

Signing Up in the Shipyard: Organizing Newport News and Reinterpreting the 1970s

Lane Windham

Welders, painters, inspectors, and mechanics were among the Newport News, Virginia, shipyard workers who lined up to mark their union election ballots one cold and crisp January morning in 1978. Jan Hooks ticked off their names from her polling station in building 103 by the number 11 dry dock, offering a friendly nod or smile to the coworkers she recognized. A crane operator for the nation's largest private navy ship builder and a Steelworkers union supporter, Hooks was officially serving as an observer for a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election involving nineteen thousand workers. This was the largest single workplace union election ever held in the South, and it would be the largest such election held in the nation in the 1970s.¹ After the workers had finished voting that evening, Hooks joined the crowd waiting for the vote count at the union hall. "We walked the floor, we listened to the

A version of this article was presented at the joint Labor and Working-Class History Association and Southern Labor Studies Association Conference in Atlanta, April 7–11, 2011. I thank the staff of the USW for facilitating access to their records and the members of Local 8888 who welcomed me into their union hall and homes to share their stories.

1. AFL-CIO, "List of Large NLRB Elections, 1961 to 2010," November 1, 2010, in the author's possession. According to this list, the Newport News election was the largest held among southern workplaces after 1961. The southern election that came closest had 11,217 voters at Cannon Mills in 1985. For the 1930s through the 1950s, see F. Ray Marshall, *Labor in the South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). Marshall does not list any elections with more than nineteen thousand voters. The Dan River vote in 1953 had about eleven thousand voters, and the RJR Reynolds vote in Winston-Salem in 1943 had about twelve thousand. There was an NLRB election held among southern workers in the Bell System in 1949 with more than thirty thousand workers in nine states, but these workers were not all in one workplace. See *1949 Proceedings of the Eleventh Constitutional Convention of the Congress of Industrial Organization*, Cleveland, Ohio, 81. There was a decertification attempt on a CWA (Communication Workers of America) unit among New York City telephone workers in 1970 that involved thirty-four thousand workers spread over many work sites. See "Largest Single NLRB Vote at Newport News," *Steel Labor*, March 1978, 7.

Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas, Volume 10, Issue 2

DOI 10.1215/15476715-2071688 © 2013 by Labor and Working-Class History Association

radio, we prayed, we cried. When we finally got the notice—yes, we had won it—it was like ‘Are you telling me the truth?’ We couldn’t believe it. I mean, not only did we win the election, we beat the heck out of them.”²

Historians are quick to find that the 1970s was a decade of blue-collar defeat, but no one told Jan Hooks and her coworkers that their role in the drama of the 1970s American working class was supposed to be a tragic one. In 1978, these workers overthrew a company-controlled union that had been in place for nearly forty years. They achieved this as part of a workforce that was half white, half black, and increasingly female. Through a union, they sought economic security in deeply insecure times. The civil rights movement greased the wheels of their victory. Their insurgency had been started by four African American men dissatisfied with the pace of ending discrimination at the shipyard under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and strengthened by increasing numbers of African American and female workers who believed they should have an equal access to the best jobs in the shipyard. These workers turned to the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) to help them secure that right.³

When Tenneco Inc.—the conglomerate that had owned the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock company for ten years—followed the 1970s corporate pattern of hiring antiworker consultants and dragging its feet in court, the workers did not wait for the law to slowly churn out justice. They struck for eighty-two days to force the navy contractor to recognize their union, even as the governor’s guardsmen met them with dogs on the picket lines and the city police stormed the union hall, beating strikers with abandon. They went on to build a local union that mobilized its members to shake up local and state politics and remained an active progressive presence for decades.

There is no question that blue-collar workers lost power in the 1970s. The rules that had governed postwar labor relations were turned on their head, in large part by a shift toward a globalizing economy sharply tilted against workers. Examination of real wages, union density, and employment shows that workers suffered by the close of the decade.⁴

Scholars differ on what forces were behind this new power relationship. Some blame workers’ worsening plight in the 1970s on unions, portrayed as apathetic and inept in the face of rising corporate power. Others have focused on a right-wing,

2. Jan Hooks, interview by the author, Newport News, VA, October 27, 2010.

3. Helen Dewar, “A Major Victory for Big Labor in Virginia,” *Washington Post*, February 2, 1978. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination on the job by race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

4. Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), xi–xiii; Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010); Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 4–7; Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Union Membership Statistics in Twelve Countries Unadjusted Data, 1955–90,” *Monthly Labor Review*, December 1991.

grassroots mobilization driving the nation's turn to conservatism. Judith Stein finds that liberals and the Democratic Party abandoned their blue-collar base for a new seat in the globalizing economy. Nelson Lichtenstein describes a tragic disjuncture between the individualized legal orientation, a lasting legacy of the civil rights movement, and the more collective initiatives favored by labor law and organized labor. In *Stayin' Alive*, Jefferson Cowie examines pop culture, politics, and the corporate media and finds that by the mid-1970s the American working class had lost not only its power but also its hold on the American imagination.⁵

Historians agree on one thing: the 1970s mattered deeply for working people. Could a major triumph at Newport News help us better understand a decade known for defeat? As scholars examine the push and pull that characterized the tumultuous 1970s, what happens if we shine the historical spotlight on working people who actually won?

