoppage. The national press seized on the strike as most disruptive

25 A biographical information sheet distributed to the press emphasized Wurf’s pioneering role in public sector unionism, characterizing him as “a vigorous exponent – both inside and outside the union – of the idea that the collective bargaining relationship is the most effective method of handling personnel problems in government.” “Throughout his career, Mr. Wurf has criticized the older concept that a government employees’ union should have to plead with members of the legislative branch of government – lobby state legislators or city councilmen – for special favors of special actions to improve their incomes. Instead, he has urged support for the idea that legislators should pass laws to enable city officials to negotiate, and reach agreement with the designated bargaining representatives of the workers to use organized strength to achieve collective bargaining through administration action such as used by President Kennedy on behalf of federal employees. This pattern exists in a number of public jurisdictions.” “Jerry Wurf, International President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees,” Biographical Information Sheet, June 1969, Box 1, Folder 36, Gilbert Jonas Papers.


(and costly) example of a growing militancy among government workers. *Newsweek* warned “the strike situation among public employees now approaches a state of barely controlled anarchy” and cautioned that the United States would soon go the way of France and Italy, where “government employees go on strike almost as casually as Manhattan secretaries take a makeup break.”*30* *U.S. News* predicted, with greater foresight than it could have imagined, that “the day may be coming when strikes against city hall may be as common as walkouts in autos, steel airlines, construction or other private industries.”*31* *The Nation* ran a column by a former aide to New York City Mayor Robert F. Wagner, who characterized the public sector labor movement as “a runaway engine.”*32*

While some contemporary declarations were overdrawn, the mid-1960s were a critical turning point in the history of public sector labor relations in the United States. Prior to the mid-1950s, public sector strikes were exceedingly rare and, as late as 1958, there had been only 15 public sector strikes nationally. Stoppages by federal, state, and local government employees increased steadily over the next seven years, but as late as 1965, the average remained a modest 30 per year. During the second half of the decade, however, the number of strikes increased both dramatically and regularly—142 in 1966, 181 in 1967, 254 in 1968, and 411 in 1969—and grew longer and larger, disrupting public services on an unprecedented scale.*33* By 1970, the City-

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County Labor-Management Service estimated that “every three days . . . an American city found itself struck by its employees.”

Contemporaries struggled to explain what *Newsweek* called the “sudden feistiness” of government employees. Many drew parallels between workplace militancy and the broader turbulence of the decade. *Nation’s Business* editorialized that the turbulence in the public sector reflected “the influence of activists from anti-Viet Nam, antisegregation, and antiauthority demonstrations who have filtered into union ranks.” Veteran *New York Times* labor reporter A.H. Raskin, who had covered AFSCME since its stand-offs with Robert Moses in the mid 1950s, cast the developments as an outgrowth of “the general rebellion against all institutions, and what institution is stuffier, more tradition-ridden than government itself.” The editorial board of the *New York Times* explained a 1970 strike by postal workers as the product of “the lawlessness already so rampant in many sectors of society.”

Wurf acknowledged some truth to these interpretations. The growth of government employment, which doubled between 1947 and 1967, brought with it a new generation of workers unimpressed with what Wurf called the “Depression psychology” of “the voiceless, servile ‘public servant’” and more sensitive to “the injustices of archaic and unfeeling personnel systems and policies.”

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34 “Revolt of the Public Workers,” *Newsweek* 75 (May 4, 1970), 78a-78b.
35 “Revolt of the Public Workers,” *Newsweek*, 78a.
39 “A Fair Share of Power,” Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Jerry Wurf, President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Before the Conference of Cities, Indianapolis, Indiana, 27 May 1971, Box 71, Folder 29, Jerry Wurf Collection, AFSCME Office of the President, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Jerry Wurf Collection]. Between 1947 and 1967, public employment increased by more than 110 percent, while the private sector grew by just 42 percent. Most of the increase came at the state and local level: in 1947, there were approximately 5.5 million public employees, about one-third of which (1.8 million) were employed by the federal government (with the remaining 3.6 million or so split between state, local, and municipal levels). Two decades later, the public sector was home to more
technique for dealing with unreasonableness,” he explained in 1970. “We have confrontations in the public sector of employment for the same reasons we have confrontations in other sectors of our society—because the system does not work.”

Yet when asked by *Time* magazine to explain the explosion of public sector militancy in 1966, Wurf suggested that the causes ran deeper than the decade’s enabling atmospherics. Public workers, he explained, had come to recognize their own marginal status relative to their unionized private-sector counterparts, and, emboldened by their example, were demanding nothing less than “parity with their peers.” Public employees, he insisted on another occasioned, organized “to combat the gross discrimination they have discerned between the rewards of public employment and the rewards negotiated by workers in comparable jobs in private business and industry.” Government workers reaped few of the benefits of the two-decade long economic boom that followed World War II. By 1960, manufacturing workers earned an average of $2.68 an hour, compared to just $2.13 for state and local government employees; private sector non-wage benefits like health insurance and pension plans began to match those available to government employees, all while a boom economy undermined the

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42 Wurf, “The Revolt of the Public Workers,” 31-34.
value of stable and regular government employment. Left with fewer tangible advantages, government employees were forced to lean on perceived psychological benefits, which often only served to reinforce their sense of marginality. Professional employees and clerical workers, Wurf explained to a New York Times reporter in 1968, “find Uncle Louie, who never went to college, coming home with a pay of $5 an hour, and they feel frustrated.”

But parity was never simply about compensation. “In its most profound sense,” Wurf told the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 1967, collective bargaining was “a process which embraces the democratic ideal and applies it concretely, specifically, effectively at the place of work.” “The democracy of our political life deserved full extension into the labor relations of our public life,” Wurf announced. “Public employees will not have it otherwise.” Public workers embraced unions, he explained on another occasion, because collective bargaining challenged “the patronizing attitude and dispensing of largesse by employers” and brought “a fair share of power” to employees at the workplace.

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44 Joseph A. Loftus, “Rising Militancy Noted in Public Employees,” New York Times, 3 September 1968, 1, 33. Wurf was consistent on this point, but by the late 1960s, there was a growing consensus that the erosion of the traditional wage and benefit gap was most responsible for sparking turmoil in the public sector. In 1968, for example, Time explained that “one major factor in making government workers more and more restive is the obvious difference between the rewards in the private sector and those in the public. Government pay scales often run below those paid by private industry . . . Not many employees any longer consider it a privilege to work for the government. The job security of civil service has lost considerable point in a boom economy, where the demand for labor outstrips the supply.” “Workers’ Rights and the Public Weal,” Time 91 (March 1, 1968): 34-35.
45 Untitled Speech by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, Before the 1967 United States Conference of Mayors, Honolulu, HI, 19 June 1967, Box 3, Folder 11, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
46 “A Fair Share of Power,” 27 May 1971, Jerry Wurf Collection. Some contemporary scholars did recognize the material roots of public sector militancy; Derek Bok and John T. Dunlop, for instance, cited the underdeveloped machinery of public sector labor relations, nothing that, after basic wage and benefit disputes, union recognition was the most common grievance behind public sector labor actions. Derek C. Bok and John T. Dunlop, Labor and the American Community (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 321-322. Journalist Irwin Ross recognized that “more than money” was at stake in public sector labor disputes: “Among all types of government workers, there is a growing desire for participation in decision making involving the minutiae of life in the office or on the shop floor—such matters as job assignments, overtime schedules, work loads, rule infractions.” Ross, “Those Newly Militant Government Workers,” 106-107.
This second feature is critical to understanding Wurf’s vision for the public sector labor movement in the late 1960s, for it marked a clear departure from reigning assumptions about the grievances of government employees. While Wurf had accepted the civil service system as a legitimate part of the public sector labor relations machinery in his early years in New York City, by the 1960s, he came to see it as a mark of the government employee’s inferior status. “The public employee . . . is teed off and outraged by his being treated as a second-class citizen,” Wurf told the *Washington Post* in August 1966. “He wants full collective bargaining, and he no longer will accept what few crumbs fall from the table.”47 “We’re not opposed to civil service,” Wurf told *U.S. News* in 1966, “but we think that conditions of employment are best handled by bilateral negotiation rather than unilaterally by an allegedly neutral civil-service commission.”48

While civil service had been “an admirably progressive step” in its time and continued to function as “a valuable adjunct to the process of running government,” Wurf wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1967, it was neither “sacred” nor “immune from the same evaluation and criticism applied to other human instrumentalities.” “It is neither all good nor all bad,” he continued, “but its good features ought not serve as a shield for its shortcomings.” Meticulously constructed job classification and career and salary plans were “at best dubious in a free market economy” in which “no one has yet defined that weary cliché, ‘A fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay,’” and were often little more than “rough approximations rationalized by an internal logic.”

“Even under the best circumstances, even with the most dedicated and competent personnel,

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even in the greatest absence of political pressures,” Wurf concluded, “civil service continues to represent unilateralism in labor-management relations in the public service.”

The “protective cocoon” of civil service offered the government employee basic protections at the workplace, but left him “without a voice in his own affairs,” Wurf told *Newsweek* in 1970, “an outrageous price to pay for economic security.” Public workers were united by “a common bond of second-class citizenship,” Wurf told a conference on public sector labor relations in 1970. “He wants out of the box that government has put him in, denying him the decency and dignity of his manhood, [which is] depriving him of the equality inherent in collective bargaining, stripping away from him the right to protest unreasonableness and redress grievances.” Collective bargaining restored balance to the relationship, he continued, “substitut[ing] dignity for paternalism.”

At the core of Wurf’s vision for the public sector labor movement, then, was a thoroughly proletarian conception of the government employee—public worker rather than civil servant. Not widely shared at the time, even within the labor movement, this apparently simple premise led AFSCME to reject most of the traditional distinctions that had separated public sector unionism from its private sector counterparts. While other organizations of public employees, particularly the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, drew impressive memberships during the 1960s, they did so largely by fusing traditional notions of professionalism with the new tactics of the labor movement. It fell to AFSCME to embody, and Wurf to articulate, a purer and far more controversial form of public sector trade unionism.

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50 “Revolt of the Public Workers,” 78a-78b.
52 As Marjorie Murphy has demonstrated in her pioneering study of teacher unionism, both organizations were at least initially interested more in protecting instructors’ control over the education process than material issues and
While Wurf’s support of the right of public workers to strike drew the most attention, the more important innovation in his vision of public sector organizing concerned the fundamental nature of the employment relationship. Though much of the early twentieth century, American courts restricted the collective efforts of government workers, reasoning that neither the state nor its subdivisions could compromise its sovereign status by engaging in bilateral negotiation. Taken to a logical extreme, this “doctrine of sovereignty” led both jurists and politicians to draw parallels between government employees and soldiers, both of whom allegedly owed their full loyalty to the state. Most practical restrictions flowed from this premise, including the prohibition on strikes—regarded by an interested observer in 1965 as “akin to treason even by friends of labor.”

The public-private distinction had troubled Wurf since his early days in New York City, but it was not until the 1960s that he began challenging the notion in broad, universal terms. Partly reflective of a changing legal landscape in which collective representation was begrudgingly afforded a limited legitimacy, Wurf nonetheless went further than most contemporaries in rejecting the differentness of government employees. “Bosses are bosses,” he told a reporter in 1965, “some good, some bad, some indifferent . . . no different than any other employers.” “Government chooses to cherish the illusion that its employees actually work for someone other than their immediate supervisor,” some “vague entity called the public interest,” he told the American Psychiatric Association in 1970. “It is conveniently forgotten that the

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were forced into the narrower agenda of teacher unionism only under pressure from forces outside the labor movement. Murphy, Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).


54 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf by Robert Becroft for Capital Assignment, 2 November 1965, Box 70, Folder 13, Jerry Wurf Collection.
public interest does not give the daily orders to a hospital worker; that the public interest does not sign the paycheck; that the public interest does not hold the right to hire and fire.”

Not only was the employer very real in the public sector, in Wurf’s view, the employment relationship was just as likely to be adversarial. Wurf insisted that public employees were neither more beneficent nor more knowledgeable than their counterparts in private industry. Civil service commissions were dominated by commissioners who were “nothing but stooges to the guy who is the boss” and “tools of the employer,” he told *U. S. News* in 1966. “Employees and their unions,” he wrote of civil service commissions on another occasion, “have no more reason to expect it to be neutral than one would expect from the personnel officers of General Electric to be neutral in their relations with the unions representing its employees.” “Being elected to political office,” he quipped with characteristic bite to forum on state and local government relations in 1971, “is not equal to being endowed by God with unbounded wisdom and unbridled power.” “Government is as unreasonable, as immoral, as brutal, and as shortsighted as any boss in private industry,” he reiterated the following year.

Wurf was quite aware, and little troubled, that his vision of public sector unionism flew in the face of prevailing legal theory. “When you strip it down,” he once told an forum on state and local government, “the concept of sovereignty means only one thing as far as labor relations are concerned, and that is that the boss will call the shots.” He ridiculed the claim that local and state executives were incapable of negotiating with their employees because the legislative

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58 “From Confrontation to Cooperation,” Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, at the Secretary of Labor’s Conference on State and Local Government Relations, 22 November 1971, Box 70, Folder 20, Jerry Wurf Collection.
60 “From Confrontation to Cooperation,” 22 November 1971, Jerry Wurf Collection.
branch generally had to authorize funds for a raise or benefit increase. It was, he told *U.S. News*, "as big a fiction and as phony as for an industrial-relations man in a plant to say: ‘I can’t speak for my board of directors; therefore, I can’t deal with the grievances of the workers.’"\(^{61}\)

While this militant rhetoric appealed to restive government workers and provided colorful copy in the press, it was also problematic. Wurf’s eagerness to downplay the employer side of the “public interest” distinction led him to discount the significance of taxes and taxpayers in public sector collective bargaining through most of the decade. “Availability of money is not the problem that public officials would like to have you and me believe,” he told *U.S. News* in 1966, dismissing the reporter’s objection that other fiscal priorities might compete with labor costs. “We have the most flourishing economy in the world,” he continued, “I don’t really think the average taxpayer wants to keep his taxes low by paying a hospital aide $1.25 an hour.”\(^{62}\) “Public employees will not allow their conditions of employment to be established by what is fiscally available,” he announced to the American Management Association in 1969.\(^{63}\) Appearing before the Republican Party’s Governors’ Association in late 1970, Wurf responded to pleading by Wisconsin Governor Warren Knowles about the fiscal impact of union demands by insisting that public workers had “a right to bay for the moon” and harbor “great

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\(^{61}\) “Coming: Unionized Government,” *U.S. News*, 26 September 1966, 96-99. By the early 1970s, the doctrine of sovereignty was less compelling as a framework for public sector labor relations, even among academics. In 1970, Derek Bok and John Dunlop wrote that “The appeal to sovereignty in recent years has become increasingly unacceptable as a norm by which to dispose of the problems of public employees. The cloak of sovereignty has been used to justify unilateral and sometimes inequitable decisions by government administrations.” Bok and Dunlop, *Labor and the American Community*, 322.


\(^{63}\) “Where Are We and Where Are We Going in Public Employee Bargaining? The Union View,” Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, to the American Management Association, Americana Hotel, New York, NY, 6 June 1969, Box 71, Folder 2, Jerry Wurf Collection.
aspirations.” It was not that Wurf was unconcerned with tax issues—quite the contrary, it would become central to AFSCME’s agenda long before it registered on the national radar in the late 1970s. But in the context of the unprecedented affluence of the late 1960s, Wurf saw little reason to heed a potential tax backlash as a limit on the ambitions of the public sector labor movement.

But Wurf’s most controversial stance came on the strike issue. Since the critical Boston Police Strike of 1919, the notion that government employees performed vital functions that could not be interrupted by labor actions had served as one of the principal obstacles to public sector unionization. Wurf challenged the notion on several fronts. He believed that the vital function doctrine was imprecise and unworkable. In one of his first national newspaper interviews in early April 1966, Wurf told John Herling and Neil Gilbride that society needed to distinguish between most government employee stoppages and those strikes that had a critical impact on the public—regardless of sector. “I think the criteria, if anything, should be what role do they play in our society?” he suggested, adding that any move toward restricting the right to strike risked “shaking at the basic structure of democracy.”

Five decades after the Boston Police Strike, he argued in a speech to the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 1967, the line between public and private sectors had “vanished beneath a maze of overlapping functions, parallel efforts, [and] incredibly complex relationships.” What logic was there, he asked, to prohibiting strikes for the public transit workers of one city while allowing them on the private lines of a neighboring town? More importantly, the absolute growth in government employment had created millions of positions that could not logically be cast into the same vital function category as police and firefighters. “The parks attendant is performing an important function,” he pointed out in the same speech,

64 Transcript of Wurf’s Appearance Before the GOP Governor’s Association, 14 December 1970, Box 70, Folder 17, Jerry Wurf Collection.
65 Transcript, Labor News Conference, 3 April 1966, Box 72, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection.
“but social catastrophe is not imminent in his temporary absence. That decorative secretary in a government agency is not performing differently from her sister in the private world.”  

Despite his pronounced reputation for militancy in the press, Wurf rarely endorsed strikes as a positive development. Rather, he believed that strikes reflected inadequately developed or poorly implemented labor relations machinery. In the wake of the 1966 TWU strike, for instance, Wurf appeared on NBC’s Today Show to discuss a proposal by Senator Jacob Javits (D-NY) to create a federal compulsory arbitration law, which would have empowered the president to appoint a fact-finding board and order a 30-day cooling-off to avert public sector stoppages. Acknowledging the legitimacy of public concern over the interruption of public services, Wurf warned that the measure risked ignoring the causes of public sector militancy by failing to address the absence of collective bargaining. Though he was willing to concede that some groups, notable police, firefighters, and prison guards, “should not and cannot strike” because “the clear and present danger to the community in such a situation makes the use of the strike weapon impossible,” Wurf also insisted that they be offered access to binding third-party arbitration to protect them from employer unreasonableness. Too often, though, Wurf believed that anti-strike statutes like New York’s Condon-Wadlin Act were used as substitutes for

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meaningful systems of bilateral negotiation, and thus served to cause rather than eliminate labor strife. 69 "The problem will not be banished so long as there are underpaid public employees whose grievances are unsettled and who have no adequate mechanism for redress," he warned in response to a growing anti-strike furor in the aftermath of the TWU action. 70

Yet Wurf also believed that the right to strike was essential to the collective bargaining process. "You can’t take away the right to walk out" and retain true bargaining, Wurf told the Connecticut State Labor Council in 1966, “anymore than you can repeal one of the Bill of Rights amendments and expect the rest to remain.” 71 Strikes were necessarily as a means “to force management to the table,” he told a management conference in 1970. 72 AFSCME’s Executive Board explicitly adopted the same reasoning when it declared that prohibiting strikes functioned “to nullify the free collective bargaining process.” “Where one party at the bargaining table possesses all the power and authority,” the board declared in February 1966, “bargaining becomes no more than formalized petitioning.” 73 Wurf also warned that legitimizing restrictions in the public sector would inevitable endanger the broader labor movement. “The effort to eliminate disagreement by fiat is both dictatorial and impractical,” he said in response to a wave of editorials denouncing the TWU strike in 1966. “If it is used against employees in the public service, it will most certainly be used in the hazy gray areas between the public and private

69 Many of the statutes dated from the immediate postwar era, when many states passed laws restricting or prohibiting public employee strikes in response to a wave of unrest that coincided with the return of millions of veterans and the end of the wartime wage freeze. While varying in scope and details, most of these state and local statutes both affirmed the right of government employees to associate with outside organizations (either unions or professional associations) while specifically barring support for or participation in strikes. Spero, Government as Employer, 16-43.
sectors of the economy and ultimately it will be used against all workers.” Union after union considered following AFSCME’s lead, dropping traditional restrictions on strikes from their constitutions. Industrial relations and legal experts followed, finding restriction upset the delicate balance between employee and employer at the bargaining table.

Through much of the 1960s, AFSCME balanced two competing legislative objectives—pushing for full organizing and bargaining rights, while also working to ease existing restrictions on public sector job actions. Neither proved easily achievable. As late as 1970, only 21 states offered any kind of general protection for organizing in the public sector and only 14 obliged public officials to bargain with their employees. While the legal restrictions loosened somewhat in the early 1970s, it was still rare for public sector workers to be afforded the full measure of protections extended to their private sector counterparts. More typical were statutes like the Taylor Law in New York, which recognized organizing and bargaining rights but also imposed severe punishments for violating the prohibition on strikes, including mandatory terminations for strikers and loss of representation for their unions. To Wurf, the law conveyed the appearance but not substance of genuine bargaining, raising false expectations that fostered resentment and frustration among workers. “Under the guise of extending rights to public employees,” Wurf told AFSCME’s 1970 convention, the Taylor Act and other similar laws threatened “to inhibit and destroy public employee unionism and promote company unionism.”

78 Keynote Address of President Jerry Wurf to the 18th International Convention of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Denver, CO, 4 May 1970, Box 70, Folder 16, Jerry Wurf Collection. A union editorial dismissed the proposal as “a sugar-coated Condon-Wadlinism which attempts to repress but which
Wurf demanded that public sector labor legislation have five components drawn from the private sector model. It had to be administered by a neutral body, include a statutory obligation to bargain (not simply “meet and confer”), offer binding arbitration as the terminal step in grievance procedures, provide for dispute resolution that excluded mandatory arbitration) and not bar strikes, and allow a broadly defined scope of bargaining that included wages, hours, and working conditions as well as other issues. More important than the individual provisions, perhaps, was Wurf’s emphasis on securing these rights through legislation, as opposed to executive action. He dismissed previously praised Executive Order 10988 as “deficient in its very nature, because it is determined by the boss, issued by the boss, administered by the boss, and appealable only to the boss.”

Wurf never accepted that AFSCME was a “strike happy” union—though he realized that its reputation for militancy was critical to the union’s early success. On several occasions, he went so far as to claim publicly that he “deplored” strikes; on another, he distinguished between his pursuit of the “right to strike” and his opposition to the practice. “Striking is a tactic to persuade and employer to deal with us,” Wurf insisted. “If it can be avoided. Almost any price out to be paid in order to avoid a strike.” Throughout the late 1960s, Wurf regularly argued that government workers were “conservative people” who seldom struck without exhausting all other options. This logic was built into the union’s strike policy, which declared that the right to

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81 Interview quoted in Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 184.
strike should be “exercised only under the most extreme provocation or as a final resort if an employer acts in an irresponsible manner.”

Most strikes could be prevented, Wurf believed, through the use of institutional mechanisms modeled on the private sector experience, backed by the good-faith participation of both employers and employees. Though perhaps partly an effort to insulate the legalization of bargaining rights from the public controversy of the strike issue, the stance was also consistent with Wurf’s belief that the fundamental grievance animating public workers lay in the gap between public and private sector rights. “The basic problem” Wurf told the press in 1968, was that “from the time of the passage of the National Labor Relations Act in the 1930s, public employees have been mistreated by public officials, . . . misused by virtue of the fact that they don’t have the same prerogatives and the same standards of conduct applied to them as workers in private industry.” Attempting to eliminate strikes by prohibition in government only served to deepen the double standard and reinforce the underlying grievances.

Wurf saw militancy as tactic, rather than an end, but it was central to AFSCME’s identity. “You heard me a thousand times talk about not being a supplication when you talk to your boss,” Wurf reflected to John Greenya and Richard Billings in 1973, “and you know to this day every time I talk to the workers I walk about it.” AFSCME’s appeal to the unorganized public worker, he remembered, was pitching the union as a means to “have input on your destiny.” “In contrast with the old brown-nosing, pant-climbing role that public employees have always had,” Wurf preached the power of confrontation. “If you put up a good fight it doesn’t mean a fuck if you win or lose—if you prove you can fight, the son of a bitch who gets elected

83 “Public Employee Unions: Their Rights,” 10.
84 Joseph A. McCartin has argued that oft-pronounced claim that collective bargaining would prevent strikes was at least in part a means of avoiding the strike issue. McCartin, “Unexpected Convergence,” 737-738.
“ain’t gonna fuck with you.” “Now that’s not totally true,” Wurf admitted in a private moment of transparency, “but you’d be surprised how much mileage we get out of it.”

Wurf’s public pronouncements were more muted—most of the time. Strikes and demonstrations, he confessed to U.S. News in 1966, were only effective if they were perceived as reasonable reactions to a recalcitrant employer. “If we take irresponsible positions, we lose influence with the community,” he noted, and in the same interview, he acknowledged that public relations, lobbying, and political action, rather than strikes, were “the most viable instruments in our effort to get equity from the boss.” “We know when to argue with a speech or a lawyer’s brief,” Wurf bragged to the union’s 1968 convention, “and we know that sometimes a picket line or a protest demonstration speaks louder than words.”

In pushing for the adoption of the private sector model for government labor relations, Wurf drew heavily on the same industrial pluralist framework that had been instrumental in shaping the original Wagner Act. To legal practitioners of “industrial pluralism,” in the mid-20th century, collective bargaining functioned as an institutional mechanism to reduce workplace strife by tying labor and management together in the creation of a system of self-government—one that protected both the interests of capital and the rights of workers while reducing the footprint of government intervention in any particular firm. It was a means to bring both order and stability to the often chaotic character of modern industrial relations by channeling disputes through a series of jointly-administered institutional mechanisms to reduce both strikes and the most blatant forms of workplace abuse. A self-styled student of American labor history, Wurf’s

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86 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf No. 3, Side B, John Greenya and Richards Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
88 Draft, Keynote Address to the 17th International Convention, 3 June 1968, Box 4, Folder 9, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
vision for the public sector owed much to these ideas. He genuinely believed that the goal of any labor relations system was not to eliminate discord at the workplace but rather to alleviate and adjudicate it. “Free societies . . . aim not to end conflict, but to achieve machinery which can deal with it and minimize its explosiveness,” he told a crowd of state and local government officials in 1971. “Collective bargaining is the vehicle for achieving these ends in the public sector, just as it is in the private sector.”

The controversial invocation of a broad right to strike, then, masked a very traditional justification for collective bargaining. In the context of the 1960s, the vocabulary of industrial pluralism was what was readily available to Wurf as he searched for a language to legitimize the nascent public sector movement, but it also appropriately conveyed the union’s agenda, which hinged on securing a stronger institutional foothold.

“The Dam or the Gate”


90 Wurf was conversant in the works of the old Wisconsin School, a critical component of which was to emphasize the constructive role of the trade union in mitigating disruptive disputes at the workplace. Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 6, Side A, n.d. [1973], John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories]

91 “From Confrontation to Cooperation,” 22 November 1971, Jerry Wurf Collection.
Richard Billings, with typical color. “I got up each morning and wondered if the fucking union would be alive the next week.”

While Wurf’s comments illustrate some of the anxiety that continued to pervade the union during the late 1960s, there was much cause for optimism in the union four years after Wurf’s election as national union president. While the bursts of militancy fueled an unprecedented range of organizing opportunities, AFSCME and other unions also encountered a legal landscape that was becoming somewhat more hospitable. Beginning with New York City Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr.’s Executive Order 49, a number of states and localities moved away from the traditional refusal to recognize or bargain with their employees. Wisconsin passed the first state legislation in 1959, while others followed in the early 1960s. The most famous example of the more accommodating attitude was President John F. Kennedy’s Executive Order 10988, which established a limited form of collective bargaining for some federal employees. Though the order endorsed only a narrow and limited form of organization—the American Federation of Government Employees lamented that its “constant repetition of the ‘right to refrain from joining’ may be construed to mean . . . there is still some question as to whether the employees should” and Wurf characterized it as “full of faults and shortcomings”—it lent critical legitimacy to legalized collective bargaining. It “laid the philosophical basis for trade unionism

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in the public service,” Wurf boasted at the 1966 union convention, and “means as much to public employees . . . as the Wagner Act means to workers in private industry.”

But the federal precedent would have meant little for a union of state and local government workers if not combined with a less recognized prerequisite to the spurt of public sector bargaining laws: reapportionment in state legislatures. In *Reynolds vs. Sims* (1964), the Supreme Court ruled that state legislative districts had to be approximately equal in population, prohibiting the practice of giving large, sparsely populated areas equal representation to their urban counterparts. Though Chief Justice Earl Warren specifically rejected the urban-rural dichotomy in writing the decision, noting that “Legislatures represent people, not trees or acres” and “Are elected by voters, not farms or cities or economic interests,” the effect of the decision was to dramatically increase the clout of urban voters and, by extension, to make state legislatures more responsive to the demands of cities (and their workers).

Beyond bolstering the union’s lobbying clout, reapportionment helped to open up new areas for organizing. Cities and states whose employees previously seemed beyond reach for political reasons were now worth money and manpower. In some places, the union was able to break out of urban bulwarks to organize statewide. The Pennsylvania General Assembly, for instance, underwent a modest reformation in response to the reapportionment cases in the late 1960s, which paved the way for the passage of the Public Employee Relations Act in 1970. The

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law, in turn, allowed AFSCME to move beyond its long-standing base in Philadelphia by organizing tens of thousands of state hospital and highway workers.98

These legislative achievements became tools for further organizing. Check-off systems freed union staff from the time-consuming tasks of collecting dues by hand to work on other campaigns, while the newly created certification procedures and representation elections gave AFSCME the opportunity to address rivalries and raiding from other unions.99 More importantly, legal status, however limited, lent a certain degree of legitimacy to the union as it appealed to potential members. In Rhode Island, for example, District Council 70 used a state-wide lobbying effort to win a collective bargaining law in 1966, and then used the momentum from the political campaign to launch a successful organizing drive under the banner “Operation First Class.”100 Similar strategies were employed in the mid-1960s in Delaware, Connecticut, and Michigan: in each case, a successful legislative campaign became a springboard for organizing drives.101 If AFSCME could never quite say, as the old CIO unions had, that a mayor or governor wanted city workers to join unions, it could at least frame the attitudes as a permissive indifference.

AFSCME made the most of these new opportunities. The union doubled in size between 1964 and 1970, from 230,000 members to 460,000, and by the late 1960s, the union was drawing in upwards of 1,000 members a week. The growth was so fast that AFSCME had trouble training new officers and organizers, creating pockets of local leadership that were both energized and inexperienced—an explosive combination that would lead the union into several difficult strikes late in the decade.102

98 Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 193-199.
102 Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Sector,” 70; “Coming: Unionized Government,” 96-99. During Wurf’s first two years in office, for example, the union grew by some 50,000 members—but nearly a
The union’s growth further accelerated the demographic changes that had propelled Wurf into office in 1964. As far back as the early 1950s, Wurf had expressed a vision of a blue collar-led public sector labor movement, but in most of the major interviews that Wurf did between 1965 and 1968, the first few questions tended to concern AFSCME’s relationship to either the uniformed services (police and firefighters) or teachers, what Wurf sarcastically dismissed in 1965 as “the glamour groups” of government employment. AFSCME, he insisted, was composed of “blue-collar people,” “people who work with their hands, people who perform physical services.” A few years later, on the television program *Speaking Freely*, Wurf reiterated this position, denying that AFSCME was "a white collar union” and insisting instead that it was “a very industrial kind of union,” with social workers and engineers and clerks but also sanitationmen and laborers and truck drivers. “I bet we have every trade, occupation and title in the United States in our union,” he continued. “Government employees are practically every kind of worker.”

The commitment to blue-collar workers was evident in organizing campaigns. The union’s greatest early successes came among the same sorts of blue- and gray-collar laborers that had provided the foundation of District Council 37 in New York City. As Joseph McCartin has noted, sanitation workers, not teachers or police officers, became the “militant vanguard of the public sector movement” in the 1960s—and they most frequently ended up in AFSCME. During the second half of the decade, the laborers and sanitation workers were joined by


103 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf by Robert Becroft for Capital Assignment, 2 November 1965, Box 70, Folder 13, Jerry Wurf Collection.


successful organizing drives among hospital service staff.\textsuperscript{106} By decade’s end, perhaps three-quarters of AFSCME’s membership was in blue-collar occupations—hardly the privileged bureaucrat imagined as the prototypical government employee.\textsuperscript{107}

The preoccupation with blue-collar organizing brought AFSCME into contact with an demographically diverse membership, laying the foundation for its collaboration with the Black Freedom (and, somewhat later, women’s) movements. Wurf later remarked that the narrow profile of the early union and intense focus on civil service issues meant that AFSCME “didn’t do a damn thing about the basic problems of race and indecency” through most of its first three decades.\textsuperscript{108} But as Thomas Sugrue and Francis Ryan, among others, have shown, the urban public sector was among the most promising sources of employment opportunities for African Americans and women—a 1969 survey by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found that African Americans occupied the majority, in some cases, the overwhelming majority, of general labor and service positions in a half-dozen of the nation’s largest cities, including Detroit, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Houston.\textsuperscript{109}

The evolution of AFSCME from passive support to active champion in the Black Freedom struggle went hand in hand with its expansion into these urban areas. To be sure, the relationship was not solely instrumental or pragmatic. Many of the union’s leaders, including Wurf, had long histories of personal engagement in the movement. But the discourse of

\textsuperscript{106} “N. Y. Locals Certified to Bargain for 35,000 in City’s Hospitals,” \textit{The Public Employee} 31, no. 9 (Sept., 1966): 1, 4.

\textsuperscript{107} Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf by Robert Becroft for Capital Assignment, Jerry Wurf Collection. Determining the exact demographic breakdown of the union is difficult because of the nuances of occupational coding in the public sector. According to one scholar’s survey of the union membership, the percentage of blue-collar members may have been closer to 60 percent than the 80 percent Wurf claimed. Dodd, “AFSCME, An Emerging Trade Union in the Public Sector,” 65-68.

\textsuperscript{108} Michael Honey, \textit{Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Sanitation Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign} (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 71.

empowerment built into the aggressive, militant model of unionism that AFSCME represented had a special resonance in the context of the civil rights struggle, providing the foundation for a shared commitment to lifting the lowest-paid, hardest-worked, and least-recognized employees of state and local government.¹¹⁰

In important respects, the public sector presented a uniquely hospitable climate for interracial organizing. Without a significant history of public sector strikes, unions like AFSCME harbored none of the tainted heritage of racialized strikebreaking that had hindered early industrial organizing in unions like the United Mine Workers.¹¹¹ More importantly, public sector unions were free from the poisoned complicity in discriminatory shop-floor and hiring practices that spoiled the interracial ambitions of many of the more progressive industrial unions.¹¹² Because the union had never sought, much less achieved, a closed shop, it was less accountable for the racial and gender disparities that existed in its workplaces than its private

¹¹⁰ The alliance between public sector labor unions and the social movements of the 1960s is well established, if often treated uncritically. The interpretation is set forth in its strongest terms by Stanley Aronowitz, who praised public sector unions as the “extraordinary exception” to the normal labor movement in their “exemplary” relationship with the civil rights, women’s, and peace movements. Stanley Aronowitz, From the Ashes of the Old: American Labor and America’s Future (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 35, 73. Two less nuanced examples, see Kim Moody, An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism (New York: Verso, 1988); Paul Johnston, Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1994). These accounts emphasize the divergence of the public sector and private sector unions on the issue, but understate the extent to which that difference, at least for AFSCME, was rooted in the implications of broader choices about organizing strategies and priorities.


sector counterparts. Born in part as a revolt against the shortcomings of the civil service system, the modern public sector labor movement nonetheless benefited from system’s hiring and promotion procedures. Without the need to balance racially explosive demands over work assignments and promotion procedures, AFSCME was freer to militantly advance a color-blind brand of unionism.

Organizing priorities, a discourse of empowerment at the workplace, and the unique landscape of the public sector thus came together to enable AFSCME to succeed in interracial organizing where other unions failed. By the late 1960s, African Americans constituted perhaps a third of the union’s membership, dwarfing many industrial unions at the time—including relatively progressive unions like the UAW, where African Americans constituted just 14 percent of the membership. The size and visibility of the union’s black membership, which was particularly strong in areas like New York and Philadelphia, in turn predisposed AFSCME to a greater awareness of issues of racial and, later, gender discrimination. It also helped ease the rise of key leaders like William Lucy, who joined AFSCME’s national staff in 1966, became Wurf’s Executive Assistant in 1970, and its Secretary-Treasurer in 1972—at the time, the highest ranking African American official in any major union. Lucy, along with local level staffers


like Lillian Roberts and Leonard Ball, went on to play pioneering roles in the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, which Lucy headed for the next four decades.  

The relationship between AFSCME and the civil rights movement was thus quite different from other parts of the “black-labor” coalition. As Kevin Boyle has shown, unions like the UAW enjoyed an instrumental relationship with civil rights groups—bartering financial and political resources for moral credibility. While AFSCME also offered practical support to civil rights organizations, it needed no atonement for previous sins. As a result, the alliance was more organic, a “common struggle,” as Wurf later put it, with “mutual foes and compatible objectives.” AFSCME drew energy from the civil rights and women’s movements not because it targeted African American or female workers, but rather because the workers it was already organizing came into the union energized by those other social movements and eager to challenge the traditional paternalism of public employment. AFSCME’s demand for “a fair share of power” at the workplace thus provided an overarching (and ostensibly color-blind) mechanism to incorporate particular grievances, however coded in racial or gendered terms.

The cornerstone of the alliance, as Wurf saw it, was not AFSCME’s embrace of a particular subsection of the working-class on the basis of special racial or gendered categories, but rather a militant, colorblind affirmation of a broad, underlying human dignity. “The labor movement has not done enough for minority workers . . . [and] it needs to do something very drastic,” he once quipped to a meeting of city managers: “guarantee them the same rights as others.”

118 “Labor Ignores Negro, Union Head Charges,” Milwaukee Journal, 11 October 1967. AFSCME thus diverged, at least partially, from the broader trend in post-civil rights America. As Nelson Lichtenstein has argued, “From the early 1960s onward, the most legitimate, though not necessarily the most potent, defense of American job rights
Demographics and mutual interest intersected to foster the much-cited collaboration between AFSCME and the Black Freedom movement, but there was a tension in the relationship, at least in the mid-1960s. In many ways, AFSCME’s ambition as a trade union for the public sector led the organization to downplay, not exaggerate, its social movement qualities during Wurf’s early years in office, as it focused on securing basic organizing and bargaining rights for public employees. The union lent support to both the Black Freedom movement and its various progeny—California locals, for instance, marched with Cesar Chavez’s farm workers, while the national union dutifully threw its support behind civil rights legislation and invited civil rights leaders to address its conventions—but its priorities were narrower and more institutional.119

Until the late 1960s, though, there were few signs of the broadly geared, social movement unionism that AFSCME would come to be associated with during the 1970s. Though in some sense conditioned on the blue-collar-centered strategy of organizing, the shift from institutional to social priorities was less the product of the model Wurf brought to the national union, but rather the pressure brought by hundreds of thousands of local, rank-and-file workers, nowhere more so than in Memphis, Tennessee.

The Memphis sanitation strike, like most AFSCME actions, began as a local affair. A small group of activists, led by Navy veteran and former shipyard worker T. O. Jones, began

would be found not through collective initiative, as codified in the Wagner Act and advanced by trade unions, but through an individual’s claim to his or her civil rights based on race, gender, age, or other attribute. If a new set of work rights was to be won, the decisive battle would take place, not in the union hall or across the bargaining table, but in the courts and the legislative chambers.” Nelson Lichtenstein, State of the Union: A Century of American Labor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 192. For a similar treatment, see Nancy MacLean, Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace (New York: Harvard University Press and the Russell Sage Foundation, 2006). In some sense, the argument set forth here owes more to the literature on the intersection of race and class in interracial union organizing during the late 19th and early 20th century, exemplified in David Letwin, The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921 (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

trying to organize black sanitation workers during the early 1960s. Modestly successful at the start, the early activism culminated with a disastrous defeat in 1966, when the union threatened and then quickly abandoned a strike. Incapable of forcing the city government to recognize the union, AFSCME Local 1733 survived in a marginal, powerless state for the next two years, sometimes with as few as forty dues-paying members.120

Two events in the winter of 1968 revitalized militancy among the city sanitation workers. On January 30, two dozen black workers were sent home from the sanitation yards when a storm interrupted collection, dismissed with two hours’ pay and no opportunity to make up the lost hours, while their white counterparts were allowed to remain, paid for a full day’s shift. Two days later, on February 1, two black sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death when the hydraulic ram of their aging truck malfunctioned, killing them as they sheltered in their truck during an icy-cold rainstorm. In both cases, the members of the struggling AFSCME Local 1733 blamed new mayor Henry Loeb, who had reinstated the rainy-day policy after several years of neglect and who had refused to heed the union’s warnings about the aging fleet of sanitation vehicles and its calls for foul-weather gear. Jones struggled to control the simmering resentment, while simultaneously urging the city leadership to recognize and bargain with the union. Loeb refused the union’s demands, and early on the morning of February 12, 1,100 members of Local 1733 struck the city.121

AFSCME’s national headquarters learned of the strike when a reporter from the Memphis Commercial Appeal called for a comment. Jones had hesitated to inform the national office of

120 The best treatment Memphis sanitation strike is Honey, Going Down Jericho Road. Also see Joan Turner Beifuss, At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1985). On the background to the strike, see Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 143-145; Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 73-75, 99; Billings and Greenya, Power to the Public Worker, 171-172.
121 Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 98-105; Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 147-148; “1,300 Members Participate in Memphis Garbage Strike,” The Public Employee 33, no. 2 (Feb., 1968): 3.
the increasingly dire situation, and the initial reaction of the staff was discouraging. P. J. Ciampa, an international organizer who had previously handled the Memphis local, was overhead telling Jones that he needed a strike in the city like “another hole in the head,” while Bill Lucy later admitted that Memphis was “certainly not on our agenda” as an organizing priority.122

Wurf was more than a little annoyed once he learned about the action, which seemed eerily similar to a failed strike in 1966. Badly organized and poorly timed, the Memphis action seemed far from a winning formula. “You are stupid if you have a garbage strike in January or February,” he later recalled of his initial reaction to the news. “It doesn’t stink as much as if you have it in the middle of the summer.” Still, AFSCME’s policy was to allow local organizations full autonomy in calling and ending strikes, and Wurf harbored no doubts that another failed action would kill the union in Memphis. “I didn’t call the strike, and I would have advised anybody against it,” he remembered, but once it began, the union could not back away.123

Despite his doubts, Wurf dispatched Ciampa and Lucy to Memphis, where negotiations unraveled into a spectacle of demagoguery and posturing. Initially kept in Washington on a family matter, Wurf joined the rest of the international staff on February 18. It was an eye-opening experience, for little in his life had prepared him for the complicated racial geography of Memphis. “I had read about, but never really understood, or physically encountered . . . the power structure of the white southern city,” he later admitted.124 Born to an old-line Jewish family in Memphis but educated at Phillips Andover and Brown University, Loeb hardly cut the figure of a race-baiting pol, but Wurf had no point of reference for the racial politics that

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122 Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 107. This important point is often lost in other accounts, and owes much to Loeb’s claim (made repeatedly during the strike) that AFSCME was using Memphis as an opening salvo in a broader southern organizing campaign.
123 Goulden, *Jerry Wurf*, 148. The political timing was equally bad: Because Loeb had just entered office as well, giving him a cushion of political goodwill that insulated him from the public pressure that normally built during service interruptions.
124 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 6, Side A, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
elevated Loeb in a campaign to “save the day for Dixie.” Whatever the mayor’s personal beliefs, Wurf came to believe, many of Loeb’s actions during the strike were guided by the conviction that “it was good politics to exploit these men, to treat them viciously, to fight this union.”

Loeb, in other words, was unlike any boss or elected official Wurf had ever encountered: He was accustomed to politicians quick to promise, if slow to deliver, not to those who cultivated political support by denigrating government workers. For five straight days, Wurf labored through talks brokered by the city’s clergy, but Loeb refused to consider even modest compromises, continually retreating into a defensive posture that blended legal objections with traditional old-South paternalism. By February 22, the union gave up on the mayor and shifted focus to the City Council; Wurf did not meet with Loeb again for the next six weeks.

Moving toward the City Council increased the union’s reliance on black middle-class allies, and Wurf was almost as unequipped to deal with the black community as the mayor. Previous experiences had brought him into contact with black workers, to be sure, and his activism in New York City had yielded numerous close friendships and working relationships with African American leaders, but most of them came out of a familiar liberal or social-democratic political culture. Memphis was quite different, distinguished by a palpable “anti-union strain” in the African American community that stemmed from historic clashes with the white building trades over discriminatory union practices.

Cultivating the support of the black community was vital to the success of the strike. Loeb’s intransigence, coupled with the scope of the grievances, persuaded Wurf and the other

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125 Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 152-156. As Michael Honey has pointed out, Loeb was also committed to a staunch brand of fiscal austerity was incompatible with either better pay or better working conditions for city workers, particularly low-paid, black sanitationmen. Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 99-100.
127 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, no. 6, Side a, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
national union staffers that the strike could not be won in “the usual labor-management way.” Memphis, Wurf later reflected, “was one of those situations where strategy was made by events, instead of events resulting from strategy.”

“We had to beat them by organizing the black community,” he later recalled, by making the strike part of a broader “freedom struggle.” “We made it a struggle for civil rights and dignity and not a struggle for union recognition,” he remembered on another occasion. This approach was evident in the rhetoric emanating from union leaders and in the courtship of the black middle class, but it was also a key part of the union’s strategy. At a relatively early point in the strike, Wurf decided to abandon any attempt to use picket lines to stop the city from collecting trash, a marked contrast to the approach used in other sanitation actions, particularly in Baltimore in 1974. Eschewing the traditional union tactics, Michael Honey has shown, AFSCME relied instead on the practices of the civil rights movement: mass meetings, public marches, and boycotts.

Winning the sympathy of the black community required winning the support of the ministers, no easy task for a New York-born Jew. “I brought my hand down so many times on a New Testament Bible that I must have become a Protestant,” he recalled of his frequent visits to the city’s black churches. While the NAACP and other civil rights organization lent support to the strike from an early date—Rev. Ralph Abernathy stood beside Wurf at one point and vouched that he was “a man with white skin but a black heart”—many of the local ministers initially held back. They fell behind the workers, Wurf recalled, only because of the way they were treated during the prolonged negotiations. At one point about a week and a half into the

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128 Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 147.
129 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 6, Side A, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
130 Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, n.d., Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
131 Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 254.
132 Notes, Interview with Jerry Wurf, n.d., Box 5, Folder 6, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
133 “Public Employees’ Voice,” 33.
strike, the union thought it had secured a resolution from members of the City Council in support of recognition and dues check-off, which would have put the union on a stable footing and allowed for a more traditional style of bargaining over the wages and working condition issues. Some of the ministers had helped broker the deal, and when the City Council, under pressure from Loeb, reversed itself on February 22, the ministers felt aggrieved. They were “accustomed to having a certain kind of phony courtesy” from the white power structure, Wurf later argued, and turned toward the workers only when Loeb was unwilling to deal with them.  

As union leaders were pushed to the background by the city’s relentless pursuit of anti-strike injunctions, the black ministers, free to publicly champion the workers’ cause, embraced a far more prominent role in leading the action.

Racial tensions grew hotter as the strike extended into its second and third weeks, exploding on February 23, when an impromptu march hastily organized to vent frustrations with the City Council’s reversal led to a confrontation with the city’s police force. Ciampa was maced during the chaos that followed, as was a staff director of the regional office of the U. S. Civil Rights Commission, though much of the city’s white press praised the “restraint” of the police. Loeb responded by securing a legal injunction against the strike and demonstrations, a misstep that only served to rally the African American community behind the strikers.

Thus, Michael Honey argues, the Memphis black community reached what Reverend James Lawson called a “threshold moment” in which the working and middle class connected “struggles for black freedom and economic justice” and built a genuine, organic alliance between

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135 Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 253-254. Honey also notes that their commitment was “fluctuating,” and that without the extensive staff commitment lent by the national and regional union, the strike almost certainly would have collapsed.
136 Goulden, *Jerry Wurf*, 162-164
137 “Memphis Strikers Stand Firm,” 1-4.
the labor and civil rights movement. Though the strike had begun as a self-conscious labor dispute, by the end of February, it was much broader. After a few weeks in Memphis, Wurf came to recognize that both he and AFSCME were “in the middle of a race conflict and a rights conflict” as well as a “union conflict.” It was at this point, in the face of Loeb’s persistent paternalism, that Lucy coined a phrase that would become the organizing slogan of the strike (and future southern campaigns): “I AM A MAN.”

It was in this context that Dr. Martin Luther King came to Memphis. Both the union and the local ministers had been working through James Lawson and Roy Wilkins to bring King to Memphis since the first weeks of the strike. King was initially reluctant. Previous campaigns in the city had ended in failure, and King’s own reputation had suffered somewhat from the failed attempt to “bring the movement north” to Chicago a few months earlier. He relented only after he was convinced that the strike could bolster the Poor People’s March planned for the following summer in Washington, D.C.

King’s presence proved critical. Rallies went from drawing hundreds in the community to thousands, even tens of thousands. The first King rally on March 18 went off so well that another was scheduled, but the March 28 demonstration was marred by violence. Both the black ministers and the union officials had been concerned from the start about the exuberance of the younger generation of black activists—whom Wurf dismissed as “goddamn crazy kids” toting “five dollar pistols.” For the most part, their activism remained separate from the strike, but

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138 Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 497.
139 Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 210.
140 Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 212.
141 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 6, Side A, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
142 Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 287-305.
143 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 6, Side A, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
144 Beifuss, At The River I Stand, 135.
black youths calling themselves “the Invaders” seized on King’s march as an opportunity. Their looting and vandalism drew such an overwhelming response from the Memphis police that King was forced to flee the brutality, which included the fatal shooting of a black teenager by a white policeman, sixty serious injuries, and nearly 300 arrests. Under growing pressure from other civil rights leaders as well as the nation’s press to prove that his non-violent philosophy was still viable, King promised to return to Memphis to lead another demonstration in early April.

King returned to the city on April 3, where he delivered a rousing speech to thousands of rain-soaked workers at Memphis’s Mason Temple. He spent much of the next day preparing for the April 5 march—briefly and fateful breaking to step out onto the balcony of the Lorraine Motel just after 6:00 p.m., where he was struck dead by an assassin’s bullet.

At the time, Wurf was in Washington, soliciting funds for the strike from other unions. He learned of King’s assassination when he heard a radio bulletin. His first instinct was to try to end the strike, lest it be tied to the explosive violence that he expected to follow—a fear animated by the glowing orange skies over an enflamed downtown Washington, D.C. Wurf reached out to William Welch, then an aide to Vice President Hubert Humphrey, pleading for federal intervention. “Bill, I don’t know what button I have to press,” he shouted over the telephone, at Welsh, “but goddammit, Memphis is going to burn.” Wurf then boarded the next plane to Memphis, hoping to both salvage the strike and help plan a tribute to King.

King’s death drew national attention to the local strike, and eventually proved the critical turning point in the dispute. President Lyndon Johnson, who had previously shown little

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145 Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 309-367, 400-426; Billings and Greenya, Power to the Public Worker, 183.
146 Beifuss, At The River I Stand, 306.
147 Wurf was inconsistent on whether the strike could have been won without King’s death. In the immediate aftermath of the strike, he argued that the combined pressure of the labor and civil rights movement might have ultimately forced the city to recognize the union. Transcript, Speaking Freely, 28 April 1968, Gilbert Jonas Papers. Years later, though, he told the New York Times that “the union would have gone under” if it had lost in Memphis,
interest in the strike, dispatched Undersecretary of Labor James Reynolds to Memphis to mediate. Federal pressure combined with growing concern among white Memphis businessmen that the assassination and strike might permanently damage the city’s reputation to soften the City Council’s stance, but the Reynolds-brokered talks dragged on through Easter weekend. Finally, on April 16, after sixty-five days, the union reached an agreement with the city that granted recognition, allowed for dues checkoff, guaranteed benefits and color-blind hiring and promotion, established a grievance procedure, and included an extensive non-discrimination clause.

Years after the strike, AFSCME organizer Jesse Epps reflected that Memphis was either “the dam” or “the gate”—a crucial test for organized labor in the South. There was much to this, for the victory gave momentum to organizing drives elsewhere in the South. “If we can organize in Memphis, we can organize anywhere,” Wurf boasted in an interview to the Wall Street Journal just one month after King’s death. Over the next five years, AFSCME made significant inroads into other southern cities, often featuring the same combination of black sanitation workers and civil rights unionism. The “I Am a Man” signs used in Memphis appeared in Atlanta, Washington, DC, and Baltimore during 1970. The union also carved out

and hinted that without King’s assassination, that fate was perhaps more likely. Fred C. Shapiro, “How Jerry Wurf Walks on Water,” New York Times, 11 April 1976, 78, 80.

148 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 6, Side A; Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, no. 6, Side B, John Greenya and Richard Billings Oral Histories.

149 Beifuss, At the River I Stand, 328-350; Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 483-496.

150 Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 258.


significant strongholds in Florida and Louisiana, and even made inroads into anti-union bulwarks Arkansas and North Carolina. Not all of the efforts were successful, of course. An organizing campaign produced a strike in Huntsville, Alabama that lasted some two years before it was broken, and highly publicized drives failed in Knoxville, Tennessee and Charleston, West Virginia. Still, the union was able to overcome a staunchly antiunion culture and hostile legal environment to win significant beachheads throughout the South by the early 1970s.

King’s death brought national attention to AFSCME, linking the union to the civil rights movement in the public mind. The “kinship” between the two, Wurf later reflected, became “a vital ingredient of the growth and style of our union.” The connection with the civil rights movement provided credibility in its workplace demands and organizing drives. Lawmakers, academics, and even the general public, Wurf observed in 1972, came to see “the pressure of public employee unions for bargaining as both desirable and socially constructive” precisely because it seemed to mesh with the broader demands of the civil rights movement. It also gave visibility to the union at a time when its membership was still well under 500,000 nationally, and helped to challenge popular assumptions about government employees, since pickets of black sanitationmen seemed more like exploited workers than overpaid bureaucrats. Finally, the alliance provided a moral justification for defying any-strike laws. When challenged on this issue, Wurf frequently pointed to parallels in the Black Freedom struggle. “If there are indecent

154 “Once They Join This Union, We Protect Their Rights,” 108-109.
laws that defend indecent practices,” he said of both in late 1968, “you have no choice but to involve yourself in civil disobedience.”

But in a sense, the changes brought by the strike were even more fundamental. The strike did more than any other single event to define AFSCME’s identity through the rest of the twentieth century. King died in service to the broader goal of uniting the civil rights and labor movements, a union editorial declared in the wake of the strike, and it was incumbent on AFSCME “to achieve the victory sought by Dr. King—the true brotherhood of man.” In the weeks that followed, Wurf began touting the “coalition of dignity” built in Memphis as a model for fruitful collaboration between the civil rights and labor movements in other parts of the country. In fact, one of the most significant personal legacies of the Memphis strike was to convince Wurf of the need to devote additional resources to the northern Freedom Struggle. “We didn’t see the racism that existed in New York City prior to Memphis,” he later remembered of his generation of northern liberals and social democrats, “We saw it in Mississippi and Alabama and in South Carolina.” “While I knew there were ghettos, and Harlems and shanty towns all over these United States,” he later reflected, it was only after King’s death that he realized “the bitterness and frustration, the meanness that existed” outside the South. Beginning in early 1970, AFSCME’s Executive Board instructed each council to appoint a chairman for civil rights and create a committee to study the way hiring, placement, and promotion practices affected minorities in their region, noting that the union had a moral responsibility to both its own

162 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 6, Side B, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
members as well as “those who would have been public employees except for their exclusion because of race, creed, or national origin.” The union also adopted as one of its standing legislative priorities the extension of the anti-discrimination provisions of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to state and local government.\textsuperscript{163}

In a subtle way, then, Memphis marked a key shift in Wurf’s vision of the public sector labor movement. To be sure, Wurf continued to employ the same kind of rhetoric as in the early transition years—just a few weeks after King’s death, he stood before AFSCME’s national convention and proclaimed that the organization had become “a real trade union with marrow in its bones and blood in its arteries” and, in the years that followed, he would regularly invoke the progressive advance of public sector unionism out of the “dark ages” of labor history.\textsuperscript{164} But something changed in AFSCME after 1968. When Wurf stood before the union convention in 1970, he declared “I am a Man” was both “a slogan of our time” and “the objective of this union”—embODYING the demand for dignity as well as material benefits.\textsuperscript{165} Memphis marked the fusion of militancy (strike), traditional goals (collective bargaining and the contract), and a social movement spirit that looked beyond the union to society-at-large.