The working class was alive and well in Newport News in 1978, and it held real potential for growth. Here we see how some blue-collar workers sought out the labor movement as the way to find a secure footing in a shifting economy. We also find that the civil rights movement energized rather than enervated workers' organizing efforts. For decades, race had been a key wedge dividing workers, especially in the South. In Newport News, workers united across racial lines and rode the civil rights movement's momentum to gain the sort of lasting economic change the movement had found so elusive.

The Newport News story happened late in the decade, and thus it troubles Cowie's argument that by the mid-1970s the "record-breaking strikes . . . and vibrant organizing drives that had once promised a new day for workers were reduced to a trickle."⁶ In fact, many workers tried to organize new unions in the 1970s. Workers were almost as likely to try to form new unions through the NLRB process during the entire 1970s as they had been in the 1950s and 1960s. Workers' organizing efforts did not slow down significantly until the 1980s.⁷ Union density, or the percentage of

5. On weak unions, see Kim Moody, *An Injury to All* (London: Verso Press, 1988), and Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London: Verso, 1986). On the turn to conservatism, see Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 1–10. Stein, *Pivotal Decade*, and *Running Steel, Running America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 191–211, esp. 192. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 12.

6. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 12.

7. According to Michael Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 90–91, table 11, there were on average more union elections held in the 1970s than any other decade. However, the size of the units voting tended to be smaller than in other decades. A better variable to study may be the average number of total workers eligible to vote in the elections that were held during each decade. An analysis of table 11 shows that the average number of eligible voters remained relatively stable in the 1950s through 1970s: an average of 564,222 workers were eligible to vote in the 1950s, 536,467 in the 1960s, and 506,244 in the 1970s. Although the second half of the 1970s saw a slight drop in the number of workers eligible to vote in elections (an average of 488,225) compared to the first half (an



Figure 1. Newport News shipyard workers cheering their 1978 union victory. It was the largest NLRB election win at a single workplace in the 1970s. United Steelworkers of America Collection, 1936–2005, Communications Department Records, Box 7, AX/HCLA/02179. Courtesy the United Steelworkers of America Archives, Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections Library, University Libraries, Pennsylvania State University

the workforce with a union, was declining in the 1970s, but because this figure also reflects unionized plant closings and layoffs it masks workers' organizing attempts. Strikes roiled the entire 1970s, not just the beginning. While it is true that the nation's largest strike wave since the 1940s came in the early part of the decade, workers kept walking out in impressive numbers right up until 1979. There were eleven strikes in 1979 that involved ten thousand workers or more, including more than two hundred thousand truckers and forty-seven thousand workers at United Airlines. While the

average of 528,767), the numbers do not drop off precipitously until the early 1980s when 252,635 workers were eligible to vote in the elections held in 1981–84. Goldfield points out that while the number of workers brought to election remained steady from the mid-1950s to 1980, the percentage of the potential voters brought to election shrank as the workforce grew. Nevertheless, even through this lens, it is clear that the 1980s are the time of rapid decline, not the 1970s. In addition, according to the AFL-CIO, "List of Large NLRB Elections, 1961 to 2010," there were as many large union elections (in which there were more than five thousand eligible voters) in the 1970s as in the 1960s. There were nineteen such elections in each decade, and Newport News was the largest in the 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, there were only three such elections during each decade.

number of big strikes did slow down somewhat, there were still more big strikes in the second half of the 1970s than in the first half of the 1960s.⁸

Workers fought back, but they ultimately lost real power. Why? In part, they lost ground because corporations upped their resistance. Workers had routinely won more than 70 percent of union elections in the 1950s and more than 60 percent in the 1960s. By the end of the 1970s, they were winning fewer than half, largely because corporations pushed back and broke labor law at an entirely new level.⁹ Unfair labor practices reached what was then an all-time high in 1979, and unions that won elections were increasingly less likely to win contracts. Employers routinely dragged their feet in negotiations and in court, effectively using weakened labor law to their benefit.¹⁰

Workers also lost ground for structural reasons. They faced increased international industrial competition in the 1970s, yet the nation did not prioritize national or global policy that would support US industry.¹¹ The events at Newport News allow us to see what might have happened if the nation had developed a coherent industrial and trade policy that anchored jobs in the United States. Jan Hooks and her coworkers had special leverage not available to other industrial workers. Newport News was the only navy yard that could build and refurbish nuclear aircraft carriers. Navy ships, by law, had to be built in the United States. While Newport News workers faced fierce employer resistance as they organized and struck, these workers were less subject to competitive forces from the changing global economy than other US workers. They had more room in which to fight back. Other US workers were left to corporate whims in the 1970s as employers used workers' deepening insecurity in the global economy to break strikes and organizing efforts.