\textit{“On the Front Lines of Unionism”}

On the back of its tremendous growth and the publicity attached to the Memphis strike, AFSCME became the “hot” union in the labor movement, attractive to the kind of capable and

\textsuperscript{164} Draft, Keynote Address to the 17\textsuperscript{th} International Convention, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers; “Revolution in the Public Sector,” Speech by Jerry Wurf to the American Psychiatric Association, Philadelphia, PA, 22 September 1970, Box 70, Folder 18, Jerry Wurf Collection; Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Jerry Wurf for a Panel Before the Conference of National Organizations, Miami Beach, FL, 5 November 1970, Box 70, Folder 16, Jerry Wurf Collection.
\textsuperscript{165} Keynote Address to the 18\textsuperscript{th} International Convention.
idealistic staffers who had previously committed themselves to unions like the UAW. Even *Fortune* magazine, hardly a sympathetic organ, admitted that AFSCME’s had “an exuberant atmosphere reminiscent of the C.I.O. organizing drives of the Thirties.” There was, the magazine noted, “an élan to the organization, an air of bustle and excitement, a sense of great plans underfoot, and an evangelical zeal that one rarely encounters these days in the stately mansions of Big Labor.”

This spirit was evident at the union’s 1968 annual convention. Given the events of recent months, Wurf’s bravado was a striking. Four years after winning office, Wurf proclaimed AFSCME in “the very front rank of American labor,” poised to secure unparalleled membership gains and unprecedented material improvements. “To those of us old timers who can remember all too well the dark, gray days of stagnation,” he boasted, “the dynamic record of this union in the past four years is a matter of wonder, and amazement, and pride.” Despite the sometimes-visceral opposition of public officials, Wurf continued, AFSCME had revolutionized the public sector labor landscape, and, by extension the broader labor movement. “The record show’s we’re on the move,” he bragged, “on the front lines of unionism.”

There was substantial reason for optimism. The union jumped to over 400,000 members in 1968, and continued to grow thereafter, topping 470,000 by mid-1970—a 2,000+ member a week growth rate that made AFSCME the fastest-growing organization in the labor movement. More importantly, the union continued to make significant progress in formalizing its bargaining position, with more than 1,100 contracts on file at the start of 1970—two-thirds of which were first-contract agreements. Despite the public attention devoted to high-profile job actions,

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166 Goulden, *Jerry Wurf*, 111.
168 Keynote Address to the 17th International Convention, 3 June 1968.
Wurf noted in a 1969 address, the overwhelming majority of the contracts (as high as 98.7 percent in states with formal procedures) were reached without resort to strikes.\(^{170}\) The improved legal position allowed AFSCME to begin pressing for union security provisions in its contracts, headlined by two key early victories in Detroit and Philadelphia.\(^{171}\) *Monthly Labor Review*, which had profiled the union in mid-1962, characterized it six years later as a militant-but-stable force, free from both the financial and factional burdens of the earlier era and with a clearer identity and agenda for the future.\(^{172}\)

The excitement and success of the late 1960s nonetheless masked weaknesses in the union that were not readily apparent to outsiders. In the aftermath of the Memphis strike, Wurf asked a recently hired staffer named Fred Jordan to conduct a confidential survey of the union. Jordan interviewed both national staff and local union officials, and concluded that national office was almost wholly disconnected from state and local affairs. He placed part of the blame on Wurf’s “one-man-band style” for the lack of a clear direction. Staff meetings, he warned, tended to descend into “Wurfian monologues which, though interesting, yielded very little information about policy or events or organization.” One staffer confessed that he regularly engaged in a sort of amateur psychoanalysis of his president: “I try to dope out what’s on his mind or how he will react to a given situation by asking myself how an old Socialist would react.”\(^{173}\)

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\(^{170}\) “We Are We and Where Are We Going in Public Employee Bargaining? The Union View,” Address by Jerry Wurf, President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, to the American Management Association, Americana Hotel, New York, NY, 6 June 1969, Box 71, Folder 2, Jerry Wurf Collection; Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Jerry Wurf, International President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, for a Panel Before the Conference of National Organizations, Miami Beach, FL, 5 November 1970, Box 70, Folder 16, Jerry Wurf Collection.


\(^{173}\) “Confidential Communications Study,” Memorandum from Fred Jordan to Jerry Wurf, 1 December 1969, Box 82, Folder 52, Jerry Wurf Collection.
Wurf had never been a strong administrator—Victor Gotbaum, a former ally and future rival, called him “a sheer unadulterated disaster”—but AFSCME’s rapid growth compounded his weakness.174 This was the case even when Wurf was present at the D.C. office, which was increasingly rare in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as he ventured out to speak to a diverse range of audiences and forums on behalf of public sector unionism. Whenever a significant strike broke, too, Wurf insisted on going in person. “He couldn’t follow the one piece of advice I had always given him,” Gotbaum later recalled, that “he had to learn to delegate authority.”175

The model made it difficult for the union to keep qualified national staff. AFSCME had among the highest turnover rates in the labor movement, in part because Wurf was quick to fire underlings (a temperamental characteristic underscored by the subtitle to Joseph Goulden’s biography, Labor’s Last Angry Man). Jordan calculated that no less than twenty top-tier staffers came and left the union during Wurf’s first five years in office—and confessed that “Many people reacted to the news that I joined your staff with smiling references to my hopes for longevity.”176 Wurf valued flexibility among his staff, which did not mesh well with his inability to delegate. William Hamilton, one of Wurf’s longest-serving deputies, recalled his resentment of subordinates’ efforts to show initiative, even when he promised them autonomy. During the early 1970s, Wurf convinced high-profile staffers like William Welsh and Jack Conway to join the national union by promising both “carte blanche” over broad areas of policymaking, only to regularly interject himself once they were there. “Strong men would not take this for long,” Hamilton recalled, “Jerry would hire people, give them authority, and then not let them use it.” Wurf had “a knack for falling in and out of love easily,” Hamilton added, bringing in “young,

175 Transcript and Notes, Interview with Victor Gotbaum, 19 January 1982, Joseph Goulden Collection.
176 “Confidential Communications Study,” Jerry Wurf Papers.
non-Jewish men, preferably from place other than New York,” who he leaned on heavily for a
time, only to “discard” them on a whim.177 Al Bilik initially resisted joining Wurf in D.C.
because of concerns about his difficult temperament, and returned to Ohio after “a very
disappointing experience” in AFSCME’s national office.178 Boer later reflected that Wurf’s
problem was simple: “[he] antagonized his friends and did no pacify his enemies.”179

But most of these problems remained beyond the public view. More obvious, and to
Jordan more troublesome, was that despite its growing size and profile, AFSCME was still
underdeveloped as a force within the labor movement. It had no coherent broader agenda, despite
its reputation as a progressive union and its identification with the civil rights movement. “We
are carried along right now on a great tide of growth,” Jordan concluded in 1969. “Our goals,
priorities, and thrust have, to a great extent, been imposed upon us by . . . the great growth in
public employment and the need to catch that segment of American working people up to
acceptable standards.” But AFSCME had yet to articulate the “goals for the uses of the power
which growth grants—within the union, within the labor movement, and in the country.”180

This pressing need to develop a strategy that was up to the moment was, perhaps, the
most important legacy of Memphis. Jack Conway once noted that unions served three
overlapping functions in American society: as bargaining representatives in a particular
workplace, as moral spokesmen for the broader community of wage earners, and as a political
interest group.181 Tried and tested in the worst of circumstances, the union had come out of the

177 Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, 31 December 1981, Folder 2, Joseph Goulden
Collection.
178 Letter from Al Bilik to Victor Gotbaum, 9 November 1969, Box 4, Folder 37, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
179 Notes, Interview with John Boer, 22 September 1981, Box 4, Folder 38, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
180 “Confidential Communications Study,” Jerry Wurf Papers.
Memphis strike a stronger bargaining agent than before, imbued with the moral credibility of the civil rights movement, and liberated to pursue a broader political agenda.
On May 23, 1970, Jerry Wurf traveled to Detroit to deliver the commencement address to the graduating class of Wayne State University. The venue was somber, for just two weeks earlier a plane crash had claimed the life of Walter Reuther, and more than any other educational institution, Wayne State had served as a training ground for the organizers and officers of the United Auto Workers. The topic of the address, given added import by the loss of the country’s most recognizable labor leader, was “The Trade Union and Social Responsibility.” Reuther, Wurf reminded the graduates, believed that a union needed to demand “something more than more”—that it “had more to do than to bargain an extra nickel or dime an hour,” that it had to embrace the “social responsibility inherent in being a worker.” Heir to a radical tradition that stretched to the 19th century and included such luminaries as Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas, Reuther's unique contribution, Wurf continued, was his ability to pair his capacity as a “social dreamer” with practical innovation at the bargaining table, a combination that made the UAW “perhaps the greatest and most effective trade union in the world” in its heyday. His death, Wurf conceded, left “A vacuum of responsibility . . . [and] power” that would need to be filled if labor was to sustain Reuther's example and "bring home not merely bread but a whole new way of life.”

1 “The Trade Union and Social Responsibility,” Address by Jerry Wurf, International President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, to the Graduate Class of the Labor College, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, 23 May 1970, Box 9, Folder 27, Chapman / Ames—AFSCME Office of the Secretary Treasurer, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Chapman-Ames Collection].
A few months after the Wayne State speech, Wurf coauthored an article with syndicated columnist Victor Riesel. Wurf began his portion of the piece by proclaiming the 1970s as “the decade of the public worker”—predicting that inequitable wages and working conditions, arbitrary treatment at the workplace, and a general spirit of militancy would fuel an unprecedented unionization in federal, state, and local governments. He boasted that AFSCME would draw in 2,000 members a week by the end of the year, and boldly predicted that as many as nine million public workers could soon be unionized. Implicit in the column was the premise that public sector unions like AFSCME were poised, as he put it more explicitly a few years earlier, to "take a leadership role in the trade union movement the way industrial unions did 30 years ago."

Taken together, these two statements suggest the scope and content of AFSCME’s growing ambitions in the 1970s. With Reuther’s death, Wurf became the most vocal outsider within the AFL-CIO. Drawing on AFSCME’s impressive organizing record, Wurf articulated a vision for labor in American life that drew from the same social democratic roots as Reuther’s, but was, in important ways, even more ambitious. Like the earlier revolution in industrial unionism, Wurf hoped the growth of public sector labor unions would spur structural changes in the labor movement, provoke new waves of union organizing, and inspire a more expansive commitment to political action. But he also believed that it would provide the foundation for a broader reorganization of American political society—headlined by an expanded and improved public sector. The 1970s, Wurf later declared, was “the age of public service in America,” so it

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necessarily had to be “the age of public service unionism” and the “age of the public service worker in America” as well.⁴

Wurf saw AFSCME as the vanguard for this new agenda. As future union president Gerald McEntee later recalled, Wurf moved from the core belief that unions "represented workers more than eight hours a day," that in addition to representing them at the workplace, unions had a responsibility to aid their members "as they struggled for change in their communities and in the political arena."⁵ Embracing a brand of “civic unionism” similar to what historians like Robert Korstad have analyzed in the context of the 1930s and 1940s, AFSCME cast its political resources both widely and deeply, on issues as diverse as civil rights, public housing and education, foreign policy, and military spending.⁶ But AFSCME’s primary focus was those areas where its institutional concerns overlapped with a broader social democratic impulse—welfare, healthcare, and social services. In so doing, AFSCME reinvigorated a statist brand of American liberalism and extended the social democratic strand of the American labor movement well into the early 1970s.⁷

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But Wurf also believed that this broader agenda could only be achieved through a reformed labor movement, specifically one that recognized both the potential power and unique concerns of the public sector. Beginning with his appointment to the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO in 1969, Wurf worked to bolster the prestige of public sector unions and bridge divisions with non-union employee associations like the National Education Association (NEA), hoping to inspire a greater commitment to union organizing and make the labor movement more responsive to the needs of non-members. He offered audacious proposals to restructure the AFL-CIO to address jurisdictional rivalries and refocus its energy on organizing new members. When that failed, he turned to the creation of an autonomous department for public sector unions, which he hoped would provide an instructive model for the new labor movement—committed equally to militancy at the workplace and a more ambitious political agenda.

Wurf found little support for his ambitious, transformative agenda within the AFL-CIO, and by the mid-1970s, the union increasingly relied on alliances outside the House of Labor to push its case. Yielding some promising initial results, the efforts nonetheless left AFSCME isolated, while the ambivalence exhibited by many in the AFL-CIO to AFSCME’s efforts to expand the social service state foreshadowed deeper troubles for public sector unions.

“A Force for Decency and Justice”

During one of their first conversations in late 1971, William Hamilton later recalled, Wurf announced that “his dream was to build a union that accumulated . . . and used power for
liberal purposes.” It was, Hamilton remembered, “a spiel I was to hear him ad lib a thousand times, and which I was to write for him a thousand times, over the next ten years.”

The notion that AFSCME had a broader social purpose was central to the union’s identity and operations after 1968. While the union continued to press direct, institutional concerns—particularly, the expansion of public sector bargaining rights—Wurf believed that the public sector labor movement had reached a critical stage in its development wherein its basic legitimacy would no longer be questioned. "The experimental and revolutionary phase of public employee unionism is over," Wurf told a forum on state and local government employment in 1971. “While I had a lot more fun waving my fist at public employers,” he continued, “I am getting a lot more satisfaction moving our union from confrontation to meaningful efforts at mutual problem-solving.”

With its basic institutional security established, Wurf reasoned, AFSCME was free to turn its considerable resources toward broader ends, a shift first evident at the union’s 1970 convention. Returning to Denver, Colorado, where he had won election as union president six years earlier, Wurf delivered what was probably the most social democratic of his convention addresses to a hall decorated by the images of the slain liberal icons of the 1960s—Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, and Robert F. Kennedy. Public workers, he argued, were “summoned as participants in the constant struggle of the haves’ versus the have-not’s” and called “to accumulate power in the cause of the powerless.” The union would wage “an unrelenting war . . . against any form of discrimination,” embracing integration as “a pragmatic ideal” and “powerful

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9 “From Confrontation to Cooperation,” Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees to the Secretary of Labor’s Conference on State and Local Government Relations, 22 November 1971, Box 70, Folder 20, Jerry Wurf Collection.
force for social justice.” The agenda was militantly liberal, not radical, seeking “power within the system to make the system work for the deprived.” Casting the union’s jurisdiction in unprecedentedly expansive terms—including not just government employees, but non-profit workers as well—Wurf called on AFSCME to play a leading role in uniting public sector unions to “see to it that the power of public employees is brought to bear wherever such power is needed, whether it be a school board in a rural community, the work force of a large municipality, or the employees of all of the fifty states.” The objective, he concluded, quoting Kennedy’s inaugural address, was nothing less than “the struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.”

The two objectives—broadening the AFSCME’s political agenda and increasing the strength and visibility of organized government employees—were intimately related, reflecting Wurf’s belief that public sector unions had a critical role to play in late twentieth century society. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, Wurf regularly likened the growth of public sector unions to the explosive rise of the CIO in the 1930s, suggesting that unions like AFSCME had an similar mission to revitalize the labor movement and broaden its agenda. Yet through most of the early 1970s, AFSCME lacked the stature and influence necessary to successfully challenge the entrenched practices that stood in the way of these grandiose ambitions. Though union density in the private sector had peaked in the mid-1950s, the building trades and old industrial unions continued to dominate the AFL-CIO, leaving the labor movement ill-positioned to engage the growing ranks of white-collar, service-sector, and professional employees. Despite AFSCME’s impressive record of growth in the 1960s—the union doubled in size between 1964 to 1970—and the visibility lent to the national union by the Memphis sanitation strike of 1968, Wurf was

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10 Keynote Address of President Jerry Wurf to the 18th International Convention of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Denver, Colorado, 4 May 1970, Box 70, Folder 16, Jerry Wurf Collection.
kept off the AFL-CIO Executive Council until late 1969. Privately, AFL-CIO president George Meany confided that he feared Wurf’s appointment would alienate other unions by making AFSCME the defacto leader of the nation’s public sector organizations—or at least Wurf later claimed. When Wurf was finally added to the Council in October 1969, it was with six other new members, including John F. Griner, head of the much smaller American Federation of Government Employees. At a time when AFSCME was the fastest-growing union in the United States, Wurf became the junior-most member of the labor movement’s unofficial governing body.

In part, Meany’s delay in elevating Wurf reflected deeper tensions within the labor movement over the growing size and power of public sector labor unions. Wurf had always found Meany to be a bit uneasy about the unionization of government employees. Shortly after the merger in 1955, Meany announced his opposition to the nationalization of key industries by stating that he believed that it was “impossible to bargain collectively with government.”

Though the statement was essentially an innocuous reiteration of a long-standing Federation position, it struck Wurf as an anachronistic throwback to an earlier era of ambivalence, and as biographer Joseph Goulden notes, it did much to shape their subsequent relationship. Though Meany came to accept the basic legitimacy of public sector collective bargaining, Wurf continued to believe that the AFL-CIO’s aging chief regarded AFSCME as the “bastard child” of

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13 Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, October 7, 1969, Traymore Hotel, Atlantic City, New Jersey, RG4, Executive Council Minutes, George Meany Memorial Archives, National Labor College, Silver Spring, MD [AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes]. The expansion came as the result of the work of a Council subcommittee, which argued that the additional seats were necessary to “recognize new areas of real or potential growth and [their] significance in the development of trade unionism, and to extend to a wider segment of the leadership of affiliated unions the opportunity for greater service to the membership of the labor movement at large.” Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, May 14-15, 1969, AFL-CIO Building, Washington, DC, AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes.
the labor movement—chronically broke, not particularly powerful, and, at least until the mid-1960s, devoted to a foreign brand of civil service unionism. As late as January 1971, Wurf complained to an AFL-CIO state legislative conference in Indiana that public employees were often treated as “orphans” by the broader labor movement.16

But Wurf’s rise was also slowed by the tricky politics of the Vietnam War. Given his penchant for outspokenness, it is quite remarkable that Wurf managed to keep quiet on the issue until 1969. In part, silence was simply the price Wurf had to pay to get Meany’s assent to sit on the Executive Council. “I came to it late,” he later recalled in a moment of reflection, and “I’m not sure that my silence on it wasn’t associated with my desire to sit at that big table.”17 Wurf actually went so far as to travel to London in 1967 to deliver remarks to the British Trade Union Congress defending the war, claiming that despite the “enormous intellectual confusion” surrounding the war, it was clear that “to do less than help defend the freedom of South Vietnam is to be contemptuous of the freedom of all men.”18 The line, a press clipping noted, was greeted by “a burst of derisory laughter from the delegates,” which Wurf responded to by candidly admitting that he was “merely reading a speech prepared for me before hand”—a rebuttal that brought “laughter, cheers and applause from the delegates who always admire a good loser.”19

16 Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 184-187; Walter Hayden, “President Jerry Wurf - AFSCME - Reports on Public Employees Collective Bargaining,” Indianapolis News & Views, January 1971, Box 39, Folder 35, Jerry Wurf Collection. For these reasons, Meany had never acquiesced to Arnold Zander’s selection to the Executive Council during the 1950s, despite AFSCME’s moderate size and Zander’s long tenure in the labor movement.


18 Address by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO Fraternal Delegate to British Trades Union Congress, September 1967, Box 71, Folder 8, Jerry Wurf Collection. Wurf’s remarks were forwarded to him by the AFL-CIO in advance of the trip. Letter from George Meany to Jerry Wurf, 2 August 1967, Box 47, Folder 14, Jerry Wurf Collection.

Despite the improvisation, Wurf’s performance in London drew praise from both the U.S. Embassy and the White House, including a personal note from President Lyndon Johnson.\textsuperscript{20}

Wurf kept whatever doubts he had about the war to himself through most of the decade. Though he never again went on record supporting the war, he prevented AFSCME from opposing it, scuttling antiwar resolutions at AFSCME’s 1966 convention, persuading the leadership of District Council 37 to withdraw another, and generally keeping the matter off of the union’s agenda and out of its newspaper.\textsuperscript{21} While there was a certain degree of opportunism involved in Wurf’s half-decade long silence, it was not a simple issue for him. Like many former socialists, Wurf harbored a special animosity against the Communist Party both at home and abroad and, as Maurice Isserman and Steven Gillon have shown, his ambiguity was typical of a certain segment of left-leaning American liberals, who tended to cast the war in terms of tragedy rather than directly denounce it.\textsuperscript{22} Organizations like Negotiations Now!, which Wurf later joined, tried to reconcile opposition to the Communist regime with opposition to the war. Americans for Democratic Action struggled to find a response for two years, creating divisions that nearly killed the organization between 1966 and 1968.\textsuperscript{23} It took Walter Reuther years to break from the Johnson administration on the war, a delay that drew ire from New Left critics who deemed it another sign of labor’s “corporate liberal” orientation.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{20} Letter from Thomas R. Byne, Labor Attache, U.S. Embassy, to George Meany, 19 September 1967, Box 47, Folder 14, Jerry Wurf Collection; Letter from Lyndon B. Johnson to Jerry Wurf, 2 October 1967, Box 7, Folder 5, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
\textsuperscript{21} Goulden, \textit{Jerry Wurf}, 187-190.
\textsuperscript{22} Maurice Isserman, \textit{The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington} (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 269.
Wurf’s biographer, Joseph Goulden, has suggested that Wurf’s silence of the war issue stemmed from a desire to secure Meany’s support for the Executive Council appointment—an interpretation born out by the timing and manner of Wurf’s announcement of his opposition. Wurf used a District Council 37 leadership meeting in June 1969 to call for total and immediate withdrawal of all American forces—then ensured that the comments were reprinted in a local union newspaper. The move came just days after the leadership of the UAW and Teamsters, both temporarily outside the labor federation, had met in Washington to form the Alliance for Labor Action, and while Wurf exhibited little enthusiasm toward the new body (the Teamsters were a long-standing rival, while the UAW showed minimal interest in public sector labor issues), the timing of Wurf’s announcement seemed to suggest that he was considering defection. The threat was enough to force Meany’s hand—Wurf’s elevation to the Executive Council came just a few months later.25

But once liberated from his self-imposed silence, Wurf emerged as one of the labor movement’s more articulate voices on Vietnam. Addressing an antiwar rally in June 1971, for example, Wurf expressed his “personal anguish” at the picture of “this well-meaning nation spilling its blood, its treasure, and its proclaimed standards of decency and justice all over the battlefields of Indochina,” wasting resources in a “fruitless war” that were needed at home and “sapping the moral strength of a nation which has always stood for justice, freedom, peace, and the expansion of human values.” Wurf continued:

We Americans are accustomed to thinking that our wars are not military adventures; that our government is capable of war only when the cause is just. Those who make these decisions could not be sending our children 12,000 miles to die in a futile, meaningless cause. But the rhetoric of government, the self-delusion of leaders, the arrogance of power took this myth and surrounded it with clichés like the domino theory, the Red menace, freedom, justice, Communist China overrunning Asia. You name it. They said it.

Wurf went on to make the case for working-class opposition to the war, noting that the $80-million-a-day cost had both spurred inflation and spun the country into recession, “an incredible national economic price . . . that we are only beginning to see in its entirety.”

Wurf went beyond the generic “guns or butter” dichotomy of the decade by specifically highlighting the danger posed to state and local government finances and services. In a stock speech delivered with only minor deviations to union audiences, business groups, and antiwar rallies, Wurf warned that the war’s “stranglehold on the financial resources of America” had three critical effects on state and local government that often went unnoticed in public debates. First, war-driven inflation increased the costs of public services and municipal borrowing, forcing city governments to demand additional revenues from increasingly anxious taxpayers in order to sustain existing services. Second, the war pulled funds from domestic priorities, pulling potential money away from federal aid to state and local governments and siphoning off the political will to address urban problems. Third, the war fostered political turmoil at home, exacerbated social tensions, and destroyed family life—all of which increased reliance on the same social services that were suffering from the war’s other effects.

Under Wurf’s leadership, AFSCME became one of the first national unions to formally call for the complete withdrawal of American troops in May 1970. Wurf repeatedly tried to block

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26 “Working People Want Out Now, Too,” Remarks prepared for delivery by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees before the Convocation of Americans to End the War, Statler-Hilton Hotel, Washington, DC, 8 June 1971, Box 70, Folder 20, Jerry Wurf Collection.
resolutions of support within the AFL-CIO Executive Council—he cast the lone dissenting vote against a resolution in support of Nixon’s incursion into Cambodia during his first Executive Council meeting. He tried to rally labor opposition to the war at a one-day conference on jobs and economy in July 1971, pleading that “the draft in the economy” was caused by “the massive national effort to prime the war pump in Indochina rather than . . . the construction pump in Cleveland, Chicago, and elsewhere here at home.”

He was a chief sponsor of the Labor for Peace conference in St. Louis in May 1972, a two-day gathering of union officials opposed to the war, and helped to organize a National Peace Action protest to coincide with Nixon’s second inauguration in January 1973. The union conducted polls of public attitudes to build support for the antiwar cause, sponsored newspaper ads criticizing the war effort and military spending, and lent its lobbying resources to legislative efforts to cut off funding for the conflict. It used its vast network of political operations to press the material case and rally political pressure on the state and local level, circulating memoranda and talking-points that emphasized the implications of the Nixon administration’s $270 billion dollar military budget for social spending programs.

Once Wurf publicly declared himself against the war, he found in that opposition an outlet for an unvarnished social democracy. He wondered aloud during his address to the union’s 1970 convention how the county could “continue year after year to give an enormous commitment of dollars and lives to a war in Southeast Asia, but can give only rhetorical

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commitment to halting the death of our cities, the rape of our environment, and the spiritual malaise of our people.”

Coming just a few weeks after the country was captivated by the plight of the Apollo 13 astronauts, Wurf expressed confusion as to why the “American know-how” deployed with such effect in “conquering space . . . [and] building the biggest and fastest jet airplane” couldn’t be “turned earthward to those Americans who can no longer afford medical care and essential education . . . who breathe polluted air and must forego swimming on oil-soaked beaches . . . who go to bed hungry in rat-infested, bug-ridden rooms that pass for housing in this country.”

In a speech to a management conference on collective bargaining a few months later, he suggested “the upheavals and skirmishes in our urban centers make Vietnam look like a place where mayors could go for rest and recreation.”

Wurf envisioned AFSCME as a national lobby for a revitalized and reorganized public sector—the counterpart to military contractors, corporate farm interests, and other similarly established mechanisms for soliciting federal funds. Rooted in institutional concerns (public employees suffered when cash-strapped state and local governments took a harder line), Wurf emerged in the early 1970s as a fierce advocate for the social benefits of government. “The need for ever greater and more costly services,” he told a House congressional committee in late 1971, “is one price we pay for attempting to improve the quality of life in our increasingly urbanized society.” Fire and police protection, sanitation and transportation services, adequate healthcare

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32 Keynote Address to the 18th International Convention, 4 May 1970, Jerry Wurf Collection.
33 Keynote Address to the 18th International Convention, 4 May 1970, Jerry Wurf Collection.
and welfare services, strong public education were not “frivolities,” he argued, but “basic essentials of living.”  

Wurf shared none of the confidence felt by a growing number of contemporary liberals about the capacity of the private sector to meet social demands. He openly touted the notion of a “public profit,” arguing before a forum on state and local government relations in 1971 that “dollars invested in public services produce a profit for the citizens of the community” that could not be achieved through private enterprise. “There is profit in rational and accessible transportation, . . . good health care, well-educated citizens, safe streets and homes, [and] recreation,” he continued in the same address. “We need to begin viewing public services as an objective in its own right, rather than as a substitute or subsidizer for the private sector.” Wurf would return to the basic argument repeatedly throughout the decade, concluding a 1975 address at Georgia State University with a defiant defense of government and its employees:

Public employees spend their working lives teaching the young, healing the sick, and protecting our health and safety, our air and water. There is no honest way for businessmen to make a private profit performing these services. But there is public profit in providing the service that keep our communities livable. To build success into public service—to reap this public profit—public employees must enjoy the dignity that is the entitlement of all American workers.

AFSCME’s social service agenda was less a coherent program than a consistent set of principles injected into a wide range of legislative contests. At base, what AFSCME pursued during the early 1970s was a federally funded, federally regulated, but locally administered social service state. Wurf defended the landmarks achievements of the Great Society—Medicare, Medicaid, federal funding of education, and a host of others—as “legitimate, visible, and

36 “From Confrontation to Cooperation,” Jerry Wurf Collection. 
37 “Public Unions in the South in the 1970s,” Remarks by Jerry Wurf, President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees at the Meeting of the American Society for Public Administration, Georgia Chapter, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, 20 November 1975, Box 69, Folder 22, Jerry Wurf Collection.
concrete actions by the people’s government to serve the people’s needs,” but criticized their construction and execution.\(^{38}\) The fundamental problem in American social policy, he argued, was the structural disconnect between the demand for public services and the funding available to support them. "In essence," Wurf told the union's 1970 convention, "the problems are in the city and the resources are in the suburbs." It was the federal government, with its expansive taxing power and broadest base, which had the power to efficiently draw money from the wealthiest enclaves and direct it to those most in need. “We must carry on a hard, unending campaign on behalf of federal aid to the cities,” Wurf announced, “not only to meet the needs of our membership, but to meet the needs of America.”\(^{39}\) “We’ve locked out cities in a tax cage and stood by as they deteriorated into islands of poverty, deprivation, and social shame, plunging from one fiscal crisis to another,” he said on another occasion.\(^{40}\) The United States, Wurf became fond of saying as the decade went on, needed “a New Deal for the cities”—one which went beyond general, macroeconomic commercial Keynesianism typical of mid-century policy approaches and instead consisted of federally funded, locally targeted combinations of fiscal relief, countercyclical aid, general revenue-sharing, and wide-ranging tax reform.\(^{41}\) As early as 1966, AFSCME had called on Congress to enact programs specifically designed to halt the decline of urban centers, arguing that the traditional focus on “physical, economic and social improvements” had to be joined with a public sector jobs program to address urban


\(^{39}\) Keynote Address to the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) International Convention, Jerry Wurf Collection.

\(^{40}\) “Jobs for the Jobless, Help for the Cities,” 12 July 1971, Jerry Wurf Collection.

\(^{41}\) “Where Does Government Go From Here?,” Address by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Before a Symposium on “The Future of Democratic Capitalism,” L’Enfant Plaza Hotel, Washington, DC, 5 May 1976, Box 70, Folder 26, Jerry Wurf Collection. Wurf was not unique in invoking the language and examples of the 1930s as recipes for reform in the 1970s; Walter Reuther cast the Model Cities program as an “urban TVA.” Boyle, The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 192, while the AFL-CIO criticized the Johnson administration’s failure to push a “New Dealish” program of public works. Robert H. Zieger and Gilbert J. Gall, American Workers, American Unions (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 232.
unemployment, while the union called for long-term public sector planning in early 1968 to address the “root problem” of eroding urban tax bases that could not meet the needs for urban public services.\textsuperscript{42}

In pursuing this agenda, AFSCME was both reinvigorating traditional staples of postwar liberalism and moving beyond them at a critical juncture in the history of American social policy. The end of the three decade-long postwar economic boom coincided with (and, in fact, encouraged) a growing skepticism toward the technocratic professionalism of the New Frontier and Great Society. From George Wallace's indictment of briefcase-toting bureaucrats to the more wonkish discussions of "delivery problems" and "performance gaps," both conservatives and liberals called into question the strategies central to the New Deal and Great Society.\textsuperscript{43} While many of the subsequent efforts to overhaul federal social policy were associated with the Right, liberals also proved willing to question the federally-funded, service-oriented approaches. Robert F. Kennedy distanced himself from the initiatives of his brother's New Frontier while on the campaign trail in 1968, while prominent liberals like Walter Heller endorsed efforts to shift resources and policymaking to the local and state level through federal revenue sharing.\textsuperscript{44} Few were as eloquent or explicit as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, sub-cabinet official in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations (and later to serve under Republican Richard Nixon), who called for a key shift from the “services strategy” to an “income strategy” in social policymaking.

\textsuperscript{44}Walter W. Heller, \textit{New Dimensions of Political Economy} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); Nathan, \textit{The Plot That Failed}, 15. Heller’s proposal was criticized by liberals like Leon Keyserling, who argued that the “no strings” approach would not lead to less political opposition on social spending (Heller’s political claim) nor to a more efficient allocation of resources (predicting, instead, “excessive dispersion of responsibility, cross purposes and waste.” Leon H. Keyserling, “Sharing Revenue with the States,” \textit{New Republic}, 25 March 1967, 14-18
Though it did not feature prominently in the 1968 presidential contest, Nixon shared much of the skepticism toward federal social policy, lamenting—in a rare campaign trail comment on the issue—that "too many decisions that would better have been made in Seattle or St. Louis have wound up on the President's desk."\textsuperscript{45} During the transition, the administration established a taskforce to consider alternative approaches to welfare, but it was not until mid-1969 that Nixon unveiled what would become his signature set of domestic policy initiatives—collectively, the "New Federalism." Richard Nathan, a key early adviser later recalled, the plan was simply designed "to sort out and rearrange responsibilities among the various levels and types of government," to decentralize many programs deemed local in nature (education, social services for the poor, community development, healthcare, law enforcement) and bring matters of national concern (income maintenance and environmental regulation) under tighter federal control. While the initiative included a range of administrative and managerial reforms, its two cornerstones were a system of federal revenue sharing that rebated a portion of income tax receipts to states and localities and a massive reform of the federal welfare system.\textsuperscript{46}

While AFSCME generally opposed the Nixon plans, the union seized on them as an opportunity to rework federal social policy toward its own preferred system.\textsuperscript{47} Wurf appeared before House and Senate committees some two dozen times during the Nixon and Ford administrations, dispatching senior union officials to testify on countless other occasions. Much

\textsuperscript{45} Nixon quoted in, Nathan, \textit{The Plot That Failed}, 13-14.
\textsuperscript{47} For instance, Rick Perlstein has argued that Nixon was largely indifferent towards domestic policymaking, except insofar as that process has a clear political angle (e.g., busing to achieve school integration). Perlstein, \textit{Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America} (New York: Scribner, 2008), 393. Bruce Schulman, in contrast, casts Nixon as an ideological conservative who nonetheless pursued some liberal programs out of sheer opportunism. Schulman, \textit{The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics} (New York: The Free Press), 23-32.
of the time, the union moved without the support of the rest of the labor movement, and at times its positions were actively undercut by the legislative staff of the AFL-CIO.

AFSCME initially approached Nixon’s revenue sharing proposal with a sort of cautious skepticism. Wary that “no strings” federal funding would allow state and local governments to divert money from social services, Wurf instead called for the creation of a three-part “survival fund” for the American city: full federal funding of welfare and categorical grants and a reallocation of federal funding from capital projects to service expenditures. As he explained to it to a skeptical audience at the National League of Cities conference in December 1970, the plan would free local resources to fund other social services.48 Yet Wurf also believed that revenue sharing was the most politically feasible way to address what he called “the disparity between the mounting demand for public services and the ability of [state and local] governments to finance them.” Because the federal government dominated the most lucrative and progressive form of revenue, the income tax, he argued before the Senate Finance Committee in 1972, it had to take on a larger role in funding state and local government services.49 While a union newspaper editorial warned that revenue sharing was not “a panacea for urban ills,” the lack of political support for a more ambitious program left the union few other options except to push for some version of the package.50

When the union announced its legislative plan for 1971, it hedged on revenue sharing, expressing familiar concerns but leaving room for support if the Nixon administration adjusted

the allocation formula.\textsuperscript{51} The administration’s proposal was based on a relatively simple calculation of population adjusted for urban poverty, which AFSCME claimed would direct too much money to the affluent suburbs instead of the struggling urban centers.\textsuperscript{52} In contrast, AFSCME demanded that funds be distributed based on the fiscal difficulties of the jurisdiction and its level of commitment to providing public services (measured by non-educational per capita expenditures).\textsuperscript{53}

The technical difference in policy preferences reflected a deeper gulf in political philosophy. Whereas the Nixon administration saw revenue sharing primarily as a way to devolve power and resources, Wurf believed it was a tool to expand and shape the social service and welfare state; while Nixon wanted to turn over more of these functions to state and local governments, Wurf believed that the matter required a greater federal commitment. “The cities are dying for lack of money,” he told AFSCME’s 1972 convention, “rotting away . . . like a piece of the world has been dropped into a void.” A whole new system of financing state and local services was needed, one that featured a greater federal role. “Not all the answers will come from Washington,” he added, “but some of the most immediate ones will.”\textsuperscript{54}

The immediate response defied clear partisan labels. The plan drew reluctant support from urban Democrats (pressured cash-strapped local officials) and mainstream Republicans (pressed by the Nixon White House). But it drew the ire of ideological conservatives from both parties (worried about both the expansion of federal commitments and the division of taxing power from administrative responsibility) and Congressional committee chairmen (who feared

\textsuperscript{51} “AFSCME Sets ’71 Legislative Plans,” \textit{The Public Employee} 36, no. 11 (Jan.-Feb., 1971): 5.
\textsuperscript{53} Hearings before the Committee on Finance on H.R. 14370, U.S. Senate, 21 July 1972.
\textsuperscript{54} Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, at the Union’s 19th International Convention, Houston, TC, 29 May 1972, Box 4, Folder 10, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
further erosion of their control over appropriations). After making little progress in 1969 or 1970, the administration revised and reintroduced the plan in 1971, expanding its scope (up from $1 billion to $5 billion annually) and directing a greater share of funds to the local level. Lobbyists for the National League of Cities and the Conference of Mayors vigorously pushed for the program, eventually forcing the Democratic leadership to convene hearings on the plan and persuade Wilbur Mills, the powerful chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, to draft a counter proposal.\(^{55}\)

In January 1972, Mills introduced a need-based form of revenue sharing that specifically targeted urban centers, tied federal funds to state’s “tax effort,” and designated particular policy areas for priority funding.\(^{56}\) Initially closer to AFSCME’s preferred model, the need- and tax-provisions were weakened in committee, but the despite the union’s professed “grave reservations,” it ended up backing the State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act in the House, with the intention of pressing for amendments in conference committee.\(^{57}\)

But while AFSCME lobbied liberal allies in support of the measure, the AFL-CIO staff worked for its defeat. The AFL-CIO claimed that its opposition was due to the absence of sufficiently stringent civil rights and fair labor practice provisions—the possibility that federal money might be used to undercut existing wage and benefits was a longstanding pillar of the Federation’s opposition to “no strings” funding. But at least some unions objected to the use of federal spending on service programs rather than labor-intensive capital projects, and as a

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\(^{56}\) “New Plan to Aid Cities and States,” *The Public Employee* 37, no. 1 (Jan., 1972): 6. The House formula was based on five criteria: 1) total population, 2) size of urban population, 3) per capita income, 4) general state and local tax effort, and 5) state income tax collections. The formula favored populous urban states in the North and Midwest and penalized the 10 states that lacked income taxes. Conlan, *New Federalism*, 65-75.

general principle, the AFL-CIO preferred extending aid through categorical grants, which were
easier to affect from Washington.\textsuperscript{58} Within the AFL-CIO’s Legislative Department, there was
some disagreement on the merits of the original Mills plan—one staffer admitted that
“somewhere down the line there’s going to be a revenue-sharing proposal that we’d have a hell
of a time objecting to—this very well may be the one.” But as the bill was amended in
committee, even this lukewarm support faded.\textsuperscript{59} In a June 1972 letter to Henry Maier, Mayor of
Milwaukee and President of the National Conference of Mayors, chief AFL-CIO lobbyist
Andrew Biemiller admitted that the federation’s chief objection to the evolving revenue sharing
plan was the shift from the original “pass through” formula, in which a substantial share of
money went to localities by way of statehouses, where the State Federations had greater
influence, to a more direct form of support to localities, where organized labor was often less
able of influencing spending decisions.\textsuperscript{60} That consideration, coupled with the older concerns
about labor standards and the impact of revenue sharing on categorical grants, ultimately led the
AFL-CIO to pull its support for the State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act.\textsuperscript{61}

AFSCME considered the AFL-CIO’s stance a striking betrayal, and for Wurf, it only
seemed further evidence that critical public sector issues were at best secondary concerns for the

\textsuperscript{58} Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, February 16-23, Americana Hotel, Bal Harbour,
Florida, AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes; “Muskie Revenue Sharing Bill (S. 1770),” Memorandum from
Arnold Cantor to Andrew J. Biemiller, 1 June 1971, Box 42, Folder 33; “Revenue Sharing,” AFL-CIO Press
Release, n.d. [June 7, 1970], Box 42, Folder 33, AFL-CIO Legislative Department Records, 1906-1978, George
Meany Memorial Archives, National Labor College, Silver Spring, Maryland [hereafter cited as AFL-CIO
Legislative Department Records, 1906-1978].

\textsuperscript{59} “Intergovernmental Fiscal Coordination Act of 1971 (H.R. 1950) / ‘Mills Revenue-Sharing Bill’,” Memorandum
from Arnold Cantor to Andy Biemiller, 15 December 1971, Box 42, Folder 33, AFL-CIO Legislative Department
Records.

\textsuperscript{60} Letter from Andrew J. Biemiller to Henry W. Maier, Mayor of Milwaukee, WI and President, National
Conference of Mayors, 6 June 1972, Box 42, Folder 33, AFL-CIO Legislative Department Records.

\textsuperscript{61} In a rare departure from its normal lobbying procedure, AFSCME agreed to a “closed rule” process for the bill,
precluding amendments in the House, with the ultimate goal of tweaking the legislation in the Senate; the AFL-CIO
seized on this particular parliamentary decision as its public justification for opposing the legislation. Eileen
Federation’s lobbyists. Days after the critical vote, Wurf appealed to Meany, warning that despite its imperfections “revenue sharing has to happen to save our cities and to save our members’ jobs” and calling Biemiller’s last-minute decision to pull support “a clear example of the failure of the AFL-CIO legislative and research staffs to evidence concern for the interests of the hundreds of thousands of members of our union”—and then copied the letter to every member of the Executive Council. Frustration erupted within the union as well. Dismissing Biemiller’s efforts to win a supportable form of revenue sharing as a “a joke,” union lobbyist Paul Minarchenko authored a furious memorandum in late June, lamenting that AFSCME had to press its own case while also “keep[ing] track of the AFL-CIO to be sure we are not traded off by them for some other affiliates' provisions.” “‘Brotherhood and Trust in Thee,’” he closed, “is a lot of shit.”

The defection of the AFL-CIO undercut Wurf’s hope that the Nixon revenue sharing plan could be used as the start of a broader restructuring of the federal service state. As the bill moved to the Senate in July 1972, Wurf focused his testimony on the need to transform the program from a simple rebate mechanism to a more ambitious federal initiative, urging that revenue sharing be used as a “catalyst for state and local tax reform” by punishing states which relied on regressive revenue streams like sales, property, and excise taxes rather progressive income and property taxes. Opponents complained that the proposal violated the spirit of the administration’s program. Wurf’s testimony was interrupted on several occasions by hostile

63 Letter from Jerry Wurf to George Meany, 13 June 1972, Box 47, Folder 8, AFL-CIO Legislative Department Records. Meany’s awkward response pointed to long-standing objections to the program and particular concerns about the dangerous precedent of accepting the “closed-rule” legislative process, but ignored the substance of Wurf’s critique. Letter from George Meany to Jerry Wurf, 27 June 1972, Box 42, Folder 33, AFL-CIO Legislative Department Records.
64 “Meany Letter on Revenue Sharing,” Memorandum from Paul Minarchenko to Jerry Wurf, 30 June 1972, Box 55, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection.
65 Hearings before the Committee on Finance on H.R. 14370, U.S. Senate, 21 July 1972.
questioning from conservatives who claimed that Wurf was trying to hijack the measure to force states and localities “to adopt priorities in expenditures which are in accordance with your ideas” (Sen. Wallace Bennett) or to empower the federal government to “dictate” tax policies to the states (Sen. Paul Fannin)—and the proposal was abandoned in favor of a simpler formula before being passed by the Senate. After a short conference process, the revised bill passed easily in both houses of Congress, allowing Nixon to sign the law on the eve of his reelection in October 1972 in a grand ceremony in Philadelphia, where he cast the program as the start of a “New American Revolution.”

Wurf publicly touted the program as a critical step in staving off state and local financial crisis, Disappointed in the final product, but many in the union, Wurf included, continued to harbor doubts about general revenue sharing. An internal memorandum written just one month after the law was signed dismissed it “a stop-gap relief” with limited long-term effectiveness— noting that it could never replace categorical grants (needed to establish national priorities and overcome local opposition to funding social services for the sick and poor) and did little to alter regressive state and local tax structures. On a few occasions, Wurf's public comments betrayed a similar sentiment: at a banquet in October 1972, he dismissed revenue sharing as “a temporary medication for a terminal malady,” noting that it would do nothing to reverse the trend of

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67 The three-part formula included population, relative income, and combined state and local tax effort, and added extra federal social service grants to offset the lost revenue for urban centers. Rather than seek a compromise between the House and Senate formulas, the conference committee simply allowed states to choose the formula that provided them with more income. Conlan, *New Federalism*, 65-75.
69 “State and Local Fiscal Assistance Act of 1972 (Revenue Sharing),” Memorandum to International Union Staff, 22 November 1972, Box 9, Folder 18, Jerry Wurf Collection.
middle-class exodus or inner-city impoverishment. Still, he generally defended the measure as a “needed shot in the arm” to sustain state and local governments.70

This pattern of frustrated cooperation carried over into AFSCME’s efforts to secure a public sector jobs program. The union scored an apparent victory in 1970 with the passage of the Employment and Manpower Act, which included $1.8 billion for public employment programs, only to see Nixon veto the legislation.71 Liberals reintroduced the program in 1971 in the Emergency Employment Act (EEA), and Wurf immediately declared his support for the measure as “a first significant step toward providing an immediate, substantial and flexible federal response” to the mounting urban crisis and a solid foundation on which to build a broader program in the future.72 In July 1971, he pitched the program to a special AFL-CIO conference.

70 “The Cause is the Country,” Remarks by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, before the Conference Banquet of the National Model Cities Association, Conrad Hilton Hotel, Chicago, IL, 6 October 1972, Box 71, Folder 36, Jerry Wurf Collection; Jerry Wurf, “Massive Tax Reform Is Critical Need,” The Public Employee 37, no. 10 (Nov., 1972): 2. A subsequent study by the Nixon administration found a clear distinction between expenditure patterns in urban and suburban/rural areas: whereas the former tended to use the money to fund existing or additional public services, the latter tended to direct it to capital construction, particularly road and building constructions. “New Report Shows Shifts in Use of Revenue Sharing Funds,” Press Release, Office of Revenue Sharing, September 1973, Drawer 17, Folder 9, William Simon Papers, Skillman Library Special Collections & College Archives, Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania [hereafter cited as William Simon Papers]. The relative share spend on operating and maintenance as opposed to capital expenditures increased over the course of 1973, as long-term uncertainty about the program abated and state and local governments became more confident in including the funds in their normal budgets. “General Revenue Sharing—the First Planned Use Reports,” Report, Office of Revenue Sharing, 24 September 1973, Drawer 17, Folder 9, William Simon Papers. By 1974, over 90 percent of funds went to operating and maintenance costs, though a gap persisted between urban and suburban/rural units. “General Revenue Sharing-the First Actual Use Reports,” Report, Office of Revenue Sharing, Department of the Treasury, March 1974, Drawer 17, Folder 9, William Simon Papers. By most accounts, Nixon administration officials were pleased with the functioning of the program, and urged President Ford to support its reauthorization in 1974. “Status and Future of the General Revenue Sharing Program,” Memorandum for the President from William E. Simon, 29 November 1974, Drawer 25, Folder 7, William Simon Papers.


72 The Nixon administration responded by linking public sector employment with welfare reform, proposing a program to create 200,000 public sector jobs for welfare recipients, which AFSCME dismissed as “a cynical appeal to the stereotype of the welfare recipient as a shiftless drone living off pork chops at the taxpayers’ expense” that ignored “the hard facts of urban joblessness.” “Public Service Job Plan Urged,” The Public Employee 36, no. 2 (Mar., 1971): 4. The program had six key elements that AFSCME hoped would be included in future programs: first, it was a jobs program rather than a training program with a large majority of funds required to go to wages and benefits; second, it provided a mechanism to address a disturbing trend in layoffs resulting from service cuts, allowing laid-off workers to be rehired with federal funds; third, it featured a flexible definition of jobs, including everything from healthcare and public safety to sanitation and recreation workers; fourth, it offered federal oversight.
on jobs, promising that it would push the country closer toward its traditional goal of full employment. "The jobs are there waiting," he continued, "and so are the people who need the work and the citizens who need the services." Under heavy pressure from state and local officials, Nixon reluctantly signed the two-year, $2.25 billion program into law July 1971, the first general public employment legislation since the New Deal.

The program failed to live up to Wurf’s expectations. Designed to combine federal funding and local administration, the program afforded a great deal of flexibility to state and local officials and required active federal engagement for effective oversight; when the latter never came, the former spun out of control. AFSCME had anticipated as much in August, urging its affiliates to involve themselves in the policymaking process at the local level to ensure funds were distributed correctly, but the challenge proved greater that the union had expected. Elected officials at the state level, eager to curry favor among increasingly important suburban voters, directed the funds away from distressed urban areas, while the lack of effective federal regulation made it difficult for AFSCME to track the use of “paper layoffs,” whereby existing workers were laid off and then rehired at lower pay and benefits with federal funds. By

through the Department of Labor to assure compliance with basic regulations of working conditions; fifth, it offered unions (and any other public group) the opportunity to weigh in on spending decisions before they were made through a public comment period; and sixth, it included a statutory provision that prohibited new hires from displacing permanent employees. “How Public Service Bill Can Aid Ailing Cities and States,” The Public Employee 36, no. 7 (Aug., 1971): 4.

73 “Jobs for the Jobless, Help for the Cities,” 12 July 1971 Jerry Wurf Collection
October, AFSCME had effectively given up on the program, accusing Nixon of “perverting” the law and allowing it to become “a patronage boondoggle for governors and other politicians.”

While critical of elements of both programs and disappointed in their ultimate execution, both revenue sharing and the EEA offered Wurf reason to believe that a broader reconstruction of the nation’s public services was politically feasible in the 1970s. Whatever its practical shortcomings, Wurf testified in November 1971, the EEA again validated the principle of federal responsibility and was a “welcome step towards the achievement of a long-range program to help meet the Nation’s needs for public services.” He used his testimony to support the proposed Employment and Manpower Act of 1972 as a strong validation “of the need for more and better public services in the Nation” and the notion of “a public profit.” However deficient, Wurf argued in the pages of *The Public Employee* in October 1972, revenue sharing established “a very important principle” that AFSCME held dear—“the responsibility of the federal government to contribute to the well-being of the cities and states.”

What Wurf was calling for, in some sense, was a public sector version of the sort of industrial planning that labor leaders and many liberals had been pushing for since the 1930s. As a member of the AFL-CIO’s Economic Policy Subcommittee, he took a leading role in drafting a lengthy report in 1971 titled “Public Investment to Meet America’s Needs,” which called for “a long-range, national effort to greatly expand and improve public investments in facilities and services” to revitalize urban America, address the pernicious effects of deindustrialization, and reunite a society fractured by ferocious population growth (123 million to 206 million between 1930 and 1970), suburbanization, and gentrification. Neither state governments nor private

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enterprise could “solve the nation’s vast public investment needs,” it continued. “The basis for meeting these needs requires national policies and nationwide measures, with adequate federal funds and standards – and the cooperation and backing of the states, local governments, business firms and private groups.” The report offered a ten-step program to improve national public investment, including full federal funding of infrastructure projects, the development of a national inventory of public service needs, and the creation of an Office of Public Investment Coordination. While AFSCME struggled to get the AFL-CIO to follow through on the report’s objectives, it nonetheless marked a striking affirmation of faith in the prospects for a broader transformations in the American service and welfare state.

But, as the EEA debacle demonstrated, there was always a tension in this vision, as AFSCME’s institutional interests prevented the union from departing too far from the existing structure of the welfare state. An organization that represented state and local government workers could not sanction a complete shift in social policy provision to the national level without endangering its own institutional interests. More importantly, the union's reform agenda was bounded by the limits of the job-intensive, service strategy approach of mid-century liberalism, a consideration that became apparent in the union’s response to the Nixon administration’s other major domestic initiative: welfare reform.

Like other elements of the New Federalism, Nixon had said little about welfare reform during the 1968 presidential campaign, but just days after his election, he instructed Nathan to organize a taskforce on the issue. The Nathan group initially proposed a modest shift—replacing the existing state-level determination with a national standard of benefit payments, coupled with an increase in the federal government’s share of the financial burden—but as the plan moved

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through the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), it was transformed into a more radical break. Convinced that the existing system penalized the working poor and encouraged breakdowns in family structure and drawing lessons from a failed pilot program from the Johnson administration and inspiration from “negative income tax” (NIT) championed by Rep. Melvin Laird and Milton Friedman, the HEW staffers proposed the implementation of a federally-funded minimum income system.  

The proposal had a second set of advantages, which became increasingly appealing in the early 1970s. A universal minimum income program ensured money went to the poor rather than caseworkers and other middle-class professionals. While the drain in the system had always been a concern, the unionization among welfare workers since the late 1950s increased both the relative cost of services and the visibility of the workers who delivered them. To advocates, then, the income strategy would both reduce the overall costs of welfare and offer the poor greater support—pressed during a presidential briefing, Moynihan argued for moving from the “service strategy” approach in social provision to an “income strategy” by likening the existing the system to “feeding the sparrows by feeding the horses.” When Moynihan took the new plan, then tentatively titled the Family Security System, to Nixon in April 1969, the president specifically asked whether it "would get rid of social workers." Moynihan happily promised that it would "wipe them out."

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82 Burke and Burke, *Nixon's Good Deed*, 67.
83 Burke and Burke, *Nixon's Good Deed*, 76
The political argument won Nixon over, despite the opposition of Vice President Spiro Agnew and future Federal Reserve Chairman Arthur Burns, who feared that the program would lead to further growth in welfare rolls. The Family Assistance Plan, as it was hurriedly renamed on the eve of the announcement, was officially unveiled in August 1969 as part of the broader New Federalism program.

The FAP sparked immediate opposition. Congressional liberals complained that the $1,600 annual income for a family of four was too low—less than half the federal poverty line of $3,600 and a fraction of the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimate of the standard of living for urban areas ($6,600). The AFL-CIO complained that the plan would flood the labor market with former welfare recipients, though it seemingly endorsed the income strategy, declaring in early 1970 that the purpose of welfare was simply “to get cash into the hands of those unable to provide for themselves.”

AFSCME’s initial response was more measured. Having long-pressed for full federal funding of welfare—a position with limited political appeal for Nixon because it would imposed major new obligations on the federal budget without actually increasing the benefits for recipients—Wurf nonetheless initially greeted the proposal with constructive criticism. In his first round of congressional testimony in October 1969, Wurf praised the premise of the proposal, arguing that the existing system “destroy[ed] human dignity and personal initiative” and “alienate[d] both recipient and nonrecipient alike” and expressing AFSCME’s commitment to “the eradication of the welfare system and its replacement with an intelligent and humane and noncategorical method of income support.” Wurf echoed liberals’ complaints about the level of

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benefits offered by FAP and warned that the plan could lead to higher urban unemployment, but implied that the union would strongly consider supporting a revised version of the plan.\(^8^5\)

Unmentioned in Wurf’s original testimony were AFSCME’s concerns about the implications of the proposal for the 30,000 members working within the welfare system at the state and local level.\(^8^6\) In a private telegram sent to Meany in July 1970, Wurf warned that federalization “may cost the jobs of thousands of our members and do grievous harm to welfare recipients.”\(^8^7\) When Wurf appeared before the Senate Finance Committee in late August, however, he focused on the impact of federalization on the pay and benefits of existing workers, not their jobs, urging the Senate to add language to insure that newly federalized workers would be subject “to no worsening in their positions with respect to their employment.”\(^8^8\) In both the Senate testimony and in subsequent lobbying efforts, AFSCME pressed for provisions similar to those extended in the Mass Transit Act of 1964, which immediately converted state and local employees to full federal status, without probationary periods or individual selection, and protected their existing levels of pay and benefits from rollbacks.\(^8^9\)


\(^8^6\) “In Nixon Plan: Job Threat Is Exposed,” \textit{The Public Employee} 35, no. 9 (Sept., 1970): 12. AFSCME outlined three sets of particular concerns: first, existing welfare workers would lose their jobs to federal conversion and have to reapply as new hires, without the accrued service and benefits from their old employment; second, that new hires would lose the wages and benefits negotiated at the state and local level; third, that those social service employees left under state control would be subject to the loss of jobs and wages, as the recently displaced state and local workers created a downward pressure on benefits. Not specifically mentioned, but also a key factor, were the jurisdictional implications of federal conversion within the AFL-CIO.

\(^8^7\) Telegram from Jerry Wurf to George Meany, 17 July 1970, Box 12, Folder 10, Office of the President, George Meany Files, 1940-1980. The telegram was occasioned by the AFL-CIO staff’s frequent statement that the Federation would accept federalization, which Wurf cast as a “frivolous and irresponsible position.”

\(^8^8\) Statement and Testimony of Jerry Wurf, Hearings on Family Assistance Act of 1970, Committee on Finance, United States Senate, 91st Cong., 2nd Sess., 27 August 1970, pp. 1691-1695. In addition to the direct threat posed by the federal conversion of state and local welfare jobs, FAP also imposed, at least in its early form, a provision that restricted the growth of staff and administrative costs, which AFSCME claimed would lead to personnel cuts and salary freezes. Letter from Girard P. Clark, Legislative Director, to Andrew J. Biemiller, 14 April 1970, Box 47, Folder 8, AFL-CIO Legislative Department Records.

\(^8^9\) Letter from Gloria Riordan, Special Representative, to Clint Fair, Legislative Department, AFL-CIO, 28 May 1970, Box 47, Folder 8, AFL-CIO Legislative Department Records.
Unable to secure some sort of protection for existing welfare workers, AFSCME lobbied hard against FAP, bringing more than 1,500 members to rally against the proposal in October 1970, where Wurf reiteratTed his underlying sympathy for the “basic concepts” of FAP, suggesting that the union’s support could be won if the program was “amender to provide sufficient protections for present welfare employees.” The protections never came—at one point, Elliot Richardson, Secretary of HEW, apparently agreed to implement language protecting the employees who were transferred to federal jobs, but offered no mechanism to ensure state and local employees had access to such a conversion.

The administration plan passed the House twice, but made little progress in the Senate. In 1971, the Nixon administration reworked the proposal, raising the income level from $1,600 to $2,400 in the (ultimately failed) hope of attracting liberal support. Citing a growing list of other complaints, AFSCME declared its opposition to the program in June, though it later threw its rhetorical support behind an ill-fated alternative sponsored by Democratic Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut, which provided political cover for its opposition. The increased benefits alienated conservatives while doing little to attract liberal support, and Nixon’s proposal stalled again. Significant welfare reform would wait another two decades.

Within the union, Wurf and the national staff took credit for blocking FAP, explicitly focusing on the threat posed to state and local welfare workers. In the eyes of a growing

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92 Conlan, New Federalism, 76-81.
number of liberals, including Moynihan, AFSCME appeared to be undercutting a needed reform simply to protect the benefits and contracts of its state and local members.

The defeat of FAP thus played a key role in politicizing public workers. In 1973, Moynihan published his account, *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income*, which remains the most authoritative word on the proposal. Moynihan’s argued that FAP had been killed not by conservatives opposed to the concept of a guaranteed income, but by a coalition of welfare activists and social service workers who had a selfish stake in the faltering old system. “With astonishing consistency,” Moynihan quipped, “middle-class professionals . . . when asked to devise ways of improving the condition of lower-class groups would come up with schemes of which the first effect would be to improve the condition of the middle-class professionals, and the second effect might or might not be that of improving the condition of the poor.” Moynihan dismissed liberal critiques of benefit levels, casting the opposition of Congressional Democrats as the product of unrelenting pressure from institutional interests vested in the existing system. Anticipating the tax-based critique if late-decade conservatives, Moynihan predicted that the liberal’s investment in the services strategy would eventually alienate middle- and working-class voters, reasoning that the “ironworker was being taxed to pay for (and bid up) the salaries of college graduates in the service professions.”

Conservatives devoured Moynihan’s “revelations.” Jude Wanniski praised Moynihan’s “deliciously bitter indictment” of those “whose careers rest on their assurances that they are the benefactors of the poor and the downtrodden” and enthusiastically endorsed the conclusion that

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“those who are now enriched—politically, professionally, financially—by providing indirect aid to the poor” were the chief obstacles to a more humane and effective system.  

The FAP battle was rich with ironies for AFSCME. Welfare workers composed less than 10 percent of the union’s total membership, and welfare reform was less important to the union than other elements of its urban-service agenda. As in debates on other policy issues, AFSCME tried to make itself the advocate for both the producers and consumers of social services, pushing for full federal funding because it seemed the best mechanism to free up resources for other services and ease pressure on state and local budgets. This ambitious goal was only partially realized, and when presented with the choice of backing a system that might eviscerate the gains hard won since the early 1960s or protecting the status quo, the union chose the latter.

In helping to defeat the plan, the union unintentionally swelled the ranks of its critics, laying the foundation for future trouble. But the failed ventures in social policymaking had a more immediate effect, bringing into relief the union’s continued isolation within labor movement, and underscoring the necessity of reform.

“Labor’s Battle With Itself”

97 Jude Wanniski, “The Inside Story of the Death of the Family Aid,” Wall Street Journal, 5 March 1973, 14. Subsequent accounts have largely sustained Moynihan’s conclusions about the role of public sector opposition. Steven F. Hayward, The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order, 1964-1980 (Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing, 2001). Wurf partly validated Moynihan’s conclusions—though he took issue with the implication of self motivations—announcing in an April 1973 address that Moynihan was “partly correct” in blaming AFSCME for the defeat of welfare reform. “Mr. Moynihan’s book says we opposed it because welfare reform would have cost us members. But he’s dead wrong. We opposed the bill because it was going to displace thousands of our members from their jobs—without guaranteeing them a shot at the new federal positions that would be created. Our concern was not losing members. It was for protecting the members’ rights.” “Public Institutions and Change,” Excerpts from a Speech by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, prepared for Delivery before the Wisconsin City and County Employees Union, AFSCME Council 40, State Convention, Madison, WI, 1 April 1973, Box 70, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection. Wurf made a similar point privately, in an interview with Harry Fleischman, noting that AFSCME had killed welfare reform and that part of the reason was to protect the job rights of its members—but insisting that Moynihan had been too cynical in his assessment of the union’s motivations. Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Harry Fleischman Oral History Collection, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter cited as Harry Fleischman Oral History Collection].
Three years after being elevated to the AFL-CIO Executive Council, Wurf stepped back and reflected on the state of the national labor movement in an interview with Haynes Johnson and Nick Kotz of the *Washington Post*. He joked that, at the age of 52, he and Secretary-Treasurer Lane Kirkland had “a monopoly on youth” within the AFL-CIO. “A lot of my colleagues are products of an era and an environment that is no longer in existence,” he continued in the same interview. “The common American worker doesn’t know what the hell we’re talking about and has given up trying to understand. He doesn’t relate to us and we don’t relate to him.”

Wurf made similar points in the months that followed, complaining in his address to AFSCME’s 1972 convention that the “lack of respect” for the labor movement and “credibility” problem of its leadership posed a significant challenge, preventing it, as he put it to the NEA in June, from functioning as “a force that will speak out and influence peace, justice, freedom and equality for all mankind.”

Wurf believed that the rise of public sector unions like AFSCME could provide an impetus for reversing the trend—that their record of success, often in the face of opposition from the rest of the labor movement, gave them a special credibility. “The time has come,” he boasted during an appearance before the national convention of the rival American Federation of Teachers in 1970, “when we in the public employee sector need no longer depend upon other people to play the trade union tune that we will dance to . . . when we can put a musician or two of our own in the band.” “Nobody has a monopoly on what is good and what is bad about trade unionism in America,” he continued. “We who built a union under the most adverse possible

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99 Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, at the Union’s 19th International Convention, Houston, TX, 29 May 1972, Box 4, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers; Address by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, to the 19th Annual Meeting of the National Education Association, Atlantic City, NJ, 27 June 1972, Box 70, Folder 22, Jerry Wurf Collection.
conditions perhaps have a thing or two to contribute towards the well-being of the American Trade Union Movement.”

To have such an effect, however, Wurf believed that public employee unions needed their own division within the AFL-CIO, a Public Employees Department (PED), both to resolve jurisdictional disputes and provide a mechanism to bolster public sector political power. There was ample precedent for such a mechanism—the Building Trades Department had been born in the early 20th century for a similar purpose—and, from Wurf’s perspective, a critical need.

Despite its recent gains, AFSCME continued to suffer regular jurisdictional challenges. At the union's 1972 convention, Wurf went so far as to claim that AFSCME expended “more energy competing with our trade union brothers and sisters than fighting the boss,” a charge that was actually softened from his prepared text, which had claimed “the real threat to our existence is more our trade union colleagues than the boss.” Since the merger in 1955, the labor movement had relied on a combination of informal arrangements and semi-autonomous departments to resolve disputes between affiliates. In cases where two unions were unable to reach an accord, the AFL-CIO President and Executive Council appointed a mediator under the provisions of Article XX of the AFL-CIO Constitution.

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100 “Getting It Together,” Remarks by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, to the Convention of the American Federation of Teachers, 17 August 1970, Box 70, Folder 18, Jerry Wurf Collection.

101 The AFL-CIO convention first entertained the idea of a separate department in 1965, but a resolution was rejected, and interested unions were instead referred to the Government Employees Council. “AFL-CIO Will Promote Laws for Bargaining in Government,” The Public Employee 31, no. 1 (Jan. 1966): 1, 3. The GEC, AFSCME believed, was narrowly concerned with federal workers’ business—and thus a poor vehicle for representing the interests of all government employees. Memorandum from Paul Minarchenko to Bill Welsh, 27 March 1973, Box 4, Folder 2, AFSCME Legislation and Political Education Department Records.


103 Remarks to the Union’s 19th International Convention, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers. For a discussion of the unique character of AFSCME’s charter and jurisdiction, see Chapter 2.

While Wurf believed that Article XX process was generally ineffective, he thought it particularly incapable of addressing conflicts in the public sector, where union security provisions, the main determinant in Article XX proceedings, were still rare. The union was under constant pressure from other unions, Wurf complained in an interview in 1973, battling “from coast to coast and border to border.” AFSCME filed 28 separate Article XX complaints between 1972 and 1974, mostly frequently involving SEIU and the Laborers International Union (LIU). In some cases, the union won its case, only to have the opposing union ignore the ruling; in other cases, the AFL-CIO refused to take the union’s complaint altogether.

Moved by what he believed was the AFL-CIO’s tepid support of the 1970 postal workers’ strike, Wurf used much of his 1970 convention address to develop a case for such a department, calling for public sector unions “to mobilize and coordinate the power available to them . . . that is now fragmented among so many organizations within and without the AFL-CIO.” Three months later, Wurf presented the case to the national convention of the rival AFT, calling on public sector unionists to “stop pussyfooting around” and unite in strategic cooperation and self-interest. Public sector unions, Wurf continued, had to take “this fragmented

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105 The Article XX provisions were designed with union security provisions in mind as part of the formula for addressing inter-union disputes. Because these provision were less common in the public sector, particularly in the 1960s, the system gave little protection to entrenched public sector organizations against other unions. In 1967, the Executive Council issued a statement of policy that sought to extend the protections to federal employment. In the early 1970s, AFSCME teamed with two rivals, SEIU and the LIU, in an effort to get the new interpretation extended to non-federal employment, only to have the move blocked by the Building Trades Department. Letter from Jerry Wurf to George Meany 24 April 1974, Box 109, Folder 24, Office of the President, George Meany Files, 1940-1980, RG1-038, George Meany Memorial Archives, National Labor College, Silver Spring, MD. [Hereafter cited as George Meany Files, 1940-1980].


107 “The State of the Union,” Keynote Address by Jerry Wurf, President to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, to the AFSCME’s 20th International Convention, Honolulu, HI, 10 June 1974, Box 49, Folder 46, Jerry Wurf Collection.

power that is spread all over the lot and stop making it available to people who may or may not be concerned about our well-being,” both for their own good and to maximize their impact on the broader labor movement.\textsuperscript{109}

There was little movement toward creating the department for the next three years, as Meany repeatedly rebuffed Wurf’s requests. It was in this context that AFSCME partnered with the largest organization of American workers, the National Education Association (NEA), which boasted more than a million members nationally. The NEA was a potentially powerful ally for AFSCME, with a large and increasingly militant membership and staunchly liberal leadership. It had also merged with the American Teachers Association, its historically Black counterpart, in 1966, a signal of the organization’s commitment to the civil rights struggle.\textsuperscript{110} The two organizations complimented each other in several respects: as Marjorie Murphy has shown, the NEA had long featured one of the most developed national labor lobbies in the United States, a remnant of its early twentieth century, top-down focus on educational reform; it was weaker at the state and local levels, where AFSCME’s political operations were strongest.\textsuperscript{111} There were fewer jurisdictional tensions between the two organizations, since AFSCME had only rarely ventured into the educational field, and even then only to organize non-teaching staff assistants, employees that NEA had historically shown little interest in.\textsuperscript{112}


\textsuperscript{112} The two organizations formally reached an agreement on the division of public sector jurisdictions in 1975. The accord surrendered control of “all job categories that are involved in the teacher-learning process” to the NEA in exchange for the Association relinquishing any claim beyond educational institutions. It also outlined criteria for determining jurisdiction over non-teaching educational employees, including historical patterns of organization, membership preferences, and the capacity of the particular unions to address the concerns of the workers. “NEA-AFSCME Jurisdictional Agreement: Principles for Discussion,” n.d. [Received August 6, 1975], Box 7, Folder 15, Jerry Wurf Collection.
Cooperation between the two organizations dated from the early 1970s, when the two organizations combined with the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) in an unsuccessful attempt to lobby the Nixon administration to insulate government workers from wage controls. Though the effort failed, it led to the creation of a semi-permanent organization called the Coalition of Public Employee Organizations in 1971—later renamed the Coalition of American Public Employees (CAPE)—which Wurf touted as “the first meaningful effort to pool public employee power.” The coalition set as its initial goal the achievement of “an increasingly strong economy which will generate sufficient public funds to meet the many needed public services which we provide,” including “an adequate education for all youth and adults; an environment, both urban and rural, which is both safe, healthful, and beautiful; intensified police and fire protection; help for the aged, the ill, and the need”—services, in short, which were “vital to the survival of American society.” By 1972, CAPE had a six-point action plan that included a multi-faceted legislative campaign, joint legal challenges, cooperative political action, shared funding of a public relations campaign, a collective effort to draft and implement tax reform measures, and an initiative to encourage local-level cooperation between affiliated and non-affiliated labor groups.

The creation of CAPE was greeted by furious denunciations from unions like the AFT (whose president, David Selden, denounced it as an “untimely and unseemly accommodation” threatened “to take the curse off [the NEA’s] general anti-union stance.”) CAPE drew little support from the rest of the AFL-CIO, hindering its effectiveness through the early 1970s, though it later proved an effective vehicle for coordinating union responses to the urban fiscal crisis and tax revolt.

But the creation of the coalition also forced Meany’s hand. In July 1973, with Meany’s blessing, IAFF President Howard McClenann hosted a meeting of representatives from more than a dozen unions interested in the creation of a PED. Wurf did not personally attend, but he communicated his concerns, noting that AFSCME would only support the department if membership were strictly limited to “those Internationals made up entirely of Federal, State, County, and Public Employees.” AFSCME’s representatives repeated the point regularly over the next twelve months, reiterating that membership should be restricted to bona fide public sector unions. Part of this, of course, was simple self-interest, since AFSCME was both the largest and strongest “pure” public sector union, and a restricted membership would eliminate potential competitors like SEIU and the LIU. But it was also quite consistent with Wurf’s vision of the public sector labor movement and his conception of the challenges facing government employees. Despite his frequent invocation of the private sector model, as far back as the early 1950s Wurf had been uncomfortable with the encroachment of private sector unions into the

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public sector, drawing a sharp line between “full-time public employee unionism” and “part-time private industry outfits dabbling in government unions.”

More than just an opportunistic effort to avoid competition—though it was certainly that as well—Wurf doubted the commitment of private sector unions to the political and legislative agenda of the public worker. In his mind, private sector unions proved far too willing to undercut AFSCME’s efforts to win legal bargaining rights through “sweetheart” contracts and backroom deal making, an approach that ran squarely against the union’s goal of formal collective bargaining.

The issue was made more sensitive by the union’s pursuit of a national collective bargaining law for state and local government employees, which was one of Wurf’s main goals for the new department. AFSCME first began to explore the possibility of a "Wagner Act" for public workers in the late 1960s. Wurf had initially opposed such a federal law—in an April 1966 interview, he cast federal oversight of state and local government labor relations as impractical and unrealistic—but despite a series of landmark legislative victories during the middle part of the decade, the union found it increasingly difficult to win new legal rights for state and local government workers as it expanded beyond the Northeast and Upper Midwest. By 1969, Wurf later admitted, AFSCME believed it had exhausted itself in the states where it could secure legalization. “The needs of our membership in the fifty states for rights and protections such as those extended to other workers cannot be met by a law here and a law

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119 Quoted in Goulden, *Jerry Wurf*, 199.
120 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, No. 6, Side B, John Greenya and Richard Billings AFSCME Oral Histories.
there,” Wurf told the union’s 1972 convention.”

“We decided that it made much more sense to seek relief through a federal law,” he later explained, “then to dribble out our lives trying to convince 50 state legislatures, 5,000 city councils, and 10,000 school boards and who knows how many other public bodies to devise an impartial mechanism at the lower level.”

In late 1969, AFSCME’s legal staff drafted a proposal for the Public Employment Relations Act (PERA), designed to convey the same basic rights as the National Labor Relations Act had for private sector workers in the mid-1930s—“to form, join or assist a union and to bargain collectively, free from interference by the employer.” Formally introduced in the House of Representative in May 1970 by Rep. Jacob Gilbert (D-NY), the legislation gained 36 cosponsors its first year. The AFL-CIO initially showed little interest in a national collective bargaining law—declining to support the proposal as a priority at a May 1969 meeting—but after AFSCME’s delegation successfully pushed through a resolution endorsing the legislation at the AFL-CIO convention in 1970, the Executive Council created a Subcommittee on Collective Bargaining Rights for State and Local Government Employees, charged with designing and lobbying for the proposal in Congress.

The composition of the group foreshadowed a range of future problems. Of the five men on the subcommittee, only two represented “pure” public sector unions—Wurf and John Griner

123 Remarks to the 19th International Convention, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.
125 “AFSCME Drafts National Law for Public Employees,” The Public Employee 35, no. 1 (Jan., 1970): 12. PERA created a National Public Employees Relations Commission (modeled on the National Labor Relations Board), empowered a general counsel to investigate violations of the act, file complaints, and intervene before the commission on unfair labor practices. It also included a 30 percent trigger for representation elections, allowing other multiple unions to participate only if they registered 10 percent support in a given bargaining unit; it included provisions for dues check-off, allowed for formal, written contracts, and authorized the use of mediation and fact-finding in some circumstances. The legislation was silent on the right to strike, but Wurf noted that AFSCME hoped the courts would allow strikes after a 60 day fact-finding process.
(American Federation of Government Employees); the majority, as well as the group chair, came from organizations with significant or majority private sector memberships—Matthew Guinan (TWU), Peter Fosco (LIU), and David Sullivan (SEIU).\textsuperscript{128} The impact of the bias was immediate and decisive—Guinan opened the subcommittee’s first meeting in July by declaring that any federal legislation would be “an encumbrance” to the unions, and when AFSCME’s legislative strategists presented the PERA proposal, it was met with studied indifference from the three private sector unions.\textsuperscript{129} When Guinan delivered the Subcommittee report at the next Executive Council meeting, it opposed any federal law, suggesting instead that legislative guidelines be distributed to state federations for implementation at that lower level—a position endorsed by Biemiller, who deemed the federal legislation impassible. Wurf furiously dissented, noting that the convention had charged the Council with pursuing a federal law, but faced with united opposition from the other three members and the relative indifference of Meany, there was little AFSCME could do.\textsuperscript{130} When the Subcommittee met against in October, Guinan encouraged the unions to distribute draft legislation on the state level, despite AFSCME’s representative Winn Newman’s pleas that “federal legislation was the only hope” for a breakthrough in non-labor

\textsuperscript{128} Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council, AFL-CIO, May 12-13, 1970, AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes.
\textsuperscript{129} “Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Council Subcommittee on ‘Collective Bargaining Rights for state and Local Government Employees’,” Memorandum from Andrew J. Biemiller , 29 July 1970, Box 22, Folder 36, AFL-CIO Legislative Department Records.
\textsuperscript{130} Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, August 3-5, 1970, Drake Hotel, Chicago, Illinois, AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes. Wurf continued to press the case over the next three months—urging Biemiller to refrain from endorsing the Pennsylvania Public Employee Relations Act as a model, and insisting again that the purpose of the subcommittee was “to discuss Federal legislation for state and local employees,” without effect. Letter from Jerry Wurf to Andrew Biemiller, 23 September 1970, Box 22, Folder 47, AFL-CIO Legislative Department Records. Biemiller responded by simply claiming that the discussion of state models did not preclude the pursuit of a federal approach in the future. Letter from Andrew Biemiller to Jerry Wurf, 28 September 1970, Box 22, Folder 47, AFL-CIO Legislative Department Records.
states. AFSCME continued to press for PERA, but it received little help from the AFL-CIO legislative staff through 1973, in part because of the opposition of the AFT and SEIU.

Wurf hoped that a strong, well-funded department for public sector unions would bolster the campaign for a national bargaining law and serve as a catalyst for changes in the broader labor movement—a vision incompatible with the emerging PED. When the question of funding came up at a mid-August 1973 meeting, AFSCME pressed for a relatively high level of per capita dues, only to find a united opposition of the federal employee unions and private sector bodies. Wurf urged a restricted membership with similar results, and the preliminary proposal opened the PED “to any AFL-CIO union whose entire membership or any segment of it is employed in any government jurisdiction.” When the planning group in September, Wurf again criticized the open membership, but the IAFF and AFT backed the inclusion of private sector unions, in part because they were less threatened by jurisdictional raiding from other AFL-CIO groups and in part to dilute AFSCME’s strength. As a modest concession to Wurf, the planning group agreed to fix voting power to per capita dues (paid on each member employed in the public service), assuring AFSCME an advantage at the department convention, but it left most power in the non-proportional executive board—meaning that AFSCME would have to carry much of the financial burden for the new department while exercising little control.

132 The AFT intervened against the law because it feared it would strengthen the non-affiliated NEA. In testimony before the House Labor committee in March 1972, AFT President David Selden argued that “legislation establishing collective bargaining is premature, and that it would have the effect of further entrenching status quo organizations and stifling progressive organizations.” Selden wanted agency shop protections to be allowed as a bargainable issue, but not automatically conveyed. “AFT Raps Collective Bargaining,” The Public Employee 37, no. 4 (Apr., 1972): 11
133 Minutes, Meeting of the Public Employees Department Committee, 16 August 1973, Box 109, Folder 24, George Meany Files.
134 Minutes, Public Employee Department Luncheon, 17 September 1973, Box 109, Folder 24, George Meany Files.
135 Report, Public Employees Department Committee, 17 September 1973, Box 109, Folder 24, George Meany Files.
Faced with a proposed department that would meet none of his goals, and likely only further legitimate private sector encroachment into public employment, Wurf pulled his support for the PED. When the planning group met again in late November to firm up final commitments for the new department, AFSCME was absent, and in early February 1974, Wurf wrote to Meany, declaring that any action on the issue “would be quite inappropriate and probably counterproductive.” When the matter came up at AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting two weeks later, Wurf went public with his criticisms, forcing Meany to delay action on the department until May. In the interim, Meany tried to broker a compromise that would bring AFSCME back on board, asking Kirkland to arrange a series of meetings in mid April. After the first session broke down, Meany invited the various sides to submit their ideal proposals for the PED. Eschewing his previous focus on the membership issue, Wurf moved directed to the function of the proposed body, insisting that it include “effective, binding jurisdictional dispute machinery” and that it freeze in all existing jurisdictional claims in a kind of “truce,” subject to the review of an external expert. When Meany brought the representatives from fifteen unions together a week later, however, Wurf’s proposals met with scorn from other labor leaders, including SEIU president George Hardy, who proclaimed that “no one has a claim on the unorganized.”

When the PED was finally officially chartered in 1974, it had few features that Wurf had originally hoped for. In addition to permitting membership to any union with members in the

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136 Minutes, Public Employees Department Luncheon, 28 November 1973, Box 109, Folder 24, George Meany Files; Letter from Jerry Wurf to George Meany, 5 February 1974, Box 109, Folder 24, George Meany Files.
138 Handwritten Notes, Public Employee Department Meeting, 9 April 1974, Box 109, Folder 24, George Meany Files.
139 Letter from Jerry Wurf to George Meany, 24 April 1974, Box 109, Folder 24, George Meany Files.
140 Handwritten Notes, Meeting on Public Employee Department, 30 April 1973, Box 109, Folder 24, George Meany Files; Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, May 9, 1974, AFL-CIO Building, Washington, D.C., AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes.
public sector—more than the two dozen unions eventually joined, a quarter of the AFL-CIO—the Department also featured a tiered voting system that reduced representation after 175,000 members, leaving the largest public sector bodies with little more clout than unions like SEIU or the LIU.\footnote{The PED convention voting system awarded one delegate for the first 4,000 members, 2 for 4-8000, 3 votes for 8-12,000; 4 votes for 12-25,000; 5 for 25-50,000; 6 for 50-75,000; 7 for 75-125,000; 8 for 125-175,000; and 9 for 175,000, plus one for each additional 75,000 members. Draft Constitution, Public Employees Department, AFL-CIO, October 1974, Box 109, Folder 25, George Meany Files. AFSCME paid $12,000 for 630,000 members, far and away the largest group. The next largest organization was AFT, with 385,000, SEIU claimed 200,000, while the LIU paid for 80,000. Affiliates of Public Employee Department, n.d., Box 109, Folder 25, George Meany Files.}

Despite all of these doubts about the emerging department, Wurf offered a measured endorsement when AFSCME’s convention met in June 1974, urging the assembly to “give it a try and seek to make it a useful vehicle.” On his recommendation, the delegates voted to affiliate with the PED “with reservations,” authorizing Wurf to withdraw if the body proved “simply another arena for warfare against AFSCME” or failed to function “in the best interests of public employee unionism.”\footnote{“AFSCME Votes Support for AFL-CIO Department,” Press Release, 12 June 1974, Box 109, Folder 24, George Meany Files.} The full resolution barely hid the doubts of many in the union, cautioning that “some AFL-CIO affiliates” intended to use the department as “a means of ‘legitimizing’ private sector union ‘headhunting’ for per capita dues in the public sector.” It expressed particular concern that the same unions would use the department “to advocate policies detrimental to public workers,” noting that “the basic loyalty of these affiliates is to contract out public work to private employers to enhance the private industry mission of their organization.”\footnote{“Resolution No. 109, Proposed AFL-CIO Department of Public Employees,” 20th International Convention, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, June 10-14, 1974, Box 109, Folder 24, George Meany Files.}

As Wurf had predicted, the inclusion of the private sector unions and absence of a strong mechanism to address jurisdictional conflicts rendered the PED almost wholly ineffective. From
its founding in 1974 through the end of the decade, the department did little more than put on an annual legislative conference. AFSCME essentially ceased working through the PED within eighteen months—in February 1976, Wurf unilaterally reduced AFSCME’s contribution from $13,000 a month to $2,000 a month, publicly charging that the figure represented his valuation of its utility. When the PED subsequently threatened to expel AFSCME for non-payment of dues, a spokesman for the union told the New York Times no one was “losing any sleep” because public workers had gotten “zilch” from the PED. The next day, Wurf formally pulled AFSCME out of the department, calling it “a waste of time and money.”

The campaign for a national collective bargaining law collapsed—in part because the Supreme Court eviscerated the constitutional justification for extending federal regulation of labor relations into state and local governments, and in part because the AFL-CIO, prodded by the AFT and SEIU, insisted in 1975 that any federal collective bargaining law include an unlimited right to strike. A poison pill designed as much to kill any potential proposal as shape public policy, Wurf took to the floor of the Federation’s 1975 convention to argue instead for the extension of compulsory arbitration for government workers engaged in critical areas of public safety. Meany’s calculated response paraphrased Calvin Coolidge, declaring that he hoped he

144 The department’s surviving records apparently fit in a single folder, and basically contain thin leaflets for the annual conferences. Box 110, Folder 1, George Meany Files.
would never see the AFL-CIO ask the federal government to impose compulsory arbitration in lieu of a right to strike “on anybody, anywhere, at any time.”

Alienating the very allies that he might have needed to push the Federation in a new direction, Wurf’s handling of CAPE and the PED betrayed his flagging confidence in the prospects for meaningful progress on the public sector agenda within the AFL-CIO. Progress toward his vision of a public-sector-led labor movement, it seemed by the mid-1970s, could only be brought about by pressure from outside the traditional boundaries of the House of Labor—not unlike the revolution in industrial unionism four decades earlier.

*From Spokesman to Maverick*

“At meetings of the AFL-CIO executive council,” a *Time* magazine profile began in May 1973, “the vote usually ranges from 25-to-1 to 34-to-1, depending on how many other union chiefs are present to vote down Jerry Wurf.” Acknowledging that the characterization was slightly exaggerated, the piece nonetheless maintained that Wurf was “certainly a maverick in the stolid hierarchy of organized labor.”

A year and a half later, the *Wall Street Journal* made a similar point, dubbing Wurf “the Labor Movement’s Maverick” and recounting his frequent, public breaks from the AFL-CIO orthodoxy. The piece quoted an unnamed union official who described Wurf as “a man with a little power who’d like a lot more,” though another noted that the animosity was driven by personality clashes—“[Wurf’s] problem is that he may be the smartest guy in a room, but he doesn’t try to hide it.” The *Journal* noted that Wurf’s regular tirades and public dissents were viewed by many in the labor movement as “evidence of an ego

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gone wild”—“the same sort of charge made in the mid-1960’s against the late Walter Reuther.”

Tucked deep within *Wall Street Journal* piece was a rumor that the NEA was lobbying AFSCME to leave the AFL-CIO and create a new public sector labor federation, echoing a story reported a month earlier by *Nation’s Business*. Within AFSCME, the *Journal* reported, a vocal contingent favored such a move, arguing that it would bolster the union’s profile and free it from association with “greedy big labor.” As rumors of a pending departure swirled around AFSCME’s 1974 convention, Wurf addressed the issue head on, quoting Eugene Debs’ comments on the old AFL—“I am the friend, not the enemy of the American Federation of Labor. I would conserve, not destroy it. I am opposed, not to the organization or its members . . . but to those who are restraining its evolution and preventing it from fulfilling its true mission.”

Despite the failure of the structural reform plan and the inability to establish a strong PED, Wurf never seriously considered pulling AFSCME out of the AFL-CIO. Don Wasserman, an AFSCME economist, later dismissed the rumors of defection as “idle staff chatter,” noting that Wurf was never going to allow the union to be put in a position where it could be freely raided with the encouragement of the AFL-CIO. But Wurf also continued to believe that public employees had a critical role to play in confronting the political and economic challenges of the mid-1970s. As Wurf put it to John Herling in 1974, he believed the labor movement stood at a crossroads—“we can stand pat as a movement that represents a declining percentage of the workforce, and watch our influence over national direction slip away,” or “we can make

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152 Keynote Address to the 20th International Convention, Jerry Wurf Collection.
153 Quoted in Goulden, *Jerry Wurf*, 221.
ourselves more relevant to the needs of workers in a postindustrial society, and become an even more substantial voice in the shaping of the future than in the past.”

Whatever AFSCME’s disappointments—and they were many between 1969 and 1974—Wurf still believed, as he told the New York Times in October 1974, that the union had a duty to bring a labor movement that often seemed “lost in the rhetoric of the nineteen-fifties . . . [into] tune with the work force of the nineteen-seventies.”

Wurf entered the 1970s with grand ambitions of transforming the American labor movement and leading a social democratic crusade for a stronger social service state. To a large extent, the early half of the decade was a time of unrealized hopes, one in which pyrrhic victories like the creation of the PED and defeat of FAP were overshadowed by its inability to incorporate the interests of public workers into the political agenda of the broader labor movement. The disjuncture between ambition and reality was brought into stark relief by two events in October 1973. After repeated calls for the AFL-CIO to take on a more proactive role in eliminating jurisdictional disputes between unions failed to gain a hearing within the Executive Council, Wurf took the extraordinary step of drafting his own plan for institutional change.

“Reforming the State of Unionism in America,” a lengthy manuscript that survives in Wurf’s papers, outlined the ambitious vision for a restructured labor movement that Wurf presented to the AFL-CIO Executive Council in October 1973. Beginning with the central premise that there was no “special characteristic” that made the American worker less favorable toward collective action than his counterparts elsewhere, Wurf traced the movement’s failure to

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effectively organize to its overgrown and Byzantine structure, nothing that only 48 of the 200-odd unions and employee associations in the United States had more than 100,000 members. Organizing contests, Wurf charged, featured little more than “wild charges and promises” that did little to educate and enlighten workers and left new union members jaded, and cynical with little sense of its broader social purpose. He called for a Commission on the State of Unionism in America, composed of union leaders, academic experts, foreign labor officials, and rank-and-file workers, to explore “every aspect of American unionism . . . with an eye toward overhauling the whole machine.” He encouraged it to find ways to overcome “the closed walls of traditional unionism” and extend membership to “the new and increasingly vibrant organizations” outside the formal labor movement, including the NEA, the American Nursing Association, and the American Association of University Professors. Most controversially, Wurf suggested that the Commission be empowered “to define a limited number of broad jurisdictions” and “to suggest which unions would fit where, and to point the way toward mergers and arrangements between overlapping bodies” with the ultimate goal reducing the total number of unions in the United States. “The old Wobblie dream of ‘one big union’ has had adherents outside of the zealots of the I.W.W.,” he concluded, “But these are the nineteen seventies, and 20 or 30 big unions sound more likely, and probably even more workable.”

One week before the 1973 AFL-CIO convention opened in Florida, Wurf released a shorter version of the plan in a full-page ad-article in the Washington Post titled “Labor’s Battle With Itself.” The method of promotion betrayed Wurf’s isolation. The radical proposal received no formal hearing at the convention—dispatched before the session opened. Even if Wurf had managed to get the issue before the convention, however, it is unlikely that the

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156 “Reforming the State of Unionism in America,” General Manuscript, 10 October 1973, Box 70, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection.

hundreds of local, state and national union officers whose very positions might be eliminated with consolidation would have approved the measure.\textsuperscript{158}

Five days later, Meany controversially elevated Al Shanker of the AFT to the Executive Council.\textsuperscript{159} Ambitious and outspoken, Shanker styled himself the nation’s chief public sector unionist, espousing a brand of unionism that matched Wurf’s in militancy but was more politically conservative—a rivalry that symbolized the institutional and political obstacles that stood in the way of Wurf’s broader agenda.\textsuperscript{160}

Isolated and marginalized within the AFL-CIO, AFSCME increasingly relied on external allies to press its agenda. Its partnership with the NEA continued through CAPE, but the union also reached out to organizations like the National League of Cities and U.S. Conference of Mayors in an effort to forge what Wurf touted as "a new coalition of urban interests."\textsuperscript{161}

The efforts bore little fruit, resting on a common ground that was growing narrower and less tenable as the economic and fiscal climate turned for the worse. AFSCME’s entire policy agenda rested on a premise that public services were inherently good and necessary and that the public wanted to see them expand. When Wurf appeared before a Senate committee in February 1973, he proclaimed that "the questions are not those of whether Government should provide for

\textsuperscript{158} Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, October 17-23, Americana Hotel, Bal Harbour, Florida, AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes.

\textsuperscript{159} The selection prompted an almost unprecedented level of dissent because he was still the head of United Federation of Teachers in New York City and had not taken charge of the national union, and was only approved by the relatively narrow margin of 17-8 after heavy lobbying from Meany and Kirkland. Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council, AFL-CIO, 19 October 1973, AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes.


\textsuperscript{161} “The Cause is the Country," Jerry Wurf Collection.
needed services, for that mandate is clearly established," but rather how those services should be funded and administered.162

Having come of age during the heyday of American liberalism that extended from the New Deal to the Great Society, neither Wurf nor others in AFSCME’s leadership saw the need to argue a case for the importance of public services as a social good. They failed to recognize the growing skepticism of would-be allies, the boldness of opponents, or the start of a broader shift in American politics, but even if they had, they were poorly positioned to respond. Purely-public sector organization like CAPE were limited by their narrow membership, and AFSCME’s inability to integrate its concerns into the labor movement's broader agenda left it more vulnerable to a rising tide of anxieties over taxes and government services as the economic crisis deepened in the mid-1970s.


“These are the dog days for American liberalism,” a sullen Jerry Wurf acknowledged to an equally dour crowd at Americans for Democratic Action’s 25th annual Roosevelt Day Dinner in March 1973. Four months after Richard Nixon’s landslide victory over Senator George McGovern, the political landscape had rarely been bleaker for liberals. “Never before,” Wurf observed, “have the American people been more troubled, more confused, more divided or more distrusting of the people and institutions to whom they, historically, have looked for leadership.”

Yet despite the scale of McGovern’s record-setting defeat, Wurf found cause for hope. The voters had rejected McGovern, not liberalism, he argued, citing a Gallup Poll that found overwhelming support for the statement “The federal government has a responsibility to try to do away with poverty in this country.” The electorate would still support an expansive, active federal agenda to aid the elderly, educate the young, clean up the environment, and revitalize the American city, he insisted, but only if those programs were presented in ways that appealed to the average voter at “a broad self-interest level” and “at a level where they can see results.”

The problem, Wurf argued, was not the content of liberalism. “They’re not sure about you and me,” he told the audience, “They’re not sure about our political leadership. They’re not sure about the Democratic Party and its goals and principles. They’re not sure where they fit anymore.” The rhythm building in his prepared text, Wurf came to his pointed conclusion:

1 “Competing for a Majority,” Speech Prepared for Delivery by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees at the 25th Roosevelt Day Dinner of the Americans for Democratic Action, Boston, MA, 10 March 1973, Box 70, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection, AFSCME Office of the President, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [Hereafter cited as “Jerry Wurf Collection”].
“There is room in the party for the poor, for blacks, for Chicanos, for more women, for youth, and so on,” he continued, “But they are not enough. We have to make room in the party, and in the process, for those who were left out or who opted out last time.”

Foremost among those who had been left out? The majority of union households who had voted to reelect Nixon.

For Wurf, then, the crisis of American liberalism went hand-in-hand with a crisis of representation in the Democratic Party. The mostly middle-class activists who, inspired by Black Freedom movement and spurred by opposition to the Vietnam War, wrestled control of the party from its traditional leadership between 1968 and 1972 brought with them a distinctive shift from bread-and-butter concerns to a whole range of post-economic issues, from minority rights and foreign policy to environmental protection. Alienating traditional constituencies—above all, organized labor—the emergence of the New Politics, as this diverse range of newly energized political actors came to be called, posed a fundamental challenge to the New Deal coalition that had dominated American politics since the 1930s.

The developments offered an intriguing blend of challenge and opportunity for AFSCME. Boasting strong civil rights credentials and a respectable anti-war record, AFSCME had also vocally supported efforts to open up the party’s processes—all of which put it in a far better position than most unions when it came to dealing with the New Politics. Between 1972 and 1974, Wurf tried to position AFSCME as a bridge between the two poles of the Democratic Party, seeking a unifying consensus that could fuse the energy of the new social movements with the inclusive economic agenda of the New Deal and organizational clout of unions and other

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traditional Democratic constituencies. Owing in part to both the union’s growing ambitions and frustration with its marginal stature within the broader labor movement, the campaign to rebuild a Democratic coalition for the 1970s was made more urgent by an emerging urban fiscal crisis. In the aftermath of McGovern’s defeat, Wurf came to believe that only a reconstructed Democratic party could effectively mobilize resources and rhetoric in defense of liberal programs and policies against their increasingly vocal and visible critics.

The efforts met with repeated failure, as both the New Politics and the AFL-CIO resisted efforts to rebuild the coalition fractured in the divisive presidential contest of 1972. Despite backing party reform, supporting McGovern’s candidacy, and defending the new system against attacks after 1972, AFSCME proved incapable of persuading key elements of the New Politics of the need for a traditional economic and urban agenda, in part because those elements felt themselves under fire from traditional party constituencies like the AFL-CIO. The union’s efforts to rebuild both the party and the liberal coalition culminated in the deeply disappointing midterm conference in December 1974.

At the very moment that AFSCME reached an unprecedented level of visibility and political influence, then, the union found itself powerless to alter the changing economic winds.

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that threatened to shred not simply the narrow institutional gains, but also the broader social
democratic agenda. Wurf had predicted but was nonetheless unprepared to respond to the onset
of a full-blown urban fiscal crisis, punctuated in the summer of 1975 by the near bankruptcy of
New York City. Though he had long warned of the need for a fundamental rethinking of urban
fiscal policy—and had regularly introduced it as a matter of concern within the Democratic Party
between 1972 and 1974—he was caught off-guard by the scope of the crisis in New York City
and by the extent to which public sector unions were cast as its cause.

It was in this context of frustration and disappointment that Wurf guided AFSCME
behind little-known Georgia governor named Jimmy Carter as its preferred candidate ahead of
the 1976 presidential election. The desperate gambit illustrated just how far Wurf’s horizon had
fallen in the mid-1970s, for however electable Carter seemed, he seemed (and, later, proved) ill-
suited to lead a revived and revised labor liberalism.

“A Golden Opportunity”

The split between reformers and regulars grew out of the chaotic 1968 presidential
election cycle. Fueled by growing opposition to the Vietnam War, Senator Eugene McCarthy
built an impressive insurgent campaign that forced incumbent President Lyndon Johnson aside,
spurred Senator Robert F. Kennedy’s fateful entrance, and threw open the Democratic
nomination. A long and indecisive primary process followed, culminating in a chaotic
convention in Chicago, where Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey secured the nomination,
while police and protesters clashed violently on the streets below. Down by double-digits in the
polls through most of the summer, few gave Humphrey a serious chance of defeating former
Vice President Richard Nixon. With the Democratic Party paralyzed by divisions, the labor
movement launched an unprecedented effort on Humphrey’s behalf, registering some 4.6 million voters, printing more than 100 million pieces of literature, setting up thousands of phone banks, and organizing nearly 100,000 Election Day volunteers—effectively transforming the Democracy, historian Jefferson Cowie has argued, into “a labor party,” with the party’s normal channels replaced by “the institutional power and financial resources of the AFL-CIO.” Though the campaign ultimately fell short, it brought Humphrey within a single percentage point on Election Day.⁵

The 1968 election marked the last time that the AFL-CIO would play such a dominant role in the presidential nominating process. To mollify McCarthy’s supporters and other critics of the insulated nominating process, the 1968 Democratic convention authorized a review and reform of the delegate selection process. Distracted by the violence outside the convention hall and by an imminent debate over a controversial foreign policy platform plank, the delegates gave little consideration to the motion, assenting in what Theodore White later dismissed as “a fit of absentmindedness” to the creation of the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection.⁶ There were few initial signs that the commission—popularly known by the names of its two chairmen, Senator George McGovern (D-SD) and Representative Donald Fraser (D-MN)—would fundamentally alter the existing system. Senator Fred Harris, a populist from Oklahoma and newly elected Democratic National Committee (DNC) chairman, saw the

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commission as a vehicle for reuniting the fractured party, populating it with moderate reformers who had dutifully backed Humphrey in the general election. When the body finished its preliminary work in late 1969, it simply affirmed a vague, unobjectionable principle of expanded representation, leaving the details and implementation of the principle to the commission’s staff. The staff, dominated by young, idealistic lawyers, took the commission’s work much further—issuing a report that called on state parties to take proactive steps to include targeted categories (racial minorities, women, and youth) for expanded representation, terminating the “unit rule” of convention voting which had allowed powerful political bosses to barter and trade delegations, and, most significantly, requiring that all convention delegates be elected through primaries or caucuses. The effect was a dramatic transformation of the nominating process, one that carried with it what one scholar has characterized as “the diminution, the constriction, [and] at times the elimination, of the regular party in the politics of presidential election.”

Galled by the exclusion of either unions or workers as “special categories,” the AFL-CIO read reform as a direct, explicit, and intentional attack on its own power broker role in the Democratic Party. From the late 1940s through the late 1960s, future AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland later recalled, a “tacit, invisible but real arrangement” governed relations between the labor movement and the Democratic Party. In what Kirkland likened to a collective bargaining relationship, a small group of union leaders, the heads of the largest unions and the officers of the AFL-CIO, negotiated with party bosses, trading on the future delivery of both union resources and, theoretically at least, members’ votes, for concessions on party platform, political priorities, and preferred candidates. “Party leaders knew that, in the general election, they needed labor to draw some of the water and hew some of the wood,” he remembered. “They wouldn’t

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8 Crotty, *Decision for the Democrats*, 110.
nominate anyone who was too offensive to the trade union movement.” Despite the periodic invocation of an older non-partisan political philosophy (“reward friends, punish enemies”), the AFL-CIO’s political operations had become so interconnected with the party’s national apparatus that AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education director Alexander Barkan later rallied opposition to party reform by proclaiming that labor was not about “to let these Harvard-Berkeley Camelots take over our party.”

While party reform threatened the position of the AFL-CIO, it offered an opportunity for liberal unions like AFSCME. Wurf saw the open, participatory process promised by the reformers as a means to not only increase AFSCME’s influence, but also to reenergize a stale labor movement. As he later wrote in an article in the *New Republic*, Wurf believed that the new rules offered unions a competitive advantage over other interest groups because of their superior discipline and “comparative orderliness.” Rather than curb their own demands to meet the political needs of elected officials, he continued, the new system of primaries and caucuses offered the chance “to say goodbye to bosses” by directly mobilizing the membership, presenting

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10 The proposed change was so significant that the AFL-CIO leadership initially believed that the broader party would never see them through. Meany believed (as it turned out, correctly) that the commission and its staff was biased toward reform, making the result of the operation inevitable, but he also apparently believed that any reforms could be blocked at a later date, either through the DNC or the state party organizations. Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats*, 84. Emphasis added. White, *The Making of the President, 1972*, 38. I have explored the persistence of non-partisanship in Joseph E. Hower, “‘Our Conception of Non-Partisanship means a Partisan Non-Partisanship’: The Search for Political Identity in the American Federation of Labor, 1947-1955,” *Labor History* 51, no. 3 (August 2010): 455-478.

11 While the building and construction trades, with their overwhelmingly white, male base dominated the AFL-CIO and largely opposed reforms designed to open up the Democratic Party process, the more diverse public and service-sector unions, as well as some of the largest industrial unions, tended to be more supportive, both because it promised a more inclusive party and because it created mechanisms to bypass the AFL-CIO’s dominance. Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats*, 83-87; Battista, *The Revival of Labor Liberalism*, 62-66. Contemporaries tended to cast the political divisions in most simplistic terms—as a split between “bread and butter” unionism and broader social activism. Haynes Johnson and Nick Kotz, *The Unions: The Washington Post National Report* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), 15-18.
“a golden opportunity to bring working families access to power through the Democratic Party.”

AFSCME seized on the new system, determined to demonstrate its potential power and use it to increase the union’s position in 1972. Though the union lacked representation on the original reform commission, it played a key role in legitimizing its work, dispatching officers to testify at the local hearings, folding party reform issue into their respective political education programs, encouraging their members to participate in delegate elections, and lending their considerable political clout to pressure state parties to comply with the Commission’s recommendations.

But despite its support for party reform, AFSCME did not immediately back the presidential candidate most identified with it, George McGovern, in the 1972 Democratic primary. Though Wurf privately preferred McGovern, the South Dakota Senator’s base among anti-war youth originally made him an unlikely candidate for nomination, so AFSCME turned instead to Senator Edmund Muskie, Humphrey’s running mate from 1968. As aide William Hamilton later recalled, Wurf outlined the case for backing Muskie during a marathon Saturday-morning staff meeting at his home in early January 1972, noting that the Maine Senator “seemed to be a winner” and that early support would provide a way “to get recognition for the union.”

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13 Most of the unions that supported reform followed this pattern. The main exception was the UAW, whose Political Director, William Dodds, was a member of the McGovern-Fraser Commission and who sided openly with the reformers. Schlesinger, The New Reformers: Forces for Change in American Politics (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).
The decision was approved by the IEB—the first primary endorsement in the union’s history—and on January 19, 1972, AFSCME became the first national union to endorse Muskie for the Democratic nomination.\footnote{16}{Richard Halloran, “Big Union Ready to Back Muskie,” \textit{New York Times}, 19 January 1972, 19. After the decision was made, but before it was announced, Wurf met personally with McGovern to explain the choice. McGovern pressed Wurf through a ninety-minute meeting—and later admitted that he had been “hard” on Wurf because he regarded AFSCME as his fledgling campaign’s best chance of an early high-level labor endorsement, “the one that I thought . . . we might have a real chance in bringing around.” Notes and Transcript, Interview with George McGovern, 5 January 1982, Folder 8, Joseph Goulden Collection.}

At a joint press conference, Wurf announced that AFSCME was supporting “the man who can best unify the Democratic Party and lead it to victory in November”—a view regularly repeated in its mailings and publications over the next three months.\footnote{17}{Statement by Jerry Wurf, President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, at a News Conference at the Mayflower Hotel, Washington, DC, 19 January 1972, Box 55, Folder 10, Jerry Wurf Collection.} To a surprising degree, AFSCME’s materials tended to overlook the Democratic primary and focus instead on his appeal in the general election. After praising Muskie’s positions on jobs, taxes, trade, consumer protection and health care, the union’s \textit{Muskie Makes Sense} pamphlet devoted substantial sections to criticizing the Nixon record (“higher prices, a freeze on wages, . . . and high unemployment”), but little attention to the host of other Democratic contenders, including McGovern.\footnote{18}{AFSCME also included an early indictment of Alabama George Wallace’s campaign, focusing on his state’s record “low wages and backward laws are a sad testimony to Wallace’s double-talk approach to working families”) “Ed Muskie Makes Sense for Working Families,” Labor for Muskie Committee Leaflet, n.d., Box 55, Folder 10, Jerry Wurf Collection. At least early in the contest, the union also tended to downplay Muskie’s position on issues of institutional concern. This changed somewhat later on in the campaign. For instance, on April 18, 1972, after Muskie’s defeat in the Florida primary but before he had pulled out entirely, Wurf wrote an open letter to the union membership justifying the endorsement in terms of Muskie’s superior position on legislation benefiting state and local government employees, and contrasting that record with the Nixon administration’s indifference. Letter from Jerry Wurf to AFSCME Membership, 18 April 1972, Box 55, Folder 10, Jerry Wurf Collection.}
AFSCME expected to play a key role in the Muskie campaign, but was soon disappointed. Shortly after its endorsement, the union dispatched members from its Boston locals to bolster turnout at Muskie events in New Hampshire, where, hampered by the then-secret machinations of Nixon’s “plumbers,” Muskie managed only a narrow victory over the ostensibly unelectable McGovern. AFSCME’s staff believed that a strong finish in Florida, the fourth contest in the cycle and the first that featured the majority of the Democratic field, could revive Muskie’s campaign. But as early as February 2, union operatives began voicing concerns about their candidate. Frank Cowan, who ran the union’s outreach operations, complained that the Muskie camp’s refusal to open its inner circle to union staff created the perception that AFSCME was simply a mechanism to turn out black voters.30 Three weeks later, AFSCME political director Jerry Clark warned that Muskie’s refusal to engage bread-and-butter economic issues was allowing George Wallace to seize working-class support through race-based appeals.31 On the eve of the March 14 contest, frustrated by Muskie’s faltering standing in the polls, Cowan fired off another memorandum to national headquarters, eviscerating the Muskie campaign for its lack of a clear strategy or identity.32 In the end, Muskie finished an unimpressive fourth in the Florida primary, behind Wallace, Humphrey, and Jackson, and just a few points ahead of

19 Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, Joseph Goulden Collection.
20 “Florida Primary and Muskie Presidential Campaign,” Memorandum from Frank Cowan to Jerry Wurf and Bill Lucy, 2 February 1972, Box 56, Folder 4, Jerry Wurf Collection.
21 “Muskie Campaign Strategy in Florida,” Memorandum from Jerry Clark to Jerry Wurf, 26 February 1972, Box 55, Folder 10, Jerry Wurf Collection.
22 “Muskie Florida Primary Campaign,” Memorandum from Frank Cowan to Jerry Clark, 2 March 1972, Box 55, Folder 10, Jerry Wurf Collection.
McGovern. AFSCME stood by Muskie until late April, when a crippling loss in Pennsylvania finally forced his withdrawal from the race.

With Muskie out, and with AFSCME’s clout compromised, Wurf announced on April 27 that the union would play no further role in the primary process. Though the collapse of Muskie’s campaign undercut AFSCME’s efforts to seize a leadership role within the Democratic Party in the 1972 primaries, Wurf did not consider the effort a complete loss, boasting at the union convention a month later that the endorsement had “made it clear that we have a separate political identity . . . that we are a force to be dealt with . . . [and] that we are not ‘go-along guys.” The prediction proved more prescient than Wurf could have known.

Left without a candidate after Muskie’s defeat, AFSCME could nevertheless ill-afford to withdraw from presidential politics in 1972. After all, the union’s entire strategy in backing Muskie had been predicated on the overlapping goals of backing a candidate that could demonstrate the union’s political power and unseat incumbent Richard Nixon. After three years of trying, without success, to find common ground on domestic and social policy, Wurf had denounced Nixon in mid-1971 as opposed to “every measure designed to ease the economic and social woes in American life.”