Newport News Shipbuilding and the "Union Stopper"

There was no missing the shipyard if you visited Newport News in 1978. The dry docks sprawled for two miles along the James River and twenty-story cranes towered over the town, emblazoned with the Tenneco name and seal.¹²

In 1978, the shipyard was the largest employer in the state, with nineteen thousand workers, and more than a third of the money circulating in the entire Tidewater local economy came from the company. It was a major navy contractor that

8. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Major Work Stoppages in 2009," news release, February 10, 2010, table 1.

9. Goldfield, *The Decline of Organized Labor*, 90–91, table 11.

10. AFL-CIO News Service, "NLRB Unfair Practice Rulings Set New Record," October 11, 1979, RG 95-009, series 4, box 5, file 4: Labor Management Consultants, 1979–80, George Meany Memorial Archives (GMMA), Silver Spring, MD. For an excellent contemporaneous look at the rise in antiworker consultants, see Bob Hall and Tony Dunbar, "Union Busters," *Southern Exposure* 7, no. 2 (1980): 27–48. While anti-union firms grew in the 1970s, they were not a new phenomenon. In *Invisible Hands* (New York: Norton, 2009), Kim Phillips-Fein points out that the first anti-union consultants appeared in the 1950s and that unfair labor practices nearly doubled in the last five years of that decade.

11. Stein, *Pivotal Decade*, xi–xii.

12. William L. Tazewell, *Newport News Shipbuilding: The First Century* (Newport News: The Mariners' Museum, 1986). To see how the shipyard looked in 1979, see the video produced by the USWA about the workers' strike: *Eighty-Eight Close the Gate* (Pittsburgh, PA: USWA, 1980).

built and refurbished aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, but it also did private work for cruise lines. This shipyard was one of the largest in the world. Tenneco bought the yard in 1968.¹³

The company was founded in 1886 as the Chesapeake Dry Dock and Construction Company and got its first navy contract in 1893.¹⁴ The company established an employee representation plan (ERP) in 1927. In 1939, in one of the first cases of the newly established NLRB to come before the US Supreme Court, the court upheld a lower court's decision that the ERP was company directed and ordered the company to disestablish it.¹⁵ The Peninsula Shipbuilders Association (PSA) replaced the ERP in 1940 and became one of the nation's longest-running independent unions.¹⁶

However, the company's hand was very visible in PSA's affairs. In fact, Robert Moore, a former PSA delegate and later a United Steelworkers of America (USWA) supporter, said that it was not really a union but a "union stopper," which the company encouraged to keep a more effective union out.¹⁷ The PSA did have a process for worker grievances, though it almost never took those grievances to an outside arbitrator—a right that is fundamental to most union's practices. The PSA constitution had no provisions for general meetings with workers, and if workers did attend the meetings, they had no vote. Instead, they used a delegate system of indirect representation. Workers in various departments could vote on their delegates, who in turn would attend the only available union meetings and make all the decisions about leadership, finances, and bargaining.¹⁸ It was a democracy in name only, for few workers were even members of the PSA. At the time of the USWA election, only about a third of the workers in the yard were PSA members.¹⁹ The PSA never even held a convention until the USWA organizing drive began.²⁰ Edward Coppedge served as a PSA delegate for many years before he helped found the USWA local, because he believed that some union was better than no union, but he was appalled by the PSA's relation-

13. US Bureau of the Census, *Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990*, www.census.gov/population/cencounts/va1900090.txt, March 27, 1995; "A Make or Break Strike in the South?," *US News and World Report*, February 12, 1979, 83–84; Ben A. Franklin, "New Unit Votes to Strike Giant Virginia Shipyard," *New York Times*, December 11, 1978.

14. Tazewell, *Newport News Shipbuilding*.

15. *National Labor R. Bd. v. Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock*, 308 U.S. 241 (1939).

16. Herbert Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York: Harper, 1944), 229–31.

17. Robert W. Moore, telephone interview by the author, October 14, 2010.

18. Thomas R. Bopeley to John A. Penello, NLRB Regional Director on Investigation of 9(f) and 9(g) Compliance of Peninsula Shipbuilders' Association, February 17, 1959, N3-25-87-1, RG-25-6-A-387, box 2, file: Re: Form 1085 (Financial Data), National Archives, College Park, MD.