But Wurf’s concerns also ran deeper than policy differences—he was wary of Nixon’s efforts to court white working class support and disturbed by the willingness of many in the labor

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23 Theodore White noted that Muskie’s entire presidential campaign had depended on retaining the perception of inevitability. “It was a high-cost, head-of-the-table, white-middle-class vote, dependent entirely on his image of front-runner, the safe man.” The loss in Florida was devastating to the campaign, and, in hindsight, ended any reasonable chance that Muskie had at winning the nomination. White, The Making of the President, 1972, 84.
24 Letter from Jerry Wurf to AFSCME Membership, 18 April 1972, Box 55, Folder 10, Jerry Wurf Collection.
25 Telex Message from AFSCME Headquarters to Area Directors, 27 April 1972, Box 55, Folder 10, Jerry Wurf Collection.
26 Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Jerry Wurf, President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, at the Union’s 19th International Convention, Houston, TX, 29 May 1972, Box 4, Folder 10, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers].
movement to lend credence to the efforts. Wurf was one of a handful of union presidents who rejected an invitation to a White House Labor Day picnic in 1970, stating plainly that he had “no desire to create the impression that there is a happy, warm, intimate relationship” between himself or the union and the president.\(^{28}\) He later went on to reject invitations to join a series of advisory panels created by the administration—more symbolic than substantive, in Wurf’s mind—for which he was later designated a place on Nixon’s infamous “Enemies List.”\(^{29}\)

Unlike many other union leaders, then, Wurf had little trouble positioning AFSCME behind the ascendant McGovern, whose success in the Democratic primaries quashed some of the earlier concerns about electability. While McGovern’s lack of a clear economic and domestic agenda was disheartening, he seemed to share basic premises with AFSCME—in an August 1971 interview with *Playboy*, for instance, he touted the principled importance of public services, dismissing those who cast government as “a kind of desperation measure” and affirming that “in some areas, the Government ought to be the employer of first resort . . . [that] there are certain things that can be done best by public-service employment.”\(^{30}\) Later, John Kenneth Galbraith, leading postwar economist and champion of expanded public services, became a key adviser to the campaign—further reassurance for AFSCME of its domestic bona fides.

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Wurf was one of the few national labor leaders eager to see a McGovern candidacy, announcing his personal support in early July. From the start of the primary process, many in the AFL-CIO, particularly Meany and Barkan, had looked unenthusiastically on his campaign. Most preferred Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson (D-WA), a hawkish Cold War liberal, whose denunciations of party reform (and vocal support of the Vietnam War) better represented the AFL-CIO leadership’s position. When the Wall Street Journal later reported “sagging” morale within COPE, Barkan penned a memorandum to Meany proclaiming the staff’s steadfast commitment to battling “the ADA, McCarthy, McGovern, and the new politics threat to the Democratic Party.”

Through much of the spring and summer, Wurf publicly insisted that labor would fall in line behind the Democratic nominee—despite mounting reports in the press to the contrary. Accepting the ADA’s first annual Walter P. Reuther Award in March 1972, for instance, Wurf reassured a skeptical audience that the labor movement would eventually “break its back on behalf of that nominee to defeat Nixon” and reminded them that Meany had pledged to support

31 “Union Chief Shifts Backing to McGovern,” Washington Post, 4 July 1972, A9. McGovern recalled that some less well-known labor union leaders did lend him early endorsements, most prominently Al Grospiron of the OCAWU and Pat Forman of the Meatcutters. Though he had the support of some UAW staffers, most importantly Bill Dodds and Victor Reuther, McGovern did not win the highly coveted endorsement of Leonard Woodcock until the summer, around the same time as Wurf. Notes and Transcript, Interview with Sen. George McGovern, Joseph Goulden Collection. For example, the Machinists, another key member of the liberal wing of the labor movement, supported Jackson. “Machinists’ Election Activity,” Memorandum from Neal Gregory to John Hein, 22 March 1972, Box 5, Folder 2, AFSCME Legislation and Political Education Department Papers, 1969-1977, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan. [Hereafter cited as AFSCME Legislation and Political Education Department Papers].


33 Memorandum from Alexander Barkan to George Meany, 4 September 1970, Box 98, Folder 18, Office of the President, George Meany Files, 1940-1980.

34 In early July, Philip Shabecoff of the New York Times reported that a high-ranking official at the AFL-CIO had told him that the federation was seriously considering neutrality, citing grievances that ranged from McGovern’s opposition to the Vietnam war to his failure to back the repeal of Section 14(b) of Taft-Hartley, the provision that allowed states to enact anti-union right-to-work laws. Shabecoff, “Labor Hints at McGovern-Nixon Neutrality,” New York Times, 5 July 1972, 30. On the history of the “Stop McGovern” movement, see Bruce Miroff, The Liberals’ Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 72-98.
any Democratic nominee except Wallace. A few months later, Wurf took to the press to ridicule the “groundless assumption” that the South Dakota Senator would hurt liberals in down-ticket races. When senior federation officials began leaking rumors that the AFL-CIO might withhold its endorsement for the first time since 1948, Wurf issued a statement reminding the press that “any ‘anonymous’ or ‘off-the-record’ whispers by staff and individuals on behalf of the AFL-CIO” were “individual views and not as any sort of official stance,” defending McGovern as “a strong pro-labor candidate” and reiterating his belief that the reformed nominating system offered labor the opportunity to act as “a force for change and progress” within the party.

Having thoroughly misread the depth of anti-McGovern sentiment, Wurf was thus genuinely stunned when the AFL-CIO ultimately pulled its support for the Democratic nominee. After a last-minute effort to block McGovern’s nomination through parliamentary procedure failed at the 1972 convention, Meany called a special meeting of the Executive Council on July 19 to consider the AFL-CIO’s stand in the general election. Meany began by declaring that the

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35 Acceptance Speech by Jerry Wurf for the First Annual Walter P. Reuther Award from the Americans for Democratic Action, 16 March 1972, Box 70, Folder 22, Jerry Wurf Collection.
38 For an overview of the 1972 convention, see White, The Making of the President, 1972, 162-165. The AFL-CIO’s goal was to use a complicated series of procedural and parliamentary maneuvers to deny McGovern the first-ballot nomination, at which point it could then leverage the three hundred union to broker a compromise nominee, which promised to both avoid the objectionable choice of McGovern and restore the unions’ traditional role in party affairs. The key early vote required challenging the winner-take-all system in California and thus splitting the state’s delegation between McGovern and Humphrey. Wurf, along with the 23 other delegates from AFSCME united in opposition to the “Stop McGovern” strategy before the Credentials and Rules committees—even though as many as half preferred Humphrey. “Labor Delegate Selection,” Memorandum from John Perkins to Alexander Barkan, 26 June 1972, Box 98, Folder 19, Office of the President, George Meany Files; “Voting of Challenged Delegates to the Democratic National Convention,” Memorandum from John Perkins to Alexander Barkan, 26 June 1972, Box 98, Folder 19, Office of the President, George Meany Files, 1940-1980; Memorandum from Alexander Barkan to Lane Kirkland, 27 June 1972, Box 98, Folder 19, Office of the President, George Meany Files, 1940-1980; AFSCME Delegates and Alternatives, Democratic National Convention, Miami Beach, Florida, July 10-14, 1972,” Internal Memorandum, 1972, Box 9, Folder 3, AFSCME Legislation and Political Education Department Papers. “Candidate Preference of the AFSCME Delegates to the Democratic National Convention,” Memorandum from Neal Gregory
general sentiment of the labor movement was opposition to both McGovern and Nixon. Noting that presidential endorsements were a relatively recent development for the national federation—only once had a candidate been formally endorsed prior to 1952—and that the practice was contingent on the presence of a clear consensus choice, Meany recommended the AFL-CIO remain neutral in the presidential contest and focus its energy and resources instead on Congressional elections. Wurf pleaded for patience, urging the Council to delay action until August, when a post-convention bump might have improved McGovern’s standing in the polls, but with Meany insistent, there was little he could do. The neutrality resolution was adopted by a 27-3 margin, and Meany immediately declared his own intention not to vote at all in the race.  

The *New York Times* quoted an anonymous source within the AFL-CIO who claimed that that the move was designed as punishment for those who had “arrogantly excluded” organized labor. “This is our showdown with the new politics,” the unnamed official said. “At some point the movement within the Democratic Party had to be stemmed, and this is it.”

Several factors account for Meany’s staunch opposition to McGovern’s nomination. The AFL-CIO’s own polling showed scant support for the South Dakota Senator, and the Federation criticized elements of McGovern’s voting record—specifically, his failure to back a repeal of the right-to-work provision of the Taft-Hartley Act. But most contemporaries tended to focus on the cultural chasm between Meany and the McGovernites. The *New York Times*, for example, reported that “the strong labor hostility to Mr. McGovern appeared to rest as much on the

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41 McGovern won just 4 percent of the vote combined in five regional COPE conferences in early 1972, compared with Muskie’s 39 percent and Humphrey’s 37 percent, and only 7 percent in the two most liberal centers, New York and Boston. Memorandum from Alexander Barkan to George Meany, 15 March 1972, Box 98, Folder 18, Office of the President, George Meany Files, 1940-1980.
lifestyles of his supporters” as “substantive issues,” while the Wall Street Journal quoted an
unnamed union official who proclaimed that he would not support “a man who favors killing
this interpretation, infamously dismissing the “new” Democratic Party as an organization “taken
over by people named Jack who look like Jills and smell like Johns.”\footnote{Rick Perlstein, Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 659.}

Regardless of the motivation, Wurf was furious at the result. Echoing his earlier critique
of the AFL-CIO’s handling of the convention—“tragic” and “pitiful”—Wurf released a
statement dismissing the neutrality decision as the product of “personal loyalties” within the
AFL-CIO rather than “a true index of support for the Democratic ticket by American trade
unionists”—an unusually direct reference to Meany’s control of the Executive Council—and
decrying the lost opportunity “to have substantial influence within the party independent from
neutrality stance “had more to do with how McGovern won the nomination than with his record
before or during the campaign.” All of the reasons offered by the AFL-CIO, from labor law
reform to Vietnam, were ultimately secondary, Wurf argued, to “participation and access, the
AFL-CIO’s vested interest which ignored the rich opportunities for workers and their unions in
the more open, ‘new’ party.”\footnote{Wurf, “What Labor Has Against McGovern,” New Republic, 21-23. Some contemporaries shared Wurf’s view, casting the AFL-CIO’s decision as a calculated step designed to retain its influence within the party. One union official, for instance, told the Washington Post that Meany’s concern was not so much that that labor would be displaced within the party, but that he would personally be pushed aside for a new group of labor leaders. “It’s going to kill George,” the official suggested, “if he has to sit there for four years watching Leonard Woodcock and Jerry}
Other union leaders shared Wurf’s convictions, and the AFL-CIO’s neutrality decision had the unintended consequence of galvanizing liberal-left unions and spurring them into cooperative political action outside the Federation’s control.46 As early as July 17, two days prior to the decision, the Wall Street Journal reported that “a small group of key union leaders” was planning to withhold their contributions to COPE in protest.47 Momentum built over the week that followed the vote: on July 24, labor insider John Herling reported that some of the largest and most active unions were distancing themselves from the AFL-CIO’s “misrepresentation” of McGovern’s record.48 The next day, eight union presidents, including Wurf, Leonard Woodcock (UAW), Floyd Smith (International Association of Machinists (IAM)), Al Grospiron (Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers Union (OCAWU)), Jacob Potofsky (ACWA), and Patrick Gorman (Meatcutters), drafted an open letter calling for “a coordinating mechanism for labor activity in the 1972 Presidential election.”49 The Labor for McGovern Committee was officially launched in mid-August when the same unions announced that they would pool their resources and coordinate their efforts on his behalf in the general election.50 For the next three months, Labor for McGovern served as the most important vehicle for unions to participate in the 1972

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46 As Taylor Dark has shown, the 1972 election was a turning point in the history of American labor politics. Afterward, organized labor’s political activity became more fragmented, more dependent on the efforts of individual unions than the national federation. “No longer would [unions] be willing to let the AFL-CIO bureaucracy serve as their main vehicle for influencing presidential politics,” Dark argued, unions became more aggressive in developing their own political machinery and more willing to break from the national federation. Dark, The Unions and the Democrats, 90-91.


49 Night Letter from the Labor for McGovern Committee to the Presidents and Officers of 101 AFL-CIO Affiliated Unions, 25 July 1972, Box 55, Folder 14, Jerry Wurf Collection.

50 Labor for McGovern Press Release, 14 August 1972, Box 55, Folder 14, Jerry Wurf Collection. In his otherwise brilliant survey of the 1970s, Jefferson Cowie has suggested that Labor for McGovern grew out of another organization, Labor for Peace, which was created by union leaders dissenting from the AFL-CIO’s position on Vietnam. Obviously there was a great deal of overlap between the membership of the two organizations, and the timing of their creation (June and July 1972, respectively) suggests that they cannot be completely separated. Cowie, Stayin’ Alive, 104-105.
presidential election, funneling financial resources, organizing teams of union leaders to stump for the ticket, and rallying and registering union members. Eventually drawing support from more than forty unions, Labor for McGovern marked the largest independent political organization of unions since the Non-Partisan League of the 1930s.

AFSCME also used its usual political apparatus on McGovern’s behalf. On July 22, the union’s political action committee endorsed the Democratic ticket, warning that American workers could not afford another four years in which “their paychecks are frozen and their tax dollars frittered away in a war in South-east Asia.” The union also published a report, *McGovern: A Good Labor Record*, which confronted the claims by the AFL-CIO in *The McGovern Record – A Critical Appraisal*, a white paper that, in historian Jefferson Cowie’s words, had “set about transforming one of the most pro-labor Democratic presidential nominees in U.S. history into an anti-labor hack.” Dismissing the federation’s claims about McGovern as “erroneous and misleading,” AFSCME used COPE’s metrics to show that McGovern had been “right” on more than 93 percent of his votes.

Privately, the concerns of many labor-liberals persisted through the fall campaign. Domestic policy continued to lag behind foreign affairs. As early as July 1971, Galbraith had warned McGovern that he was “uneasy” with the candidate’s emphasis on tax reduction, noting

51 Dark, “Organized Labor and Party Reform,” 515. The committee continued to organize teams of union leaders to stump for McGovern in the final weeks of the campaign, even after became evident that he was going to lose the election. “Union Leaders Will Stump For McGovern Labor Vote,” *New York Times*, 27 October 1972, 24.
that it was “not easy to reconcile the pressure for filling urgent social needs with increased private consumption.” Galbraith repeated similar advice regularly over the next twelve months—often without effect—and as McGovern’s prospects faded in fall, he urged the candidate to adopt a more populist language line against Nixon, to pose the campaign as a battle between “the very rich and the rest of us,” “the comfortable or the concerned.” Many in AFSCME believed that the flagging campaign owed much to McGovern’s failure to incorporate union leaders into the candidate’s inner circle. “McGovern’s people paid too little attention to us,” staffer Bill Hamilton later complained. “They wanted our money and our bodies, but not our participation.” As the scale of McGovern’s likely defeat became evident in September and October, some in AFSCME wanted to pull resources from the campaign and invest them in state and congressional races. Wurf refused, Hamilton later remembered, in part to spite the AFL-CIO political staff and partly to “keep the labor coalition together for use in the future.”

In the end, the efforts of the liberal labor unions had little effect on the outcome of the election. McGovern carried just Massachusetts and the District of Columbia on November 7, suffering one of the most decisive defeats in American political history. Nixon won more than sixty percent of the popular vote, including a majority of union households, ushering in a whole new conception of working-class politics.


57 Letter from John Kenneth Galbraith to George McGovern, 19 October 1972, Box 530, John Kenneth Galbraith Personal Papers.

58 Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, Joseph Goulden Collection.

59 Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, Joseph Goulden Collection.

60 The rejection of McGovern, Cowie has argued, “created an enduring, if distorted, political template for what the white, male American working class was not: radical, effete, movement-based, anti-war, and, perhaps most profoundly, Democratic.” Cowie, Stayin’ Alive, 122. McGovern’s nomination and campaign played a key role in spurring the coherence of the neo-conservative movement in American politics. Justin Vaisse, Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 84-86.
Many at the AFL-CIO headquarters saw McGovern’s defeat as a vindication of the Federation’s neutrality strategy. In the days after the election, one official boasted to the *New York Times* that “no political party will ever take us for granted again,” while Barkan later bragged that “there wasn’t one chance in a million of a McGovern problem ever occurring again.”

Wurf took no such solace in the election results. He viewed McGovern’s defeat as a disaster for American liberalism, and was particularly alarmed by Nixon’s success among white workers. As the party began to rebuild itself after McGovern’s defeat, Wurf was convinced that the openness and transparency of the New Politics had to be paired with a more class-driven agenda. This was the core of his address to the ADA in March 1973. Both the reformers and the unions, he argued, had to “own a share of the ashes” for Nixon’s victory: the labor movement for ceasing to function as “a bulwark of progress and reasonableness”; the “intellectual and liberal elements” of the party for becoming “insulated and self-centered.” Each, he insisted, had ignored the concerns of “the man who works with his hands or on an assembly line, the housewife who cares for her home and her family, the young person who struggles through public schools and into a difficult job.”

But there was a bigger point, one that Wurf made most clearly in testimony to a Senate subcommittee two weeks prior to the ADA address. The crisis of American politics was one of substance as well as representation. Nixon had seized on his sizable victory over the fractured

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61 Philip Shabecoff, “Labor Struggles to Unify Ranks and Regain Influence in Democratic Party,” *New York Times*, 13 November 1972, 27. “Meeting With Barkan,” Memorandum from Neal Gregory to Bill Welsh and Jerry Wurf, 28 August 1973, Box 55, Folder 7, Jerry Wurf Collection. When several McGovern supporters, including Wurf, challenged the AFL-CIO’s handling of the 1972 presidential election cycle at the next quarterly Executive Council meeting, Meany defended the decision as consistent with the Federation’s long-standing policy of non-partisan action, and the quasi-official verdict entered into the Executive Council minutes was that that “COPE had done an excellent job under very difficult circumstances” and it was proper to “put aside past divisions and seek unity for the elections to come.” Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, February 19-26, 1973.  
62 “Competing for a Majority,” Jerry Wurf Collection.
Democratic Party as a mandate for the premise that “Bigger Government is the wrong way to meet our Nation’s needs”—a far more dangerous development, Wurf believed, than the party’s short-term political struggles. “The Congress must not permit the debate to polarize around the simplistic question of cuts in Federal spending versus a tax increase,” Wurf warned. “The Congress must illustrate in specific human terms the real impact and the human cost of the administration’s budget.” “It is futile, to debate about programs which clash head-on with the rhetoric of the ‘work ethic,’” he continued. “The battle cannot be won with slogans of ‘save the cities’ and ‘war on poverty’ and ‘welfare reform,’ but we can win the battle for the programs which are the substance of these slogans.”

“Unity Constructed with Band-Aids and Scotch Tape”

In an effort to unify the party after the divisive primary process, the 1972 Democratic convention authorized a mid-term meeting for late 1974. Originally charged with drafting a charter that could provide a lasting, unifying structure of governance for the party, the conference took on a different purpose in the wake of McGovern’s landslide defeat, becoming a forum for re-litigating the controversial changes in party structure and delegate selection rules. Those who had opposed McGovern’s nomination, particularly the AFL-CIO, saw the conference as an opportunity to roll back reform and reestablish the old power broker system, a campaign that forced the original advocates of reform to entrench themselves further in its cause. Both approaches marginalized the concerns of liberal labor leaders like Wurf, who hoped the 1974 conference would provide an opportunity to move beyond the battles over process and address

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instead the broader economic and policy challenges of the mid-1970s. Given its strong support for McGovern and party reform, AFSCME expected its influence to expand within the “new” Democratic Party, and saw the 1974 conference as the first opportunity to test its new position.

Buoyed by the scope of McGovern’s defeat, the AFL-CIO launched its campaign to roll back the reforms within days of the election. Appearing before the distraught DNC on November 11, 1972, Barkan boldly demanded both a larger share of seats on the national committee and complete AFL-CIO control over the selection of labor delegates. Though the proposal was easily defeated, it foreshadowed much of the thrust of the Federation’s efforts over the next two years, which hinged on a combination of expanding labor’s influence within the party and reasserting its control over the political activities of constituent unions. The core of the plan, one insider told columnist Victor Riesel in late March 1973, was to “reshape the Democratic party into a vehicle they can live with.”

The AFL-CIO’s strategy complicated AFSCME’s efforts to carve out an independent position with the Democratic Party. While the union found common ground on some important issues—most notably, the selection of conservative Robert Strauss as the new party chairman in late 1972—it chafed at the AFL-CIO’s efforts to monopolize labor’s activities within the party, having only recently secured seats for Bill Lucy on the DNC and William Welsh on the Charter

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64 DNC Chairmanship and Organization,” Memorandum from Bill Welsh to Jerry Wurf and Bill Lucy, 11 November 1972, Box 55, Folder 5, Jerry Wurf Collection.
65 At a COPE meeting in mid-July 1973, Barkan urged individual unions to refrain from running their own operations to elect delegates for the Charter conference and instead allow the AFL-CIO to win representation through the state party organizations, empowered to name 25 percent of the convention delegates and generally more responsive to the recommendations of state federations than individual unions. “Charter Commission Meeting in Colorado,” Memorandum from Neal Gregory to Bill Welsh, 25 July 1973, Box 55, Folder 8, Jerry Wurf Collection. A month later, Barkan suggested that the most politically active affiliates create an informal executive committee within COPE, an acknowledgement that their positions were often overwhelmed in the unwieldy 75-person committee, but also an effort to preempt independent bodies like Labor for McGovern—but the proposal was ultimately dropped because of concerns about alienating the Executive Council. “Meeting With Barkan,” Memorandum from Neal Gregory to Bill Welsh and Jerry Wurf, 28 August 1973. Wurf later cut off AFSCME’s contributions to COPE, noting that the union “had more input by not paying.” Paul R. Wieck, “Some COPE, Some Don’t: Labor and the Democrats.” New Republic, 30 June 1973, 10-12.
AFSCME hoped to the Charter not simply to erect a new party structure, but to set party on a course toward an updated liberalism. To that end, Wurf agreed to raise $10,000 in March 1973 to fund a project proposed by Michael Harrington, the country’s leading social democratic theorist and author of the influential book, *The Other America*, to sketch “a new agenda for the proponents of social change” ahead of the 1974 meeting.

As the Charter Commission took shape in mid-1973, however, it became clear that neither the AFL-CIO nor most non-union reformers shared this vision. Decrying the lack of either leadership or unity in the group, AFSCME staffer Neal Gregory complained that the first meeting in July 1973 was wasted in fruitless debate between “reformer-McGovernites” and a “‘conservative’ coalition of blacks, the South, and labor” over whether the midterm conference would deal solely with the Charter or engage in a broader discussion of major policy issues. AFSCME favored the latter, while acknowledging that there would not be time during the scheduled three-day affair for a full consideration of all important issues—a moderate position lost amidst the shouts and squabbles.

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67 Wurf initially supported California party chairman Charles Manatt, the candidate of most reformers to replace incumbent Jean Westwood, but was eventually won over by Strauss’s pledge to return economic issues to the fore of the party’s agenda. “Robert Strauss,” Memorandum from Bill Hamilton to Jerry Wurf, 15 December 1972, Box 149, Folder 40, Jerry Wurf Collection; Miroff, *The Liberals’ Moment*, 262-263. Initially, Wurf was slated for the Charter commission, but Welsh took his place. AFSCME also secured representation (Victor Gotbaum) on the Mikulski Commission, which was formed to review the delegate selection rules ahead of the 1976 convention. The new commission on delegate selection was initially to be chaired by UAW President Leonard Woodcock, but was eventually led by then-Baltimore city councilwomen Barbara Mikulski, for whom it was named. It was not formally related to the Charter or midterm conference, but the Charter Commission drew heavily on the Mikulski Commission’s compromise language on full participation in drafting the relevant portions of the document, and opponents of the Mikulski Commission’s affirmative action and quota provisions also directed fire at the Charter Commission’s similar compromise language. “Democratic National Committee Appointments,” Memorandum from Bill Welsh to Jerry Wurf and Bill Lucy, 5 September 1972, Box 55, Folder 5, Jerry Wurf Collection.

68 “The New Agenda: A Proposal by Michael Harrington,” Memorandum, 22 March 1973, Box 1, Folder 9, AFSCME Legislation and Political Education Department Papers; “Harrington Project,” Memorandum from Liz McPike to Bill Welsh, 11 April 1973, Box 1, Folder 9, AFSCME Legislation and Political Education Department Papers; Note from John Hein to Bill Welsh, 26 April 1973, Box 1, Folder 9, AFSCME Legislation and Political Education Department Papers.

The persistence of battles over representational issues posed a major stumbling block to the broader discussion. Both the Charter Commission and the Mikulski Commission, which was tasked with reexamining delegate selection rules for the 1976 party convention, struggled to balance the competing imperatives of broadening participation and protecting traditional constituencies. Despite his presumed opposition to party reform, Strauss played a key role in straddling the divide, appointing moderate former North Carolina Governor Terry Sanford to chair the Charter Commission. Through careful and prolonged negotiations, Sanford won preliminary approval of a compromise “full participation” section (Article X) that banned discrimination and required state parties to work to expand minority representation, but barred quota-like litmus tests of convention delegations. The Article X language closely mirrored AFSCME’s position, formally adopted by the IEB in July 1973 and presented to the Mikulski Commission, which called for the perpetuation of “open accessibility” in party processes “without the constraints and limitations of quotas, but with assurances that affirmative action programs are undertaken . . . to guarantee full participation and democracy.”

While AFSCME considered the plank a reasonable compromise, it infuriated the AFL-CIO, which sought nothing less than a return to the old system. Overwhelmed by the alliance of reformers and moderates in the two commissions, Barkan moved in October 1973 to undercut the commissions themselves by appealing directly to the DNC, which Strauss had worked since early 1973 to fill with moderate, Old Party-types, seeking the authority to revise the commission

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70 For an overview, see Crotty, Decision for the Democrats, 222-238.
73 Statement by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO to the Commission on Delegate Selection, Democratic National Committee, Baltimore, MD, 10 August 1973, Box 55, Folder 7, Jerry Wurf Collection.
reports.\textsuperscript{74} Clumsy in both conception and execution, the gambit failed to draw support even from those sympathetic to the AFL-CIO’s position—few were unwilling to see two commissions authorized by the party convention so blatantly undercut—but it was a signal of intent, ambition, and confidence. Writing to Meany in mid-November 1973, Barkan boasted that the “infatuation ... [with] the ‘new politics’ has diminished, and a comeback of so-called ‘old politics’ and the coalition that made it successful” was well underway.\textsuperscript{75} Buoyed by this growing confidence, Barkan launched an even more ambitious attempt to undercut party reform in August 1974, when the draft charter was presented to the full Charter Commission for the first time. At this ostensibly routine juncture, Barkan set in motion a plan to roll back the entirety of the representational reforms, using the Commission’s growing moderate majority—put there by Strauss to ensure that the final product was accepted by all sides—to push a series of votes that stripped out what the anti-reform elements deemed the “implied quotas” in Article X. Caught completely off guard, and facing the prospect of having all the changes won since 1968 wiped out in a single day, the reformers walked out of the meeting.\textsuperscript{76}

For Wurf, the August developments were a calamity, exacerbating tensions between the regulars and reformers, amplifying concerns about organized labor’s long-term role within the party.

\textsuperscript{74} “Drafting Committee – Delegate Selection Commission,” Memorandum from John Perkins to Al Barkan, October 3, 1973. Box 98, Folder 19. Office of the President, George Meany Files, 1940-1980. There were competing legal opinions as to whether the Mikulski Commission derived its authority form the DNC or from the convention. If it was the former, then the DNC had the authority to revise the Mikulski commission’s language on delegate selection before inserting it into the draft charter; if it was the latter, then only the party conference could alter the language. For an overview, see Crotty, Decision for the Democrats, 225-232.


\textsuperscript{76} Under pressure from the AFL-CIO, Strauss had worked through the summer to moderate the ideological balance of the Charter Commission in an effort to ensure that its final product was widely accepted. Crotty, Decision for the Democrats, 240-247. Also at issue were sections banning the unit rule system and mandating the same-year timetable for the selection of delegates.
party, and scuttling his hope that a grand bargain on representation would pave the way for a broader, issue-based discussion at the party’s midterm conference. These concerns were shared by many of the unionists who had supported McGovern, and on August 27, 1974, representatives from seven liberal unions met with Strauss to impress upon him the importance of reconciling the reform and anti-reform factions. Over the month and half that followed, these same half-dozen unions, which included AFSCME, the UAW, the CWA, the OCAWU, and the IAM, played a key role in trying to repair some of the divisions between the AFL-CIO and party reformers. In late September, the unions joined with representatives from the Congressional Black Caucus, women’s groups, and other liberal groups to form the Democratic Planning Group, which organized to press for the reinstatement of the pre-August Charter language on representation. In late October, Lucy led a delegation of liberal union representatives in a meeting with Meany, urging him to force Barkan to accept some compromise language on full representation. Under growing pressure from some of its largest and most active affiliates, the AFL-CIO softened its stance, agreeing in mid-November to draft a new compromise that removed language making that loosened compliance standards but left the Article X provisions in place. Though Barkan continued to press the anti-reform case, warning a Democratic

78 Memorandum to All Participants, Democratic Planning Group Meetings, September 30 and October 1,” Memorandum from Marie Benton and Miles Rubin, DPG, 3 October 1974, Box 50, Folder 15, Jerry Wurf Collection.
80 At issue was whether the composition of a convention delegation would constitute *prima facie* evidence of compliance or non-compliance. “Democratic Charter Meeting at the AFL-CIO, Monday, November 13,”
Governors’ Conference meeting that the full representation rules produced “serious disillusionment among labor people,” the compromise language seemed to provide common ground for labor unity on the eve of the December 1974 convention.  

The desperate efforts to find a compromise on the representation issues distracted from those to broaden the conference’s agenda. In October 1973, the DNC opened the door to a wider discussion by the slim vote of 52-50—over the strong objections of both Barkan and Strauss—the former likely fearing that it would detract from the campaign to roll back reform, the latter worried about the prospect of additional divisions within the party. By the time the conference opened, though, the consideration of other issues had been reduced to a few carefully controlled workshop panels, with no allowance for a more open-ended floor debate. When Strauss issued his report in January 1974, he narrowly cast the Charter Commission’s mandate as “investigating the interrelationship between the function of a political party and its structure,” even as he acknowledged later in the report that it was necessary for the party to shift its focus from internal divisions to external problems.  

For Wurf, this narrower profile squandered an opportunity to address issues of growing importance in national politics at a key moment. The Watergate crisis, Nixon’s resignation on August 9, 1974, and new President Gerald Ford’s decision to preemptively pardon his predecessor, Wurf believed, created the space for a Democratic resurgence just six short years after the disastrous spectacle of Chicago. Stung by the backlash to the pardon, Ford was paralyzed by the unprecedented combination of anemic economic growth, rising unemployment,  

Memorandum from Bill Welsh to Jerry Wurf and Bill Lucy, 15 November 1974, Box 50, Folder 15, Jerry Wurf Collection.  
81 Democratic Planning Group Memorandum, 4 December 1974, Box 50, Folder 15, Jerry Wurf Collection; “Barkan Report on Kansas City to CIOE Operating Committee, November 20-21,” Memorandum from J. Clark and M. Scheckelhoff to Bill Welsh, 2 December 1974, Box 50, Folder 15, Jerry Wurf Collection.  
82 Crotty, Decision for the Democrats, 310.  
83 “Responsibility and Opportunity,” 5-6, 36.
and double-digit inflation. Prioritizing the inflation problem over unemployment, Ford announced that his first budget would include $5 billion in social spending cuts and targeted surtax—what Wurf complained amounted to “financ[ing] a program for the middle class out of the meager service ration now available for the poor, while leaving the wealth of more fortunate Americans untouched.” The proposal had a negligible effect on the economic trends and did nothing to address the administration’s political slide. On November 5, the Democratic Party won sweeping gains in the midterm elections, including a 48-seat gain in the House of Representatives.

Wurf believed that the midterm conference offered the Democratic Party an opportunity to craft its own workable vision for the economy and society, which could then be implemented by the Democratic congressional majority elected in the 1974 midterms. “It is not enough to throw the rascals out,” Wurf reminded the AFSCME’s membership at its June 1974 convention, long before the scope of Democratic gains became evident. “We need to replace them with honest and committed people” dedicated to “decent public services” supported by “realistic budgets” and “progressive taxes,” with the goal of ensuring that social expenditures were made on the basis of social need instead of treating the notion of planned public services as some wild pie-in-the-sky concern.” The Democratic Party leadership could help in that endeavor by putting forth bold and coherent proposals for the economy, Wurf continued. “Instead, its personalities and cliques seemed preoccupied with their parochial squabbles.” As the economy continued to deteriorate in the final months of 1974—the six months between October 1974 and March 1975

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86 “The State of the Union,” Keynote Address by Jerry Wurf, President to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, to the AFSCME’s 20th International Convention, Honolulu, HI, 10 June 1974, Box 49, Folder 46, Jerry Wurf Collection.
saw the sharpest decline since the 1930s—the need for a coherent response became more pressing. Others joined Wurf in pressing for a broader meeting in Kansas City. In late November, Jack T. Conway, former UAW staffer and president of Common Cause, wrote to the DNC to plead for a more open discussion about the major issues facing the country: energy, tax reform, and the economy.

There was a delicate balance to be struck in the campaign, for many of the candidates that AFSCME and other unions supported were at best uninitiated in the importance of labor in the Democratic coalition. As early as 1970, Wurf had fretted about the growing intellectual hostility among many younger Democrats to organized labor, lamenting during an television interview that the “knee-jerk identification with the trade union movement on the part of liberals” had been replaced with a “knee-jerk hostility.” Wurf praised as “timely and significant” Harrington’s 1970 New York Times Magazine article, “Don’t Form a Fourth Party; Form a New First Party,” which posited that the increasingly visible mass of middle-class, single-issue activists harbored a “barely concealed contempt for working people” stemming from their own insulation from the “grinding everyday problems of making a living.” Even while defending McGovern’s record in the midst of the heated 1972 convention, Wurf made a point of acknowledging an underlying sincerity (if not truth) to the some of the AFL-CIO’s critiques of the “new” party, cautioning that

87 Stein, Pivotal Decade, 115-116.
88 Letter to the Democratic National Committee from Jack T. Conway, President, Common Cause, 22 November 1974, Box 79, Folder 14, Jerry Wurf Collection. Unity, too, became more important. UAW staffer Steve Schlossberg fretted in late October that an open floor fight in Kansas City would undercut the incoming Congress by “Kansas City Convention,” Memorandum from Steve Schlossberg to Leonard Woodcock, 22 October 1974, Box 197, Folder 1, Leonard Woodcock Records.
“those who aspire for the support of labor must show a responsibility to the needs of working Americans,” a concern that the union later regretted was lacking in the party’s 1972 platform.91

Four years in advance, then, Wurf and Harrington had correctly identified one of the major dynamics in American liberalism. The “Watergate Babies” that swept into office in the 1974 midterms, historian Jefferson Cowie has noted, foreshadowed the rise of a new kind of Democratic official—“post-1960s, free-market, social liberals, who were skeptical of workers’ needs and suspicious of their institutions . . . inspired to do something about urgent issues of race and gender inequality, . . . [but] wary of structural solutions in an era of inflation.”92

Finally, on the eve of the conference, Wurf persuaded Strauss to allow the conference to consider at least a general economic platform. An early December memorandum outlined AFSCME’s preferred program, which included a series of targeted tax increases (including a surtax on upper income brackets, an excise tax on luxury goods and services, a significant increase in the gasoline tax, and the elimination of capital gains and oil depletion allowance tax exemptions), middle- and working-class tax relief, federally-funded public sector jobs programs, an end to all wage controls, and shift in federal anti-inflation policy to prices through vigorous prosecution of anti-trust actions.93 In many respects, it was a modest list—a clear diminution of the transformative ambitions of the preceding half-decade. Gone were the calls for an expanded and reorganized welfare state; unmentioned was the union’s long-standing demand for a national collective bargaining law to empower public workers. Absent, too, was any trace of the “new agenda . . . for social change” that Wurf and Harrington had contemplated just eighteen months

91 “Statement by Jerry Wurf,” AFSCME Press Release, 12 July 1972. While the party’s platform included planks for greater federal spending on education and public service employment programs, it did not delve deeply enough economic issues, or at least an internal report charged. Report Prepared by American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, 1972, Box 9, Folder 3, AFSCME Legislation and Political Education Department Papers.
earlier. In its place was a blueprint to restore the stability of the status quo and reverse the country’s economic slide.

The *New York Times* credited Wurf for putting “the Democratic conference on record with a program for economic recovery,” but, in truth, the program adopted by the 1974 Democratic conference was a disappointment. The delegates, more than half of whom described themselves as “left-liberal” or “radical,” endorsed an eight-point platform that included commitments to public service jobs, tax reduction, and anti-trust suits, as well as energy conservation and universal health insurance—but left unaddressed the critical question of how the programs would be paid for, structured, or administered. Enacted with only a superficial debate, the program was a sentimental but insubstantial throwback to an older liberal tradition, but it offered nothing of what Wurf thought truly critical—a broad and open discussion about the Democratic Party’s philosophy on the proper role of government in American life.

In fact, the conference as a whole proved anti-climactic. Even the debate over the full participation plank had a choreographed feel to it—AFT president Al Shanker offered token opposition on the AFL-CIO’s behalf, and Jack Henning of the California State Federation of Labor predicted future trouble with working-class voters, a claim that met with boos and hisses from the assembled delegates. In the end, the compromise language, which required states parties to enact affirmative action programs to expand representation, but barred challenges of convention delegations solely on the basis of their composition, passed easily. Exhausted by

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96 *The Official Proceedings of the 1974 Conference on Democratic Party Organization and Policy, Kansas City, Missouri, December 1974*, 204-213. A DPG Memorandum suggested that 12-14 percent of the delegates were union members, but only around half were supporting the Meany-Barkan line on representational issues. Democratic Planning Group Memorandum, 4 December 1974, Box 50, Folder 15, Jerry Wurf Collection. On the composition and profile of the delegates, John S. Jackson III and Robert A. Hitlin, “Party Elites in the United States, 1974:
years of infighting, both reformers and regulars found common cause in rejecting a motion to expand the conference agenda on a voice vote. The meticulously crafted, process-centered agenda appeased party regulars without alienating most of the reformers—a considerable achievement, given the divisive gatherings of 1968 and 1972. As one observer noted, the result was “a quiet December meeting with a unified and harmonious party, strategically placed to battle effectively for the presidency two years hence.” Three years later, journalist Jules Witcover leveled a similar verdict, suggesting that Kansas City had produced a Democratic Party “constructed with Band-Aids and Scotch Tape.”

But some contemporaries recognized that the party had missed an opportunity in Kansas City. A week after the conference came to a close, Curtis Gans, former staff director for Eugene McCarthy’s presidential campaign in 1968, captured the ambivalent quality of the meeting in a column in the *New York Times*. Crediting both party leaders and liberal unionists (including Wurf) for crafting a Charter that could govern the party for decades and “the questions of process that have been the visible symbols of party disunity and discord for the last six years,” Gans nevertheless warned that the conference had left unaddressed fundamental questions about the direction of public policy. “The mixture of Keynesian economics, large-scale Federally administered social-service programs, and international economic and military interventionism on a global scale to combat Communism” that had united the Democratic coalition for nearly half a century would no longer do so in the future, he predicted. “The ideological glue no longer binds either party or nation.”

97 Crotty, *Decision for the Democrats*, 248. Other contemporary academic accounts were less glowing. Herbert S. Parmet judged the apparent consensus a “superficial harmony,” emphasizing persistent divisions over both foreign and domestic policy. Parmet, *The Democrats: The Years After FDR* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 311-315.
This latter view was almost certainly closer to Wurf’s interpretation of Kansas City. The midterm conference marked the culmination of two years of disappointment for the union and for Wurf. He had hoped that the mid-term conference would provide an opportunity to move beyond the representation and process issues that had defined and divided the party since 1968 and initiate a serious discussion of party policy and governing philosophy. While he got the former, at least superficially, the latter went unaddressed, and Wurf left the midterm conference deeply discouraged with both regular and reformist camps. If there was a silver lining in the wake of the conference, it was that there still time and chance for such a reorganization. The newly expanded Democratic majority in Congress, Ford’s flagging poll numbers, the promising field of potential Democratic challenges all augured well for the future. The previous two years had been more disappointing that disastrous, marked more by slow progress rather than outright reversal. Wurf worried about the growing popular angst over taxes, mounting concerns over inflation, declining support for labor unions, and falling popular faith in government, but none seemed in late 1974 to pose an immediate, grave challenge.

Seven months later, the landscape would look very different, and the crisis far more immediate.

“Why Ten American Cities Died in 1975”

On July 10, 1975 Wurf stepped to the podium at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. to deliver what turned out to be one of the most publicized speeches of his career. Channeling the great muckraker Lincoln Steffens, he began by bemoaning the “shame of the cities”: the “big banks which charge exorbitant interest rates for funds for public operations,” the “nursing homes which receive hefty payments to mistreat and abuse the elderly and disabled,”
the “politically-connected builders who receive the new patronage in the form of lucrative construction contracts”), each a manifestation of corruption that was both deeper and more ordinary—“managers who can’t manage, planners who can’t plan, and elected officials who try desperately to cover for these failures because their mission isn’t effective delivery of services but simply improving their own images.”

The crisis of the American city, Wurf charged, stemmed from arrested development of the public sector in American society. Lacking a rational system for sharing the costs of public services across the country’s 80,000 units of government, most of the burden for welfare, education, and health services was born by local government, which was least able to pay. “We have yet to match the human need for public service with the national fiscal capacity to pay for it,” Wurf lamented. The “life-and-death problems of the cities” required a massive, national commitment: a renewed economy, expanded revenue sharing, reformed tax codes (both to raise needed revenue and ease the pressure on middle-class taxpayers), federal absorption of state and local debt, and a range of other measures designed to free state and local governments to finance public services. In the absence of such a commitment, Wurf declared, ten American cities faced disaster in 1975, varying in size, region, and demographics, but common victims of a “the new demagoguery,” “the politics that suggest we can simply dismantle public services and trust private industry to provide the social amenities.” Seized on by new liberals as well as old conservatives, it was increasingly popular among an electorate “fed up with tax systems that aren’t fair and services that don’t work.”

Though the content of Wurf’s address was consistent with a case he had been making since the late 1960s, the context was newly urgent. The near-bankruptcy of New York City in the

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The summer of 1975 brought unprecedented national attention to the fiscal plight of the American city, with consequences that reached far beyond the Big Apple.

The roots of the city’s crisis stretch back to the 1960s, when the explosive growth of welfare and other social service spending, rising labor costs (brought on by both new programs and improving pay and benefits for existing workers), and business and residential outmigration combined to put the city in a precarious financial situation. Already the most heavily taxed locale in the country, New York City was poorly positioned to respond to the growing expenditures as the economy turned in the early 1970s, forcing city leaders to lean more and more heavily on short-term borrowing to cover operating expenses. By 1974, the city had more than $11 billion in debt and spent 10 percent of its annual budget on interest payments. Wary of the city’s overleveraged position and spooked by the global economic downturn, the city’s financial community began pressing for budget reforms and spending cuts. After releasing an austerity budget, Mayor Abraham Beame reversed course in late 1974, bowing to unrelenting pressure from city labor unions. Convinced that the city government was unwilling to take steps to reduce spending, the city’s largest financial institutions decided not to underwrite a massive $500 million bond sale in early 1975, plunging the city into a state of near-bankruptcy and forcing it to turn to the federal government for aid.¹⁰²

Many around Ford saw the city’s crisis as a well-deserved indictment of liberalism gone awry. William Simon, Secretary of the Treasury and architect of the administration’s response, suggested that the near-bankruptcy stemmed from decades of an unmitigated push for “more”—

more public services for the middle class, more pay and benefits for government workers, and more social programs for the poor, aged, and indigent.\textsuperscript{103} Initially convinced that the adverse effects of default would be both limited and localized, the administration initially decided against proactive support.\textsuperscript{104} The White House released a statement in late May suggesting that the city’s crisis stemmed from it “living beyond its means for too long,” and prescribing a strict regimen of “fiscal responsibility” as the surest long-term solution to its problems. “Every family who makes up a budget has to make painful choices,” the release continued, “as we make those choices at home, so also must we make them in public office.”\textsuperscript{105} Simon expanded on the point in late June testimony in the House of Representatives, announcing that New York City’s problem was “not merely too much government,” but a “financial disaster” stemming from too much spending on social services and employee compensation. “Mayor Beame and his colleagues would be in the fight of their lives the moment they touched the scalpel to the layer of fiscal fat which is strangling the city,” Simon acknowledged, but a federal bailout would send a confusing signal to the “brave local leaders” throughout the country “who literally put their political futures on the line by insisting that all questions, however painful, be addressed and that the problems be solved in a responsible manner.”\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{103} Kalman, \textit{Right Star Rising}, 62. In truth, as many within the administration recognized, the situation was far more complicated—and Simon was a key architect of the loan-dependent system of municipal finance that had precipitated the crisis in the first place. Kim Phillips-Fein, \textit{Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan} (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 245.

\textsuperscript{104} Locally, one administration staffer acknowledged, default would force an austerity budget that would increase unemployment, slow economic growth by scaring consumers into more conservative spending patterns, and potentially saddle the stock market, but because the city’s crisis had been so publicly discussed, it would not jar anyone into a full-scale crisis, nor effect the general system of state and local government borrowing. “Possible Economic Consequences,” Memorandum from J. C. Partee, 7 May 1975, Drawer 24, Folder 30, William Simon Papers; “Possible Market Consequences,” Memorandum from Alan Holmes, 7 May 1975, Drawer 24, Folder 30, William Simon Papers.


As Simon’s testimony hinted, the issue for the Ford administration was less outright opposition to lending aid to New York City than it was an eagerness to use that assistance to leverage a shift in the city’s spending habits—and, by extension, to set an example for other urban centers. While the administration continued to publicly insist that the matter was a local concern, in private, it acknowledged that “the fiscal problems which now beset New York City result at least in part from circumstances which are common to most major cities throughout the nation,” as an undated internal administration memorandum put it. While the city narrowly avoided default in mid-1975 through the creation of Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC) and Emergence Financial Control Board (EFCB), which authorized $3 billion in new bond issues to retire the city’s existing debt, the required spending cuts and budget reforms were slow to follow, as city union leaders, working through the Municipal Labor Committee (MLC), struck a deal with Beame to minimize layoffs and service cutbacks in exchange for deferred raises. Meanwhile, Simon continued to counsel Ford that it was “counterproductive” to discuss federal aid until the city demonstrated “a viable, concrete plan of self-help.” The modest cuts that came out of the Beame-MLC deal did little to settle uneasy investors or satisfy the administration—in mid-August, Edwin Yeo, Undersecretary for Monetary Affairs, sent Ford an “Eyes Only” memorandum warning that the city had failed to make “material progress in closing the gap between what is paid and what is received,” despite its “posturing and maneuvering” to the contrary. Default was almost certain, Yeo acknowledged, unless the federal government guaranteed MAC obligations, which would set a dangerous precedent, putting the federal

108 Freeman, Working Class New York, 256-270;
government in the untenable position of bridging the gap between spending and revenues, on the one hand, or forcing local governments to shutter schools, close hospitals, and re-negotiate existing contracts with municipal unions, on the other—either of which would amount to little less than a full-scale “federalization of municipalities.”110 Later, Yeo would go even further, warning Simon that aiding New York City would “send out a message to municipal unions across the country that their pay and pension demands no longer needed to be constrained” by fiscal realities and remove any incentive for elected officials to take a hard line against their employees in bargaining sessions.111

Avoiding a truly national crisis, it seemed to Simon, Yeo, and others around Ford, required permitting New York City’s crisis to serve as an object lesson in the pitfalls of unbridled liberalism. By early September, the administration’s focus shifted from avoiding default to minimizing its impact.112 Despite warnings from Burns that a default could trigger a recession, Simon held firm, counseling Ford in a September “decision directive” that federal intervention would remove any incentive for state and local governments to limit spending, framing the choice in a way that assured presidential opposition to aid.113 The administration began assembling plans to stabilize the bond markets in the event of a default, while a confidential memorandum underscored the need for contingencies to deploy the military in the event that the city’s inability to meet payroll provoked a general strike by city workers.114 On

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111 Memorandum for Secretary Simon from Undersecretary of the Treasury for Monetary Affairs, 7 November 1975, Drawer 24, Folder 34, William Simon Papers.
October 29, Ford announced in nationally televised address that he would veto any federal bailout of New York City, essentially arguing Simon’s point: that bankruptcy was the only route for the city to free itself from its social service and labor obligations. The Daily News headline the following day summarized the message: “Ford to City: Drop Dead.”115

The New York City fiscal crisis marked a new era in public sector labor history and a critical turning point in the politics of public services. In the midst of the summer’s crisis, the editorial board of the New York Times boldly declared that “New York is working for its unionized civil service workers, not vice versa.” and that “the real power in the city” was held not by elected officials, or even unelected bankers, but “by the municipal unions.”116 A. H. Raskin observed that a distinctive shift in the conduct of elected officials:

Every time a mayor gets into a confrontation with his municipal unions these days, he dangles a specter before the taxpayers . . . the specter of New York City plunging toward bankruptcy under the weight of swollen payrolls forced upon it by over-powerful public unions and management ineptitude at the bargaining table.

The unions, Raskin noted, were exasperated by the emerging conventional wisdom, variously laying the blame on inequitable rigid tax structures, usurious banks, an uncaring Ford, and, above all else, on the toxic economy. But this struck Raskin as disingenuous. “When they are not busy conjuring up statistics designed to prove that civil servants are still miserably underpaid and thus blameless for the cities’ plight,” Raskin continued, “union leaders delight in boasting of the gains in pay, pensions, and other perquisites their organization have won for a group that once trailed the bulk of industrial workers and is now well ahead of them.”117

Story after story in major newspapers and magazines heralded a shift from the “cozy,” “sweetheart” relationship between public sector unions and their liberal-Democratic allies to a sharp confrontation, as a growing number of elected officials realized, in the words of Douglas Kneeland of the *New York Times*, that there was “more to be gained at the polls from other irate taxpayers than would be lost to the unions by taking a hard line in dealing with public employees.”118 In an address to the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 1975, pollster Louis Harris predicted political success for those who ran on a platform “which says that the modern city can no longer survive with stand-pay trade unionism as usual.”119 “Whether or not Lou has the facts on the New York City situation,” aide Bill Welsh wrote in a cover note for the speech text, “I have little doubt that his perception of the public’s present view is correct.”120

The New York City fiscal crisis, perhaps more than any of single development to that point, served to reverse the momentum of the public sector labor movement and bring back into question the basic legitimacy of unionized government. While Victor Gotbaum and District Council 37 took a leading role in addressing the crisis at the local level, Wurf and AFSCME took the defense to the national level. As early as May, the union’s Public Affairs Department began encouraging affiliates to demand equal-time and equal space to response to the “unthinking applause to state and local budget slashers”, but the most visible push-back came from Wurf.121 The day before his National Press Club address, Wurf participated in a National Public Radio roundtable on the question “Should Government Employees Have the Right to Unionize” at the Kennedy Center, appearing opposite Senator Strom Thurmond, Representative Philip Crane, and

119 Remarks by Louis Harris before the U.S. Conference of Mayors, Boston, MA, 7 July 1975, Box 51, Folder 35, Jerry Wurf Collection.
120 Memorandum from Bill Welsh to Jerry Wurf, Jerry Clark and Victor Gotbaum, 25 July 1975, Box 51, Folder 35, Jerry Wurf Collection.
121 Internal Memorandum from Don McClure, 7 May 1975, Box 3, Folder 6, AFSCME Legislation and Political Education Department Papers.
Representative Frank Thompson.\textsuperscript{122} He used a late August *Washington Post* op-ed to ridicule “the myth that public workers are bankrupting our cities with fat pensions” as “colorful fodder for politicians and columnists” with “very little to do with reality.”\textsuperscript{123} He appeared on NBC’s Meet the Press, where he defended the public sector unions’ refusal to accept pay freezes by citing the need to keep up with inflation.\textsuperscript{124} Later, in February 1976, Wurf secured from the AFL-CIO Executive Council a lengthy affirmation of AFSCME’s position, declaring that public employees “had been made the scapegoat for the financial crisis of state and local governments” as a “cop-out for public administrators” and cover for the Nixon-Ford economic policies responsible for creating the fiscal crisis.\textsuperscript{125}

With Ford seemingly unwilling to intervene, AFSCME and other public sector unions focused on the liberal majority in Congress. Here too, though, the terrain was less hospitable that the union might have hoped. When the House Banking Committee convened hearings on the a federal guarantee for New York City loans, a majority of Democrats privately admitted that they would support the move only if “tough conditions” were attached.\textsuperscript{126} In the end, the key to the resolution of the crisis was the willingness of the municipal unions to invest $2.5 billion of their own pension funds in city and MAC securities—a risky sacrifice generally often lost in the

\textsuperscript{123} Jerry Wurf, “Public Pensions: Beyond the Myth,” *Washington Post*, 26 August 1975, A16. Careful observers noted that the narrative of over-compensated government workers was at best imprecise—that federal workers were better paid than state and local government employees, that those employed by smaller governmental units were even less likely to keep up with their private sector counterparts, and that, taking educational achievement and age into account, government workers at best held steady against their private sector counterparts, and often lagged behind—but these analyses were rarely seized on by the press with nearly the same gusto as indictments of greedy, self-serving public sector union power. Robert G. Kaiser, “Public Employees Get High, Low Pay,” *Washington Post*, 3 September 1975, A1, A6.
\textsuperscript{124} Transcript, *Meet the Press*, NBC, 31 August 1975, Box 52, Folder 21, Jerry Wurf Collection.
public wrangling over their culpability. With this show of good faith, the state legislature agreed to raise taxes in the city by more than $200 million and convert much of the remaining debt into long-term notes. With these concessions, the Ford administration bowed to growing public pressure (including from some of its own political operatives, who feared the impact of the “Drop Dead” stance in the upcoming election) and agreed to support a program that allowed the Treasury Secretary to approve short-term “seasonal” loans to help the city manage its cash flow, which provided enough flexibility for the city to push through the crisis.127

In early December, Wurf traveled to Miami to address the annual meeting of the National League of Cities. Designed to be a firm but conciliatory speech that recognized the reality of bargaining-table adversity but underscored the need for political cooperation, Wurf’s “A Workers’ View of Public Service” began with a strong affirmation of the need for public services. But, as New York Times reporter Fred Shapiro noted, Wurf, facing 2,500 of “his members’ bosses,” lurched from his prepared remarks, dropping much of the conciliation, and launching instead into “a 25-minute harangue,” “raking over old quarrels and precipitating new ones,” ultimately accusing most of those assembled in the now half-emptied room of political cowardice for failing to push for much-needed tax increases.128 Perhaps Shapiro overstated the case, for Wurf’s prepared remarks also featured a defense of public employees. “As one who has spend his adult life organizing and representing public workers, I am bewildered by reports of our overwhelming and unqualified success,” Wurf suggested. Acknowledging that the unions had made some progress “in achieving a measure of equity and fairness for public employees,” Wurf denied that they were “pervasively powerful,” accusing elected officials of obscur[ing]

127 Freeman, Working Class New York, 256-270.
their own administrative and legislative responsibility for the problems of public service” and foisting their own responsibilities onto the shoulders of public employees.” “Let me oversimplify for a minute,” Wurf continued, “The crisis of public service is not a crisis at the lowest levels of public employment. It is a crisis at the highest levels of public office.”129

The developments in New York City offered a sharp reminder of the tenuousness of public sector union power. Wurf fumed to Walter Mossberg of the Wall Street Journal in mid-December that public sector wages and benefits had become the “glib, easily cited cause of the problems that confront New York City,” even as he admitted that the union was “taking a beating on public opinion.”130 Worrisome enough when the crisis was confined to New York City, the perception of public sector complicity was made more troubling by the Department of Legislation and Political Education Report warning a few weeks later that “the absence of a national policy for urban survival threatens to bring other cities to the brink of ruin.”131

It was that broader threat that likely drove Wurf toward a more confrontational presentation at the National League of Cities meeting, for many in the room that day were representatives of a new post-economic, post-labor liberalism that Wurf believed complicit in the crisis. It was in that spirit that Wurf addressed the conference of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee in Washington, D.C., in late January 1976. Beginning with the admission that the assembled were living through “difficult days for the Democratic Left,” Wurf denounced the “seemingly indifferent” attitude among too many liberals toward the critical issues facing the

129 “A Worker’s View of Public Service,” Address by Jerry Wurf to the National League of Cities, Miami Beach, FL, 2 December 1975, Box 69, Folder 22, Jerry Wurf Collection. Regrettably, I have yet to locate a transcript of Wurf’s comments.
country, from tax reform and urban finance to national healthcare and social services. While the “politics of heartlessness and malice” were by no means new in American history, Wurf continued, never before had “liberals, progressives, and democratic radicals” been so complicit. Though he singled out a handful of “Nixonized liberals” for special censure (Governors Jerry Brown of California, Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts, and Hugh Carey of New York, he claimed, embodied a “small-minded vision of America,” “gambling that pain for the unfortunate of society” was “good politics for the more fortunate minority”), Wurf recognized that the problem ran deeper than individual politicians. “Planning is a dirty word in America,” he lamented, “when we talk about it, some people conjure up images of a faceless bureaucrat in Washington telling people in Peoria what breakfast cereal to feed their children.” To both succeed politically and effectively address the problems facing the country, Wurf argued, the American left had to address the nation at a practical and pragmatic level. “The working person, the farmer, the shopkeeper, and the professional person care about decent schools, clean streets, affordable health care, and fair taxes,” Wurf argued. “I’m confident that most Americans will respond favorably to a plan to put all our unused resources—human and material—back to work and to tax a prosperous nation equitably to finance a decent level of public service.”

From the ambivalent embrace of the contemporary Democratic Party to the almost wistful invocation of an older liberal tradition, Wurf’s address to DSOC echoed much from his presentation to Americans for Democratic Action three years earlier. Yet the differences revealed much about the intervening three years. Gone was much of the ambition: The call was call no longer for a grand transformation of the American public sector nor a broad reallocation of

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resources from foreign to domestic and from suburb to city, but rather the more modest objectives of developing unused resources and protecting existing services.

“Quite a Distance”

In early April 1975, a fair-haired, gangly figure meandered into AFSCME’s headquarters in Washington, D.C. Initially unrecognized, Jimmy Carter had trouble getting past the office guard, but after a few minutes, the former Georgia governor was directed upstairs to Wurf’s office.

Early conversations were neither substantive nor promising. There was a cultural gap—to Wurf, aide William Hamilton later remembered, “anyone south of New Jersey was a ‘cracker’”—and a deeper suspicion of Southern politicians born of a decade of tremendously difficult organizing drives. But over time, the relationship improved, as Wurf won promises of a major expansion of federal revenue sharing, countercyclical federal support for social services, and a national collective bargaining law. Alarmed by the candidate’s “continued babbling about balancing the budget” and diatribes against “bureaucrats,” Hamilton later remembered, Wurf took solace in the conviction that, at minimum, Carter was a different kind of Democratic politician. As he later told Ken Bode of the New Republic, Wurf believed that, despite his frequent invocation of anti-statist, anti-government rhetoric, Carter offered an antidote to the “beating down of government” in American politics: “We’re under attack and we’re trying to find some rational answers to demagogy,” Wurf explained. “Perhaps there is a measure of legitimacy in some of these criticisms, along with a measure of bullshit,” but too often, he lamented, it “made candidates shy away from government solutions to serious problems and

Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, at his home, 1 January 1982, Folder 2, Joseph Goulden Collection.
needs.” Carter was different, Wurf insisted. “When I ask him questions, he doesn’t give me the answers I like, but he sticks to the answers he gives. He’s vague, but in some ways that’s better than the utopias these other guys spin off.” Challenged by Bode, Wurf admitted that he harbored “reservations” about Carter. Directing the reporter’s attention to the framed stills of above his desk, of Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas, Wurf acknowledged that “Going from that to Carter is going quite a distance.”

AFSCME entered the 1976 presidential election cycle more cautiously than it had four years earlier. When the New York Times ran a profile of AFSCME’s political operation in March 1975, Wurf declared that he had yet to see a candidate “strong enough or attractive enough to warrant a pre-convention endorsement” (an unnamed AFL-CIO official mocked AFSCME’s preparations to “guess wrong” again in the presidential race). AFSCME initially had more modest ambitions in the presidential race. After the AFL-CIO declared in February 1975 that it was not the “keeper of any political party” and would take no formal role in the nominating process, AFSCME joined with nine liberal labor unions in creating the Labor Coalition Clearinghouse (LCC). Functioning as both a Washington-based distribution point for political information and polling and a state- and local-level mechanism to encourage shared funding of phone banks and outreach activities, the LCC was initially geared toward the modest goal of

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136 “Politics,” Memorandum from Bill Hamilton to Bill Welsh, 12 August 1975, Box 186, Folder 40, Jerry Wurf Collection. In addition to AFSCME, the Nine unions included the Communication Workers of America, the United Auto Workers, the Machinists, the Graphic Arts Union, the Electrical Workers, the Oil Workers, the United Mine Workers, and the National Education Association. Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, February 17-24, 1975, Americana Hotel, Bal Harbour, Florida, AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes; Peter Milius, “AFL-CIO Postpones Party Role,” Washington Post, 19 February 1975, A1, A9.
coordinating delegate-selection efforts ahead of the 1976 Democratic convention. The organization struggled at first, but despite calls from some staffers to reduce its funding contribution, Wurf hoped the LCC would serve as an alternative nexus to COPE during the presidential campaign.

Many in AFSCME initially favored an uncommitted delegate strategy, possibly with the intention of throwing the nomination to the ailing icon of the Kennedy-Johnson era, Hubert Humphrey. Carter was a long shot; as late as December 1975, he did not figure among the 14 Democratic identified by NBC news for polling. AFSCME took no position in the early Iowa caucus because its supporters were split between Carter, Birch Bayh, and Representative Morris Udall. Early LCC efforts on Carter’s behalf were hamstrung, an early Coalition memorandum noted, by “a scarcity of information from the Carter campaign”—and few of the Carter’s closely-knit, Atlanta-based campaign staff warmed to the outsiders in the months that followed. But by early March, AFSCME could no longer afford to stay out of the race. Wary of the threat posed by former Alabama Governor George Wallace, who was both the best funded and most...
recognizable of the early Democratic contenders, AFSCME, the UAW, and a handful of other liberal unions coalesced around Carter during the critical Florida primary, providing a key margin of victory.\footnote{\textsuperscript{142}}

To the hopeful, Carter promised to do personally what the Democratic Party had failed to do institutionally: reunite the New Deal coalition of urban, labor, and Southern constituencies.\footnote{\textsuperscript{143}} Despite leading a botched “Stop-McGovern” effort at the 1972 National Governors’ Association, Carter effectively positioned himself as a post-reform candidate by 1974.\footnote{\textsuperscript{144}} Future running mate Walter Mondale later remembered that his first impression of Carter was one of “a genuine progressive: a committed environmentalist, a champion of human rights, a big believer in education and equal opportunity.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{145}} “Conspicuously difficult to corner,” as journalist Jules Witcover put it in 1977, Carter was liberal on civil rights, conservative on economic policy, and apparently both liberal and conservative on nearly everything else, moving from position to position with “all the elusiveness of a scatback,” a “fuzziness” crucial to his early campaign success.\footnote{\textsuperscript{146}}

Beneath the folksy charm and generic liberalism, Carter’s strategy rested on a very simple arithmetic: garner the support of Southern moderates to prove his antithesis to the typical Southern Democrat; emphasize his ties to the civil rights movement to make himself acceptable to northern liberals; secure strategic endorsement from liberal activists and trade union leaders to gain a national foothold, and then hope that the old-line trade unionists and party bosses would fall in line behind Carter as the most acceptable alternative to the despised New Politics

crowd. In a wildly open field, this is almost precisely what happened. Key wins in Illinois (March 16), Wisconsin (April 6), and Pennsylvania (April 27) followed the Florida primary, forcing Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson from the field. With the field clear on his right, Carter was free to tack back toward the center, and wait, running up victories in the Southern states and strong second-place finishes elsewhere. Though he won a majority share of the popular vote in just one non-Southern state (Indiana) until the last day of the primaries, Carter easily fended off a late “Anyone-But-Carter” charge and secured the nomination at the 1976 convention in New York City. Marked by a mood of a coronation, James Gannon of the New York Times noted, any sign of convention conflict was quickly stifled by the Carter campaign.

The New York Times cast Carter’s nomination as the second straight election cycle in which a nominee had emerged in the Democratic Party over the objections of the AFL-CIO. “Union chiefs barely know Mr. Carter, and he owes them nothing,” a late July editorial explained. “The pressures of common interest drawing them together are stronger than those that divide them,” but it was “a marriage of convenience, not a love match.” A few unions, led by SEIU, attempted an ineffective “Stop Carter” campaign late in the spring, pointing to a 1971 promise not to challenge Georgia’s Right to Work law, but few were prepared to risk another boycott. Most union leaders fell in line, if unenthusiastically, reasoning that Carter was preferably to the Republican alternative. “If it’s Carter against Reagan,” Lane Kirkland admitted

149 “Love’s Labor Lost,” New York Times, 21 July 1976, 32. Welsh echoed the sentiment, telling U.S. News that “the apathy of the general electorate can’t help but be reflected in the union members.”
to U. S. News in July, “we’ll find virtues in Carter his own mother didn’t know he had.” Though the opponent turned out to be the incumbent, Ford, the strategic imperative held.151

“No labor union has more to lose or gain in the 1976 presidential election than AFSCME,” Wurf announced in a memorandum to the union’s state and local leadership in late September 1976. “The future ability of our cities and states to deliver adequate public services is riding on the success of the Carter-Mondale ticket.” Casting the election as a referendum on the preceding eight years, Wurf cautioned that a Ford victory would mean four more years of “public employees as the whipping boys of high cost government.”152

Notably absent was a positive case for Carter, but AFSCME poured resources into the campaign anyway. Publishing half a million piece of campaign literature, arranging nearly as many phone calls, and providing hundreds of staff and thousands of volunteers to the campaign, AFSCME’s effort for Carter was impressive—and, to the union, decisive. Carter’s advantages several key states, including Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, were smaller than AFSCME’s membership, a Department of Political Education Report later noted.153

Yet even on the eve of its greatest political success, there was cause for concern within AFSCME. A survey conducted by William R. Hamilton & Staff for the union in late September warned that the “political environment” was darker than the Carter-Ford contest would suggest. “The voter is both more cynical about government and more independent of political parties than ever,” it observed, “dissatisfied over government waste, sheer expansiveness, and the lack of ability to solve economic problems.”154 Disturbing enough, the same firm followed nine months

154 “Overall Themes Emerging From Our Recent Political Studies,” Staff Memorandum no. 8 from William R. Hamilton & Staff, 26 September 1976, Box 185, Folder 28, Jerry Wurf Collection.
later with a second report, focusing solely on AFSCME’s members’ political views. The survey found that despite a strong bias in party affiliation (75 percent Democratic, versus just 11 percent Republican), overwhelming support for Carter (80 percent in 1976), and AFSCME’s reputation as a pillar of labor liberalism, the union’s members were “not much less conservative than the public as a whole.” “While there are slightly more liberals than conservatives,” the report warned, “there is a significant plurality of middle-of-the-roaders who lean toward non-expansion of government’s size and responsibilities.” For a union of state and local government employees, the tepid support for expanded government was striking. Only one in twenty AFSCME members identified themselves as “very liberal,” and only 25 percent described their political stance as “somewhat liberal”—roughly the same share that described their stance as some degree of “conservative.” The plurality (39 percent) considered themselves centrists or moderates, not unlike the general public. The report emphasized the implications of this point—“some might assume from the overwhelmingly partisan balance and Democratic voting pattern that the membership was predominantly liberal. This is not the case! Care must be taken to avoid being tagged with a liberal label.” Nearly half of AFSCME members (45 percent) believed that government “was too large and should be cut,” while only one in three backed its general expansion. The result, the report concluded, was a contradiction central to the “dilemma of modern liberalism”:

If further gains in economic equality and justice are to be made, greater government activity is a necessary aspect of that goal. Yet, the general public is opposed to any government expansion. Even government employees are split, with a preponderant thinking that government is already too large. Some dramatic attitude change is needed before progressive programs can proceed.\(^{155}\)

\(^{155}\) “AFSCME Members’ Attitudes Toward and Participation in Political Activities,” Report II Prepared for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees by William R. Hamilton & Staff, Job 520A, August 1977, Box 133, Folder 33, Jerry Wurf Collection. When pressed for details, however, many AFSCME members expressed views that put them significantly to the left of the general electorate—favoring the full
The reports were a startling reminder of how disappointing the previous three years had been for Wurf and AFSCME. Entering the post-McGovern era, AFSCME seemed well positioned to play a leading role in the reorganization of the Democratic Party and American liberalism. Having actively supported party reform, boasting the best organizing record in the contemporary labor movement, AFSCME ought to have had a strong position the Democratic Party. Yet at the very moment that the union reached the pinnacle of its institutional influence, and Wurf the apex of his personal stature, the political winds shifted over a landscape that seemed less and less capable of sustaining the weight of Wurf’s vision of an expanded public sector, even as the nation’s faltering economy underscored both its necessity.

Yet, unbeknownst to Wurf and others, the crisis had only just begun.
“Every Candidate . . . is Running Against Our Union”: Public Workers, the Tax Revolt, and the Rise of Popular Conservatism, 1976-1978

On September 3, 1978, Jerry Wurf appeared on NBC's *Meet the Press*. The Labor Day weekend visit was his second to the nation's most prestigious Sunday morning television stage and his first as its featured guest. The topic for discussion, as it had been almost everywhere Wurf had gone during the previous three months, was the passage of Proposition 13, the landmark property tax cut adopted by California in June. Wurf tried to guide the conversation toward the regressive effects of the measure, but host Bill Monroe pressed the AFSCME president on what he characterized as a “growing public feeling” that “public employee unions have too much power," particularly in their capacity to leverage budget-busting salaries and benefits from bosses they helped elect. Unusually defensive, Wurf laughed off Monroe’s premise: “I think practically every candidate in these United States who is running for office is sort of running against our union," he remarked, "some of them are even running against me."

As asked to explain the sudden political appeal of attacks on organized government workers, though, Wurf struggled to respond. He claimed that "Demagogic politicians," incapable of resolving the contradiction between their promises of tax cuts, on the one hand, and improved public services, on the other, had discovered that public workers were a useful "scapegoat," and admitted that public sector unions had been slow to answer the attacks. But Wurf also acknowledged that there was a deeper dynamic at work in the increasing political appeal of anti-public worker attacks. Presented with an inflated tax bill or deteriorating public services, Wurf

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1 Transcript, *Meet the Press*, NBC, 3 September 1978, Box 29, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection, AFSCME Office of the President, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Jerry Wurf Collection].

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complained, "the public somehow or other sort of gangs up on the sanitation man, on the recreation employee, upon the policeman, the fireman, the teachers, instead of holding to account the politicians who haven't fulfilled the promises they made."²

Perhaps without realizing it, Wurf identified one of the central paradoxes of late-20th century American politics--what political scientists David Sears and Jack Citrin have called the "taxes, no; big government, no; services, yes," or “something for nothing” mentality.³ As historian Bruce Schulman has noted, "poll after poll confirmed that Americans rejected steep reduction in public services just as adamantly as they opposed taxes and resented bureaucracy."⁴ Lingering beneath the surface through much of the postwar era, this tension exploded into public view during the late 1970s, as prolonged economic torpor accelerated a shift from what economist Robert Lekachman termed a politics of growth to a politics of distribution, a zero-sum game defined by increasingly divisive contests over a shrinking pool of new resources.⁵ As cash-strapped middle-class homeowners found more and more of their dwindling income going to pay inflated property tax bills in the late 1970s, they sought a mechanism that would sustain their valued public services for the least cost.

As the Wurf-Monroe exchange suggests, public employees were critical to this process. The publicity attached to New York City's 1975 fiscal crisis fueled increasingly hostile editorial treatment of public sector labor unions, which in turn emboldened a previously marginalized

² Transcript, Meet the Press, 3 September 1978, Jerry Wurf Collection.
anti-public sector union movement. As late as 1976, organizations like the Public Service Research Council (PSRC) struggled to frame their critique of public sector union power in a way that appealed to middle-class voters or the broader conservative community. This changed in the late 1970s. Dropping earlier legalistic objections to unionization, the PSRC and other similar groups seized on the growing salience of tax issues during the late 1970s to craft a critique of union power that prominently featured the threat posed to the citizen-taxpayer. At the same time, anti-tax activists like Howard Jarvis found in the anti-public worker language a compelling tool to wield in their own campaigns, one which effectively masked the fiscal implications of their tax-cutting logic. By casting government workers as parasites on the body politic, Jarvis and others were able to suggest that revenues could be reduced without cutting services, simply by shrinking the share directed to government workers through pay cuts, benefit reductions, and layoffs.

Proposition 13, then, was not solely a California issue, nor was it even strictly about the distribution of the costs of suburbanization, as Robert O. Self has shown. It was also the manifestation of an older anti-public worker impulse fused with an increasingly urgent concern over taxes, a potent combination that posed little less than an existential crisis for the public sector labor movement.

As Wurf's Labor Day appearance on Meet the Press showed, AFSCME struggled to respond to the threat. Although the union had pressed for state and local tax reform for the better part of a decade, it failed to accurately gauge the political power of the fused anti-tax / anti-

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worker/anti-union argument because Wurf and other union officials assumed that middle-class taxpayers would never risk valued public services by sharply curtailing public revenues. This premise was evident both in the union's handling of the initial emergence of an anti-public sector movement and in its reaction to the passage of Proposition 13. Marginalized within an AFL-CIO that was at best ineffective on the tax issue and left with a dwindling range of political allies among elected officials, Wurf and the union’s national leadership responded to the growing concern over taxes by launching a multi-million dollar advertising campaign designed to establish AFSCME as "The Union that Works For You." Predicated on defending public sector unions by defending public services, the strategy was designed to instill in taxpayers of the inextricable link between the tax bill and basic government services. Forced into an even more defensive posture in the aftermath of Proposition 13, AFSCME adopted a two-track response to the crisis, trading short-term concessions to stunt the growth of the backlash while also pursuing progressive alternatives to what Wurf dismissed as the "meat axe" approach to tax relief, all while continuing to insist on the intrinsic importance of public workers to the provision of public services.

Partly successful at mitigating the worst effects of the Tax Revolt, the union’s campaign nonetheless rested on a misreading of the new political landscape. AFSCME in general, and Wurf in particular, misunderstood the extent to which the politicization of public workers (and their unions) had altered the basic taxes-services equation. Far from undercutting the core message of conservative critics, AFSCME's defense of government services only served to strengthen the perception that those services were, at least in part, self-serving.
“Arise Ye Prisoners of Taxation”

Rhetorical manipulation of tax issues was critical to the political ascent of conservatism in the 1960s. As early as 1964, Senator Barry Goldwater used taxes to call into question the fundamental validity of the welfare state, vowing to give voice to the “forgotten American” who paid taxes and held dear the virtues of “private property, free enterprise, and hard work.”8 The tax issue took on increasingly clear racial connotations during the late 1960s, particularly when fused with explosive battles over school integration and welfare.9 By decade’s end, the taxpayer-homeowner-parent identity formed a critical rhetorical component of both “reactionary populism” (to borrow historian Ronald Formisano’s phrase) and its more respectable, middle-class counterpart.10

Despite its increasing prominence in political language, however, organized opposition to tax issues was strikingly sporadic prior to the 1970s, and tax-based critiques of public sector workers were slower to develop than anti-civil rights claims. To be sure, as early as 1968, Fortune magazine warned of the financial implications of public sector militancy. When a strike produced “unconscionably generous settlement,” journalist Irwin Ross suggested, “the public suffers twice—first from the disruption of services and then from the high price of labor peace.” He predicted that “the taxpayer will continually have to pay more to keep the schools open and the garbage trucks running” until the pressures finally produced “a revolt by the taxpayers.”11

Publications like Business Week frequently featured editorial cartoons depicting city leaders

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caught between screaming taxpayers and militant public workers.\(^\text{12}\) There were even early cases of localized tax revolts against public sector settlements: voters in Cleveland and Youngstown rejected revenue-increasing referenda in 1971 and 1972, forcing cancellations of contractual promises made to municipal workers.\(^\text{13}\)

But despite concern about the fiscal consequences of public sector unionization, organized opposition was slower to develop and largely relegated to the margins of the conservative movement well into the mid-1970s. The most vocal early critic was Wake Forest law professor Sylvester Petro. A former machinist and union member, Petro emerged in the 1950s as one of the most important intellectual architects of the New Right’s anti-unionism. Drawing on the work of Ludwig von Mises and other members of the “Austrian School” of political economy, Petro crafted a libertarian critique of the New Deal labor relations system that focused on threat posed by “compulsory unionism” to the operation of the free market, an argument most clearly set forth in his 1957 book, *Labor Policy of a Free Society*, which earned him membership in Friedrich Hayek’s Mont Pelerin Society. As Joseph A. McCartin and Jean-Christian Vinel have demonstrated, Petro drew upon this trans-Atlantic conservative tradition in the 1960s to craft a radical critique of public sector unionism that emphasized the constitutional threat posed by collective bargaining to the orderly operation of representative government—a somewhat dated argument set forth most clearly in a stinging 140-page law review article titled “Sovereignty and Compulsory Public Sector Bargaining” and propagated through Wake Forest’s Institute for Labor Policy Analysis.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^{12}\) “When Cities Collide With Unions,” *Business Week*, 2 January 1971, 24-27

\(^{13}\) Sterling D. Spero and John M. Capozzola, *The Urban Community and Its Unionized Bureaucracies: Pressure Politics in Local Government Labor Relations* (New York: Dunellen, 1973), 231

Petro’s work provided an important intellectual foundation for future conservative opposition to public sector unionism, but few in the movement were initially prepared to go as far as to inhibit collective bargaining. The public sector anti-union movement began as a spin-off of the National Right to Work Committee (NRWC), which was primarily concerned with restricting union security, rather than rolling back bargaining rights. After securing Right-to-Work laws in most Southern and Western states, the NRWC launched a three-pronged campaign to slow the growth of government employee unionism during the late 1960s, pursuing legislation to bar union security arrangements, using its Legal Defense and Educational Foundation to challenge agency shop provisions in court, and backing both federal and state-level efforts to strip the tax-exempt status of unions.\(^{15}\) Though the NRWC used its existing networks and machinery to rally opposition to a national collective bargaining law for state and local government workers during the mid-1970s, it showed little interest in moving against collective bargaining where it already existed.\(^{16}\)

In October 1973, several veterans of the NRWC’s campaigns formed the Public Service Research Council (PSRC) with the intention of expanding the campaign. As Reed Larson, President of the NRWC, explained it in a letter to conservative journalist Ralph de Toledano, the PSRC’s purpose was to pick up where the NRWC had left off. “Our committee has been waging an all-out—though admittedly uphill—battle to stop the spread of compulsory unionism into

\(^{15}\) “Right to Work Committee,” Internal Memorandum, January 1970, Box 72, Folder 39, Jerry Wurf Collection. This campaign persisted into the mid-1970s, when the NRWC published *A Basic and Precious Right*, a report that detailed the twelve states that “scorn[ed] free choice in the public sector” by permitting agency shops. “A Basic and Precious Right,” NRWC Report, 22 January 1974, Box 172, Folder 55, Jerry Wurf Collection. The twelve states were Alaska, Hawaii, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin.

\(^{16}\) In early 1973, the NRWC issued a mailing to major newspaper editors warning that an AFSCME-NEA proposal for a national collective bargaining law “would force public employees to fork over dues even to unions they violently opposed.” National Right to Work Committee Mailing to Newspaper Editors, Including ‘The Threat of Compulsion in the Public Sector’, 1 February 1973, Box 184, Folder 18, Jerry Wurf Collection. The PSRC also moved to block further legalization on the state level, creating a “grassroots citizen’s campaign” to defeat a collective bargaining law in Michigan in 1973. Right to Work News, 19 March 1973, Box 184, Folder 18, Jerry Wurf Collection.
government employment,” Larson wrote, but despite these efforts, “union control over
government is expanding rapidly.” The PSRC was designed as vehicle for “respected citizens” to
publicize “the grave dangers posed by public policies which foster and encourage unionization of
government employees.” Over the next half decade, the PSRC would play the leading role in
expanding the anti-union movement to the public sector. Despite its professed sympathy for
“responsible unionism,” the PSRC built on the NRWC model by calling attention to the threat
posed by public sector organization to the fiscal and physical welfare of “citizen-taxpayers.”
Publishing both an academic journal (Public Union Review) and a biweekly newsletter
(Forewarned, and later Government Union Critique), the PSRC also featured a political action
arm, Americans Against Union Control of Government (AAUCG), which drew the support of
well-known conservatives like Russell Kirk and Senator Jesse Helms. Both organizations were
run from the northern Virginia offices of James L. Martin, former aide to Senator Edward
Gurney (R-FL) and protégé of conservative fundraiser Richard Viguerie.

Viguerie’s influence was particularly important, because the PSRC relied heavily on
mass mailings for both fundraising and organization building. The “Dear Friend” letters often
included a cover piece by a prominent conservative, as well as a public opinion survey on some
combustible policy issue related (sometimes peripherally) to public sector union power. For
example, in late 1973, Helms offered his name to a letter declaring “freedom’s days are
numbered” and warning of “the very real possibility of America’s take-over by a relative handful

17 Letter from Reed Larson to Ralph de Toledano, 19 October 1973, Box 34, Folder 4; Letter from James L. Martin,
Managing Director, Public Service Research Council, 29 October 1973, Box 34, Folder 4, Ralph de Toledano
Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts [hereafter cited as
Ralph de Toledano Collection].
18 “PSRC Lauds California Union on No Strike Stand to Aid Nation’s Economy,” PSRC Press Release, 15 July
1974, Box 79, Folder 47, Jerry Wurf Collection; “Court ‘Slaps Wrist’ of N. Y. Firemen’s Chief for False Strike
Call,” PSRC Press Release, 1 August 1974, Box 79, Folder 47, Jerry Wurf Collection.
19 “Background Information on Officers and Advisory Council (plus their right-to-work involvement) of Americans
Against Union Control of Government,” n.d. [1974], Box 79, Folder 46, Jerry Wurf Collection.
of union bosses.” The mailing then moved to an “Energy Crisis poll” which, after soliciting opinions on the spike in oil prices, informed the reader that the real threat to the country’s transportation system was the proliferating strikes by public sector workers. “It’s simply a matter of union bosses taking over our cities and towns,” Martin wrote in the accompanying commentary. “If union officials call a strike that seriously threatens the lives and property of you and your families . . . and they hold out until elected officials give in to their demands on how your city will operate…who really runs your city?” Martin brought the letter around to the original point by speculating that public utilities would soon be controlled by “radical union bosses” who would “blackmail every American taxpayer into handing the reins of his free government to a few radicals.”

Months later, when the PSRC released the results of the survey, it boasted that the 97 percent who opposed union control of public energy was evidence of grave public concern with “the stranglehold of some self-serving public service union leaders on our pocketbooks and our daily lives.”

The PSRC frequently seized on high-profile strikes to illustrate the dangers posed by public sector unionization and introduce traditional anti-union tropes into government employment—and Wurf’s proved a particularly useful foil. After a series of strikes launched by AFSCME locals shut down Baltimore’s sanitation and police services for two weeks in July 1974, for example, the PSRC denounced Wurf as “the militant pied piper boss of millions of the

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20 Americans Against Union Control of Government Mailing, with Cover Letter from Senator Jesse Helms, n.d., Box 79, Folder 46, Jerry Wurf Collection.
21 “Poll Shows Americans Against Union Control Over Public Services and Energy Supplies,” Public Service Research Council Press Release, June 1974, Box 79, Folder 46, Jerry Wurf Collection. Most appeals were more direct. An early December 1973 mailing included a “Dear Friend” cover letter from de Toledano. Largely focused on the threat posed by AFSCME’s campaign for a national collective bargaining law for state and local government workers, de Toledano warned that union organizers lusted after the “potential goldmine” of government employee and held “no regard for your interest as a taxpayer.” “Each day we delay union bosses seize another opportunity to usurp powers normally held by elected officials,” he continued. “The prime danger is the fact that union officials would actually ‘control’ the operation of public services.” He called for contributions to AAUCG to help “stop the cancerous growth of union monopoly power.” AAUCG Mailing, 11 December 1973, Box 79, Folder 47, Jerry Wurf Collection.
nation’s municipal workers” who “arrived on to the scene, thumbed his nose at the law and any state of normalcy and harangued union employees into more militancy” before taking up residence “at the most costly hotel in the city, renting the high-cost Presidential suite while rank-and-file union members picketed on filthy, garbage-littered streets.” Martin went on to blame the cowardice of elected officials for having “bowed and scraped to the ever increasingly demands of the public employee union bosses and their rabble rousers.” Again claiming that the PSRC was not opposed to unionization or moderate pay raises, Martin closed by underscoring the threat posed by extravagant demands and militant tactics. “As long as union bosses can cower city hall, and the public, the taxpayer suffers and control of city government by elected officials is in jeopardy.”

Baltimore might have faded as just another municipal strike had it not been for the developments that followed. After working behind the scenes for weeks in an attempt to secure the reinstatement of police officers terminated for their role in the Baltimore strike, Wurf issued a statement on July 31 claiming that Maryland Governor Marvin Mandel had betrayed a promise to ensure that Baltimore Police Commissioner Donald Pomerleau would take no further reprisals against the strikers. The same day, and at least in part at AFSCME’s urging, the Thomas M. Bradley, president of the Greater Baltimore Labor Council, announced that he would oppose a Maryland State Federation of Labor endorsement of Mandel in the Democratic primary later that year because of his failure to secure the reinstatement of the police officers. The next day,
Mandel took to the press to announce, for the first time, that Wurf had warned him that Baltimore would “burn to the ground” during negotiations. Through AFSCME denounced Mandel’s claims as a “new package of lies,” the PSRC ran with the story, which became a critical part of its version of public sector lore, immortalized in de Toledano’s anti-union manifesto, *Let Our Cities Burn*. On August 7, Martin released a press statement calling for the U.S. Attorney General to investigate Wurf’s actions during the strike. A few weeks later, the PSRC reissued the original Helms mailing, using the new revelations as a hook to solicit further contributions. “During the Wurf-led strike the average number of fire alarms shot up from 150 to more than 500 a day!” Martin wrote in the new piece. After dispatching “outside agitators” to Baltimore “to stir things up,” he continued, Wurf “arrived himself, riding in like a conquering general, shouting ‘We have no choice but to break the law’”—the latest example of the fiscal and physical dangers of Wurf’s “damn-the-public tactics.” “Jerry Wurf,” Martin concluded, “is probably a greater threat to you and your family’s well-being than anyone else in America.”

For the next few months, the PSRC regularly featured the Baltimore strike in its newsletter and mailings. The inaugural of the PSRC newsletter, *Forewarned*, featured the strike as its lead story, “Baltimore Bows to Union Boss Demands,” proclaiming that the summer strike wave “once again pointed out to the taxpayer the dangers posed to the free American system by

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24 Statement by Marvin Mandel, Governor for the State of Maryland, 1 August 1974, Box 137, Folder 20, Jerry Wurf Collection.
25 Press Release, PSRC, 7 August 1974. Martin later praised Maryland Governor Marvin Mandel for refusing to bow to AFSCME’s demand that nearly two hundred police officers punished for their participation in the strike be reinstated. “Three cheers for Governor Mandel,” Martin wrote. “It is about time that an elected official has shown the guts to repudiate Jerry Wurf, or any other of the power hungry union bosses.” “Maryland Governor Praised for Stand Against Militant Unionists Threats,” PSRC Press Release, 7 August 1974, Box 79, Folder 47, Jerry Wurf Collection
the unholy alliance wrought upon them by the politicians and the bosses of the militant public employee unions.”

The PSRC repeatedly returned to the example over the next two years, warning that each new advance in union organizing could lead to “another Baltimore, with city workers and police halting all services in order to blackmail the taxpayers.”

Buoyed in part by the publicity attached to the Baltimore strike, the PSRC claimed 50,000 members by the time the first issues of Forewarned were published in August 1974. The organization continued to rely on mass mailings, but shifted beyond direct fundraising appeals to movement building, encouraging its members to clip and return local news stories of illegal strikes, inflammatory rhetoric, and union-cozy public officials. The membership, Martin wrote, are “our eyes and ears in your part of the country, appraising us of what is happening, who is saying what, who is striking, and why.” Partly an organizing tool designed to get members invested in the Council’s activities, the active solicitation of press clippings also reflected the PSRC’s complicated organizational mission, which blended research and education with non-partisan political activity. After a number of newspapers, including the New York Times, began referring to the Baltimore strike as “illegal,” Martin claimed credit for the Council, citing its letters to editorial boards. “We believe PSRC’s educational program is beginning to pay off as more and more opinion molders are seeing the differences between public and private sector collective bargaining.”

By late 1974, the PSRC and AAUCG had matured to the point that they occupied a fairly large suite of offices in the D.C. suburb of Vienna, VA. Over the first year and a half of its existence, Martin told the Detroit Sunday News in March 1975, the PSRC had

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30 “Americans Against Union Control of Government,” Memorandum from A. L. Zwerdling and Janet Kohn to Jerry Wurf, 18 December 1974, Box 79, Folder 46, Jerry Wurf Collection.
collected $445,000 from more than 175,000 contributors and mailed out more than 3.5 million pieces of literature.\textsuperscript{31} The AAUCG won its first legislative victory in February 1975, when it successfully defeated a collective bargaining bill in Virginia, paving the way for a broader national campaign against proposals for a federal law.\textsuperscript{32} By September 1976, the PSRC would claim 700,000 members—half contributing, half simply on the mailing list—roughly the same number of members that AFSCME had nationally.\textsuperscript{33}

Buried within the PSRC’s attacks on public sector unions were a number of key themes. Some were familiar: the threat posed by unions to constitutional government and public order, the gap between the rank-and-file worker and the “union boss,” the role of outside “agitators” and “rabble rousers” in fomenting militancy, and the weakness of elected officials in the face of union pressure all echoed critiques that had been leveled since the 1950s, many of which had antecedents in private sector labor history.

But in other respects, the PSRC was a critical pioneer in constructing a language that could link critiques of public sector labor power with broader popular grievances. The juxtaposition of “citizen-taxpayers” and government employees provided a mechanism to split public sector workers into a separate, tax-consuming class. Moreover, by late 1974, there was some sign that the PSRC was beginning to connect its critique of public sector unions to a broader anti-statist message—rejecting proposals for public sector job programs as another “panacea” of “big government advocates” who “dip into the pockets of the taxpayers whenever their other pet schemes prove unworkable or wrong” to feed an ever-growing bureaucracy.

“When more people are added to the public payrolls,” Martin argued in September 1974, “the money to pay them necessarily comes from the taxpaying citizen.” An early 1975 mailing reminded the reader that “Every time the union bosses call a strike, your family’s safety is held hostage until the labor barons’ demands for more money are met . . . and then you pay the bill.” Though slow to gain attention in the mid-1970s, the PSRC laid the foundation for the language to be picked up by a broader audience later in the decade.

AFSCME was slow to recognize the seriousness of the threat. As early as January 1970, an internal memorandum warned that “the lack of wide-spread public understanding regarding public employee unionism” offered the NRWC “fertile ground for their anti-union and fear-producing propaganda tactics,” but beyond tracking press releases and mailings, the union did little to respond to the early anti-union movement. An October 1974 memorandum dismissed the PSRC and AAUCG publications as “long and full of rhetoric” and derided Martin as “a public relations man with a long history of right-wing and right-to-work-type causes.” Wurf instructed national union staff and local officers to treat the mailings as “professional fundraising


35 AAUCG Mailing with Cover Letter by Jesse Helms, n.d. [1975?], Box 155, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection. The four questions were: 1) Should public officials give in to inflationary wage hike demands because of political blackmail by union officials? 2) Should union officials be allowed to dictate to elected public officials inflationary wage increased and benefits for strikes? 3) Should policemen and firemen who break the law and endanger lives by going on strike be punished? 4) Should union officials who call illegal public strikes be prosecuted?

36 “Right to Work Committee,” January 1970, Jerry Wurf Collection. AFSCME joined a lawsuit led by labor lawyer Joseph Rauh in early 1974 to force the NRWC to disclose its donor list (a move designed, as union counsel A. L. Zwerdling put it, to “slow down” the backlash). The unions’ argued that the Landrum-Griffin Act prohibited employers from financing their employees’ legal action against their organizations. National Right to Work Committee Newsletter, 22 January 1974; “Lawsuit Against Right-to-Work,” Memorandum from A. L. Zwerdling to Jerry Wurf, 27 June 1974, Box 172, Folder 55, Jerry Wurf Collection; “Rauh and Silard Legal Fee,” Memorandum from A. L. Zwerdling to Jerry Wurf, 11 July 1974, Box 172, Folder 55, Jerry Wurf Collection. Though a federal judge initially accepted this argument, the decision was later overturned by the U.S. Court of Appeals, which ruled that Congress did not intend for the law to bar legal assistance to employees from “bona fide, independent legal aid organizations.” The decision was remanded to trial court to determine whether the NRWC fit that description. AFSCME continued supporting the legal campaign through 1979, most in the hope of securing access to the Committee’s donor list. “Unions’ Suit Against Right-to-Work,” Memorandum from A. L. Zwerdling to Jerry Wurf, 20 November 1978, Box 182, Folder 36, Jerry Wurf Collection; “Right-to-Work Suits Against Unions,” Memorandum from A. L. Zwerdling to Jerry Wurf, 7 November 1979, Box 180, Folder 13, Jerry Wurf Collection.
by an old and experienced huckster,” and suggested that the attacks were simply a testament to
the union’s growing stature. When called for comment by the Detroit Free Press in early 1975,
Wurf later dismissed the PSRC as the latest incarnation of “the mindless, heartless Far Right.”

Wurf misjudged the scale of the threat, for the PSRC was only the most pronounced
example of an increasingly explicit brand of anti-unionism. In March 1975, Nation’s Business
ran a feature on AFSCME’s president tilted “Jerry Wurf: Can He Shut Down Your Town?”
which began with a Republican National Committee official proclaiming “he has this country by
the throat!”

But the most vehement and visible critic of public sector unionism was Ralph de
Toledano, whose 1975 book Let Our Cities Burn exposed the issue to a broader conservative
audience. A veteran journalist who had made his name as an anti-Communist crusader during
the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, de Toledano emerged in the early 1960s as an
important (if oft-neglected) figure in the conservative movement. He came to the cause of anti-
unionism in the early 1970s through Little Cesar, a short, critical tract on the history of the farm
workers movement in Delano, California, and soon after commenced his active participation in
the PSRC. In December 1974, he began work on Let Our Cities Burn, which he promised his

37 “Americans Against Union Control of Government,” Internal Memorandum to Union Leadership, 30 October
1974, Box 79, Folder 46, Jerry Wurf Collection; AFSCME Leadership Bulletin, 13 November 1974, Box 79, Folder
46, Jerry Wurf Collection.
38 Kantor, “Union Fighters’ Lobby Opposed to Public Workers’ Groups.”
40 Former Nixon political operative Roger Stone was initially tasked with drafting “a booklet on Jerry Wurf . . . to
tell the story of his . . . lust for power,” according to an a 1975 interview with Martin. It is unclear when Stone
dropped the project, and what, if any, connection it had to de Toledano’s work. Kantor, “Union Fighters’ Lobby
Opposed Public Workers’ Groups.”
41 In this sense, de Toledano was continuing the work of pioneering anti-union columnists and writers like
Westbrook Pegler, who devoted his career to exposing union corruption during the first half of the 20th century.
2005): 527-552; David Witwer, Shadow of the Racketeer: Scandal in Organized Labor (Urbana: University of
Illinois Press, 2009). On the impact of de Toledano’s work on the campaign to stop a national collective bargaining
law, see Joseph A. McCartin, “‘A Wagner Act for Public Employees’: Labor’s Deferred Dream and the Rise of
publisher would offer both a complete history of public sector unions and expose the threat posed by the “Big Labor Dictatorship” that would result from further expansion of collective bargaining. The historical portrait was thinly documented but directly argued, tracing public sector unionism from the “healthy sanity” of Coolidge’s crushing opposition in the 1919 Boston police strike through its expansion in the 1960s, when, de Toledano argued, “Big labor” “captured the Democratic Party” and forced elected officials to legalize collective bargaining as the pay-off for their political contributions. Deploying a range of arguments against public sector collective bargaining—from the out-dated legal case to its fiscal consequences—de Toledano concluded that public sector unions were “shredding the texture of orderly government, substituting Big Labor might for civil right, and slowly introducing us to a condition in which we will be forced to choose between anarchy and a new form of feudalism.”

De Toledano’s talent for dramatizing the alleged implications of widespread unionization put into an accessible form the critiques crafted by Petro and others during the previous decade; the book formed an important extension of the broader anti-union movement’s strategy. Prior to publication, de Toledano secured the NRWC’s commitment to purchase 2,000 copies of the book, and the publisher, Arlington House, promoted it as part of its Conservative Book Club list. Russell Kirk and Ronald Reagan offered blurbs for the book’s dust jacket: Kirk asked whether the Republic was in danger of being overrun by “cliques of ruthless men who dominate the public-employee unions;” Reagan called the book “must reading” for anyone interested in understanding the how “Forced unionization of public employees threatens to replace our elected

42 Letter form Ralph de Toledano to Neil McCaffrey, Arlington House, 27 December 1974, Box 35, Folder 1, Ralph de Toledano Collection.
45 McCartin and Vinel, ”Compulsory Unionism,” 245.
46 Letter from de Toledano to McCaffrey, 27 December 1974, Ralph de Toledano Collection.
officials with an undemocratic ‘private government.’”

Hugh Newton, NRWC Director of Information, urged Arlington House to target “major cities and areas where there has been a great deal of public employee unrest,” including Michigan, Pennsylvania, California, Ohio, and New Jersey, reminding one company official that the project had a broader purpose: “The more people that know of the book, the more likely it is that our point of view will get the attention of key opinion leaders and legislators across the country.”

Early reviews were promising. The Knoxville Journal noted the “alarming” picture of “gross ineptitude and ignorance on the part of public officials” and “lawlessness on the part of the unions.” The Springfield News-Republican warned that public sector strikes were “symptoms of a municipal doomsday machine”—“the practice of public employee unionism, a cunning device whereby the suffering taxpayer is made to suffer even more by way of blackmail and intimidation.” The St. Louis Globe Democrat credited de Toledano exposed the danger of a federal collective bargaining law that “would give public sector unions a stranglehold, double the annual income of the AFL-CIO, and make Wurf the most powerful labor leader in the country.”

The Indianapolis News worried that the “U.S. may be transformed from a nation of constitutional government with political sovereignty to a neo-feudal society with Jerry Wurf occupying the Manor on The Hill.”

Let Our Cities Burn was also just one of a new genre of books dealing directly or indirectly with the threat posed by government workers. William Rusher’s The Making of the

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47 Letter from Russell Kirk to Hugh C. Newton, 27 April 1975, Box 35, Folder 2, Ralph de Toledano Collection; Letter from Ronald Reagan to Earl Dunckel, Manager, Business Environment Communications, General Electric, 19 May 1975, Box 36 [Unprocessed], Ralph de Toledano Collection
48 Letter from Hugh C. Newton to Maureen McCaffrey, Arlington House, 9 July 1975, Box 35, Folder 3, Ralph de Toledano Collection
49 “Let Our Cities Burn,” Knoxville Journal, 23 August 1975
50 Stanton Evans, “Strike Flurries: Let Cities Burn,” Springfield (MA) News-Republican, 5 October 1975,
51 Robert Betts, “Neros in Blue Collars,” St. Louis Globe Democrat, 6 September 1975,
52 “‘Against the Public Safety’,” Indianapolis News, 7 August 1975.
*New Majority Party* posited as its main thesis that class had been displaced as the key fissure in American politics by the division between “productive” and “non-productive” elements, with businessmen, industrialists, craft and blue-collar workers, and farmers on one side, and academics, government workers, and the media on the other, a brilliantly contrived reworking of 19th century producer-populism that also neatly captured the essence of the ambivalence felt by even private sector unionists toward government workers.53 Douglas Caddy’s *The Hundred Million Dollar Payoff* unveiled the scale of partisan bias in organized labor’s political spending—which the PSRC seized on as further evidence of the threat posed by “union-boss control of our free political process.”54 These texts, as well as others, such as Rep. Phillip M. Crane’s *The Sum of Good Government*, became staples of conservative reading lists, bolstering the spirits of the PSRC, which claimed the “growing public awareness of the dangers inherent in compulsory collective bargaining and union control of government” and the recognition by even major liberal media outlets of the “dangers of union power in the public sector” as major achievements in 1976.55

The PSRC’s pivot to a more explicit appeal to tax issues coincided with a broader reorganization of American conservatism, one which recast tax issues as a mechanism to address long-standing concerns about the growth of the state at all levels of government. Previously the concern mostly of business groups and financiers, taxes emerged as a critical tool in the

popularization of conservative politics in the mid-1970s, providing a bridge between organizational groups and locally-oriented, grassroots social movements.\textsuperscript{56}

Conservative concern with taxes was not new, of course, even in the postwar era. As early as the mid-1960s, organizations like the National Tax Reform Committee (NTRC) mobilized to demand tax and spending cuts at the federal level, denouncing, in equal parts, the level of taxation and the use to which it was put (welfare and social services), giving some future anti-tax activists their first starts in the movement.\textsuperscript{57} But most of the early energy came from more marginal groups, like John Birch Society’s Tax Reduction Immediately (TRIM). Formed in 1974, TRIM claimed that federal taxation was designed “for the very purpose of destroying the traditional American economic system and bringing us under the tyranny of a totalitarian regime” and pledged to educate the public on “the sinister and un-American purposes behind most of the higher taxes which they are paying today.” TRIM’s slogan, “Lower Taxes through Less Government,” neatly captured its conception of both means and ends, but also betrayed its underlying weakness: most Americans, it seemed, did not particularly care for less government, at least not if it meant fewer middle-class services.\textsuperscript{58} President Gerald Ford’s 1975 embrace of a $28 billion package of tax and spending cuts, which he praised as the first step toward “getting

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\textsuperscript{57} One of those who spanned the two generations of anti-tax activism was de Toledano, who authored a fundraising letter for the NTRC in 1967 lamenting the taxpayer’s status as “low man on the economic totem poll” and vowing to mobilize the “law-abiding, tax-paying citizen” to reduce the size (and thus cost) of government. Open Letter from Ralph de Toledano, National Tax Reform Committee, n.d. [1967], Box 60-1, Tax Rebellion Movement Materials.

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government off your back and out of your pocket,” won praise from some conservative intellectuals—but generated little interest nationally.  

There was an obvious material basis for the mounting angst over taxes. According to *U.S. News*, local, state, and federal taxes rose by 62 percent between 1972 and September 1977. The inflated levies were particularly accurate at the state and local level, where per capita taxes had swelled by more than 150 percent between the late 1960s and early 1970s. By mid-1977, state and local taxes took an average of 13 percent of Americans’ income—and a much higher share of that of the property-owning middle class.  

To become viable as a political strategy, anti-tax activism needed to be framed in a way that insulated popular government programs from potential cutbacks—and public sector unions provided a natural and useful mechanism. Over the course of 1975, there was marked increase in general conservative interest in taxes and public sector unions, largely an outgrowth of New York City’s fiscal crisis. In August 1975, William Safire used a *New York Times* column to unleash a scathing attack on striking San Francisco police officers, sarcastically noting that they had “the option of looking for jobs in the private sector, where competition is keener and raises less automatic.” De Toledano used a pair of columns in late September and early October to warn that Wurf’s “to hell with the taxpayers” mentality was spreading through the AFL-CIO, threatening additional public sector strikes that would eventually force cowed elected officials “to dig deeper into the pockets of the taxpayer.” In mid-November 1975, a NRWC mailing

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warned that a national collective bargaining law would lead to union control of state and local
government, “[meaning] that an international labor boss could stop your police protection and
garbage collection . . . shut down your schools . . . cut off your water supply . . . and force you to
pay higher taxes which will go for featherbedding and other rip-offs which enriched the union fat
cats at your expense.”65

But it was Milton Friedman who probably did more than any one to bring home the
connection between taxes and public workers. He used his October 1975 Newsweek column to
tout the “growing tide of public resistance to ever-higher taxes and spending” and returned to
theme repeatedly over the following year. In November 1976, he highlighted a little-known
ballot provision in Michigan that would cap taxes at a fraction of residents’ income that he
suggested “may have greater significance for the long-run future of the U.S. than who is elected
President.”66 The idea, Friedman noted, was not wholly new—California voters narrowly
defeated a similar measure, Proposition 1, in 1973—but it was becoming more important in a
climate of rising inflation and growing concern over taxes. “Government employees and other
special-interest groups have succeeded in bamboozling the naïve taxpayer,” Friedman asserted,
but there was cause for both urgency and optimism in the battle against “those who feed at the
public trough.” “Unless we can limit the cancerous growth in government,” he lamented, “there
is little hope of maintaining a free political system.” “The longer the delay, the harder the task,”
Friedman wrote, “because the tribe of bureaucrats grows apace.” “Arise ye prisoners of
taxation,” he concluded, paraphrasing the call of the Internationale, “you have nothing to lose
but the IRS.”67

65 NRWC Mailing from the Office of Rep. William I. Dickenson, 12 November 1975, Box 149, Folder 14, Jerry
Wurf Collection.
In fact, there was mounting evidence that taxpayers were doing just that. In April 1977, William Bonner, Executive Director of the National Taxpayers Union, reported that “literally hundreds” of new tax protest groups had formed in the past year, during which the NTU’s membership had doubled from 20,000 to 40,000.68 “Taxes are quickly approaching a level where people can’t take it anymore,” Sally Cromwell, an organizer for the NTU told U.S. News in late January. “Their homes and lifestyles are threatened.”69 The growing attention to anti-tax sentiments also raised long-dormant conservative groups like TRIM out of their slumbered inactivity, spurring it to reissue its old pamphlets and declare anew its goal of striking at “the growing army of bureaucrats.”70 Slowly, many of these arguments seeped into the work of influential conservative pundits. In a February 1977 column in Nation’s Business, James J. Kilpatrick identified the threat posed by public sector union power as the most serious challenge facing the country—above both inflation and unemployment.71 A month later, U.S. News predicted a “stormy” year in public sector labor relations, as state and local government officials struggled to balance the contradictory demands of “the growing militancy of public employee unions and the steadily increasing union members” and “a taxpayer backlash . . . against strikes and union demands.”72

Most concerning for public sector union leaders, though, was growing evidence that anti-tax sentiment was spilling over into the unionized private sector workforce, exacerbating long-standing tensions between private and public sector workers. In 1975, Douglas Fraser, President

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72 “Public Workers and Public on a Collision Course,” U. S. News and World Report, 14 March 1977, 82
of the United Auto Workers and a leading liberal within the labor movement, admitted that UAW members “get bothered when the benefits they are paying for public workers are higher than the benefits they received”; union Secretary-Treasurer Emil Mazey echoed the sentiment, noting that “a trade unionist will fight like hell to raise wages at Ford—even though that may raise car prices—but he won’t vote to increase property taxes to raise teacher salaries.”

Better than most at the time, AFSCME recognized the danger posed by working-class anti-tax sentiment. As early as February 1977, Welsh urged Wurf to impress upon liberal labor leaders the seriousness of the threat: It would be “tragic,” Welsh warned prophetically, “if the autoworker becomes our adversary over taxes and local public services.”

“AFSCME: The Union That Works for You”

AFSCME continued to dismiss the anti-union movement well into the late 1970s, emphasizing its ties to discredited antecedents. The Coalition of American Public Employees (CAPE) featured the PSRC in a multi-issue series titled “The Anti-Union, Ultra-Rightists: Where Are They Now?” in its 1977 newsletter, declaring that “the extreme right wing, spawned out of the racist, anti-union John Birch Society of the early 1950’s, is alive and well and growing in the latter [sic] 1970’s,” operating through “high-sounding grant organizations that sound ‘open,’ ‘independent,’ ‘non-partisan,’ and ‘un-political.’” The piece specifically cited the PSRC as “the newest, growingest, and perhaps the most impressively effective of all the groups linked together and cooperatively working in right-wing common cause,” in an effort to “carry forward its anti-

74 “Meeting with Doug Fraser,” Memorandum from Bill Welsh to Jerry Wurf, 9 February 1977, Box 58, Folder 27, Jerry Wurf Collection.
union program and propaganda with renewed and restored credibility using new and modern names.”75

But within the union, there was a growing realization that the PSRC campaigns could not be ignored. Wurf acknowledged as much during his 1976 convention address, where he began by quoting the opening lines of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, declaring it both “the best of times,” due to its soaring membership (over 750,000) and national reputation as a force for “social and economic justice,” and the “worst of times” because of the growing threat of fiscal crisis and political attack. A “season of darkness” had set in over the union, Wurf lamented, featuring a “meanness of spirit” in American politics that called into question the basic commitment to public services. “We as a people,” an uncharacteristically pessimistic Wurf admitted, “may not possess the desire to care properly for our children, our sick, and our aged”—a striking reversal of the optimistic vision of an expanded public sector that he had put forth just a half-decade earlier. Faced with a very real fiscal crisis (state and local governments had moved from a collective $10 billion surplus in 1973 to a $12 billion deficit in 1975), elected officials had been forced to cling to burdensome tax systems, even as taxpayers suffered the effects of inflation and stagnating wages. “Our regressive tax system,” Wurf charged, “is one of the principle deterrents to popular support for public services.”76

Attacks on public workers found greater cache in the poisonous fiscal climate, Wurf continued, as “Reactionary politicians and their liberal counterparts alike” found political appeal in “distorting the truth about public employment.” Wurf blamed the “well-orchestrated


76 “State of the Union: Our People, Our Jobs,” Address by Jerry Wurf to the 21st International Convention of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, 14 June 1976, Box 70, Folder 26, Jerry Wurf Collection.
campaign” to cast public workers as “overpaid, unproductive, and the recipients of special privilege” for changing public perceptions about public employees. “Millions of Americans are convinced that our demands for economic justice are responsible for governments’ fiscal problems,” a perception that only encouraged further political attacks. “Candidates run for office against us,” Wurf lamented, obscuring their own incompetence by “slandering the people who sweep the streets, maintain roads and parks, operates hospitals, schools, courts, recreational programs and prisons.” The “war against public employees” launched by New York City’s fiscal crisis, Wurf continued, “now rages in all corners of the country.”

The months that followed featured an unusually humbled stance from AFSCME’s national office. Interviewed the New York Times in late June, Wurf admitted that the depth and success of anti-public sector sentiment had caught the union off-guard, and forced a basic change in the union’s approach. The growing hostility toward public sector unions meant “the day when unions can deal with problems by force majeure is over,” Wurf continued. “The business of sitting at the bargaining table and saying that we’ll cut off the water if you don’t come through, that day is gone.” Wurf would return to the theme over the next eighteen months, regularly expressing a willingness to engage in new and creative approaches in public sector labor relations. Wurf renewed his call for the expanded use of the arbitration in 1976, a recognition, as he told a reporter, that it had become “good politics for inept public managers to provoke strikes,” but also designed to underscore the willingness of public employees to accept (at least for a time) the fiscal limits of state and local governments.

77 Address to the 21st International Convention, 14 June 1976, Jerry Wurf Collection.
Wurf admitted that most strikes had become “counterproductive” in the public sector, serving only to further alienate the working-class public. The union created a Public Service Advisory Board in 1976, a “blue ribbon” panel of university experts which it used to garner academic feedback on its policy positions. More than most union leaders, and perhaps more than AFSCME’s own membership would have supported, Wurf proved willing to acknowledge the need for short-term give-backs, announcing to the National League of Cities in late 1977 that AFSCME stood ready to “consider relevant concessions and initiate new directions” in return for local elected officials’ support for progressive tax reform in a sort of grand bargain. Later, Wurf would emerge as a strong critic of public sector pension abuse (in which employees used inflated incomes late in their careers to unrepresentatively large pension), which, while rare and largely confined to the protective services, nonetheless gave the perception the average public employee “was getting away with bloody blue murder.”

There was a tension in Wurf’s constructive moderation, for more of the union’s crisis than he recognized stemmed from its success. Having won a massive organizational membership by militantly demanding parity with private sector workers (in pay and benefits as well as workplace rights), AFSCME found itself trapped in its own model of public sector unionism. While the union had made substantial gains for its members, state and local government workers continued to lag behind their private sector counterparts in the mid-1970s (once age, education,

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81 “Draft, AFSCME Public Service Advisory Board,” Internal Memorandum, n.d. [1976], Box 8, Folder 8, Jerry Wurf Collection; Letter from Jerry Wurf to Professor Alan [Scotty] Campbell, 27 April 1976, Box 8, Folder 8, Jerry Wurf Collection; “Public Service Advisory Board,” Memorandum from Joe Adler to Jerry Wurf, 26 May 1976, Box 8, Folder 8, Jerry Wurf Collection. The PSAB became more active later in the decade, culminating in a December 1979 retreat. “Summary: Future Prospects of American Cities,” Public Service Advisory Board Retreat, Harrison Conference Center, Glen Cove, NY, 11-12 December 1979, Box 5, Folder 38, AFSCME Public Policy Analysis Department Records.
region, and other factors were taken into account). Yet even as AFSCME saw its work as incomplete, its partial progress came under fire from taxpayers whose own purchasing power was eroding and who found in government employees an outlet for their own economic anxieties. As elected officials, bowing to public pressure, took a harder line against government workers, AFSCME’s membership, equally aggrieved by the same broader economic forces and accustomed to ignoring elected officials’ claims of fiscal limitations, responded by demanding that those limitations not be used as an excuse to perpetuate their own second-class status. When traditional bargaining failed, union locals used strikes, slowdowns, and other forms of direct action to underscore their case, just as they had for much of the previous two decades, failing to recognize that the same elected officials who had once felt public pressure to protect the delivery of public services and avoid massive inconvenience by settling now found it politically expedient to take a hard line against their employees, even if it meant provoking strikes.

Wurf and the rest of AFSCME’s leadership only partially recognized the extent to which the landscape had changed, initially regarding the crisis as one of public relations, rather than underlying transformation. AFSCME launched an ambitious public relations program in mid-1976, designed to reconnect public workers to still-valued government services. As early as June 1, AFSCME ran a half-page piece in the Washington Post expressing solidarity with the struggling taxpayer, dubbing itself “The Union That Cares,” calling for “Better government at fairer prices,” and vowing to fight to put “tax justice into the tax system.”

Wurf announced the start of a $1 million advertising blitz a few weeks later. Early spots were similarly clumsy and clichéd. On Labor Day, for instance, AFSCME purchased a half-page advertisement in the New York Times claiming that public workers were “taxpayers working for taxpayers,” but the thrust

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84 “The Average Taxpayer,” Washington Post, 1 June 1976, A11
of the piece serve to underscore the “dignity” of government employees as workers—a language that had served the union quite well through the 1960s, but which seemed out of touch with the growing perception that government workers were overcompensated and underworked.86

But despite the modest early returns, AFSCME entered into negotiations with the PR firm Marrtila, Payne, Kiley & Thorne (MPKT) in late 1976, swayed by the firm’s argument that a carefully constructed and strategically targeted series of television, radio, and print ads could “change attitudes among the American public and key national public opinion leaders” and “re-define the notion of public service in America.”87 Yet the firm was also careful to sketch the limits of public relations. It warned in a mid-November memorandum that AFSCME “should not try to defend public employees” in general terms because “the public, fueled by political rhetoric, refuses to believe in the need for and efficacy of a large public sector employment force” and instead associated public workers with “the bloated bureaucracy that results in higher taxes.” A strikingly honest admission, the MPKT urged the union to moderate its confrontational rhetoric, drop its demand for a national collective bargaining law, and significantly curtail its broader political agenda and instead adopt the role of honest critic.88 “It is easier to build respect for AFSCME and Wurf than to build respect for public employees,” MPKT cautioned in another mid-November memo. “A million dollar advertising campaign, no matter how original, could not easily change the public’s negative attitude toward public employees.”89

88 “1977 Public Relations Campaign,” Memorandum from MPKY to AFSCME, 15 November 1976, Box 62, Folder 14, Jerry Wurf Collection.
89 “Summary of Recommendations,” Memorandum from John Marttila and Dan Payne, MPKT, to Bill Hamilton and Jack Howard, AFSCME, 17 November 1976, Box 62, Folder 14, Jerry Wurf Collection.
AFSCME worked only briefly with MKPT, but much of its subsequent public relations campaign reflected these early recommendations. The union used the spots to address issues ranging from the impact of budget cuts on human services (“dirtier water, weaker police protection, shoddier health and mental care, fewer trash collections”) to the privatization of public institutions and services, emphasizing that layoffs and cutbacks brought meager budget savings at a tremendous social cost. Other ads continued the union’s long-running criticism of Cold War military spending, noting that the cost of just one B-1 bomber ($87 million) could fund day-care subsidies for 7,500 working-class families in New York, pay the salary of every uniformed policemen in Boston for a year, and keep Philadelphia’s public hospital system open for an additional two years.

Aimed at 20 liberal newspapers and magazines, the glossy pieces were designed to counteract liberals’ easy invocations of themes like “fiscal integrity” and “tough fiscal management” by putting a human face on service cutbacks and privatization—a goal embodied in the tagline that concluded each ad: “The business of government is people.”

Though the campaign was already in development, it took on new importance after Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson broke a strike by more than 900 sanitation workers by firing them in April 1977. Unable to secure a raise for the sanitation workers, the national office spent $60,000 on a media blitz designed to cast Jackson, whom AFSCME had supported in 1973, as corrupt and incompetent “union buster,” intent on placating business by betraying his liberal 

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allies. A gross miscalculation, the campaign backfired: the city press and civil rights community (including Martin Luther King, Sr.) joined business and the white middle class in rallying behind Jackson, who retained his hard-line opposition to wage increases, leading to the collapse of the strike and the union.

AFSCME was forced to lean on public relations in part because it lacked other institutional outlets to mount its campaign. The AFL-CIO showed little interest in seriously engaging tax issues prior to the passage of Proposition 13, even within the ineffective confines of the Public Employees Department. CAPE proved somewhat more capable at coordinating union responses to the crisis. Originally formed to press for a national collective bargaining law, CAPE shifted focus to the anti-union movement (and particularly the PSRC) after 1976, largely at AFSCME’s urging. Drawing on AFSCME’s expansive network of state and local political operations, CAPE became a key clearinghouse for gathering information of politicians’ stances on public service and fiscal issues and coordinating voter education efforts among its constituent organizations. Newly minted Executive Director James Farmer played the most visible role in leading CAPE’s campaign, traveling the country to participate in a range of university seminars on public sector labor issues, but also, as an internal memorandum noted, to “gain some positive

95 Minutes, Coalition of American Public Employees, 10 March 1976, Box 186, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection; Minutes, Coalition of American Public Employees, 3 November 1976, Box 176, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection; “CAPE,” Memorandum from Bill Hamilton to Jerry Wurf, 5 May 1977, Box 133, Folder 19, Jerry Wurf Collection.
publicity for public employees.”\textsuperscript{97} Trading on his former position as head of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), Farmer played a key role in reminding the public of both AFSCME’s civil rights credentials and the costs of rolled-back public services.\textsuperscript{98}

Wurf told report Marc Levinson that he sensed “a turn taking place” and that AFSCME’s advertising and public relations work was “paying off” in September 1977, but internal polling showed quite the opposite.\textsuperscript{99} A study contracted by the union during late 1977 and early 1978 showed a marked decline in general support for public sector collective bargaining and strikes and strong agreement with the statement that “government payroll could be cut by 5-10 percent without affecting services.” Worst of all, the report confirmed that public employees were increasingly becoming “entangled with a growing concern over government at the state and local level in regard to taxes” and that press reports were more and more frequently following “the rhetoric of an ever increasing number of anti-government, anti-public employee political leaders.”\textsuperscript{100}

Increasingly frustrated with the union’s inability to effectively challenge emerging conventional wisdom about the public sector crisis, Wurf dispatched with the recommended conciliatory tone. He began a May 1977 address on “Public Management and the Public

\textsuperscript{97} “James Farmer,” CAPE News Release, January 1978, Box 2R588, James Leonard Jr. and Lula Peterson Farmer Papers; “Letter from Harvey Zobaugh to Dave Williams, Area Director,” 15 March 1977, Box 2R588, James Leonard Jr. and Lula Peterson Farmer Papers. Having worked as an organizer for District Council 37 in the mid-1950s, Farmer approached Wurf in the mid-1970s to secure a job—and, offered the choice between the union staff or Associate Director for CAPE, Farmer choose the later, in part because it figured to be less taxing, and in part because the organization itself was in a transitional phase and Farmer hoped to affect its agenda. He was later elevated, at Wurf’s urging, to Executive Director. James Farmer, \textit{Lay Bear the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement} (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 348-349.

\textsuperscript{98} “All Aboard the Bandwagon: Across the U.S. Politicians Scramble to Join the Tax Revolt of ’78,” \textit{Time}, 26 June 1978, 8-11; “Telegram to Howard Jarvis, United Organization of Taxpayers, from James Farmer, CAPE,” 20 June 1978, Box 2R588, James Leonard Jr. and Lula Peterson Farmer Papers

\textsuperscript{99} Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf by Marc Levison, 2 July 1977, Box Unknown, Folder 1, Labeled “AFSCME”, John Sweeney Papers (Unprocessed), Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as John Sweeney Papers]

\textsuperscript{100} William R. Hamilton & Staff, “The Public’s Attitude Toward Public Employees,” n.d. [1977 or 1978], Box 7, Folder 23, Jerry Wurf Collection.
Employee” by proclaiming, in a line highlighted for emphasis in his draft copy, that “government is an institution not of laws but of people; people who do their jobs well and people who do not; people who can make government work again and people who never will.” Incompetent and unprofessional managers had brought on the crisis, not public workers, Wurf insisted. “The buck stops three times,” he argued. “Elected leaders set policy. Managers design and administer delivery. Employees deliver. Major mistakes and misdeeds at the start cannot be undone at the finish.” The solutions to the crisis lay in elevating public administration to a higher level.

“Political activists ranging from ward heelers to speech writers quite often end up after Election Day in the decision-making positions at City Hall or the State House,” he lamented.

“Unfortunately, proven talents in collecting campaign contributions are no guarantee of any ability to manage the collection of a city’s trash” and “getting out the snow plow requires more than past experience in getting out the vote.” Wurf echoed the combative tone seven months later in an appearance before the annual convention of the National League of Cities, boldly declaring that the general public would not be “turned against the government worker through the politics of scapegoating and demagoguery” and confidently boasting of “a resurgence of public awareness of the real need for well-funded, well-staffed, and well-managed public service delivery.”

In hindsight, the address seems naïve. In early 1978, the union received a report from its polling firm, William R. Hamilton & Staff, which warned that a growing segment of the “are so

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101 Untitled Speech on Public Management and the Public Employee, [Location Unknown], 26 May 1977, Box 28, Folder 27, Jerry Wurf Collection.
102 Remarks to the 1977 Congress of Cities and Exposition, National League of Cities, December 1977, Jerry Wurf Collection. There was reason for Wurf’s optimism. Just two months earlier, AFSCME received a CAPE-sponsored survey that showed general satisfaction with tax levels and eager support for additional public services (and little interest in significant layoffs or salary cuts) in Virginia. “A Survey of Virginia Voters’ Attitudes Toward State Services and the 1977 Gubernatorial Election,” Report Prepared for the Coalition of American Public Employees by William R. Hamilton & Staff, Job # 556, October 1977, Box 133, Folder 33, Jerry Wurf Collection.
concerned with state and local taxes . . . that they are being drawn to any politician who simply says, ‘I’ll cut the government payroll” or “I’ll cut your taxes.”

In response, the union authorized another round of media work in mid-March, a pair of television commercials designed by J. Walter Thompson, the country’s largest advertising agency. Designed to combat public ignorance about the work done by government employees, the 30- and 60-second ads opened with footage of a cluttered city street the day after a parade, then described the various functions performed by city workers, and concluded with the tagline, “AFSCME: The Union that Works for You.” As Hamilton later remembered, the move to contract the Thompson firm seemed bizarre to many at the union’s headquarters at the time, but was motivated by the desire to move beyond the public-interest framework of AFSCME’s previous advertisements and “capture the attention and minds of unorganized workers and minimize bad public opinion about government unions.” As Wurf explained it in a letter to the membership, “the gist of the commercials is that behind the maneuvering of the politicians and the machinations of political appointees there are thousands of honest, hard-working men and women who keep government and public institutions running.” Acknowledging that the notion of “using union dues to promote our union like toothpaste and automobiles was repugnant to me,” Wurf argued that the only way to address the “terrible beating” public workers were taking was “to confront it indirectly, in the same way that the oil companies . . . have successfully begun to offset their images as greedy, anti-patriotic institutions.” “We don’t have the unlimited resources of Exxon and Mobil,” he admitted, “but to the best of our ability we intend to take our

105 Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, at his home, 1 January 1982, Folder 2, Joseph Goulden Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Joseph Goulden Collection].
message to Joe Citizen – telling taxpayers that they’re getting their money’s worth from AFSCME members.”

Set to air in a half-dozen cities, including Washington, D.C., New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Miami, and Columbus, the commercials marked a new turn in the union’s PR program—previously focused mostly on single-issue pieces in print media. Regrettably for the union, none of the commercials were planned to air further west than Des Moines, Iowa—well beyond the reach of California media markets, where the tax rebellion was about to stage its biggest breakthrough.

**Proposition 13 and the Birth of the Tax Revolt**

The passage of California’s Proposition 13 in 1978 has long been viewed as a key marker in the rightward turn of late-20th century American politics. On its face, the outburst of taxpayer backlash simply reflected a natural response to a very real economic crunch. The state’s population doubled between 1950 and 1970, from ten to twenty million, overwhelming the housing market, which grew by 3.5 million units over the same period. As home values soared in the mid-1970s—at rates far ahead of inflation—property tax bills followed, producing a windfall for the state and a great deal of anxiety for homeowners.

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106 “President’s Letter No. 1,” 1 March 1978, Box 15, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection.
108 Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, “The Message of Proposition 13,” *Commentary*, September 1978, 42-46. These inflationary pressures were unintentionally exacerbated by reforms implemented in the Petrix-Knox Act of 1966, which aimed to address long-standing irregularities (and sometimes open corruption) in the state’s assessment system by standardizing valuation at 25 percent at three-year intervals. The result, as Bruce Schulman and others have noted, was to shift more and more of the tax burden from business (which had previously been under-assessed) to homeowners (who had generally enjoyed a softer treatment under the broad discretion granted to assessors. Schulman, *The Seventies*, 205-207
But there was another element to the emergence of Proposition 13: the growing size, cost, and militancy of the state’s public workforce. California’s public payrolls swelled by 21 percent between 1970 and 1975, more than three-times the rate of population growth.\(^{109}\) As early as 1973, then-Governor Ronald Reagan had tried to fuse the tax and public employee issues, blaming the explosive growth in the state budget on the machinations of “self-serving bureaucrats.” Unable to halt the growth of state spending (which doubled during his two terms) or government payrolls (which swelled by 14 percent over the eight years), Reagan threw his support behind Proposition 1 in 1973, a complicated proposal designed by Friedman and other conservative economists to cap income taxes, limit state spending to fixed percentage of gross personal income, and impose a supermajority requirement for future tax increases.\(^{110}\) Opponents, including public sector unions, claimed the plan would threaten public services or force local governments to implement replacement levies, and the proposal was defeated by a 54-46 margin.\(^{111}\) Over the next half-decade, however, the mounting militancy of public sector unions provided additional leverage to anti-tax activists. San Francisco alone endured four major public sector strikes between 1970 and 1976—including one that shut down major portions of the city transit, school, and park system for 39 days in April 1976. Set off by a reaction to pay and benefit cuts, the strike showed the potential for anti-union rhetoric in even the relatively liberal Bay Area, as Mayor George Moscone took a firm line against the union demands, announcing

\(^{111}\) Steven F. Hayward, The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order, 1964-1980 (Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing, 2001), 387-389. Despite its defeat, though, Proposition 1 played a critical role in demonstrating the potential utility of tax cutting measures. Lewis K. Uhler, a former assistance to Reagan, went on to co-found the National Tax Limitation Committee in 1975, which in turn would become an important base of organizational support for future state-level campaigns and, later, Friedman’s balanced budget amendment. Open Letter from Lewis K. Uhler, President, National Tax Limitation Committee, n.d. [1979], Box 60-1, Tax Rebellion Movement Materials.
that the strike was “a question of people who have been enjoying extraordinary benefits having to give them up.”

It fell to Howard Jarvis, an experienced crusader for conservative causes, to fully connect anti-union and anti-tax activism. Born the son of a state judge in Utah in 1903, Jarvis eschewed a legal career for journalism and business. He moved to Los Angeles in the mid-1930s, where he became involved in both real estate and the Republican Party, serving as a regional operative in both Eisenhower’s 1956 reelection campaign and Richard Nixon’s 1960 presidential bid. Jarvis ran for U.S. Senate in 1962, but lost in the Republican primary. From that point on, he focused his ambitions on state and local politics. In 1977, he ran for mayor of Los Angeles on a campaign that emphasized the “evil” of government and called for the privatization of garbage collection, recreation facilities, and library services.

Jarvis emerged as a national figure only in March 1978, when a Newsweek profile dubbed him the “drum major of a statewide tax revolt.” Proposition 13 was Jarvis’s fifth effort at winning a statewide tax cut. It promised a compellingly simple three-part solution to the state’s tax crisis: limit taxes to 1 percent of the assessed value of a property; allow new assessments only after property transfers; and impose a supermajority requirement for raising any other tax. Yet despite its common-sense appeal, the measure was slow to attract positive attention. Business groups were initially divided, with many concerned that individual property tax relief

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114 On Jarvis’s background and a self-portrait of his role in Proposition 13, see Howard Jarvis and Robert Pack, I’m Mad as Hell: The Exclusive Story of the Tax Revolt and Its Leader (New York: Times Books, 1979); Schulman, The Seventies, 209.
116 Self, “Prelude to the Tax Revolt,” 158.
would require higher levies elsewhere to maintain funding for popular services.\textsuperscript{117} As late as May, \textit{Newsweek} predicated that opposition from renters (who stood to gain little from property tax cuts and) would overwhelm support from homeowners.\textsuperscript{118}

The ultimate success of Proposition 13, which passed by a stunning 2-to-1 margin on June 6, reflected its supporters’ ability to convince voters that the draconian tax cut would not require offsets in government services. Though largely accomplished at a local level, Friedman did much to carry the message to a national audience, dismissing opponents’ predictions of massive closings in an early June column that Proposition 13 would require only a 10 percent cutback—easily found in “fat” in the bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{119} Friedman also reprinted a letter sent to the \textit{San Francisco Chronicle} that underscored the animosity many Proposition 13 supporters felt toward the state’s public workers:

\begin{quote}
We are saying that we know it will severely disrupt state and city governments. We are saying that we want it to severely disrupt state and city governments. We are not anarchists, we are not radicals and we do not think we are impossible. We are simply fully sick and tired of having out pockets picked at every level of government . . . We only want the most necessary government ‘services.' We want an end to the countless layers of useless bureaucracies. We refuse to pay any longer for the parasites who are feathering their own nests directly out of our pockets.\textsuperscript{120}
\end{quote}

On the evening of June 6, basking in the glow of victory at a rally at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, Jarvis boasted that a “new revolution” was sweeping the country that would displace government-by-bureaucrat with popular sovereignty.\textsuperscript{121} GOP National Chairman Bill Brock touted Proposition 13 as the turning point toward a new national mood: “People are just plain sick to death of more government than they need and more taxes than they can afford . . . if

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{120} Milton Friedman, “A Progress Report,” \textit{Newsweek}, 10 April 1978, 80.
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America has to choose between right-wing nuts and left-wing nuts, it will choose the right wing.” Proposition 13 was immediately heralded in the press as the start of a national movement and political commentators rushed to interpret the results. The editorial board of the New York Times suggested that Proposition 13 marked “a rejection of liberal values” and “a potent outburst of conservatism.” Journalist Tom Wicker quipped that it represented “a massive rejection of liberal government as it had developed in the post-New Deal era—its high cost and its broad variety of supposedly ‘necessary’ services.” The New Republic explained Proposition 13’s passage by citing the ability of anti-tax activists to appeal directly to middle-class homeowners, offering “a sheer of high purpose to a cause that in fact is rooted in narrow self-interest,” “blending libertarian rhetoric with cash prizes” to “[salve] the conscience by saying that voters can do good by doing well for themselves.” Newsweek similarly described the growing tax revolt as a movement of the white middle-class committed to tax relief for homeowners and austerity for the poor. The Nation cast doubt on any sort of ideological meaning, dismissing the tax revolt as “something between a fad and a mania” and “a kind of pathological Hula-Hoopism, jogging on skateboards.” Rev. Jesse Jackson suggested that the measure was a new manifestation of racial politics, “a new code word, like busing and Bakke,” a view echoed by Senator George McGovern, who dismissed the “undertones of racism.”

Proposition 13, Irving Kristol noted shortly after its passage, marked the start of “a new kind of class war—the people as citizens versus the politicians and their clients in the public

124 Wicker, “A ‘New Revolution,’” A27
sector.” The sentiment certainly echoed through California in the wake of the vote. Rev. Richard Gillett, an Episcopal minister from Pasadena, wrote that “the prospect of money actually flowing in an unaccustomed direction, from the hands of ‘government bureaucrats’ back to the burdened taxpayer, is like manna in the wilderness.” Veteran liberal journalist Carey McWilliams noted that many supporters had voted against their own economic interests in “a rebellion against what is regarded as indefensible government spending, a constant increase in public payrolls, and steadily rising pensions for public employees.” A local government worker from Berkeley confessed backing the measure out of a reaction against “the people . . . who get a free ride in government.”

But again Jarvis took the lead. Still glowing from the victory, Jarvis appeared on NBC’s Meet the Press on June 18, vowing that Proposition 13 was just the start of an international movement against bloated government and onerous taxes. Challenged by a panel of reporters about the implications of the tax cuts for government services, Jarvis demonstrated a remarkable talent for generality and imprecision, declaring that he was “not in a position today to talk about the 10,000 things that can be trimmed from Federal Government or State Government” but was certain that “a great deal of government activity is useless, ineffective, and expensive.” Pressed on the prospect of layoffs, Jarvis defensively responded that California had “far too many public employees, anyway,” so much so that most were simply “standing on each other” to the point that they “can’t do any work,” their ranks swelled by “the power of employee unions,” which he characterized as “the tail wagging the dog” when it came to government spending.

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133 Transcript, Meet the Press, NBC, 18 June 1978, Box 29, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection. Jarvis boasted that he had already received expressions of support from all fifty states, England, Canada, and France.
Jarvis launched a national tour in the months that followed, carrying the same brand of anti-statist populism to the multiple state-level imitations inspired by Proposition 13’s success. In early October, Jarvis featured in a 30-minute television broadcast that aired in more than 130 markets in which he urged viewers to join his crusade “to force politicians to cut the fat at the top and the not the muscle at the bottom” by joining his American Tax Reduction Movement (ATRM) which called for $50 billion in income tax cuts and $100 billion in spending reductions.\(^{134}\) Fusing the anti-tax and anti-union arguments that organizations like the PSRC had pioneered in the mid-1970s, the ATRM boasted that the California victory had shown once and for all that “the People, and not the politicians, bureaucrats, and special interests, can still control government.”\(^{135}\) Using the same sort of push-polling techniques as the PSRC, the ATRM insisted on a direct connection between rising tax bills and the machinations of overcompensated, underworked public employees.\(^{136}\) Jarvis continued his activism well into the 1980s, building on its previous arguments to offer an anti-statist critique of government workers. “Bureaucrats create nothing but paperwork,” he began on 1980 mailing, “Growth, expansion, invention, creativity—it all comes from the highly motivated people, working in enlightened self-interest in a free economy” and “Every tax, bureaucrat, and regulation just puts up one more obstacle toward achieving our potential for greatness.”\(^{137}\)


\(^{135}\) Generic Letter to Colonial Lecture Management, Boston, Massachusetts, from Howard Jarvis, Chairman, ATRM, n.d. [1979], Box 60-1, Tax Rebellion Movement Materials.

\(^{136}\) An undated 1979 mailing asked respondents to estimate how far taxes could be cut without affecting vital services, identifying seven “major” explanations for rising tax rates: 1. People expect too many services from government; 2. Government workers are overpaid and receive too many benefits; 3. Too much money is spent on welfare and other ‘social services’; 4. Politicians spend too much money on their own salaries, staffs, fringe benefits and junkets; 5. There are too many regulatory agencies which do not fill a useful function; 6. The administration of government is wasteful and inefficient; 7. There are simply too many people on the government payroll.


\(^{137}\) Open Letter from Howard Jarvis, Chairman, ATRM, n.d. [1980], Box 60-1, Tax Rebellion Movement Materials. The ATRM continued its activism well into the mid-1980s, denouncing the combination of “liberals, tax-spending special interests, bureaucrats, big labor union bosses, and the left wing press” to the “free enterprise system” and
Proposition 13’s success cowed liberals almost as much as it inspired conservatives. President Carter cited the measure’s success as evidence of the need to bring about “a more efficient operation of government.” Walter Heller, former dean of the Kennedy economic advisers, acknowledged that state governments would “need to deliver more per dollar of tax” in their services and return the difference to taxpayers. Most damning, perhaps, was the admission from Senator Edward M. Kennedy (a would-be liberal challenger to Carter for the Democratic nomination) that all levels of government had to find “more effective ways to cut the fraud and the fat and waste to counter the rising frustration of the taxpayers who pay the bills.”

San Francisco Supervisor (and future mayoral candidate) Quentin Kopp proposed implementing a set of Tayloristic efficiency measures for city workers to improve productivity, lamenting that “There was a greater pride in performance among civil servants when there were fewer of them.” The atmosphere at the 1978 U. S. Conference of Mayors meeting was one of bewilderment, as many Democratic Mayors struggled to understand how to balance seemingly contradictory taxpayer demands. According to a mid-June Gallup poll, 57 percent of the public supported a Proposition 13-like measure in their own states; a majority also believed that their local governments were not paying too much for public services. As the magazine almost quizzically summarized: “the American taxpayer seems to want it both ways—lower taxes and ample services.”


139 “Sound and Fury over Taxes,” 12-16.
140 Pied Piper on the Potomac,” Time, 3 July 1978, 15.
143 “The Big Tax Revolt,” Newsweek, 19 June 1978, 20-23. When pressed, 29 percent of respondents to the Gallup poll expressed their belief that taxes could be cut by 10 percent without forcing serious offsets in government.
In some respects, then, liberals better understood the meaning of Proposition 13 than energized conservative activists. Far from a call for a massive reduction in the size and scope of government, the tax revolt was a call for cheaper delivery of improved public services. This latter point was the most alarming to AFSCME. Surveying the major studies done in the aftermath of Proposition 13, a Public Interest Opinion Research study commissioned by the union found “the most significant message of the tax revolt” was “the public’s feeling that officials must take account to cut out waste and inefficiency and can do so without reducing services.”

“The Most Visible Advocate for Tax Justice in America”

Ironically, Proposition 13 had little immediate impact on AFSCME. To a much greater degree than in other states, civil service groups like the California State Employees Association (CSEA) had served as the leading edge in the public sector labor movement in California, shifting in the course of the 1960s from a focus on retirement systems and civil service protections to incorporate some of the traditional elements of labor unions. AFSCME gained a few small footholds in the state during the 1960s—AFSCME Secretary-Treasurer Bill Lucy rose

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services, and 23 percent of those surveyed believed that levies could be reduced by 20 percent without slashing services.

144 This was evident in poll after poll conducted in the aftermath of Proposition 13’s passage. *Time* pollster Daniel Yankelovich noted in the aftermath of the vote, the most common motivation expressed by supporters was a protest against perceived waste and inefficiency in government “Spreading Consensus to Cut, Cut, Cut,” *Time*, 25 September 1978, 48-50. An ABC News-Harris poll found that fully 89 percent of respondents agreed that Proposition 13 was “a strong protest that people running government will have to respond to by trimming a lot of waste from government spending.” A *New York Times*-CBS News poll found that 78 percent agreed with the statement that government wasted “a lot of the money we pay in taxes”—nearly double the rate of affirmative response to the same question in 1958. Lipset and Raab, “The Message of Proposition 13,” 42-46. Depending on the poll, between 70 to 85 of Proposition 13 supporters stated that percent of also stated that tax reduction would not result in any cutbacks in services. “Background Material: A Summary of Recent Poll Results; For Mr. Vic Fingerhut’s Discussion of Progressive Strategies for Dealing with Property Tax Limitation Measures,” Special Report Prepared by Public Interest Opinion Research, 1978, Box 5, Folder 12, AFSCME Public Policy Analysis Department Records, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as AFSCME Public Policy Analysis Department Records].
to prominence through Local 1675 in Contra Costa County—but it continued to lag behind other organizations well into the 1970s. As late as July 1975, the union had fewer than 18,500 paying members in the state, just 2.5 percent of its potential jurisdiction of nearly 700,000.145

While AFSCME monitored the situation in California, the national office invested little in the anti-Proposition 13 campaign. In fact, when Wurf ventured to San Francisco in March 1977, he praised the Brown administration’s efforts to secure property tax reform, pronouncing the state “on a sound course of seeking a more reasonable and fair tax system for its citizens.”146 Though Wurf announced that the union newspaper, The Public Employee, would begin covering tax issues in more depth in March 1978, noting that “the injustice facing taxpayers makes them reluctant to pay the higher taxes that are often needed to give our members better wages and benefits,” but made no mention of the looming vote in California.147

For several weeks after the vote, Wurf insisted that the measure was best understood in terms of local factors with no national implications. This dismissive posture was evident in a June 11 appearance on CBS’s Face the Nation. Guided by a persistent faith in the popularity of public services, Wurf defiantly declared to a panel of stunned reporters that the public would reject mass layoffs because they recognized that “the quality of service frequently depends upon the number of employees available.” Noting that government employees stood to collect

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145 “Occupational Representation in State Service -- an Appraisal and Analysis,” Memorandum from the Clerical & Allied Service Employees (CASE), n.d. [1970s], Box 4, Folder 6, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers; AFSCME’s operated five regional councils in CA, but only two District Council 36 (Los Angeles, 5,394) and District Council 57 (San Francisco, 1,887) had significant memberships. Most of the union’s members (9,803) were in unaffiliated locals, which operated mostly at a local level. There were 967,703 total public employees in the state, 200,481 employed by the state and 768,222 by local governments. 258,691 of those were teachers, and another 23,151 were firefighters, both of which were clearly outside AFSCME’s defined jurisdiction. “California,” Memorandum from Keith Tarr-Whelan to Jerry Wurf, 18 December 1974, Box 4, Folder 6, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers. For a overview of California public sector labor relations through the late 1970s, see Winston W. Crouch, Organized Civil Servants: Public Employer-Employee Relations in California: University of California Press, 1978).
147 “President’s Letter No. 1,” Jerry Wurf Collection.
unemployment insurance in the event of a layoff, Wurf insisted that the principal victim of cutbacks would be the general public. Even if vital services were insulated from cuts, Wurf argued, there was an unrecognized value in a strong public sector that most taxpayers took for granted. “You drink your water every morning and you don’t get diarrhea by noon; you buy a hamburger and the worst you will get is indigestion,” Wurf told the panel, drifting into the crude language he was infamous for around AFSCME’s headquarters but generally concealed in public. These invisible public goods, he insisted, were underwritten by the same competent and professional public service currently under fire from anti-tax activists. Regardless of the short-term political appeal of draconian cuts, Wurf predicted, “the American people want and need qualitative and quantitative public services” and would reject elected officials who gutted those services for their own immediate gain.148

In the days that followed, Wurf reiterated his claim that Proposition 13 was a local “aberration.”149 In a June 13 column in the Washington Post, Wurf explained the measure as “a natural reaction by the California voters to an intolerable property tax burden” and blamed the state’s elected leadership for failing to enact reasonable tax reform, and thus creating the political space for “demagogues” to present the public with a draconian outlet for its frustrations.150 Wurf expressed a similar idea six days later in a letter to AFSCME’s staff, underscoring both the local causes of the crisis, on the one hand, and the need for progressive tax reform, on the other.151

By late June, however, there was growing evidence that the union would not be able to dismiss the developments as a local matter. Correspondence poured into the union office from taxpayers, both in California and other states, praising the measure. “Our backs are bent with the

148 Transcript, Face the Nation, CBS Television Network, 11 June 1978, Box 29, Folder 2, Jerry Wurf Collection.
151 “President’s Letter no. 3,” 19 June 1978, Box 15, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection.
burden of overpaid government employees, who are usually snotty, uncooperative, and unhelpful,” Edward Wolfe of Newport Beach wrote in early July. “There’s no question we don’t want more employees and more services… we expect reduced services and increased efficiency by the people who remain.”152 Another letter from a Springfield, Virginia resident challenged AFSCME to “justify the salaries and other benefits which are provided by the taxpayer for the many ‘services’ provided.” “HURRAH for Proposition 13,” it continued, “we might be able to control this monster yet.”153 Former staffer Harry Evans wrote to him shortly after Proposition 13’s passage, complaining that too many California unions “have decided to hide out until the heat is off.” “Proposition 13 is not an issue that will simply go away,” he warned. “It is an issue that could screw up every city, every county, every school district, every special district in the nation.”154

When the IEB met ahead of the 1978 union convention in Las Vegas, just two weeks after Proposition 13’s passage, it received a daunting report from its political affairs department about the “long-term ramifications” of “the growth and direction of the ‘New Right.’” Noting a sharp growth in both the number and activity of conservative groups, the report warned that “the general thrust of these organizations is against the labor movement” and “the focal point of their attack is public employee unions—particularly AFSCME.” Previously confined to the margins of political life and forced to fight relatively obscure legal battles over union security issues, it noted, the New Right had found a new and powerful vehicle in anti-tax, anti-government referendums like Proposition 13, which, combined with a coordinated legislative attack on

152 Letter from C. Edward Wolfe, Newport Beach, CA, to Jerry Wurf, 3 July 1978, Box 48, Folder 39, Jerry Wurf Collection.
collective bargaining, posed a critical threat to the union. The report concluded that while it was organizing the membership to “counterbalance the grassroots lobbying techniques of the New Right,” it lacked a long-term strategy to deal with the problem, and it called for a wide-ranging review of AFSCME’s political and messaging operations ahead of the 1978 election season.\footnote{Political Education Report, Presented to the International Executive Board, Las Vegas, NV, 21-30 June 1978, Box 9, Folder 16, AFSCME International Executive Board Records.}

This latter challenge dominated the union convention that year.\footnote{Fittingly, the featured speaker was liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith, invited four months earlier to address the growing “assault” against government workers. In a ranging speech titled “For a Positive Defense of Public Services,” Galbraith emphasized the need for a stronger affirmation of the role of public services in American society, a bolder awareness of the superiority of collective-social responsibility to individual action, and a more emphatic assertion of the joined interest of public workers and the poor. Letter from Jerry Wurf to John Kenneth Galbraith, 6 February 1978, Box 262, John Kenneth Galbraith Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts [hereafter cited as John Kenneth Galbraith Personal Papers]; “For A Positive Defense of Public Services,” Address by John Kenneth Galbraith before the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Las Vegas, Nevada, June 28, 1978, Box 891, John Kenneth Galbraith Personal Papers. Galbraith’s characterization of Proposition 13 and other similar measures as “disguised attacks on the poor” drew the most attention in the press, but the speech as a whole neatly captured Wurf’s own position Galbraith later told Wurf telling him that he had rarely had as many requests for reprints of one of his speeches. Letter from John Kenneth Galbraith, 31 July 1978, Box 262, John Kenneth Galbraith Personal Papers.}

Speaker after speaker took the floor to warn of the growing anti-tax sentiments in their own state, and in his much-anticipated keynote address, Wurf acknowledged that AFSCME had “never been so strong and never . . . so strongly threatened,” facing a political crisis that transcended partisan label.

“Scapegoats for the failings of incumbents” and “targets for the rabble-rousing of insurgents,” Wurf lamented, public workers had become a bipartisan political target: “The old conservatives insist they do not need us,” “the new liberals complain they can’t afford us,” and “demagogues of every stripe scratch for votes by calling for our scalps.”\footnote{Keynote Address by Jerry Wurf to the 23rd International Convention of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, n.d. [1978], Box 157, Folder 57, Jerry Wurf Collection.} Rather than pursuing reflexive opposition to anti-tax movements, AFSCME, Wurf insisted, had to mobilize its resources to “take the initiative” by pressing for progressive tax reforms that would preserve high-level services (and protect public employees) without ignoring the real concerns of the middle-class
homeowner. As the *New York Times* put it, Wurf proposed AFSCME fight the influence of Proposition 13 by “joining the tax revolt.”

In the months that followed, the union published and distributed a pamphlet titled *The Great Tax Ripoff (and What We Can Do About It): AFSCME’s Guide to Tax Justice*. “No issue is more important to public employees than tax justice,” Wurf began. “Tax revenues pay for our jobs, our wages, and our benefits” and shaped the contours of contract negotiations, since “a government short on tax revenues is a government short on reasonableness.” The union’s long-standing commitment to tax reform was newly urgent, he continued, as “self-styled prophets of the so-called ‘tax rebellion’ have been on the warpath against public employees, against public services, and against honest efforts to reform the tax system.” Acknowledging the legitimacy of taxpayer grievances, Wurf insisted “the best way to counter the phony ‘tax rebellion’ is by launching a real tax rebellion against unfair tax systems.” The pamphlet went on to outline an “Action Program for Tax Justice” designed to radically overhaul the revenue system, both on the state level (by exempting basic needs from sales taxes, implementing circuit breakers on property taxes, and using federal revenue sharing as a carrot to encourage the implementation of progressive income taxes) and the federal level (by eliminating the cap on Social Security contributions, increasing corporate tax rates, eliminating tax shelters, reducing mineral depletion allowance to increase oil tax receipts, and closing capital gain loopholes). “AFSCME should become the most visible advocate of tax justice in America,” Wurf claimed in a letter to union leaders a few months later, “The jobs of our members depend upon it.”

161 “President’s Letter no. 4,” 28 August 1978, Box 15, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection.
But even as AFSCME outlined its own response to the tax revolt, it found few effective allies within the rest of the labor movement. “Every demagogue politician will be beating on us,” Wurf told the *New York Times* on the eve of AFSCME’s convention. “If other unions make the mistake of trying to preserve the status quo, the taxpayers will tread on us with the scorn we deserve.” Where Wurf believed unions needed to adopt a pragmatic attitude with respect to short-term concessions and, if need be, forgo strikes for arbitration, other public sector union leaders, like Howard McClennan of International Association of Fire Fighters, vowed to take militant steps to “convince people that in order to have A-1 services they’ll have to pay for them.” Nor did the AFL-CIO prove an effective ally. The Public Employees Department, mostly dormant since its creation in 1974, called an emergency meeting in June 1978, only to announce (with considerable fanfare) its intention to develop “a coordinated program of action for the future.” At its quarterly meeting in early August, the AFL-CIO Executive Council released a statement denouncing the efforts of “the traditional advocates of bargain-basement government” to use “legitimate taxpayer discontent as a smokescreen for measures to reduce the taxes of wealthy individuals and corporations, dismantle essential programs, and hamstring the ability of government to provide necessary services” and calling for “tax justice,” including progressively-structured income, sales, and property taxes. Of course, the lack of specifics underscored the difficulties posed by crafting an actionable tax reform program that could garner the kind of wide-ranging support required for AFL-CIO action.

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164 Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, August 7-8, 1978, Drake Hotel, Chicago, Illinois, AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes, George Meany Memorial Archives, National Labor College, Silver Spring, Maryland [hereafter cited as AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes].
165 Departures from general “soak the rich” proposals were rare because of the vast range of interests within the AFL-CIO. In February 1978, for example, the federation endorsed the Carter administration’s proposal to limit business deductions for entertain expenses and meals to 50 percent of the cost—the “three martini lunch” tax. A few days later, Edward Hanley, President of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees, wrote to Meany to object to the
If anything, the growing saliency of tax issues only exacerbated tensions between public sector unions like AFSCME and their private sector counterparts. Other cases were even more explicit. “Jerry’s big problem with the tax thing lies in convincing the rest of the trade union movement of the legitimacy of the positions that he has taken,” a senior AFL-CIO official told the Washington Post in early July. Because the 14 million private sector members were functionally the tax-paying employers of government workers, the source continued, AFSCME was expected to seek the AFL-CIO’s support for its tax program before pushing it publicly. 166

But even within AFSCME, the cautious, conciliatory reaction to the tax revolt was problematic. For one thing, it was often difficult to rein in the militancy of the membership in the face of proposed cutbacks. The same inflationary pressures that produced “bracket creep” among increasingly anxious middle-class taxpayers also eroded public sector workers’ purchasing power, which fell by as much as 33 percent in some cities between 1971 and 1976. 167 Wurf and other public sector union leaders became prisoners of the militancy of their own members—in the same 1978 convention speech in which he sketched the dangers posed by the emerging tax revolt, Wurf also pledged AFSCME’s unstinting commitment to wage increases for its own member, vowing that the union would continued to insist on Cost of Living Adjustment clauses in every one of its contracts. Even when AFSCME locals managed to persuade its membership to accept contracts that left them lagging behind—a 4 percent raise in New York City in 1978, a 5.5 percent raise for Pennsylvania state employees—it still faced fierce criticism from elected officials. 168 “We’re on everybody’s bad list,” a disenchanted staff economist told the New York Times, claiming it would lead to “thousands” of lost jobs. Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, February 20-27, 1978, Americana Hotel, Bal Harbour, Florida, AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes.


167 This estimate is comes from an Urban Institute survey, quoted in Mathews and Walcott, “Union Blues,” 25.

168 Less than a month after District Council 37 accepted the meager raise, the New York Times editorial board brought its evolution on the public sector labor issue full circle, declaring in an August 4 editorial that “militant
Times days later. Despite curbing wage demands and accepting rollbacks, Linda Lampkin lamented, “We can’t do anything right for most people.”

Similarly, AFSCME often faced stiff opposition from its own members to its own tax reform program. “There is serious hostility toward income taxes,” Wurf admitted to U.S. News in July 1978. “Even our own people would rather be nickeled and dimed.” He made a similar point in his “President’s Letter” of August 28, noting that “our members, like all workers, get angry about the unfair bite that taxes take out of their paychecks.”

Wurf carried this message to the set of a Washington, D.C. affiliate of ABC on October 1, where he confronted Jarvis personally for the first time. While the two agreed about the failures of elected officials, Jarvis charged that the fundamental message of Proposition 13 was aimed at a more pernicious threat. “We’re not going to permit public employee unions to run this country, . . . That’s what ‘13’ said,” he argued. “They’re trying hard to run the country, [but] we’re not going to let them do it.” A startled Wurf stumbled to respond. “I’ve been representing public employees for thirty years,” he eventually replied, “and it seems to me every politician in these United States sort of runs against our union.” Jarvis’s innovation, Wurf continued, was his capacity to fuse the old anti-public sector sentiment with an even more venerable anti-tax impulse, using propaganda, misstatements, and demagoguery to create the impression that public workers were responsible for high property taxes and capitalize on the seamier side of American politics—“a guy is disappointed, frustrated; he becomes a ready subject for demagoguery and nonsense.”

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unionism, drawing power from its leverage over public services, is simply incompatible with efficient government.”


171 “President’s Letter no. 4,” Jerry Wurf Collection.

172 “Tax Revolt, Round Three,” Transcript, Crossfire, 1 October 1978, Box 46, Folder 19, Jerry Wurf Collection.
It was a telling and largely correct interpretation of the roots of working-class anti-tax sentiment, one that underscored the importance of pressing alternatives to draconian cuts, rather than simply opposing them, as AFSCME approached the 1978 fall elections, when four states (Michigan, Oregon, Idaho, and Nevada) were slated to consider Proposition 13-like measures. The task was complicated by developments in California, where the infusion of $5 billion from the state government’s surplus and $7 billion from federal aid had allowed local governments to avoid the dire service cutbacks that many unions had predicted. An internal memorandum warned that the bailouts had created “a false sense of security” in the state—allowing local jurisdictions to survive without cutbacks “not because ‘the fat was cut out of government,’ but because an alternative funding source was available.” It was critical, the memorandum continued, that AFSCME emphasize the “uniqueness of the California situation” and stress that its “success” could not be readily duplicated in other states.  

The union did reasonably well. The ballot provisions passed in Idaho and Nevada, but were defeated in Oregon and Michigan, the two states where AFSCME was positioned to make a significant difference. The union took satisfaction in the results—an post-election memorandum boasted that “the Jarvis-type meat ax approach to property tax relief was soundly defeated in the only two populous states in which is was taken up.” CAPE optimistically declared that the results demonstrated that “a public educated through the combined efforts of public employees, 

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173 Proposition 13: An Update,” Internal Memorandum, n.d., Box 48, Folder 39, Jerry Wurf Collection. Michigan voters actually had three options at the polls—the Tisch Amendment, a 50 percent across-the-board property tax reduction, the Voucher Amendment, which terminated the use of property taxes in education funding and offered parents a voucher for private education, and the Headlee amendment, which capped state spending to the growth in income tax receipts and linked property tax increases to the Consumer Price Index. Oregon, Idaho, and Nevada all considered simpler measures that simply cut property taxes, while a dozen other states entertained ballot provisions that limited state spending in one way or another.  

174 “Fact Sheet on Tax Limitations,” Internal Memorandum, November 1978, Box 5, Folder 12, AFSCME Public Policy Analysis Department Records.
trade unions, and citizen groups will reject measures that threaten human services and benefit the few at the expense of the many.”

On November 9, Wurf called a press conference, where he began by rejecting the day’s headline in the *New York Times*—“Tax Cut Measures Gain Wide Support.” Opposition to taxes, he began, was a venerable tradition and “constant concern” in American politics. What was new, he acknowledged, was the fusion of anti-tax sentiment with the question of “the quantity and quality of services that the American people are getting for their taxes.” He took solace in the election results, but acknowledged that the crisis had far from passed. Voters were “fearful of not getting enough for their taxes,” Wurf admitted, a concern which meshed dangerously with the public’s “misconception of the wages, hours, working conditions and hiring mechanisms that public employees have.” Insisting that average compensation was misleading (inflated by well-compensated professionals and better-paid federal workers), that public employees were subject to the same inflationary pressures as other workers, and that government workers shared the same concerns about tax levels as other Americans, Wurf pleaded that public workers sought only fair compensation for “a useful day’s work” and were strongly committed to improving “the quality, quantity, and productivity of government services.”

*The Politics of Public Services*

Donald McClure, former director of public affairs for AFSCME and Executive Director of CAPE, remarked in late 1979 that Proposition 13 marked a fundamental departure in the relationship between elected leaders, government workers, and the voting public. “Politicians used to try to avoid disruption of public services at all cost,” he noted, “now the politician

\[175\] *CapeUpdate* 2 (November 1978).

usually gains from a confrontation . . . because even though the cost of everything is going up, taxes and government are the one thing people have the chance to vote against."177

Inflationary pressures were necessary but insufficient to generate the anti-tax backlash that began with Proposition 13 and soon spread through the rest of the nation, transcending the narrow issue of tax reduction to become what historian Robert Self has characterized as “a much larger project to reduce the power, scope, and credibility of regulatory, social-wage public policy.”178

Attacks on public workers played a critical role in legitimizing this new political language. As Casper Weinberger noted in 1972, there was a discernible “inconsistency” in public polling: “they all wanted government to spend less, but they wanted more services for themselves.”179 Through most of the postwar era, and well into the 1970s, voters regularly opposed extreme spending and tax cuts, recognizing an integral link between revenue measures and government services. This began to change in the mid-1970s, in part because of the anxiety created by inflationary pressures, but it was not until the anti-tax claims were fused with a critique of government workers that the mechanisms became respectable and effective. The political genius of ant-tax architects like Howard Jarvis was to resolve the zero-sum logic of the relationship, disconnecting the service from the tax bill by interjecting a “greedy,” “powerful” public employee, making it appear that taxes could be reduced and services maintained simply by striking at the pay and power of government workers.

Long concerned with the prospect of a tax-based reaction against government workers, AFSCME was nonetheless unprepared to deal with the scope of the political appeal. The union

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178 Self, “Prelude to the Tax Revolt,” 145
staked its initial response on the premise that simply defending government services would be sufficient to insulate the government workers who provided the services. When that proved insufficient, AFSCME adopted a complicated blend of short-term concessions, educational activism, and renewed political action—a strategy that proved more effective at warding off tax cutting measures than improving the image of public workers. By late 1978, the union had adopted an even more deferential tone in its advertising campaign, emphasizing that its members were “hardworking, tax-paying people like you, working for you” in one late November spot.180

None of it seemed to make a difference. “It’s not like a faucet you can turn on and off,” John McCart, Executive Director of the Public Employees Department, told Newsweek in late September. “We’re going to have this anti-public-workers attitude for a long time to come.”181

AFSCME had only weathered the first part of the storm. The worst was yet to come.

180 „Laura Evans. She Knows What a Warm Smile Can Do for Someone In Trouble”, Script for Ad Prepared by J. Walter Thompson Co. for AFSCME, 29 November 1978, Box 46, Folder 10, Jerry Wurf Collection; “National Television Ads (JWT),” Memorandum from Bill Hamilton to Mike Dowling, 20 November 1978, Box 46, Folder 10, Jerry Wurf Collection.
181 “Public Strikes Back,” 71-72.
CHAPTER NINE

“The Rear Guard for Progressive and Labor Interests in Retreat”:


On a Monday morning in mid-September 1979, AFSCME’s political staff delivered a damning report to the union’s International Executive Board. Claiming only “relative success” at warding off the most draconian cuts to key programs and policies as political victories, the report lamented that AFSCME had become “the rear guard for progressive and labor interests in retreat,” its agenda undone by a combination of economic and political crisis. Squeezed by inflation and anemic economic growth and rattled by a growing wave of anti-tax sentiment, the federal budget, the cornerstone of the union’s national agenda, had become a “political whipping boy for politicians who can no longer guarantee unending increases in the economic well-being of their constituents.” The new political reality put AFSCME in an untenable position.

“Legislators support AFSCME’s programs quietly and cautiously when asked to do so,” the report continued, “but more than ever they have to be asked,” often balancing their support “with the rhetoric of the new thrift in newsletters, floor debates, and public speeches.” Whatever the union’s short-term success, the report concluded, the long-term outlook for expanded domestic spending was “not bright.”

The 1979 report illustrated a shift in AFSCME’s political agenda three years in the making. Gone by the late 1970s was much of the optimism and ambition that had marked the union’s previous political activity. Earlier attempts to expand and transform the American welfare state gave way to a desperate series of episodic efforts to preserve its foundations, as

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AFSCME scrambled to secure federal support for state and local government services while also waging a state-by-state fight to stunt the spread of Proposition 13-like tax cutting initiatives. Similarly, AFSCME’s efforts to broaden the collective rights of public workers evolved into an increasingly desperate campaign to preserve the basic legal framework that underlay public sector unionism.

The union’s more defensive posture reflected the impact of broader political and economic changes that many in AFSCME only partially understood at the time, but it also stemmed more immediately from disappointment with the Carter administration. After eight years of Republican rule, the union’s national leadership expected much from Carter following his election in 1976. Disappointed from the start by its lack of influence, AFSCME nonetheless stood by Carter long after many of his labor allies had deserted, even as Carter’s fiscal conservatism strained the relationship. Desperately in need of allies in the aftermath of Proposition 13’s passage in California in mid-1978, Wurf became frustrated by Carter’s response to the Tax Revolt, particularly his embrace of political language that echoed many of its anti-public-worker themes. Carter’s ineffective decision to focus the administration’s economic policy on fighting inflation rather than curbing unemployment exacerbated these simmering tensions, and by mid-1979, the delicate, tenuous alliance showed signs of public fracture. The final break came in early 1980 when, stunned by the depth of Carter’s commitment to an austerity budget, AFSCME threw its efforts, haltingly and reluctantly, behind challenger Edward M. Kennedy. When Kennedy’s inconsistent campaign failed to unseat the incumbent, AFSCME fell unenthusiastically back in line behind Carter, having become so invested in and dependent on federal support that it could not effectively retreat from presidential politics.
Wurf’s reluctance to break from Carter reflected a broader ambiguity about the future of American liberalism. Having devoted a significant amount of time and energy through the 1970s to striking a balance between the “regular” and “reform” wings of the Democratic Party, AFSCME increasingly shifted its political energies outside its formal boundaries during the late 1970s, seeking out and participating in labor-liberal groups like Democratic Agenda, Progressive Alliance, and the Citizens Labor Energy Coalition. Though energizing and, in some limited sense, productive, the reliance on these extra-party efforts also illustrated the limits of progressive politics in the last quarter of the twentieth century. As an increasingly fractured labor movement scoured for allies among an equally fragmented yet even more diminished left, labor-liberal coalitions became narrower in purpose, even as they came to encompass a broader range of participants.²

For Wurf, this tension was in some respects deeply personal. He reconnected with veterans of the social democracy of his youth, only to find its political appeal even less potent than in the age of Norman Thomas. His unwavering focus on liberal-left politics distracted at times from developments within AFSCME, to the point that he briefly faced the first and only challenge to his presidency in the late 1970s. Quickly dispatched, the short-lived threat nonetheless highlighted a sad personal irony for Wurf: He reached the pinnacle of success and status—the Carter administration’s leading labor ally and president of what officially became the largest union within the AFL-CIO in 1978—at the same moment that AFSCME’s organizational clout began to decline.

² On the importance of coalitional politics to the persistence of labor liberalism in the 1970s, see Andrew Battista, The Revival of Labor Liberalism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007)
“A Watered-Down Dose of Snake Oil”

Carter came to the White House in early 1977 as self-defined new political entity, distinct from either New Deal-Great Society liberalism or Old South conservatism, the two traditions he was most frequently associated with. Technocrat by disposition and populist by convenience, Carter vowed to root out political corruption, make government more efficient, and leverage the private sector toward socially-constructive ends. In short, as historian Sean Wilentz has put it, he sought to “Carterize” the Democratic Party, scrapping “the liberal dogma and bromides of the New Deal” for “a revised liberalism and liberal leadership befitting the confusing rigors of the 1970s.”

Organized labor had no clear role in this new liberal tradition. During the transition, Carter pollster Pat Caddell drafted a 50-page memorandum suggesting that the administration would benefit politically from breaking with organized labor, reasoning that it was so inextricably bound to the Democratic Party that it had no where else to go, freeing Carter to court business without fear of political retribution. As governor of a right-to-work state, Carter had little personal experience with or affection for labor unions, viewing them, as domestic policy aide Stuart Eizenstat later put it, as “just another interest group” with no “special call on his heartstrings.” At times, union staffers complained, the administration seemed willfully ignorant of the labor movement—“you mentioned the IAM,” one AFSCME staffer later lamented, and

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“you had to explain you were talking about the machinists.” Despite the mutual distrust, the AFL-CIO endorsed Carter over Ford and claimed a significant share of credit for his victory in November 1976, but Carter entered the White House, as historian Taylor Dark has put it, “with better ties to individual union leaders than with the AFL-CIO itself.”

Wurf was the labor leader who perhaps had reason to expect the most from the Carter White House. More than any other union, AFSCME had played a key role not just in helping Carter secure the Democratic nomination, but also in legitimizing his candidacy to the broader labor movement. To be sure, Wurf had been troubled by the former Georgia governor’s anti-government, anti-bureaucrat campaign tropes, and shortly after the November election, Wurf warned (in hindsight, prophetically) that he had “learned the hard way that you can’t depend on a guy helping you just because you helped elect him.” But early signs were promising. Wurf was credited with an early victory when Carter selected Ray Marshall as Secretary of Labor, rather than John Dunlop, the candidate preferred by Meany and the AFL-CIO. Further, aide William Hamilton later recalled that Wurf enjoyed greater “social access” at the White House than ever before during the early months. The President-Elect went out of his way to court Wurf personally, once calling Wurf’s home and spending fifteen minutes on the phone with Wurf’s daughter Abigail—the best remembered of a string of small but meaningful courtesies that Wurf later acknowledged were “very moving.” Like many liberals, Wurf was disappointed by Carter’s initial tax cut-laden stimulus plan, complaining in private correspondence that it would

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6 Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, at his home, 1 January 1982, Folder 2, Joseph Goulden Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Joseph Goulden Collection].
place “a stiff mortgage on new spending in the future” with “exceedingly modest” effect on the economy, but AFSCME eventually supported the package in public, in part to preserve its good standing with the new administration and in part because the plan promised $16 billion in aid to state and local governments for public service jobs and job-training. On the eve of Carter’s inauguration, the union’s political staff anticipated that it would play a key role in policy deliberations on a range of issues, from fiscal policy and urban development to welfare and healthcare reform.

Wurf remained publicly optimistic about the new president for months thereafter, believing that the late 1970s marked a critical moment of opportunity for labor liberalism, a period of progressive possibilities not unlike the 1930s, when even a reluctant president could be carried toward reformist breakthroughs. “There is a direct line between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter,” Wurf observed to an audience at San Francisco’s Commonwealth Club in March 1977. Just as a slew of programs and policies had been instituted to stabilize the economy and insulate American society from the exaggerated fluctuations of the business cycle amidst the Depression, Wurf suggested, Carter could use “a similar kind of governmental activism—


informed, realistic, and based on the goal of serving the people better” to address the challenges of the late 1970s. The “new” New Deal, Wurf predicted, would include a revamped system of revenue sharing and federal aid to distressed urban areas, an overhaul of the welfare and Medicaid systems to ease the burden on large city governments, an ambitious program for universal healthcare, and a federal-led effort to restructure the nation’s tax code, leveraging federal money to encourage states and localities to adopt graduated income taxes, homeowner-friendly property taxes, and progressively-structured sales taxes.\(^\text{13}\)

Few in the labor movement shared Wurf’s faith. The AFL-CIO suffered a string of disappointments in the first months of 1977: a system of wages and price controls, a smaller-than-expect increase in the minimum wage, and an increasingly neoliberal bent in trade policy.\(^\text{14}\)

But the AFL-CIO needed Carter’s support for its highest priority, labor law reform, preventing a full break through much of the administration’s first two years. Publicly undaunted by the surprising defeat of a bill to legalize joint union picketing of construction sites in March, the AFL-CIO announced plans to press for a major set of reforms in late June.\(^\text{15}\) The initial package included a full repeal of Section 14(B) of the Taft-Hartley Act (which allowed state “right-to-work” restrictions on union security) and the implementation of a “card check” system of

\(^{13}\) “Remarks by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO,” Before the Commonwealth Club, Sheraton-Palace Hotel, San Francisco, 25 March 1977, Box 28, Folder 27, Jerry Wurf Collection


\(^{15}\) Ken Bode, “Annual Sunbath: Organized Labor Comes to Terms with Carter,” New Republic (12 March 1977): 12; “Big Labor’s Big Defeat,” Newsweek, 4 April 1977, 54; “A Rapid Decline in Political Clout,” Time, 11 April 1977, 55. A somewhat obscure issue, the “common situs” bill had passed comfortably in 1975, only to be vetoed by Ford, who caved to an unprecedented direct mail campaign by New Right and business activists. Carter promised to sign the bill, but not work for its passage.
organization to bypass the National Labor Relations Board election process. But, in a telling hint of what was to come, both were soon dropped under pressure from both the Democratic leadership and the White House in favor of a more modest set of technical changes to the NLRB process. A useful political concession for the fiscally conservative White House (unlike a federal job programs, national health insurance, or significant increase in the minimum wage, Gary Fink has noted, labor law reform required little no additional outlays in the federal budget and had no direct impact on inflation), the White House finally publicly announced its support for the Labor Law Reform Act in mid-July, but opted to prioritize the ratification of the controversial Panama Canal treaty instead of pressing for the bill’s immediate passage. The delay allowed the Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and other conservative organizations to launch an unprecedented direct-mail effort against the “power grab” of “union bosses.” Cowing marginal Democrats, the campaign allowed Senate opponents to successfully mount a filibuster in the summer of 1978, leaving the AFL-CIO with little to show for the first half of Carter’s presidency.

Wurf watched the labor law reform fights with great interest. The union dispatched its lobbyists to support the legislation, which it hoped would provide a beneficial model for legal reforms on the state and local level as well as aid imperiled private sector unions. But the strong backing also reflected the perception that the fate of the AFSCME’s broader political

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**Notes:**

19 “President’s Letter No. 1,” 1 March 1978, Box 15, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection.
agenda was inextricably linked to the political fortunes of the AFL-CIO. An unsigned memorandum from late March 1977 noted that many on Capitol Hill continued to treat organized labor as synonymous with the AFL-CIO, despite the diversity of the broader labor movement. “When we are winning, being viewed as a monolith doesn’t hurt,” the memo continued, but the defeat of common situs by a Democratic-controlled Congress had left organized labor looking vulnerable. While direct, institutional concerns had already presented a difficult legislative challenge for organized labor, the defeat of a minor reform that the powerful Building Trades Department held dear marked a new era in labor politics.20 “Anybody who doesn’t think we’ve come to a watershed in Congressional politics and labor lobbying,” the report surmised, “is out of touch with reality.”21

For Wurf, the labor law reform defeat represented both the poisoned fruit of the AFL-CIO’s narrow-minded politics during the previous decade and a damning indictment of the marginal position of labor in the new Democratic Party. “Organized labor’s mistakes are catching up with it,” he told the New York Times in late June 1977, after the defeat of the common situs bill. Cynical in its handling of McGovern’s nomination and blind on Vietnam, Wurf charged, the AFL-CIO ought not have been surprised to learn that “it did not have the real clout it thought it had in Congress.” “The AFL-CIO treats the situs defeat as a tactical error,”

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21 “Notes and Comments on the Situs Picketing Debacle,” Internal Memorandum, 25 March 1977, Box 61, Folder 7, Jerry Wurf Collection. Contemporaries soon echoed similar sentiments. In mid-April, for example, U. S. News commented that organized labor’s high expectations had turned to “political disappointment and legislative heartbreak.” “Worst of all from the union's view-point, an attitude seems to be developing among congressional leaders, and perhaps in the executive branch, too, that any proposal narrowly identified with unions is doomed to failure." There was some evidence that this message was being internalized by the unions themselves—AFL-CIO aide Thomas Donahue said in a March 29 speech "Our legislative agenda isn't to make unions strong . . . It's a program for people who work for a living, who have families to feed, who demand their rights." “Unions’ Sweet Hopes Turn Sour,” U. S. News and World Report, 11 April 1977, 93.
Wurf told the paper, “but it was more—it was the voice of the United States government it helped elect.”

In private, though, AFSCME’s staff acknowledged that the new political landscape posed a major challenge to its agenda for the Carter administration. “Our task,” a late June report from the Public Policy Analysis Department suggested, “is to find a way through the thicket of a four-way relationship involving the Carter Administration, the Congressional leadership, the labor movement, and the public”—all complicated by the growing profile of “New Breed” Democrats who believed that “a few anti-labor votes will look good to the ‘independent’ voters back home.” Maneuvering through this complicated political geography became a strategic imperative for AFSCME, particularly after the passage of Proposition 13 in June 1978 galvanized anti-tax and anti-statist sentiment on the Hill and in the White House. Desperate to secure additional federal support to stave off the effects of state-level tax cuts, AFSCME struggled to corral a disenchanted AFL-CIO, a fiscally conservative White House, and a Democratic Congress that often belied its own liberal majority, all while simultaneously working to ward off further attacks from the New Right.

The new political climate demanded political concessions. Having already embraced a softened line on labor relations (acknowledging the limited effectiveness of strikes and the need for moderated wage and benefit demands), Wurf began retreating from long-standing positions on issues of social policy, most notably, public sector job programs, which AFSCME had

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23 Public Policy Analysis Department Report, Presented to the International Executive Board, Las Vegas, NV, 29-30 June 1977, Box 8, Folder 14, AFSCME International Executive Board Records.
previously supported as a valid policy tool for reducing unemployment, stimulating the economy, and expanding public services.  

The Carter administration’s proposals on welfare reform and urban policy forced AFSCME to reconsider its position. After promising to clean up “the welfare mess” during the 1976 campaign, the administration initially struggled to find a budget-neutral set of reforms, finally settling on a two-part program that was both ambitious and remarkably simple: first, consolidate traditional welfare programs (Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Food Stamps, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI)) into a single guaranteed annual income, allocated to those deemed incapable of self-supporting employment (the elderly, blind, disabled, and single parents with young children); second, create 1.4 million minimum wage, public sector jobs for recipients deemed capable of full-time self-support (two-parent families with children, single parents with older children, single people, and childless families), to provide experience geared toward eventual private sector employment. Though the plan received the overwhelming support of the National Governors’ Conference, it quickly came under fire from both liberals (who opposed the sub-poverty line benefit levels and the meager funding allotted for public sector jobs) and conservatives (who worried it would foster welfare dependency and inflate public payrolls). Lacking support from either side of the political spectrum, the welfare program made little headway in Congress, and was essentially dead legislatively by mid-1978.

Wurf’s outright opposition to the program was predictable—nine of the ten proposed public sector job categories already included AFSCME members, raising the specter of an

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24 AFSCME had been careful to insist on basic labor and pay standards in new federal job and job training programs, lest they undercut existing public workers. For a discussion, see Chapter 6.
untenable situation in which some public employees were paid according to union contracts and others the federal minimum wage.\textsuperscript{26} In a December 1977 address to the National League of Cities, Wurf warned that Carter’s plan would “replace a welfare disaster with a public employment fiasco of enormous proportions,” turning “third class citizens on public welfare rolls into second class citizens on public payrolls.”\textsuperscript{27} A March 1978 mailing to AFSCME state and local leaders proclaimed that the union would fight any reform proposal that threatened to “swamp local and state government with low-wage welfare workers.”\textsuperscript{28}

But Wurf didn’t stop at the institutional case for opposition. He went further, using the welfare proposal to reflect more generally on the proper role of federally funded job creation as a tool of social policy. “I’m becoming convinced,” Wurf wrote in the same mailing, “that in the long run, the best thing for our country and our members may be for the federal government to concentrate on building a strong economy by providing jobs in private industry.” Tax incentives, job training, and infrastructure provided mechanisms to encourage private sector investment in urban areas, Wurf argued, “the most direct route to reducing unemployment and perking up the economy without distorting state and local government and making life harder for our members.”\textsuperscript{29} He built on the argument in the months that followed, beginning with a widely publicized March 21 address at the National Press Club, in which he sketched the limits of what he called the “ward-of-the-state approach” to the urban crisis. Too much federal policy, Wurf charged, only preserved the illusion of urban health, keeping cities on federally-funded life support with “partial solutions and emergency measures” (welfare, Food Stamps, and federally-


\textsuperscript{27} “Remarks by Jerry Wurf, President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees,” Before 1977 Congress of Cities and Exposition, National League of Cities, December 1977, Box 28, Folder 28, Jerry Wurf Collection.

\textsuperscript{28} “President’s Letter No. 1,” 1 March 1978, Box 15, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection.

\textsuperscript{29} “President’s Letter No. 1,” Jerry Wurf Collection.
funded government jobs) to “assuage the pain of urban decay” without ever challenging its actual causes. There would be “no life there, no vitality, no share in the commerce, pride, and dignity of our national community,” Wurf cautioned, without “the revival of self-sufficiency in our once-great urban centers” that came with a revitalized urban private sector. Government could not spend its way out of the urban crisis by expanding public payrolls, Wurf continued, denouncing the concept of “employer of last resort” as “a proven loser” and identifying “the availability of private sector jobs” as “a prerequisite for the health of American cities as well as the foundation of a prosperous American society.”30 He reiterated the message in early May before the National Association of Counties, acknowledging that “only a healthy private sector can provide the jobs that create a tax base to rescue declining communities from a permanent dependence on the federal dole.”31

Though increasingly wary of public jobs programs as a tool to address unemployment, however, Wurf never abandoned his belief in the need for an active role for government in the urban economy. The very title of his address, “Urban America: The Crisis Need Not Be Permanent,” both acknowledged the scale of the problem and implied that it was eminently solvable. Private investment had fled the American city, “encouraged and rewarded” by federal policies, Wurf charged in the same National Press Club address, taking jobs and the middle class with it, precipitating a cyclical crisis that led to more and more regressive levies, driving more taxpayers and jobs from the inner cities. What was needed, Wurf argued, was a far more aggressive and targeted urban policy: differential tax credits to stimulate business investment in city centers and retain those companies already there; an additional 20 percent investment tax

31 Address by Jerry Wurf to the National Association of Counties Legislative Conference, 1 May 1978, Box 28, Folder 29, Jerry Wurf Collection.
credit for specially blighted urban areas; a vastly expanded Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program to fund 300,000 existing public service jobs in the most financially distressed cities; more carefully targeted general revenue sharing and better funded countercyclical assistance; welfare reform to ease the financial burden on inner cities; and public pension reform and universal Social Security coverage to protect state and local governments from bankruptcy and workers from their failure. The crisis was a national problem requiring national investment, Wurf insisted, appealing to the increasingly suburban base of the new Democratic Party. “We can’t close our eyes, seal our borders, roll up our windows when driving through blight and expect that the cancer will not spread one day to our own doors.”

Wurf’s conversion was met by rare praise from the conservative press (Business Week lauded his “remarkably clear thinking,” while the Wall Street Journal featured his shift in a front-page story). It set AFSCME squarely at odds with many labor liberals, who were pressing the Humphrey-Hawkins Act, which initially required the federal government to provide enough jobs to bring the unemployment rate down to a fixed target of 4 percent. Some of the reaction misunderstood the context, for Wurf’s retreat from a traditional Keynesian faith in public job creation stemmed more from a concern about the political implications of the approach than its efficacy. Though often downplayed in an effort to reach blue-collar workers, an important segment of AFSCME had always been marked by a strong

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33 “The Way to Make Jobs,” Business Week, 3 April 1978; “Labor Letter: Private-Sector Jobs are the Key to Curing our Urban Woes, Jerry Wurf asserts,” Wall Street Journal, 21 March 1978, 1. The latest incarnation of a proposal that dated from the ill-fated Full Employment Bill of 1945 and the 1963 March on Washington, Humphrey-Hawkins combined the rights consciousness of the 1960s—a federally-guaranteed of a job and, in early drafts, the right to sue for it—with the unfinished economic agenda of the New Deal. It provided a rare forum for unified liberal support: pushed by the Congressional Black Caucus in a campaign largely funded by organized labor that attracted the votes of both traditional laborites and suburban liberals. But over the course of 1976, as economists called into question the inflationary effects of the program, support weakened in Congress, and following his election, Carter distanced himself from the measure, which he had tentatively endorsed during the primaries. With Carter’s blessing, the proposal was transformed through 1977, reduced, as historian Jefferson Cowie put it, into “something symbolically important but economically meaningless,” with concrete triggers replaced by “goals and targets,” “a mere economic suggestion put into legislative form.” Cowie, Stayin Alive, 266-286.
commitment to the traditional sense of government employment as a “profession,” and when
Wurf testified the House Joint Welfare Reform Subcommittee in October 1977, he had
complained that Carter’s proposal “downgrades the value of public service work.” Carter
proposed to pay for welfare reform by phasing out the CETA program, which subsidized some
750,000 entry level public sector jobs, providing a useful avenue to permanent employment and
a critical fiscal boost to Rust Belt centers like Buffalo and Cleveland, where it funded as much as
20 percent of the municipal workforce. In contrast to CETA-funded employees, who worked
alongside existing workers in the same job titles at the same pay, Carter’s proposal threatened to
create a separate, distinctive class of local government workers readily identified with the
welfare system. AFSCME endorsed an alternative proposal which would have preserved CETA
while giving qualified welfare recipients access to entry-level government jobs, promising them
“a beginning job with some future to it, rather than a stigmatized, dead-end job that only worsens
the desperate struggle for economic independence.”

Though Carter’s welfare plan tested AFSCME’s commitment to the administration, the
relationship between the union and the White House remained cordial through Carter’s first year.
A December report evaluated the first year of the Carter administration and 95th Congress as “a
mixed bag for public employees,” citing the stimulus program as a worthy achievement and
CETA/welfare as areas of concern. There were cautionary notes. A mid-February 1978
Department of Legislation and Political Education report lamented the disappointing lack of
ambition in the administration agenda. “On a number of issues the battle has not been joined at

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34 Testimony by Jerry Wurf before the Joint Welfare Reform Subcommittee, U.S. House of Representatives, 95th
Congress, 1st Session, 12 October 1977.
AFSCME Mailing?], Box 58, Folder 28, Jerry Wurf Collection.
36 Department of Legislation and Political Education Report, Presented to the International Executive Board, Los
Angeles, CA, 4-8 December 1977, Box 8, Folder 26, AFSCME International Executive Board Records.
all,” the report noted, citing national health insurance, tax reform, and urban policy as areas of unfulfilled promise. “Admittedly these are tough items, but a bold and courageous Executive can lead a party and a people toward victory on them” and “at least we can insist that the President not sound the retreat before the battle has been joined.” The same report singled out the State of the Union rhetoric, admitting concerns about the administration’s courtship of business, its fiscal conservatism, and “skepticism about the role of government in our society.”37 A Public Policy Analysis Department report echoed these sentiments, warning that the administration’s budget was “tragically disappointing for its lack of domestic initiatives.”38

AFSCME’s national office began to distance itself from Carter only when his fiscal conservatism became a clear obstacle to its urban agenda. The administration’s Urban Policy Research Group (URPG), an unwieldy, multi-agency effort, meandered unproductively toward the presidentially-mandated “comprehensive” urban policy through much of Carter’s first year. Initially concerned with identifying programs worthy of additional funding, the URPG shifted focus in early 1978 under pressure from Carter. Dispositionally drawn to programs that emphasized community-based reform and suspicious of grand “Great Society-style” approaches, historian Thomas Sugrue has shown, many around Carter came to doubt the federal government’s capacity to rescue distressed urban centers, and while the administration remained publicly committed to that goal, the lack of faith and enthusiasm showed in the final product. The president previewed the limits of the program in his 1978 State of the Union Address, proclaiming that “Government cannot solve our problems … cannot set out goals . . . cannot

38 Public Policy Analysis Department, Presented to the International Executive Board, Washington, D.C., 13 February 1978, Box 9, Folder 7, AFSCME International Executive Board Records.
define our vision … cannot eliminate poverty or provide a bountiful economy or reduce inflation or save our cities or cure illiteracy, or provide energy.”

Carter unveiled the “New Partnership to Conserve America’s Communities” in early March. Including more than fifty initiatives grouped into nine policy areas, the program promised to address the urban crisis by fostering cooperation both across levels of government and between the public and private sectors. Staffers assured Carter that the program would address urban problems without additional outlays by creating a more “responsive” and “streamlined” government. The proposal excited little enthusiasm, either in the press or on Capitol Hill, and the White House soon distanced itself from some elements of the plan, wary of the inflationary impact of any additional federal urban programs.

Wurf denounced the preliminary proposals as “a watered-down dose of snake oil.” Though he later singled out elements of the programs for praise (particularly the Urban Development Bank), Wurf was stunned by the lack of new federal money. “In philosophical terms, it’s marvelous … but as an economic program, it’s inadequate,” he told the Washington Post. “Unfortunately, America is mainly in need of economic stimulation, not philosophy.”

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40 The nine policy goals were: 1) Encourage and support efforts to improve local planning and management capacity, and the effectiveness of existing Federal programs, by coordinating these programs, simplifying planning requirements, reorienting resources, and reducing paperwork; 2) Encourage States to become partners in assisting urban areas; 3) Stimulate greater involvement by neighborhood organizations and voluntary associations; 4) Provide fiscal relief to the most hard-pressed communities; 5) Provide strong incentives to attract private investment to distressed communities; 6) Provide employment opportunities, primarily in the private sector, to the long-term unemployed and disadvantaged in urban areas; 7) Increase access to opportunity for those disadvantaged by a history of discrimination; 8) Expand and improve social and health services to disadvantaged people in cities, counties, and other communities; 9) Improve the urban physical environment and the cultural and aesthetic aspects of urban life. A New Partnership to Conserve America’s Communities: A Status Report on the President’s Urban Policy, June 1978 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978).
42 “Remarks by Jerry Wurf Before 1977 Congress of Cities and Exposition, National League of Cities, December 1977, Jerry Wurf Collection,
For many at AFSCME’s national office, the modest urban policy proposal served to bring into relief Carter’s broader shortcomings, doubts deepened by the disappointments that followed over the next year. Carter singled out government workers as part of his effort to fight inflation, encouraging mayors and governors to toe the line at 5.5 percent as an example to private industry—a move Wurf dismissed as “silly symbolism” and “sheer nonsense” but which also emboldened local officials to take a stronger line in negotiations.44 The inflation issue was particularly tricky for AFSCME, overlapping with what Wurf dismissed in June 1978 “the false, misleading view that we are overpaid and underworked.”45 The broader anti-inflation program was equally galling: accepting the basic necessity of wage controls, AFSCME, like many unions, insisted that Carter also place equally stringent restrictions on prices and profits. But when Carter formally introduced his anti-inflation effort in October 1978, the administration called for only voluntary controls, while continuing to urge that government hold the line on wages).46 In a nationally televised October 24 address, Carter claimed significant progress in curbing unemployment (down to 5.8 percent from the 7.8 rate at his election) and announced that the administration would fully shift the focus of its economic policy to fighting inflation, up to 8.9 percent, up fifty percent since the preceding April. Deeming “fiscal restraint” the best course, Carter promised to “hold down government spending, reduce the budget deficit, and eliminate government waste” by freezing federal hiring and pursuing a budget that required “difficult and

45 Keynote Address by Jerry Wurf to the 23rd International Convention of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, n.d. [1978], Box 157, Folder 57, Jerry Wurf Collection.
46 Donald S. Wasserman, “The President’s Anti-Inflation Program,” AFSCME Alert, 6 November 1978, Box 1, Folder 26, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter cited as Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers].
unpleasant decisions.” Describing the era as one of “national austerity,” Carter voted to slash the federal deficit ($33 billion), half of where it stood two years earlier.47

If the Oval Office address was intended to blunt popular anxiety, it failed. Two weeks after Carter delivered his speech, the Democratic Party suffered a stinging rebuke in the midterm elections, losing fifteen seats in the House or Representatives and three in the Senate, including that of the late Hubert Humphrey. The Democratic Party’s 1978 midterm meeting was dominated by criticism of the administration’s preliminary proposals—Kennedy keyed the criticism, announcing that “the party that tore itself apart over Vietnam in the 1960s can’t afford to tear itself apart over budget cuts in basic social programs” in the 1970s.48 An exasperated Meany captured the sentiments of many labor liberals, denouncing Carter as “the most conservative chief executive since Calvin Coolidge.”49

Carter’s austerity budget proved the breaking point for many in AFSCME. Union political aide Tony Carnevale complained in a New Year’s Day memorandum that the president was “not interested in genuine social reform,” spooked by “the hysteria inherent in the ‘new thrift.’”50 Three weeks later, a Public Policy Analysis Department report projected that the 7.7 percent overall increase in total spending was insufficient even to maintain existing services against inflation. More alarmingly, it offered no increase in state and local government assistance, a sharp break from the previous two decades, when federal assistance had grown by an average of 14 percent annually. “The economic slowdown … will generate increased costs to

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50 “Marshall, Califano, Eisenstat Meetings,” Memorandum from Tony Carnevale to Jerry Wurf, 1 January 1979, Box 33, Folder 8, Jerry Wurf Collection.
state and local governments—e.g., welfare, social services, unemployment-related spending,” the report warned. “If a full-blown recession hits, the fiscal capacity of state and local governments (especially in older urban areas) will be wiped out.”

Wurf was more conciliatory than most union leaders. Appearing on ABC’s Issues and Answers in mid-December 1978, Wurf blamed the “very bad advice” from Carter’s staff for the shift toward balanced budgets. While he acknowledged that the proposal had sparked criticism within the union, Wurf stopped short of outright opposition, and later insisted that his criticism of the budget proposals was “in no manner, shape, or form a break with the administration.” On January 10, he promised a group of AFSCME officials that he would express the union’s “outrage” to the President in a personal meeting for making public workers “patsies” in “public relations game,” but two days later, he struck a largely measured tone with Carter, emphasizing the impracticality of deficit reduction and the importance of countercyclical aid.

In the weeks that followed, columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak mocked Wurf’s transparent and ineffectual threats and suggested that the White House had discovered a “trump card” in its dealings with organized labor: unions had nowhere else to go. Wurf’s uncharacteristic moderation, the influential pair opined in a late January column, “confirmed feelings within the labor movement that Wurf is a Carter man at heart, a view shared by the president’s aides.”

51 “The FY 1980 Federal Budget: An Analysis by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees,” n.d. [January 22, 1979], Box 4, Folder 14, AFSCME Public Policy Analysis Department.
53 “Meeting with Carter,” Memorandum from Jim Savarese to Jerry Wurf, 10 January 1979, Box 4, Folder 14, AFSCME Public Policy Analysis Department Records, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as AFSCME Public Policy Analysis Department Records]; “Carter Meeting Today,” Memorandum from Anthony P. Carnevale to Jerry Wurf, 12 January 1979, Box 33, Folder 13, Jerry Wurf Collection. The “patsies” comment is quoted in Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 268.
Meanwhile, criticism of the administration continued to build within AFSCME. A March 1979 memorandum confessed that the union’s “most pessimistic scenarios” were unfolding. The national economy had “begun to sputter, inflation [was] getting worse,” and the preliminary budget threatened “a financial disaster for state and local governments.” More worrisome, the report continued, was the possibility that the administration’s approach would lend legitimacy to calls for balanced budgets and reduced spending at the state and local level.\(^{55}\) While “conservative spending policies” (along with inflated tax bills and increased federal aid) offered the appearance of fiscal health, a June Public Policy Analysis Department report warned, they also encouraged short-sighted tax cuts that left governments ill-prepared to face the recession which union economists predicted would begin in late 1979.\(^{56}\) An internal draft of one of Wurf’s “President’s Letters” noted that Carter’s “wait-and-see policy” toward the economic slowdown left “a lot to be desired.”\(^{57}\) Slowly, some of Wurf’s own frustration began to spill into the public; in February, the eminently quotable AFSCME president denounced the notion that budget deficits were “a sin against man, woman, and beasts of burden” as “nonsense.”\(^{58}\)

AFSCME was hardly alone. Carter’s focus on inflation rather than unemployment drew the ire a broad coalition of liberal, civil rights, and labor groups, but it was the administration’s inability to actually curb inflation that spurred something far more politically dangerous: disenchantment. Despite the voluntary standards suggested by the administration’s Council on Wage and Price Stability, inflation stood at a startling 9 percent by early 1979, with some sectors

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\(^{55}\) IEB Report, Public Policy Analysis Department, March 1979, Box 5, Folder 34, AFSCME Public Policy Analysis Department Records.

\(^{56}\) IEB Report, Public Policy Analysis Department, June 1979, Box 5, Folder 34, AFSCME Public Policy Analysis Department Records. The predictions of a coming recession became more common through the summer, particularly after Congressional Budget Office Director Alice Rivlin’s July report predicted a toxic combination of double-digit inflation, growing unemployment, and stagnating GNP through 1980. “Economic Update,” Memorandum from Jim Savarese to Jerry Wurf, 12 July 1979, Box 4, Folder 12, AFSCME Public Policy Analysis Department Records.

\(^{57}\) “President’s Letter,” Memorandum from Jim Savarese to Bill Hamilton, 17 August 1979, Box 4, Folder 12, AFSCME Public Policy Analysis Department.

(including politically sensitive food prices) rising even faster. The Iranian Revolution and subsequent spike in oil prices further exacerbated the economic and political situation, forcing Carter to lift restrictions on oil prices, even as motorists lined up for gasoline.\(^{59}\)

By late spring, Carter faced a political crisis. Surveying the straw-poll results from seven Committee on Political Education (COPE) regional meetings, COPE Director Alexander Barkan, no great fan of Carter’s, sent an panicked memorandum to Meany in late May. “The criticism was so intense,” COPE Director Alexander Barkan reported to Meany, “that I felt compelled to caution some of our leaders to use restraint when talking to the rank and file” so not to “bury Carter so deep under open and fierce criticism that it would become impossible to resurrect him as an acceptable candidate to our own members.”\(^{60}\)

Facing almost unprecedentedly poor job performance and favorability ratings, the White House announced plans for a national address on the energy crisis on July 5—only to cancel it two days before the scheduled event. On the advice of his aides, Carter retreated to the seclusion of the presidential retreat at Camp David, where he held court for eleven days, as more than 130 representatives from labor, business, academia, and politics traveled to the presidential retreat to offer their counsel (and criticism) on the administration’s course. The whole arrangement, Vice President Walter Mondale later recalled, was designed to both address Carter’s declining public image (Caddell, in particular, believed the theatrical secrecy was necessary to stir public interest) and to reconnect the administration to “fundamental priorities” after three years of policy drift.\(^{61}\)

Wurf was one of the seven unions leaders invited to participate in the series of meetings, which generally included about two-dozen guests seated around a large conference table with

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\(^{59}\) Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 95-98; 
\(^{60}\) Memorandum from Alexander Barkan to George Meany, 29 May 1979, Box 99, Folder 2, Office of the President, George Meany Files, 1940-1980, Collection, George Meany Memorial Archives, National Labor College, Silver Spring, Maryland [hereafter cited as George Meany Files, 1940-1980].
Carter. During one such meeting, Wurf, seated next to then-Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, was distressed by what he saw as the sycophantic tone of the conversation and used his brief remarks to confront Carter. “Mr. President, you haven’t kept your commitments,” he later recalled telling Carter, “You’ve confused the people . . . you speak of budget-balancing with no off-setting concern for the people, labor and blacks, who got you elected.” “We are the people who knocked ourselves out with our constituencies,” he continued, “and we are getting very little to show these constituencies in return.” Carter avoided Wurf during the luncheon that followed, and Wurf later remembered the meeting as a key moment of revelation. “He was incapable of accepting criticism, however well-intentioned,” Wurf suggested of Carter.62 Carter, Hamilton later recalled, responded to the advice by firing “his only competent staff person,” Joseph Califano, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, one of five cabinet officers purged in a late July shake-up that offset much of the polling bump from the Camp David venture and subsequent “Malaise Speech.”63

Increasingly frustrated with the meandering course of the Carter administration, Wurf used a July 12 address at the National Press Club to reflect on the state of labor politics. Titled “Labor and 1980—We Must Not Be Spectators,” the speech began by distinguishing the political climate of “sadness and doubt” from other periods of crisis in the 20th century. Explicitly reversing his previously favorable comparison of Carter to FDR, Wurf credited Roosevelt’s “bold and creative leadership” with averting totalitarian disaster during the Depression, then

62 Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 269.
warned that American society stood poised for disaster in the late 1970s—“a nation without gasoline may turn in desperation to a man on horseback.”

Yet, having established the critical stakes of the coming context, Wurf took an unexpected course, claiming that the administration’s failings went beyond the person of Carter and to the heart of late-century liberalism. Unlike Roosevelt, Wurf insisted, Carter had not been effectively moved by constituent pressure. He cautioned labor liberals against easily abandoning the president, noting that the rumored alternatives were either far worse (Ronald Reagan and Jerry Brown) or less electable (Ted Kennedy). Though Wurf invoked the possibility of a return to a non-partisan, “friends and enemies” approach to labor politics (“If the Democrats become indistinguishable from the Republicans, then we won’t pretend there is a difference between the two parties”) or a labor-backed third-party effort, he also called on labor liberals to redouble their efforts to strengthen the Democratic Party and combat the growing influence of corporate and business interests. He went so far as to suggest that, it might be better, long-term, for the Democratic Party to lose in 1980 rather than drift further to the political right. “We suffered through—but we survived—eight years of Republican administrations,” Wurf noted. “If we could survive Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, then how much worse could Howard Baker or George Bush possibly be?”

Misinterpreted by much of the press as a call to move toward an alternative to Carter, Wurf’s July address reflected his conviction that the president, however flawed, remained the best electable option for labor liberals. It was a difficult balancing act—acknowledging

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64 “Labor and 1980: We Must Not Be Spectators,” Remarks Prepared by Jerry Wurf, International President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, for the National Press Club, 12 July 1979, Box 29, Folder 12, Jerry Wurf Collection


66 “President’s Letter no. 9,” 6 July 1979, Box 29, Folder 17, Jerry Wurf Collection.
disappointment with Carter’s record, while trying to preserve him as a viable candidate for the future. As Wurf told aide William Hamilton around the same time, he continued to believe that AFSCME could “get enough from the White House … to make it worthwhile … to stick with Carter.” In fact, over the next few months, Wurf took steps to defend Carter against criticism within the union. An August mailing noted that Carter’s proposals were often ones that that union supported, while admitting that the administration “had little success in translating those programs into positive action in the Congress.” The same piece cautioned against rallying toward a primary challenge. “The last time Americans wrote off a sitting Democratic president was in 1968, and what we got was Richard Nixon,” Wurf wrote. “With Ronald Reagan and his friends on the sidelines waiting to move into action, I think we would be wise to give the President more room and do our damndest to help him when his programs are consistent with the well-being of our members.”

Though his public support was increasingly both reluctant and qualified in the summer of 1979, Wurf nonetheless felt strongly that Carter could still be a useful ally, if labor liberals pushed him more effectively. Increasingly in the late 1970s, that sort of pressure seemed more likely to come from the proliferating left-leaning coalitions outside the formal boundaries of the Democratic Party.

The Limits of Coalitional Politics

Even as Wurf worked through 1977 and 1978 to forge a productive relationship with the Carter White House, he continued his active engagement with the liberal-left alliances created during the preceding half decade. In two respects, though, the coalitional politics of the late

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67 Interview with William Hamilton, 1 January 1982, Joseph Goulden Papers; 68 “President’s Letter no. 4,” 28 August 1978, Box 15, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection.
1970s were markedly different from the earlier efforts: first, to a much greater extent, they reached beyond the labor movement to include a broader range of groups, each with their own emphasis in agenda and issues; second, they came when the White House was occupied by a Democratic ally, and thus their purpose tended to revolve less around electoral mobilization than shaping the administration’s agenda.

Many of these efforts grew out of alliances forged through the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC). Formed in 1973 as the leftist counterpart to Social Democrats USA following the collapse of the Socialist Party, DSOC sought to evoke the memory of Depression-era CIO drives, though its energy was devoted to political action, not union organizing. Consistent with leader Michael Harrington’s strategic imperative to occupy “the left of the possible,” DSOC represented a gradualism that emphasized pressing the boundaries of liberal reform, rather than replacing the tradition itself. Striving to secure the support of union leaders, Harrington initially tried to minimize his own profile to protect DSOC from attacks, as he put it in a private letter to Wurf, from “my surfeit of enemies in the immediate entourage of George Meany.”

Boasting support from Victor Reuther, brother of the late UAW president, Ralph Helstein, retired president of the United Packinghouse Workers, and David Selden, former president of the American Federation of Teachers, DSOC aspired, as Harrington put it in a letter to Wurf, to be “an articulate and responsible spokesman for democratic socialism in the labor movement as well as in American society at large.”

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70 Memorandum from Michael Harrington to Jerry Wurf and Douglas Fraser, 15 February 1974, Box 79, Folder 18, Jerry Wurf Collection.
71 Letter from Michael Harrington to Jerry Wurf, 1 May 1974, Box 79, Folder 18, Jerry Wurf Collection. At Harrington’s request, Wurf wrote to Hans Janitschek of the Socialist International testifying to the bona fides of DSOC (in order to offset the charges made by Social Democrats USA), characterizing the organization as in “very finest tradition of American socialism—in the mold cast by Eugene Victor Debs and Norman Thomas.” Letter from Jerry Wurf to Hans Janitschek, 31 May 1974, Box 79, Folder 18, Jerry Wurf Collection.
DSOC’s activism dated from 1974, when it pressed unsuccessfully for a broader agenda at the Democratic Party’s midterm meeting. It rebounded at the 1976 convention party convention, where it played an important role in shaping the party platform. Wurf became more involved in 1977, when he worked with Harrington to rewrite DSOC’s statement of economic policy, “Towards a Full Employment America.” Cast as an open letter from self-described supporters of the administration and released by Democratic Agenda, the more inclusive offshoot of DSOC, the statement emphasized the disconnect between Carter’s campaign pledge to address unemployment and his administration’s emphasis on fighting inflation. Arguing that “full employment” was a prerequisite to all of the administration’s other priorities, it offered a four-pronged program, all drawn from either the 1976 Democratic platform or Carter’s own campaign statements: national planning for full employment; fairer distribution of wealth through tax reform; enhanced and expanded social services; and the creation of a stable international market through nuclear non-proliferation and arms control.

Wurf rewrote much of content to make it more acceptable to the mainstream labor movement. His draft acknowledging the need for some level of protectionism for industry, softened the original’s criticism of political conservatism, and significantly sharpened its economic platform, blaming corporations for the economic crisis, calling for the public ownership of utilities and transit. Wurf also called for the creation of a unified national labor market through national standards for workmen’s compensation, more generous unemployment insurance, the repeal of 14(b) of Taft-Hartley, and, most controversially, a requirement that all corporate relocations be submitted for public review and approval. “We demand that Washington

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73 “Towards a FULL EMPLOYMENT America,” Statement of Democratic Agenda, n.d. [1977], Box 111, Folder 22, Jerry Wurf Collection
systemically take the social dimension into account whenever it intervenes in the investment process,” Wurf wrote in the statement. “A systematic bias in favor of human needs must replace the current systematic bias in favor of corporate profit.”

Wurf was careful to distinguish between his personal and AFSCME’s institutional support. Some within the union, including William Welsh, were quite wary of DSOC and other similar organizations, warning that AFSCME needed to remain “separate from the other coalitions,” lest it attach its name to propositions bound to fail and “add to the already prevalent image of labor’s ineffectiveness.” Many within AFSCME expressed more faith in the Progressive Alliance, founded in October 1978 by UAW president Douglas Fraser, and designed to strengthen the left-center forces within the Democratic Party. Representatives from more than 100 unions, civil rights organizations, and other liberal groups gathered at the inaugural meeting in Detroit’s Cobo Hall, brought together by shared frustration over the administration’s failure to fulfill its own campaign promises or enact any meaningful part of the 1976 platform. Despite the impressive turnout, though, the “planning session”—so characterized by Fraser to insulate the event from the ire of the White House—also betrayed the limits of the post-New Politics liberal movement. Newsweek joked that “it was hard to tell whether the meeting represented a new beginning or a golden oldie,” featuring a diverse cast that ranged from elected officials and union leaders to Tom Hayden and other veterans of the New Left. Despite the apparent unity, one delegate complained, the entire affair was wrought with divisions over whose

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75 “Mid-Term Convention and AFSCME’s Role,” Memorandum from Bill Welsh to Jerry Wurf, 10 August 1978, Box 46, Folder 2, Jerry Wurf Collection.
narrow set of concerns were most pressing. “All the one-issue people wound up in arguments about which issues were the most important.”

Not all of the efforts had such breadth of participants and purpose. AFSCME also joined Citizens for Tax Justice, the belated labor effort created by SEIU President George Hardy to respond to the success of anti-tax appeals among American workers. In late April 1979, Hardy authored an open letter to union presidents, warning about growing success of right-wing organization in “peddling tax-slashing initiatives,” exploiting legitimate concerns about tax levels to force through corporate tax cuts and regressive policies at the expend of social programs and public services. Hardy presented a report on the issue to the AFL-CIO Executive Council in early May, which, more moved by Hardy’s appeal than by Wurf’s earlier warnings, authorized the creation of CTJ. The group sought to counter the conservative use of the tax issue by publicizing its regressive effects and by mobilizing labor and liberals in support of progressive alternatives.

Though essentially similar to the strategy that AFSCME had pursued in the aftermath of Proposition 13, Wurf was initially hesitant about the new body, in part because it was dominated by personal and institutional rivals—Hardy of SEIU and AFT President Al Shanker—but also because of long-standing doubts about the commitment of the AFL-CIO to public sector concerns. When Hardy arranged for the CTJ board to be expanded by two seats and extended

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78 Open Letter from George Hardy to All International Union Presidents, 26 April 1979, Box 93, Folder 5, George Hardy Collection, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Executive Office Files, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as George Hardy Collection].
79 Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, May 8, 1979, AFL-CIO Building, Washington, D.C., AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes, George Meany Memorial Archives, National Labor College, Silver Spring, Maryland [hereafter cited as AFL-CIO Executive Council Minutes]. CTJ drew support from a number of unions, national organizations, and grassroots groups—but was primarily funded by the AFL-CIO and its Public Employees Department. “Contributions to Citizens for Tax Justice,” Internal Memorandum, 1 August 1979, Box 93, Folder 8, George Hardy Collection
Wurf an invitation in late August, though, Wurf accepted, and AFSCME subsequently became one of the larger financial supporters of the organization. But Wurf increasingly harbored doubts about the ability of unions to effectively move their membership on tax issues. “A worker who started ten or twenty years ago looked on a $15,000 or $20,000 salary as the good life,” he reflected in Nation’s Business. “Now he finds that with taxes and inflation, he can no longer pay his bills or live comfortably on that kind of salary,” and he and his family became “easy converts to conservatism.” For Wurf, then, the key to effectively mobilizing the unionists on tax issues required an effective, proactive campaign for progressive alternatives to property and sales taxes—and he remained suspicious of how strongly most private sector unions were committed to that cause, even as he recognized their critical role.

Interspersed among these firmer organizational commitments were a series of smaller, more targeted efforts, some of which were more a product of Wurf’s personal activism than the union’s institutional commitment. AFSCME supported the efforts of the Council on National Priorities and Resources, which aimed to shift budget cuts from domestic to military spending. Wurf joined with other union leaders, as well as Ralph Nader and consumer groups, in calling on Carter to create a publicly-owned energy company, even organizing a one-day “Big Oil Protest” outside the American Petroleum Institute’s D.C. office.

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80 Letter from George Hardy to Jerry Wurf, 24 August 1979, Box 93, Folder 8, George Hardy Collection; Memorandum to Friends of Citizens for Tax Justice from Jonathan Rowe, Associate Director, 12 October 1979, Box 178, Folder 13, Jerry Wurf Collection; Letter from Jerry Wurf to George Hardy, 3 December 1979, Box 178, Folder 13, Jerry Wurf Collection.
81 “Labor’s Changing Profile: Unionism is at a crossroads, and many think it is because leadership is out of step with the rank and file,” Nation’s Business, April 1979, 31-35.
In the short term, the coalitional experiments yielded modest returns. Democratic Agenda’s 1979 meeting produced a platform that demanded everything from mandatory price controls and expanded federal support for home mortgages to national health insurance and public ownership of energy resources—reflecting both the scope and diversity of organization’s constituents.\(^8^4\) The Progressive Alliance, featuring an even broader range of participants, was unable to secure even a unifying program for its political action, forced instead to oscillate between various roles—party caucus, think tank, and vehicle for mass mobilization—during its brief three-year existence.\(^8^5\) Citizens for Tax Justice funneled thousands to anti-tax-cutting campaigns in California, Massachusetts, Ohio, and a number of other states in 1980, though it struggled, as AFSCME had earlier, to mobilize private sector union members at the polls.\(^8^6\)

But the efforts fell short of Wurf’s broader hopes, incapable of altering the direction of the Carter administration or inspiring a broader revitalization of American liberalism.\(^8^7\) As he explained in a rousing address to a Democratic Agenda conference in November 1979, Wurf believed that the labor-liberal coalitions represented much needed efforts to restore “a politics of principle and compassion” to the increasingly popularly trend toward treating politics as “an exercise in technology”—an indirect but not unnoticed reference to Carter’s own political style. In a speech that the Washington Post later described as “disjointed and rambling,” Wurf unleashed a stinging (and largely autobiographical) rebuke of the “new” Democratic Party,


\(^8^6\) Whereas AFSCME had generally appealed to the threat posed by the tax revolt to the foundations of the welfare state, CTJ adopted a narrowed course, emphasizing the links between conservative anti-tax activists and efforts to roll back OSHA and Davis-Bacon. “The Tax Revolt, Round Two,” Memorandum from Dean Tipps to All AFL-CIO International Unions, March 1980, Box 174, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection; Citizens for Tax Justice, Memorandum from Mike Dowling and Marcia Caprio to Jerry Wurf, 25 June 1980, Box 174, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection; Citizens for Tax Justice Memo, Board Minutes and Press Release, November 1980, Box 174, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection.

casting the 1,200-plus conference delegates (one-third of whom were union members) as the “misused and abused” cornerstones of the party. They were courted when it was convenient, he complained. Democratic candidates “massage and stroke us, . . . they let us write their platforms, . . . they give our kind of speeches, . . . they put on UAW windbreakers and AFSCME PEOPLE tee-shirts,” only to be forgotten about after elections. “The remembrance that we get is rhetorical—or ceremonial—not substantive,” Wurf complained, while real influence passed to corporate and business interests. “We need an electoral process in which candidates offer a record and a program—not a smile and a slogan.”

That Wurf believed such a landmark shift possible seems, in hindsight, a bit naïve, and the union’s increasing reliance on those coalitional politics betrayed both its desperation to find effective allies and its own misunderstanding of Carter himself. If Wurf and other AFSCME leaders saw DSOC, the Progressive Alliance, Citizens for Tax Justice, and similar organizations as valuable vehicles to unite disjointed progressive constituencies and put pressure on the White House, those around Carter saw them as prima facie evidence of vested interests and Old Politics—groups to be avoided rather than courted.

Desperate to rally and organize labor liberals, Wurf neglected developments within AFSCME. Critics charged that Wurf’s broader political ambitions led him to neglect institutional concerns. Aid William Hamilton later acknowledged the point, noting that Wurf became “kind of bored with running the union” during the second half of the 1970s, surrendering most day-to-day tasks to staff and freeing himself to devote his own time and energy to Democratic and liberal

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88 Wurf Speech to Democratic Agenda Conference, November 16 1979, Box 29, Folder 12, Jerry Wurf Collection; Letter from Ruth Jordan, Conference Organizer, to Bill Hamilton, 7 December 1979, Box 179, Folder 4, Jerry Wurf Collection; Letter from Michael Harrington to Jerry Wurf, 12 December 1979, Box 179, Folder 4, Jerry Wurf Collection.
politics. Former Secretary-Treasurer Joe Ames, who underwent his own very public break with Wurf as chairman of the union’s Judicial Panel in the late 1970s, later told biographer Joseph Goulden than AFSCME’s membership made few significant gains through new organizing between 1978 and 1981, relying instead on the absorption of civil service associations.\footnote{Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, Office at Planned Parenthood and the Apple Tree Restaurant, Washington, DC, 31 December 1981, Folder 2, Joseph Goulden Collection.}

Regularly unopposed for reelection since consolidating his hold on the union presidency in 1966, Wurf faced meaningful opposition for the first time when former COUR ally Victor Gotbaum, head of New York’s District Council 37 emerged as a potential rival. Their relationship first began to fray in 1975, when Wurf privately fumed at Gotbaum’s soft response to the New York City fiscal crisis and his cozy relationship with New York City financier Felix Rohatyn. The breach widened in the spring of 1977, when Wurf presented Gotbaum and Pennsylvania District Council 13 president Gerald McEntee with a plan to replace the union’s existing structure of locally-elected District Councils and regionally-elected International Executive Board with between eight and ten regional “super councils,” with presidentially-appointed directors, who would then form the new union board. While Wurf believed the change necessary to address issues that transcended the narrow confines of local governments, Gotbaum saw it as a transparent effort to strengthen national control and undermine union democracy.\footnote{Notes, Interview with Victor Gotbaum, District Council 37 Headquarters, 9 November 1979, Box 4, Folder 47, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; Transcript and Notes, Interview with Victor Gotbaum, 19 January 1982, Folder 3, Joseph Goulden Collection; “Who We Are, Why We Speak Out,” Dissident Mailing, 28 September 1979, Box 2, Folder 26, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; Notes and Transcript, Interview with Joseph Ames, 4 January 1982, Folder 4, Joseph Goulden Collection. On Wurf-Ames, see Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 273-280.}

After failing to persuade McEntee to challenge Wurf, Gotbaum launched his own unofficial
campaign, run mostly through the national press (where he criticized Wurf’s “disastrous”
leadership for AFSCME’s inability to organize new members).92

Many around Wurf initially doubted the seriousness of the challenge. Hamilton noted that
Gotbaum failed to articulate a distinctive vision for the union, relying instead on personal
animosity and rivalries to build support. His criticism of Wurf also failed to recognize the
complexity AFSCME’s evolving membership, which, in sharp reversal to the early 1960s, was
becoming more rural and professional and less urban and blue-collar. The short-lived challenged
was brought to a definitive end by the April 1978 affiliation of the 200,000-member New York
State Civil Service Employees Association as AFSCME Local 1000, which Wurf facilitated by
promising to rebate the national union’s share of per capita dues for its first two years (at a cost
of some $8-12 million).93

The move took AFSCME over the 1,000,000-member mark for the first time, passing the
Steelworkers as the largest union in the AFL-CIO, and effectively ended Gotbaum’s campaign
long before AFSCME’s 1980 convention, freeing Wurf to refocus on a different kind of
presidential politics.94

“Prettier at Closing Time”: Presidential Politics in 1980

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1979, 45; Samuel Allis, “Leaders Are Feuding in Government Employees’ Union,” Washington Post, 6 August 1979,
A2. For a detailed account of Gotbaum’s short-lived challenge, see Goulden, Jerry Wurf, 272-288.
93 The CSEA reversed its previous stance against affiliation in response to a string of defeats by SEIU and the AFT.
John Geagan, organizing director for SEIU, remarked to the press that Wurf “ought to send us a check” for driving
the organization into AFSCME. Jerry Flint, “New York Labor Dispute Hints at Jurisdictional War,” New York Times,
2 May 1978, 20; Pranay Gupta, “Union of Civil Service Employees to Affiliate With a Longtime Rival,”
94 Notes, Interview with Al Bilik, 20 November 1981, Box 4, Folder 37, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers; Notes
and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, Office at Planned Parenthood and the Apple Tree Restaurant,
While disenchantment with Carter continued to swell within the labor movement through 1979, there was little unity among union leaders about how to approach the 1980 presidential race. With the notable exception of Hardy’s SEIU, few major unions were prepared to back Jerry Brown’s challenge to the incumbent, regarding the California governor’s balanced budget politics with grave concern. As Kennedy vacillated over whether or not to run, most union leaders were forced into a reluctantly patient posture.

When Kennedy finally announced his candidacy in mid-November 1979, it began poorly. He was infamously incapable of articulating a rationale for his campaign during an interview with CBS’s Roger Mudd in November, foreshadowing future troubles. Meanwhile, the taking of the American embassy by Iranian students and onset of the hostage crisis (and Kennedy’s inopportune denunciation of the Shah) solidified Carter’s meager standing in the polls. Over the next two months, Carter, bolstered by a short-term boost in public support in reaction to the Iranian crisis, secured decisive primary victories in Iowa, New Hampshire, Florida, and Illinois.95

Wurf watched these early developments from the sidelines. Intrigued by the idea of a Kennedy challenge, he nonetheless found the would-be candidate himself less impressive, confessing in mid-December to an ABC affiliate in Washington that he feared that the Massachusetts Senator had not been candid or specific enough in outlining his economic or urban program.96 Never moved by the family legacy—he had told an interviewer in 1974 that he had never been a “hot Kennedy man” because his early experience in the Socialist Party taught him “to separate style from substance” and “style from statesmanship”—Wurf and others in AFSCME’s national office harbored concerns about Kennedy’s electability, doubts seemingly

95 Wilentz, *Age of Reagan*, 113-120.
96 Transcript, Eyewitness News Conference, WABC-TV, 16 December 1979, Box 34, Folder 11, Jerry Wurf Collection.
confirmed by Carter’s success in the early caucuses and primaries. The White House took some steps to repair the relationship with its best-known union ally in early 1980. Carter personally appeared at the AFSCME’s quarterly IEB meeting in January, while both Stuart Eizenstat and Ray Marshall gave assurances that CETA, revenue sharing, and urban assistance would all be protected from any potential budget cuts.

Yet despite a lack of viable alternatives and Carter’s efforts, Wurf became increasingly vocal in his public criticism of the administration during early 1980. In a mid-January speech to the American Arbitration Association, Wurf criticized Carter’s drift toward austerity. “What I see for 1980 looks dark and bleak and uncomfortable,” Wurf confessed, predicting that tighter reins on government spending would lead to less invention and ambition at the state and local level. “It’s hard for unions to hold out for prepaid legal services, for better dental plans, and for shorter work weeks,” Wurf admitted, when they were under fire in traditional labor strongholds. More importantly, he continued, AFSCME was forced to devote much of its legislative resources to defending past victories against cutbacks rather than pressing for an expansion of the social safety net and welfare state.

Two weeks later, Wurf complained to a union meeting that Carter’s rhetoric and politicized legitimizing the “media”-created perception that “the American people are blessed with a new hatred of government,” and suggested that AFSCME might remained neutral in the presidential campaign. Wurf went so far as to invoke an older brand of non-partisan political action by extending convention invitations to Republicans John Anderson and George H. W. Bush, reminding the activists that federal support for state and local

97 Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, Number 70a-b, October 1974, Harry Fleishman Oral History Collection, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter cited as Harry Fleischmann Oral History Collection]; Note from Frank Cowan to Jerry Wurf, 4 December 1979, Box 28, Folder 23, Jerry Wurf Collection.
98 Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, 1 January 1982, Joseph Goulden Collection.
governments had grown faster under Nixon and Ford than Carter. Following an AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting in late February, Wurf again raised the possibility of non-endorsement, claiming that AFSCME was focused more on key House and Senate races than the upcoming presidential contest.

Privately, though, Wurf inched closer to action. Even as Wurf was publicly stating that AFSCME might remain neutral, at least in the Democratic primary fight, he and Secretary-Treasurer Bill Lucy began reaching out to key AFSCME leaders to gauge their interest in backing Kennedy’s challenge. Kennedy made things somewhat easier. Rebounding from a disappointing start to the campaign, Wurf aide William Hamilton later remembered that Kennedy’s late January 1980 speech at Georgetown University as a key turning point for many at AFSCME’s national office. Sharply critical of Carter’s handling of a range of foreign policy issues—from Iran to Arab oil—Kennedy’s address, Hamilton claimed, marked the first time that he “talked like a Democratic candidate” during the campaign, though, foreshadowing future problems, the address was light and imprecise on matters of domestic policy. Encouraged by his conversations with Gotbaum (with whom he reached an uneasy reconciliation) and McEntee, Wurf directed the union’s political staff to begin work on an operational plan for the remainder of the primaries.

The final breaking point came in mid-March, when Carter announced a plan to cut more than $13 billion in federal spending as part of the administration’s effort to curb inflation. The proposal, which included some $2 billion in cuts to federal revenue sharing, drew the ire of an unusually united front of public sector interests—the National Governors’ Association, National

100 “Report,” Legislative Conference, 9-10 February 1980, Box 20, Folder 57, Jerry Wurf Collection.
102 Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, 1 January 1982, Joseph Goulden Collection.
103 Notes, Interview with Al Bilik, 7 April 1980, Box 4, Folder 37, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
Conference of State Legislatures, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and AFSCME, among others. Wurf warned that the cuts would “wreak havoc on urban America” while doing nothing to address inflation, returning the country “to the economic philosophy of Herbert Hoover”—not the last time he would draw the unfavorable comparison.\(^{104}\)

The break with Carter came shortly after. Fueled by mounting concern over the administration’s approach to both domestic affairs and by Carter’s untimely decision to support a U.N. resolution calling for Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, Kennedy secured victories in New York and Connecticut on March 25. The next day, presumably at Wurf’s direction, Jerry Clark drafted a confidential memorandum outlining thirteen steps to “build credibility with the [Kennedy] campaign about our political ability to commit and deliver specific resources.” In addition to mass mailings in most of the remaining primary states, the plan targeted Pennsylvania, Michigan, Oregon, Ohio, and Rhode Island for “full scale efforts.” Clark emphasized AFSCME’s ability to make a unique impact for Kennedy in key southern states, particularly Tennessee, using its growing number of locals as bases to mobilize the broader African American community.\(^{105}\)

Five days later, after securing the approval of the union’s Executive Board, Wurf announced AFSCME’s endorsement. Citing the “courageous and forthright way” in which Kennedy had “spoken out with clarity and common sense on the problems facing our country” and challenged the “conventional wisdom about America’s so-called drift to the right.” Wurf’s published press released acknowledged “disappointment” with the Carter’s economic and

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\(^{105}\) “AFSCME Involvement in Kennedy Campaign,” Confidential Memo from Jerry Clark to Jerry Wurf, 26 March 1980, Box 22, Folder 4, Jerry Wurf Collection.
spending policies and praised his challenger’s consistent opposition social service cuts.\footnote{Statement by Jerry Wurf Announcing Endorsement of Kennedy, 2 April 1980, Box 22, Folder 4, Jerry Wurf Collection.} At the subsequent press conference, Wurf admitted that the key turning point came when Carter “walked away” from his promises to stand behind the original 1980 budget, which fully funded existing social service programs.\footnote{Philip Shabecoff, “Government Workers’ Union, Unhappy with Carter, Backs Kennedy,” \textit{New York Times}, 3 April 1980, 34.} A subsequent letter to the union membership offered a similar set of explanations, lauding Kennedy’s “clarity and commonsense” and expressing disappointment with Carter. “The man we helped elect in 1976,” Wurf wrote, was now “espousing policies which will do great damage to our members . . . and to the people who depend upon the services our members provide.”\footnote{“President’s Letter no. 14,” 5 April 1980, Box 18, Folder 21, Jerry Wurf Collection.}

The Kennedy campaign turned out to be a disappointment. Despite a pair of narrow victories in Pennsylvania and Michigan in April, Wurf’s prediction that a string of victories would carry Kennedy to the nomination proved unduly optimistic. By early May, the union was willing to concede that Kennedy would not overtake Carter in the remaining primaries, even as major newspapers continued to treat the race as a close contest. At some point, Clark explained to Wurf on May 9, AFSCME would need to decide whether it would accept Carter’s re-nomination or press the floor fight to its limit and walk out. Clark advised Wurf to adopt a posture of committing to “Kennedy’s principles” and vowing to fight for them at the convention, without engaging in the nominating fight. “This is the best way to maintain our credibility both externally and internally,” Clark suggested, “regardless of the outcome of the Democratic convention.”\footnote{“Kennedy,” Memorandum from Jerry Clark to Jerry Wurf, 9 May 1980, Box 22, Folder 4, Jerry Wurf Collection.}
While Wurf and many of the national union staff were prepared to deal with Carter’s renomination, it also had to face mounting criticism from some state and local affiliates over the decision to back Kennedy’s challenge. Wurf felt enough pressure to issue a blanket response to the “why support a loser?” inquiries, using one of his presidential mailings to offer an object lesson in labor politics. “Win or lose,” Wurf wrote, “Kennedy is saying what needs to be said. If we don’t give support to those who speak out for our members’ interests, then we don’t deserve their support.”

As Kennedy stumbled through the final primaries, AFSCME’s national office showed little interest in converting Carter delegates, and rather than challenge the nomination at the 1980 convention, the union focused on strengthening the party platform. In his testimony to the platform committee in early June, Wurf urged the party to “articulate a clear, coherent, and distinctly Democratic position” on spending and social policy. He charged both the White House and the Congress with “acting like conservative Republicans” on “bread-and-butter economic issues” by clinging to a disastrous budget-cutting philosophies, “a slide toward economic arch-conservatism” that threatened to alienate key constituencies and imperil the party’s political chances. He blamed the party for failing to assertively press the case for progressive tax reform, allowing “right wing, anti-government groups” to seize the issue and use it to turn struggling and working-class families. The wide-ranging statement touched on everything from comprehensive price and income controls to the need for urban economic development, closing with a fiery call for the party to abandon its fixation with corporate power and the wealthy and “reaffirm its traditional commitment to the less privileged and to full-employment” and “refuse to submit to

110 “President’s Letter no. 15,” 21 May 1980, Box 18, Folder 21, Jerry Wurf Collection.
111 “President’s Letter no. 16,” 1 August 1980, Box 18, Folder 21, Jerry Wurf Collection.
the demagogues who would sacrifice the interests of the average worker by having the federal
government abdicate its responsibility for economic stabilization.”

A broadsided indictment of the Democratic Party’s abandonment of working-class
concerns, Wurf’s 1980 testimony brought him full circle from a decade earlier, when he had
staunchly defended the rise of the New Politics against criticism from the AFL-CIO. At the party
convention in New York City, Wurf backed the Progressive Alliance’s effort to insert an
Economic Bill of Rights into the party platform. Titled the “Democratic Credo,” the statement
called on the Democratic Party to forge “a new covenant” based on the principles of “economic
justice, individual dignity, and security.” Echoing the language of the New Deal era, the
statement asserted as basic rights “useful and remunerative” employment, free and fair market
competition for small businessmen, affordable housing, an education, and social protections
against old age, illness, injury, and unemployment. Signed by Fraser and Wurf, as Chairman and
Secretary-Treasurer of the alliance respectively, the statement also drew support from
organizations ranging from labor unions to the Children’s Defense Fund. Though the Rules
Committee adopted other Alliance resolutions—one calling for the creation of a Committee on
Party Accountability, the other committing the party to a third mid-term conference in 1982—the
Platform Committee declined to give the Credo serious consideration. Instead, in sharp contrast
to the 1976 platform, the 1980 convention adopted what a pair of union political aides dismissed
as “a laundry list” approach, a “rather bland” statement that was “not likely to offer any kind of
coherent vision for the party” going forward.

112 Statement of Jerry Wurf, International President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal
Employees, AFL-CIO, Presented to the Democratic Party Platform Committee, Washington, DC, 6 June 1980, Box
174, Folder 16, Jerry Wurf Collection.
113 “Democratic Credo: Economic Bill of Rights,” Statement Submitted by the Progressive Alliance to the
Democratic Party Platform, 14 June 1980, Box 175, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection.
114 Letter from Bill Dodds to Jerry Wurf, 1 July 1980, Box 175, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection; “Progressive
Alliance and the Democratic National Convention,” Memorandum from Bill Dodds and Bob Carolla to Doug Fraser
In the end, Carter secured renomination with ease, though Kennedy’s famous convention sign-off left the conclusion less than comfortable. The AFL-CIO, determined not to repeat the mistakes of 1972, opted to swallow its own concerns about the party platform to ensure a unified convention. The *New York Times* observed that it was difficult to tell which was the harder concession for liberal union leaders—Carter’s victory or their own irrelevance to the proceedings. Even the modest victories seemed hollow. An unusually united push by organized labor, as well as a strong, stirring appeal from Kennedy, inspired the convention to enact a plank calling for a $12 billion jobs program—which Carter essentially ignored, promising only to abide by its “its spirit and aims.” A dejected Wurf denounced the president’s concession as “meaningless.” Yet when William Winpisinger of the Machinists, Wurf’s successor as the liberals’ darling and the man whom Joseph Rauh called “the best thing that’s happened to the labor movement in 25 years,” led a walkout following Carter’s nomination, Wurf and AFSCME did not join.

Most in the labor movement fell in line behind Carter, even while warning about the limited enthusiasm of the rank-and-file members. Fraser pledged his personal support, but admitted that it would be “very difficult” to mobilize the UAW membership in support of the president, a sentiment echoed by Al Shanker of the AFT. Wurf went further, claiming that

and Jerry Wurf, 26 June 1980, Box 175, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection. The group counted the authorization of another mid-term conference as a victory, and encouraged its constituent organizations to run delegates for the meeting. “Proposal Concerning the 1982 Democratic Mid-Term Party Conference and Beyond—How the Progressive Faction Can Regain Influence over the Party,” Internal Memorandum, 28 October 1980, Box 175, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection.
119 Sawyer, “The Democrats Look for a Way to Pull It Together,” A1, A10;
widespread “bitterness” toward Carter for “using unemployment as an economic policy” left many AFSCME members prone “to lash out at the betrayed they feel”—making it difficult for union officials to convince the rank-and-file to turn out and work for Carter. “The issue of the lesser of two evils is lost,” he admitted in mid-August. “Maybe it can be turned around, but I don’t know.”

One of the few dissidents was newly elected AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, who offered a ray of pragmatic optimism following the convention. Most workers would eventually swing Democratic on Election Day, Kirkland predicted: “Just like the country music song, the girls get prettier at closing time.”

Wurf declined to endorse Carter at the convention, or at any point during the month that followed. On September 19, he urged AFSCME members to focus on the Congressional and Senate races, warning that “budget-cutting fever” was “running rampant through Congress” and reminding them that “our bucks at the bargaining table start at the ballot box.” Without discounting the importance of the presidential election, Wurf reminded the leaders that Congress and the statehouse played a far more direct role in shaping the landscape for contract negotiations. The following day, Wurf was invited to the White House for a personal meeting with Carter. Following the meeting, Wurf tepidly endorsed the president’s reelection as in “the best interest of the union,” even while warning that the support would mean little without a sharp shift toward “concern and sympathy” in the administration’s economic policies. AFSCME prepared and distributed a brief defending the Carter-Mondale record, emphasizing the increases in educational spending, urban development, and countercyclical spending. Mostly, though, the

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122 “President’s Letter no. 17,” 19 September 1980, Box 18, Folder 21, Jerry Wurf Collection.
report stressed the dangers posed by the political alternative, warning that Reagan would have little trouble pushing “extremely large and regressive tax cuts” through an increasingly reactionary Congress. On the eve of the election, Wurf pleaded with the union’s members to support Carter regardless of their past concerns, lest they empower a “cruel conservatism.”

The endorsement made no difference. Reagan emerged from the Republican Convention in late July with a nearly 30-point lead over the incumbent, though a series of early blunders closed the game by the time AFSCME announced its support for Carter. The Reagan campaign’s polling suggested that Carter briefly held a narrow lead two weeks before the general election, but a strong performance in the cycle’s only debate on October 28 confirmed Reagan’s viability as a candidate in the eyes of most voters—something brought into question by his previous campaign-trail blunders. One in four voters decided their vote in the week that followed, and the vast majority swung to the challenger. In the end, Reagan scored a narrow majority of the popular vote (51 percent) and a massive landslide in the Electoral College (489), while Carter carried only six states.

Wurf issued a statement on November 5 warning Reagan not to read too much into his own victory. “Landslides tend to make presidents feel they don’t have to be accountable,” Wurf argued, citing Nixon and Johnson as precedents. “I hope Ronald Reagan is aware there are a lot of Blue Collar votes in his landslide,” he continued “a lot of working men and women and senior citizens on fixed incomes who were really hurting believed Candidate Reagan when he said he would help them.” Wurf expressed cautious, strained, and perhaps even insincere optimism about the union’s political prospects going forward. In his sixteen years as union president, Wurf

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124 “Carter Administration Record,” Brief Prepared by AFSCME Department of Public Policy Analysis, October 1980, Box 22, Folder 2, Jerry Wurf Collection.
125 “President’s Letter no. 18,” 15 October 1980, Box 18, Folder 21, Jerry Wurf Collection.
remarked, he had worked with two Republican and two Democratic administrations—“It has always been my policy to support an Administration’s reasonableness and fairness in dealing with the critical social and economic issues and to criticize the President when I thought he was being unreasonable or unfair,” and he vowed to continue in that role under Reagan.  

*Public Sector Unionism in an “Age of Limits”*

On September 11, 1980, Wurf penned a short note to an old colleague from his days at New York City’s Distinct Council 37. “The union,” he remarked, had “a million members nationally and [was] still growing.” He had just finished “dashing about the country on behalf of the union,” he reported. “Our problems remained somewhat the same [as they had been in the early days of Council 37], but with the new anti-public worker, anti-government feeling, a little more complicated.”

Despite Wurf’s claim, the “anti-public worker, anti-government feeling” was hardly new in 1980, only more potent, reaching beyond its traditional base in the political right to affect the politics even of those traditionally devoted to an a more positive vision of government. The key to understanding liberalism in the Carter years lay in the tension created by those who failed to recognize (and refused to accept) that shift. As Jefferson Cowie has noted, the confrontational relationship between labor liberals and Carter was rooted, in some sense, in “an unconscious and misguided New Deal triumphalism that allowed the surface glimmers of a Carter presidency to appear like something more substantial.” After all, Carter’s embrace of a particularly rigid

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brand of fiscally conservative liberal reform should not have been surprising. He had previewed the approach in the 1976 campaign and made it an explicit part of his inaugural address, punctuated by the profoundly safe declaration that the country had learned that “more” was not better and that “our great nation has its recognized limits.”

While hardly a captive of nostalgia, there is an element of this sentiment in Wurf’s view of Carter. The optimism Wurf expressed toward Carter in his 1977 address to San Francisco’s Commonwealth Club embodied what Business Week feared would be the push for “the 1970s version of the New Deal.” While in some respects more measured than his labor colleagues, Wurf nevertheless invested Carter with far greater capacity for social reform than he deserved, discounting the anti-statist rhetoric, ignoring early signs of fiscal conservatism, and continuing to trust that, as journalist Haynes Johnson put it, somewhere deep down, Carter was “a Truman-Kennedy Progressive who appreciated the role of government.”

Some within the union did recognize the change. As early as May 1977, William Welsh advised Wurf that the key to influencing the new administration lay less in “framing the old problems in terms of ‘welfare reform,’ ‘national health care,’ ‘tax reform,’ or ‘unemployment’” than in using all of the union’s resources and influence toward “changing the direction of the new politics of ‘balanced budgets.’” Given the “non-ideological” composition of both the White House and the post-Watergate class of suburban liberals in Congress, Welsh continued, AFSCME had to embrace a wide range of non-financial aspects of political action—media campaigns, direct mail, lobbying, and expert testimony—to affect the direction of liberal reform,

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130 Writing in his memoir, historian William Leuchtenberg later recalled, Carter seemed to recognize more than most contemporaries how essential the notion was to his administration. “Watching the sea of approving faces,” he wrote of his Inauguration Day experience, “I wondered how few of the happy celebrants would agree with my words if they analyzed them closely. At the time, it was not possible even for me to imagine the limits we would have to face. In some ways, dealing with limits would become the subliminal theme of the next four years and affect the outcome of the 1980 election.” Quoted in Leuchtenburg, “Jimmy Carter and the Post-New Deal Presidency,” 21.
131 Johnson, In the Absence of Power, 81.
since the traditional bromides of the New Deal-Great Society era were unlikely to move those who increasingly defined themselves in post-New Deal and post-Great Society terms.\textsuperscript{132}

The developments of the next three years proved Welsh prescient—with dire implications for AFSCME. Under fire from an increasingly active anti-tax and anti-union movement, saddled with perceived responsibility for the fiscal crisis of the American city, and finding only traditional allies either indifferent or ineffective, public sector unions were forced to adopt a more defensive posture. As if to punctuate the change in political landscape, John Tepper Martin, President of the Council on Municipal Performance, created in 1973, wrote to James Farmer in early 1980 to offer the Council’s services, counseling that “the best approach of public employees in this ‘era of limits’ is to show that they are delivering value for money” and place themselves on the popular side of “the rising level of public concern of state and local government accountability.”\textsuperscript{133}

That, of course, was precisely what AFSCME had tried to do through a half-decade of political education, public relations advertising, and political mobilization—within the labor movement and outside of it, within the Democratic Party and outside of it. The crisis of the Carter years was only partly about the White House’s embrace of fiscal conservatism. It was also a story of the limits of coalitional efforts to force Carter leftward, of the shortcomings of the Kennedy insurgency, and of the inability of labor liberals to rally sufficient support in the face of the most conservative major-party candidate since Barry Goldwater. More than anything, though, it was a crisis that exposed the limited of labor liberalism to speak to the economic challenges of

\textsuperscript{132} “Impacting the Key Economic and Military Budget Decisions of the Carter Administration,” Memorandum from Bill Welsh to Jerry Wurf, 12 May 1977, Box 58, Folder 27, Jerry Wurf Collection.

the late 1970s. The unprecedented combination of inflation and unemployment overturned the political landscape on which postwar labor liberalism had rested, as stagnating real incomes combined with growing tax bills to undercut middle-class support for expansions of the social safety net and welfare state, even as it made those expansions more critical.

The political poverty of the labor liberal tradition became clearest as AFSCME approached the 1980 presidential election, and the “era of limits” was particularly problematic for Wurf. Naturally inclined toward militancy, Wurf had long functioned best when engaged in crusading endeavors—whether it was demanding legal rights for powerless public workers, racial justice and civil rights, or a broader economic and social empowerment of the marginal working class through the expansion of the social service state. While his reputation as a maverick was, in part, a strategically exaggerated persona, it captured an element of his personality and temperament that was quite real—and quite incompatible with the defensive posture that the union was forced to adopt in the waning years of the 1970s. The potential for an internal union challenge only further pushed Wurf toward a militant public line, as, perhaps, did the conduct of union leaders like Winpisinger, whose exaggerated public denunciations of Carter won plaudits in the liberal-left press.

But in important ways, Wurf no longer had the luxury of unbridled aggression. The union had too much to lose to simply threaten a withdrawal from electoral politics—as “Wimpy” did through his 1980 walkout. Having worked since the late 1960s to expand federal support for state and local government services, AFSCME simply could not forsake national politics, particularly not in the face of the anti-tax fervor sweeping across the nation.

Wurf’s awkward, persistent public defense of Carter through early 1980, in the face of increasing evidence of that the administration would not live up to even the most tempered
expectations, betrayed something of this dependency, but it also illuminated Wurf’s frail confidence in the liberal alternatives. If Kennedy was preferable in policy terms, his perceived unelectability contained its own indictment of contemporary liberalism. Faced with a choice between a fiscally conservative, technocratic liberalism that offered few solutions to the economic and social concerns of the late 1970s, on the one hand, and an unelectable fusion of the New Deal-New Frontier-Great Society and New Liberal traditions that seemed insufficiently concerned with those same critical problems, on the other, AFSCME labored behind the safer political option until Carter’s unrelenting march toward austerity left it no other choice.

The inadequacy of both Carter and Kennedy illustrated the eroded social and political basis for the form of labor liberalism that Wurf had long embraced and championed, and on which he had pinned much of AFSCME’s agenda. Carter seemed unrelentingly unconcerned—incapable of recognizing what Wurf called the “human cost” of budget cuts, unnecessarily abstract, and unduly negative in his conception of government’s capacity. Kennedy’s, meanwhile, seemed an inflexible relic of a by-gone era, one that ignored critical changes in the American political landscape and proposed antiquated solutions to the new problems of the 1970s.

Into that breach, as Wurf had feared, stepped a conservative political alternative.
“Solidarity Day, 1981”

“I have been a very careful observer of the political process in this country ever since I can remember,” Wurf closed a union mailing on November 13, 1980. “What I had accepted as the political ‘facts of life’ in the 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s have been so transformed that they are almost totally irrelevant today.” Unions could no longer afford to stand on the sidelines and wait to be courted by elected officials desperate for votes and resources. A more proactive approach was necessary, Wurf suggested, lest the labor movement “be left standing in the wings, playing by the old rules and wondering why they got left behind.”

For Wurf, the 1980 presidential election marked the culmination of a disastrous course in labor’s political activity that dated from the late 1960s. “The labor movement, the Democratic Party, [and] progressive forces generally have not dealt with the fundamental problems facing society,” he told Philip Shabecoff of the New York Times a week after the election. “For workers, the perception of America the beautiful and the dream of upward mobility has been turning sour,” and the labor movement, paralyzed by its own internal divisions and blinded by too much self-interest, seemed incapable of marshalling an effective response. The consequences of this failure, he believed, transcended the narrow bounds of the labor movement, for without the leadership of organized labor, American liberalism stood poorly positioned to speak to the needs

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1 “President’s Letter no. 19,” 13 November 1980, Box 18, Folder 21, Jerry Wurf Collection, AFSCME Office of the President, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Jerry Wurf Collection].
2 Reagan’s victory over Carter inspired reflection and hand wringing about the future of labor politics in the United States. While AFL-CIO political chief Alexander Barkan insisted that Reagan’s election owed to factors outside labor’s control—the poor economy, international affairs, and Carter’s general ineffectiveness—many union leaders saw his success among union households (which he lost only narrowly, by a 44-47 margin according to a CBS News poll) as symptomatic of a deeper crisis. “Bad Tidings for Labor,” Newsweek, 12 January 1981, 65.
and concerns of middle- and working-class voters. In the absence of an effective labor liberalism, Reagan had surged to victory, a development which an internal union report predicted would “boost the resources and ambitions of all elements of the New Right and make it a menace to be dealt with” for years to come.4

Ten days after the election, Wurf used an address to the National Board of Americans for Democratic Action to publicly reflect on the state and future of labor liberalism. He began by calling into question the very notion that a permanent alliance between labor and liberals had ever existed. Cooperation had always been both conditional and episodic, he insisted, and the heyday of labor liberalism came during a particular historical age—when “professors . . . didn’t have tenure,” “labor leaders were working at the machines,” and both were more attuned to the concerns of the average workingman. The labor movement, Wurf noted, had generally moved leftward since the Depression era, particularly when it came to supporting social welfare programs. Yet the relationship was weaker than at any point in the postwar era.5

The problem, he continued, was the drift of non-labor liberals. “This business of liberals who go around telling me that they’re fiscal conservatives and social liberals really distresses me,” Wurf confessed, recalling a pundit’s election night advice that the party eschew big-money federal initiatives for a closer devotion to issues of individual rights. “That will deal very effectively if he wants to change the law with regards to women’s rights,” Wurf countered, “but it will not be effective if he wants to move their wage situation from 59 cents to a dollar.” The future success of the Democratic Party, he warned, was imperiled by its drift toward the concerns of narrow, but politically influential, constituencies and its abandonment of the vast majority of

4 “Political / Legislative / Policy Outlook,” Internal Memorandum, 20-21 November 1980, Box 20, Folder 45, Jerry Wurf Collection.
5 Edited Transcript, Speech to the National Board Meeting, Americans for Democratic Action, 15 November 1980, Box 18, Folder 24, Jerry Wurf Collection.
working- and lower-middle class voters, those often most in need (and supportive) of positive government action.\textsuperscript{6}

Wurf’s bleak portrait of the labor-liberal alliance sparked a spirited discussion at the meeting. Fittingly, the response was given by prior arrangement to Rep. Barney Frank. Few better epitomized the “new” liberalism than Frank, who, as a state legislator, had campaigned for reelection in 1976 on a platform of stripping public employees’ bargaining rights, denouncing public employees as an unproductive leech on the public dollar. “The value of government is supposed to be that people benefit from it,” Frank had told the \textit{Washington Post} in 1976. “But now, the only benefit is to the people who run the government.” Channeling the conservative critique of organized public workers, Frank complained, “You can’t hire them, you can’t fire them, you can only yell at them.”\textsuperscript{7}

Recently elected Congressman from Massachusetts’s 4\textsuperscript{th} District, Frank countered that, contrary to Wurf’s analysis, the electoral collapse of the labor-liberal alliance was rooted in the \textit{dominance} of unions within the Democratic Party, rather than their marginalization. “The average working person cares more about his pistol and his sexual morality and race [and] … respect for America abroad,” than the issues pushed by union leaders, Frank asserted. “Liberals haven’t gotten any political benefit out of being for the labor movement,” he continued, because the underlying conservatism of the blue-collar voter was rooted in social issues that the labor movement refused to address.\textsuperscript{8}

Wurf’s sharp exchange with Frank illustrated some of the tensions within the labor-liberal-left community in the wake of Reagan’s election. While the two agreed on most specific

\textsuperscript{6} Edited Transcript, National Board Meeting, Americans for Democratic Action, 15 November 1980.
\textsuperscript{8} Edited Transcript, National Board Meeting, Americans for Democratic Action, 15 November 1980.
issues, they differed dramatically in their prioritization, and, by extension, on the relative importance of labor in a liberal political movement. For Frank, unions were antiquated relics of a bygone era, one of many constituencies and not particularly effective as electoral vehicles—a view not entirely dissimilar from Carter’s. Other liberal leaders, including many with better labor credentials than Frank, expressed similar sentiments in the weeks that followed. At a late November dinner arranged by *New Republic* editor Martin Peretz to discuss the future of New Deal-Great Society liberalism, Senator Patrick Leahy identified the Democratic Party’s chief problem as having “pandered too much to [the] single-issue politics expounded by labor and the left” at the expense of the concerns of the average “factory worker.”

For Wurf, unions, however imperfect, remained central and essential cogs, the lone entity capable of speaking to the concerns that united working Americans across lines of race, gender, region, and sector. It was more than just self-interest. He seemed unable to comprehend the political relevance of the new centrist liberalism, with its attendant ambivalence toward unions. He was overheard at the same late-November meeting muttering about “Standard Brown rhetoric” after the California governor’s presentation on the need to adjust the Democratic Party’s programmatic agenda to reflect the new realities of austerity. Yet, by most press accounts, the majority of the twenty-two leadings Democrats assembled at the Washington D.C. restaurant found themselves closer to Brown than Wurf, leading the exasperated union leader to plead at one point that “no one here and no one in the party” was addressing the fundamental problem in American politics, “an irrational tax system that places an unreasonable burden on the taxpayer.” Whereas a growing number of national and statewide Democrats saw a need to

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tighten social spending and rein in policy ambitions, Wurf pressed a losing case for progressive tax reform that would sustain an *expanded* social welfare state. While a similar sort of tension had existed through much of the second half of the 1970s, Reagan’s comfortable victory over Carter threatened to further legitimize the new fiscal politics within the Democratic Party.

Much of the next year was spent addressing this threat.

Wurf was not alone in his concerns. When a half dozen liberal union presidents and representatives met in early December 1980 to contemplate the fate of the Progressive Alliance, most favored abandoning coalitional arrangements and single-issue alliances for a more assertive AFL-CIO-centered strategy designed to exert top-down influence through the upper echelons of the Democratic Party.11 In early 1981, Lane Kirkland and the AFL-CIO political staff organized an unusually united campaign on behalf of Charles Manatt for the chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee after securing his pledge to fill 15 of the 25 at-large seats with representatives from organized labor.12 In some sense, this was simply a return to an older pattern of labor politics that had existed prior to fragmentation of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when liberal unions split from the AFL-CIO over party reform and McGovern’s candidacy. Those tensions persisted in the early 1980s, to be sure, but they were alleviated by a new sort of balance that allowed a greater range of independent political action in electoral politics in exchange for a modest level of union deference to the AFL-CIO on party appointments—a slight reversal of what Taylor Dark and others have identified as a long-term drift toward

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11 “Meeting, Progressive Alliance Union Presidents,” Memorandum from Frank Cowan to Jerry Wurf, 5 December 1980, Box 175, Folder 3, Jerry Wurf Collection.
12 “Labor and the DNC,” Memorandum from Frank Cowan to Jerry Wurf, 2 February 1981, Box 176, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection.
decentralization in labor politics. Wurf was among those nominated by Manatt to the DNC in late February 1981, a crowning symbolic achievement for a life spent in Democratic politics.

As organized labor worked within the Democratic Party to respond to Reagan’s victory, Wurf launched a personal tour to defend his vision of labor liberalism. As early as January 16, Wurf criticized the early drafts of President-Elect Reagan’s anti-inflation program, warning that it would be a “disgrace” to fight inflation “by cutting federal spending for social programs such as food stamps, welfare, health care, and unemployment compensation at the same time that it hands out tax breaks to corporations, oil companies, and the wealthy.”

Days after Reagan’s inauguration, Wurf appeared on the Chamber of Commerce-funded It’s Your Business program with Rep. Jack Kemp, Rep. Pete Stark, and Chamber president Richard Lesher. Host Virginia Sherwood quizzed the panel on the wisdom of cutting taxes in the midst of a poor economy with high inflation. Kemp noted that Reagan had explicitly campaigned on the idea that high taxes were “a barrier to economic growth, savings, work, production,” and while the three conservatives disagreed on the merits of across-the-board vs. targeted cuts, Wurf was left alone to protest the regressive effects of any large-scale tax cut.

But the most interesting public appearance came four days later, when Wurf appeared on CBS’s After Hours opposite Reagan aide Pat Buchanan. Wurf began by dismissing the anti-government “cry of the day” as “good politics” of demagogues. Challenged by Buchanan to explain the roots of anti-statist populism, Wurf responded by citing a “special sensitivity” in American political culture, a double standard in which consumers directed general anxieties

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14 “DNC Meeting,” Memorandum from Nanette Falkenberg to Jerry Wurf, 25 February 1981, Box 176, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection.
about inflation and the economy toward the narrower issues of taxes and government employee’s compensation, but not the services that they provided—a gap, he added, that AFSCME was working to bridge through political education and advertisements. Buchanan also pressed Wurf to explain Reagan’s popularity among working-class voters—a question Wurf struggled to respond to, ultimately admitting that Reagan had demonstrated far greater “political courage” than either the Carter or Kennedy. When Buchanan asserted that Reagan’s popularity among working-class voters was beneficial for unions because it liberated them from their reliance on the Democratic Party, Wurf balked, noting that despite moderation, the labor movement—a very “patriotic institution” fully devoted to “the free enterprise system”—regularly found itself “harassed, and pushed, and kicked around, in a very severe way,” by those in power. Because Reagan’s attitude validated that feeling, Wurf charged, there was no way to see his victory as beneficial to working people. He closed by rejecting Buchanan’s broader premise: that Reagan’s victory marked a tidal shift in working class politics. Reagan’s efforts to “cut back on the needs of the poor, of the old, [of] the hapless” would eventually generate a political backlash, Wurf predicted. “You can’t be for cutting taxes, increasing the defense budget, [and] cutting back . . . social programs that make any sense.”

Wurf continued the campaign through the spring, appearing on Good Morning America, the Today Show, and the Sunday morning talk show circuit during the first full week of April, all in an effort to rally liberal constituencies against Reagan’s budget. AFSCME had more to lose than most from the Reagan budget cuts. One union study predicted that Reagan’s budget would cut state and local employment by 2.5 percent, or nearly 350,000 jobs, and that AFSCME stood to lose disproportionately from the cuts, with more than 4 percent of its national membership, or

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17 Television Transcript, Interview with Jerry Wurf, After Hours, WDVM Television, 29 January 1981, Box 28, Folder 11, Jerry Wurf Collection.
18 Television Transcript, After Hours, 29 January 1981.
some 40,000 members, directly threatened by Reagan’s budget cuts. As outlined in an early April memorandum on the union’s “Counter Reagan Budget Strategy,” Wurf was encouraged to adopt a position of respectful opposition, emphasizing that Reagan was “a decent and well-intentioned person” and that AFSCME stood ready to work with to lower taxes and trim inefficient government spending. His posture, it continued, should be that of the honest critic: “the political situation is now sufficiently serious that I must speak out, fully realizing that I’ll take a lot of flak,” the document suggested Wurf say, emphasizing the unfairness of tax cuts tilted toward business and the wealthy, the inequitable impact of spending cuts on small business, workers, and the poor.

The campaign had little effect on the Reagan administration’s strategy. Despite open speculation that the tax cuts central to Reaganomics were really part of a thinly-veiled effort to “starve down” government programs (a claim most frequently asserted by Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY), but made famous by Reagan aide David Stockman), Reagan proved far more successful at rolling back government regulation than reducing federal spending. The crushing wave of state and local government rollbacks never came, and AFSCME proved quite resilient under Reagan, holding its membership relatively steady through the 1980s.

Even as AFSCME was busy battling the rise of Reaganomics, though, a more serious threat loomed. Having endorsed Reagan in the 1980 election, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) had reason to believe that the administration would respond favorably to its demands for better pay, a shorter work week, and changes to the civil service

19 “Impact of Budget Cuts on AFSCME Membership,” Memorandum from Marcia Caprio to Jerry Wurf, 7 April 1981, Box 28, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection.
20 “Counter Reagan Budget Strategy,” Memorandum from Joe Beeman, Phil Sparks, and Don McClure to Jerry Wurf, 2 April 1981, Box 28, Folder 1, Jerry Wurf Collection.
status of its members. But negotiations between the union and the Federal Aviation Association soured, and on August 3, 1981, PATCO called a strike. Reagan immediately declared the action a violation of federal labor law and a danger to “national security” and issued a return-to-work ultimatum. Two days later, Reagan fired and permanently replaced some 11,300 air traffic controllers—a move that both participants and historians later cast as a key marker in a broader shift in American labor relations, particularly insofar as it spurred private sector business to take a stronger line against their own unions.  

For Wurf, the PATCO strike was deeply concerning on both a professional and personal level. In private, Wurf, like many union leaders, was quite critical of PATCO’s handling of the tactics of the strike. At one point, he found himself wandering around Chicago’s O’Hare International, desperately seeking out picket captains for permission to cross the picket line to reach his summer home in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, only to eventually give up when he was unable to find a single representative from the union at the nation’s busiest airport. But Wurf was also alarmed (though not particularly surprised) by the meager support given to PATCO within the labor movement, particularly among private sector unions. “We can’t stand still and watch these decent people thrown out of their jobs and blacklisted for federal employment with less due process than would be accorded a person with a record of 80 arrests accused of raping a 93 year-old woman,” Wurf told the press, with his typical flair. “Reagan’s overreaction against the air traffic controllers could bring terrible misery for the whole labor movement, public and private, unless we recognize the gravity of the challenge and muster the solidarity to reverse it.”  

Wurf saw in labor’s response to PATCO symptoms of its broader crisis. There was no

greater cleavage in the labor movement, Wurf told William Serrin of the *New York Times* during a late-August interview, than that between public and private sector unions. “One thing that has always irritated me is that large pieces of the private sector, not just conservative folks in the building trades, would not accept the fact that public workers should have rights of trade unions.” Despite all the progress that public sector unions like AFSCME had made since the 1950s, Wurf believed that the tepid support demonstrated by many private sector unions during the PATCO strike betrayed the limits of public sector progress.25

Wurf saw in the PATCO debacle signs of future failure. The same lack of militancy evident in the labor movement’s modest response to the strike, he argued, undercut unions’ ability to respond to corporate counterattack, and left the labor movement too reliant on political action. “I don’t know why, if you can develop a trade union in South Africa, you can develop a trade union in Tunisia, you can’t develop a trade union in South Carolina,” Wurf reflected in the same *Times* interview. By 1981, age had brought a degree of reflection absent in earlier eras. “When I was very young, I used to think that every C.I.O. leader was blessed with purity, morality and so on,” he admitted. “It wasn’t true. I used to think that every building tradesman was a son of a gun . . . and that isn’t true either.” “Conservatives and liberals,” he continued, “there is unreasonableness all around.”26

As the labor movement sat paralyzed by divisions, Reagan seemed to be gaining more confidence in his own ability to attract the working-class and union vote. During the transition, White House aid Robert W. Searby spun Carter’s narrow advantage among union voters into long-term political strategy for a “Republican-Conservative Governing Majority.” The core of the plan, as Searby outlined it, was to publicly reward those (relatively few) unions that had

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26 Serrin, “A Union Chief Muses on Labor and the Controllers,” A12.
backed Reagan in the November elections—including, most notably, the Teamsters and PATCO—in the hope of breaking the “ unholy alliance” of unions and the Democratic party long-term. Though there was little in the administration’s domestic policy to lend itself to such ambition, Reagan proved adept at wielding his personal narrative to appeal to union voters—trading on his own past leadership of the Screen Actors Guild, praising, sometimes to the consternation of his own conservative supporters, the past achievements of both organized labor and liberal icons like Franklin Roosevelt, and then turning all of that into a critique of the labor’s more recent failures.\(^\text{27}\)

Reagan’s claim to speak for the rank-and-file union member galled Kirkland, who secured the Executive Council’s authorization for a massive rally in Washington in September. The first such event in the AFL-CIO’s history—in the same year it celebrated its 100\(^{th}\) anniversary—Solidarity Day was to be a protest of the administration’s budget proposal, a political rally to demonstrate rank-and-file support for the labor movement’s agenda, and, after the PATCO strike, a demonstration for the most basic labor right.

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It was warmer than expected on a late September Sunday afternoon when Jerry Wurf pulled himself up a ladder to address more than a quarter million progressive activists gathered on the National Mall. Unable to participate in the day’s march because of illness and troubled by the same piercing foot pain that had been present since his childhood bout with polio, Wurf struggled to ascend to the dais, stubbornly refusing any suggestion that he defer the opportunity to deliver his address. “I have to be here for my troops,” he told his driver. “These are my people,” he remarked to AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland.\(^\text{28}\)

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\(^{27}\) On Reagan’s working-class political strategy, see McCartin, Collision Course, 250-255.

Organizers initially hoped that 100,000 union members would turn out for Solidarity Day. The turnout vastly exceeded expectations: the National Park Service estimated more than twice that number the day of the event. Greyhound estimated that it had rented more than 12 percent of its national fleet for the event (and the company accounted for only one in ten buses at the event). The AFL-CIO rented the city’s subway system for the day—at a cost of more than $65,000 dollars—allowing all riders free transit to and from the National Mall. The United Mine Workers called a “special convention” to coincide with the event, giving its members the option of designating themselves as delegates and thus excusing themselves from work on “official union business.” More than 200 labor, feminist, civil rights, and environmental groups sent delegations—but none was bigger than the 50,000-plus members of AFSCME.

Wurf’s comments that day were brief—exceptionally so by his own standards. He began by praising the assembled cast of activists and organizers, united by a common commitment to “social justice and decency.” The day’s demonstration, he promised, was “part and parcel” of a national turnaround—one that rejected Reagan’s economic policies and reasserted a national commitment to “a responsible and meaningful society.” “We are committed,” he vowed, “to social responsibility to the old, to the sick, to the poor, to all that are disadvantaged.” It would not be easy, Wurf acknowledged, and required political mobilization both inside and outside the normal bounds of electoral activity. “Civil disobedience is not treason,” Wurf shouted, directing his comments specifically to the contingent from the (PATCO). It was “bedrock unionism in action,” and Reagan’s attack on PATCO was “symptomatic of the fight against workers, the fight

against the poor, the fight against the disadvantaged.” Solidarity Day, he closed, marked a promising beginning to “united effort” to fight back.\textsuperscript{32}

Featuring a turnout previously associated with the height of the civil rights and anti-war movements, Solidarity Day seemed a major success. Beyond the sheer numbers, the diversity of the participants was particularly encouraging. Newspaper coverage emphasized the surprising number of women, African Americans, and Hispanics, “visibly integrated” throughout the crowd.\textsuperscript{33} While there was little originality in the speeches themselves, there was much to celebrate in the execution.\textsuperscript{34} The AFL-CIO had to overcome significant logistical obstacles to pull off the event. The District’s requirement that organizers provide one toilet for every two hundred marchers proved most challenging; post-even clean-up was eased by a strict “no ribs and no chicken” rule for boxed lunches.\textsuperscript{35} The event even spooked conservatives. The \textit{Wall Street Journal}, while casting doubt on how deep the average union member was invested in the proceedings, nonetheless admitted that the event would have to give the administration “pause” in its assumptions about Reagan’s appeal to the working class.\textsuperscript{36} Disinclined to face a quarter million protesters eager to denounce his signature domestic initiatives, Reagan left town, hastily organizing a weekend away at Camp David.\textsuperscript{37}

In other respects, though, the demonstration illustrated the underlying weakness of the political left. The morning of the event, an incisive \textit{New York Times} editorial—“Solidarity Today; What Tomorrow?”—noted that the 14-point program adopted by the steering committee

\textsuperscript{32} Reprinted in Jerry Wurf, “This is Just a Beginning and It Won’t Be Easy,” \textit{American Federationist} 88, no. 10 (Oct. 1981): 14-15.
was more a “Quixotic wish list” than coherent policy alternative. Speaker after speaker took to the podium to cast particular grievances and narrow policy demands in the rhetoric of sentimentalized past achievements: civil rights organizations denounced the administration’s flagging commitment to enforcing anti-discrimination laws, UMW chief Sam Church demanded further regulation of mine safety, and Joyce Miller (Coalition of Labor Women) denounced Reagan’s opposition to abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment. Kirkland tried to weave the various threads with a stirring call to “pledge to each other to return to our communities and to build a new mandate for a humane and just America.” Judging by crowd reaction, the New York Times reported, Social Security cuts, high interest rates, and cuts to school lunch and college loan programs were the best unifying issues—but they hardly amounted to a powerful and unifying alternative political agenda. On the eve of the event, Bill Lucy had told the Washington Post that the purpose of the march was not to cure the internal divisions within the House of Labor, but rather to begin to challenge Reagan’s “wholesale attack on programs to help people” and the broader anti-statist, anti-government sentiment that those attacks embodied. The very diversity of the coalition that came together for Solidarity Day, it seemed, would make it more difficult to forge a lasting, unifying agenda out of the event.

These weaknesses became clearer the day after. “What do we do for an encore?” Kirkland mused quizzically to the press. Wurf might have wondered the same. Unlike Kirkland, however, he would have only a limited time to pursue a meaningful follow up. Solidarity Day proved the last major public appearance of Wurf’s career.

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Wurf’s health faded in 1981. In addition to the pronounced limp, his childhood bout with polio had also damaged his lungs, a condition exacerbated by smoking, and which caused colds to drag on for weeks. Recurrent ulcers and other stomach ailments further weakened him, while a bout with shingles added to the irritation. Aide William Hamilton remembered Wurf shuffling through various doctors, gathering overlapping prescriptions, and liberally altering the prescribed dose when a treatment failed to work after a few days. Biographer Joseph Goulden recalled that the medicine cabinet at Wurf’s Wellfleet home looked like a “pharmaceutical supply house” during the summer of 1981.\(^42\) His days at AFSCME’s national headquarters became shorter and less frequent, and by the summer, he was working more from his home than the national office.\(^43\)

As late as the summer, though, few in the union realized how ill Wurf really was. Hamilton later recalled being shocked when fellow staffer Jim Savarese predicted days after Solidarity Day that Wurf would be dead within a few months.\(^44\) In the final six months of his life, Wurf took some halting steps to repair relationships with the staffers and allies he had alienated during his tumultuous tenure—particularly Victor Gotbaum, whose short-lived challenge for the union presidency in 1978 marked the nadir of a relationship that extended back to COUR. Few were wholly healed. Wurf’s legendary temper and eagerness to exercise control had always made AFSCME a difficult place to work, but by many accounts, these trends became more exaggerated in the final few years of his life.

\(^42\) Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, at his home, 1 January 1982, Folder 2; Notes and Transcript, Interview with Joseph Ames, 4 January 1982, Folder 4, Joseph Goulden Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter cited as Joseph Goulden Collection].

\(^43\) Unless otherwise noted, the material that follows on Wurf’s final days comes from Goulden, _Jerry Wurf_, 289-291.

\(^44\) Notes and Transcript, Interview with William Hamilton, 1 January 1982.
Critics charged that Wurf had become detached and distracted from union affairs. Gotbaum privately estimated in July 1981 that AFSCME had lost as many as 100,000 from its peak membership in the late 1970s, though the union continued to refer to itself as a “million-member” organization thereafter. AFSCME also struggled to cope with a growing range of union rivals, suffering significant losses to the CWA in New Jersey, the AFT in Connecticut, the NEA in Minnesota, and the Teamsters in Iowa.

As his health continued to deteriorate, Wurf was forced to delegate some of the union’s public appearances. Secretary-Treasurer Bill Lucy, who had spent much of decade focused on Democratic Party and D.C. politics, reemerged as a public presence, taking Wurf’s place in a September 1 interview with NBC.

In his final weeks, Wurf helped prepare a stinging indictment of the growing trend toward the privatization of public services, later delivered by Rob McGarrah, an assistant general counsel, to a conference of charitable organizations in Washington. Wurf defended AFSCME’s membership—and public employees in general—as critical cogs in modern life, engaged in “the mean and dirty chores needed to make a city work or a state operate,” thanklessly performing “the wretched, stinking jobs, in prisons, in mental hospitals, in sewers and sewage treatment plans, and much else,” without which “a city wouldn’t last 10 minutes.” He dismissed arguments about the efficiency of private sector alternatives, noting that the very existence of public

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46 Notes, Interview with Victor Gotbaum, 1981, Box 4, Folder 47, Bernard and Jewel Bellush Papers.
47 NBC Interview,” Memorandum from Donovan McClure to Bill Lucy, 1 September 1981, Box 28, Folder 9, Jerry Wurf Collection.
services derived from the unwillingness and inability of the private sector to carry out vital functions.⁴⁸

It was the last major address of Wurf’s life. Admitted to George Washington University Hospital in early November with a perforated ulcer, Wurf missed the 1981 AFL-CIO convention in mid-November in New York City. One of the final letters that Wurf received, dated December 2, came from Donald McClure, who relayed the best wishes of the nation’s dwindling core of labor beat writers. “All the reporters asked about you during the AFL-CIO convention in New York, and conceded part of their concern was their own self-interest: they really missed Wurfian quotes to spice their copy and perhaps even educate their readers a bit.” The bulk of that note concerned Goulden’s looming publication of Wurf’s biography, Labor’s Last Angry Man. Due out in June 1982, McClure expressed the hope that the book would “give AFSCME the momentum to lead the fight in the ’82 elections,” and looked forward to Wurf recovering well enough to lead that political campaign.⁴⁹

Wurf never lived to see the midterms. He died a week later, on December 10, 1981, suffering cardiac arrest while undergoing an operation to cure recurrent infections. He was sixty-two years old.

The flurry of obituaries and memorials that followed Wurf’s death stressed three common themes: his foghorn voice, his maverick reputation, and his pioneering role in the public sector labor movement. The Jewish Labor Committee eulogized him as an “indefatigable fighter for

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human dignity and working people” and touted his contributions to civil rights and liberties.\textsuperscript{50} The AFL-CIO Executive Council issued a statement praising Wurf for establishing a “model of democratic trade unionism” and helping “a generation of government workers throw off second-class citizenship and enjoy the benefits of union membership.”\textsuperscript{51} Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill characterized Wurf as “a man of principle who saw the union movement as a vehicle for fulfilling basic human needs,” while DNC Chairman Charles Manatt praised him as “a fighter for all those in American society left out of the American dream.” Bill Lucy, James Lawson, and Fr. Albert Blatz offered eulogies at Wurf’s December 16 memorial before some 2,000 mourners. Even Al Shanker, Wurf’s long-time rival, paid tribute, calling Wurf “a pioneer in the fight to organize this country’s public sector workers.”\textsuperscript{52}

The \textit{Washington Post} went so far as to grant Wurf his own editorial. Had public sector unionists across the country petitioned Central Casting to fill the role of union leader, it suggested, “they could not have found a better caricature—or a more effective, passionate organizer, thinker, and spokesman for their cause.”\textsuperscript{53}

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Wurf life’s arced across many of the critical transformations of the “short” twentieth century. Born in 1919, at a time when the labor movement was dominated by narrowly drawn craft unions, Wurf was in many respects too young to truly understand the implications of the explosive growth of industrial unionism in the 1930s. By the time he died, a third tradition had taken hold in the labor movement, public sector unionism, one that he more than any other had

\textsuperscript{50} “In Memoriam: A Tribute to Jerry Wurf and Presentation of the Labor Human Rights Memorial Tribute,” Presented by the National Trade Union Council of the Jewish Labor Committee, 7 January 1982, Box 9, Folder 7, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.  
\textsuperscript{51} Statement by the AFL-CIO Executive Council, Bal Harbour, FL, 15 February 1982, Box 9, Folder 7, Jerry and Mildred Wurf Papers.  
helped to build and one which would remain the dynamic force in American labor into the 21st century.

The vision for public sector unionism that Wurf formed and articulated in the dreary early days of District Council 37 in the 1940s and 1950s became central elements of AFSCME on a national level in the 1960s and 1970s, and AFSCME, in turn, became the single most influential model of public sector organization. To be sure, there were other critical bastions of public sector growth: the creative and explosive tension between the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, in particular, did much to drive public sector organization in the educational field. But to a much greater extent than any other organization, AFSCME was built as an occupationally diverse union of public workers, from low paid street cleaners and janitors to six-figure-earning engineers and administrators. Decentralized by the fragmented nature of public sector collective bargaining, the union was bound together by the shared premise that the government employment relationship was, despite legal and constitutional distinctions, fundamentally one between workers and bosses, and thus subject to the same forms of collective action that prevailed in the private sector. On that apparently simple premise, public employees surged to a leading place in the labor movement by the late 1970s.

Yet in another sense, the revolution in public sector unionism was a product of a particular historical era. A crucial impulse behind early postwar public sector unionization was the relative affluence of the private sector worker. As the long post-war boom lifted millions of workers into middle class status, many government employees saw their traditional advantages in non-wage benefits (pensions, job security) eroded and surpassed. It was this relative decline that proved the most effective, binding grievance for early public sector organization, while the same strong economic growth cushioned private sector workers against the cost of unionization.
in the public sector, as public officials found it easier to extend raises and benefits from expanding coffers.

In this sense, the economic crisis of the 1970s was the pivotal turning point in public sector labor history. As the economy slowed and inflation soared, it became both more important and more politically difficult for unions like AFSCME to represent the material interests of its members. Greeted more and more frequently by hard-line opposition from public officials, the union was put in the untenable position of striking for pay and benefits that would keep up with inflation, or doing the best it could through backroom dealmaking. While some locals opted for the former—often against the advice of the national office—most settled for the latter. In either case, AFSCME was put on a more defensive footing, its broader ambitions swallowed up by growing tensions of the fiscal politics of taxes and government services. Distilling the lesson learned from the political success of Reagan’s “harsh new tone” toward government, senior AFSCME staffer Don Wasserman noted that the history of the previous two decades had shown that “Collective bargaining works rather well when we are sharing a growing pie.” The logical question, he admitted, was whether it would “work as well with a shrinking pie.”

Ironically, then, the success of public sector unions played a key role in creating the conditions for their own political crisis. AFSCME could boast of achieving something close to parity with private sector workers at the very moment that the pay and benefits of the private sector began to recede, under pressure from global competition, regional deindustrialization, concerted anti-union drives, and a whole range of other factors. Public sector workers were left vulnerable to politically resonant charges of being over-paid burdens on the middle-class taxpayers precisely because those taxpayers were losing ground. In this combustible environment, unions like AFSCME simply proved incapable of effectively countering the

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conservative, anti-union narrative of public sector excess. Faced with the choice between progressively structured tax reform that would raise revenues among the wealthy and business, on the one hand, and promises that taxes could be cut and services maintained simply by undercutting the position of government employees on the other, most taxpayers opted for the course more in line with their aspirations to comfortable middle class status.

For all of his intellectual and organizational savvy, Wurf never fully understood that point. Having risen to power and influence, first within AFSCME, then within the labor movement and liberal politics, on a message of oft-unrelenting aggression and ambition, he struggled to adjust to the new political era. Reagan’s election, he boldly proclaiming to the union’s membership in mid-November 1980, was not a “mandate for conservatism” because poll after poll showed that most Americans did not seek “less government.” “They want government to work better,” he claimed, “they want to heard new, genuine ideas from men and women who have the energy and vision to carry them out.”

It was a striking claim, rooted in a fair reading of public polling, but disconnected from the new political atmospherics. Wurf had entered the 1970s hoping that it would be “the decade of the public worker”—a period when a revitalized labor movement, empowered by the growing ranks of organized government workers, would lead a broader transformation of American liberalism to challenge existing notions about the limits of the American social welfare state, transform ideas about the role of the government in American society, and set the country on a course toward an Americanized social democracy, all while lifting millions of low-paid government workers into middle-class status.

Wurf recognized the capacity for public sector union power to change the American political landscape, but misread the direction of that shift. Rather than a revitalization of

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55 “President’s Letter no. 19,” 13 November 1980.
American liberalism, public sector unionization helped ease the rise of the New Right. As the erosion of middle- and working-class wages continued through the end of the 20th century, any job action or political campaign by public workers fed into an existing narrative about the greed and self-interest of government employees. From 1981 onward, PATCO, not Memphis, became the defining moment for the public sector labor movement, a symbolic marker of Wurf’s disappointed ambitions for public sector labor.
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