19. USWA, "Why You Should End the Tenneco-PSA buddy system," *Vote USWA, Shipyard Organizing Committee* [election leaflet], January 1978, USWA Communications Department Records, box 165, folder 5, Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA.

20. "Shipyard Official Speaks: Text of D. T. Savas' Remarks to PSA Convention," *Daily Press*, September 28, 1977, 30.

ship with the company. “The independent union was controlled and owned by the company. . . . you basically [got] what they wanted to give you.”²¹

During its fifty years in the Newport News shipyard, the PSA beat back four attempts by outside unions to represent the workers, including by the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers in the 1940s, the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers in the 1950s, and the International Association of Machinists in the 1960s and early 1970s.²² The PSA did not succeed alone. The company had a vested interest in keeping the PSA as the workers’ representative. For instance, the company’s president sent a letter to all workers in 1972 urging them not to sign machinist union cards: “If you haven’t signed one of these cards, I hope you won’t. . . . so far as I’m concerned, there already is a bargaining agent—the Peninsula Shipbuilding Association.”²³

“Rights Consciousness” Paves the Way for Workers’ Union

On July 2, 1965, a group of African American workers filed a Title VII suit against the shipyard, charging that it denied promotions on account of race and did not allow black workers into the higher paying jobs. Many yard facilities, such as water fountains and restrooms, were still segregated at this time. The federal government began a thorough investigation. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) found “reasonable cause” in its investigation of racial discrimination and signed a conciliation agreement with the company to increase African American access to higher paying jobs.²⁴ As a result of the settlement with the EEOC, the company promoted 3,890 black workers, assigned blacks to some supervisory positions, and increased black participation in the apprenticeship school. The PSA promptly charged that the agreement between the company and the government violated its contract. Thirty-one black members of the PSA disagreed with their organization and filed their own report. Among their ranks was one key leader, Oscar Pretlow, who helped spur the USWA effort in later years.²⁵

Workers filed and won more such suits over the next decade, yet change was not fast enough for four African American yard workers who had been active in the PSA—Oscar Pretlow, Edward Coppedge, Ellis Cofield, and W. T. Hayes. By the mid-1970s, they decided that they had had enough of company unionism and the PSA’s lack of activism on civil rights. “We went out and filed and followed up on dis-

21. Edward Coppedge, phone interview by the author, October 27, 2010.

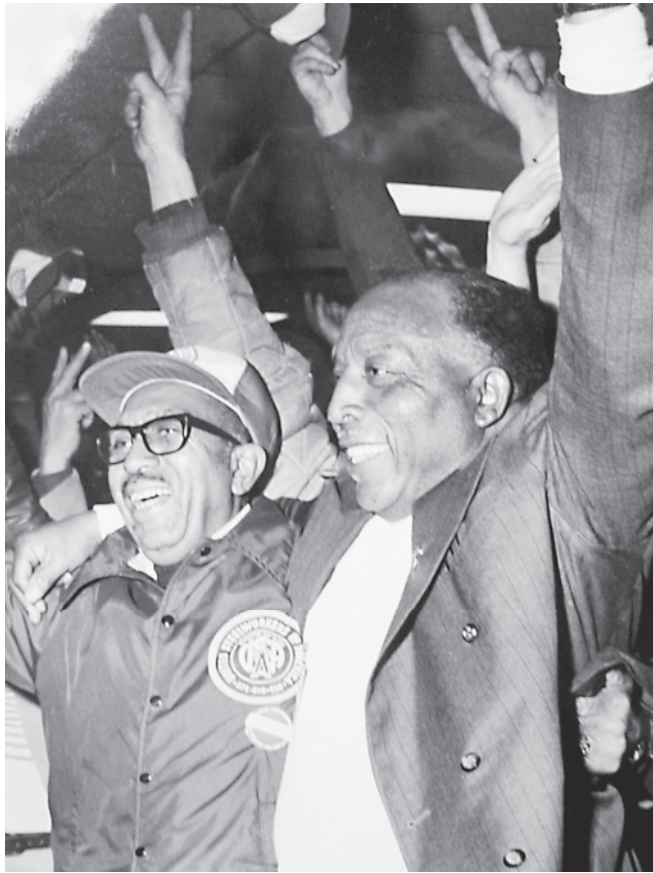
22. Solomon Travis, “PSA’s Election Victories Reviewed,” *Times-Herald*, June 24, 1979; Lloyd McBride, letter to President Carter, January 9, 1979, WHCF, box LA-9, file LA 5-10, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, GA.

23. Letter from L. C. Ackerman, president and CEO, to Newport News Shipbuilders, March 2, 1972, box 2 of Al Treherne Files, USWA Legal Files, Pittsburgh, PA.

24. Herbert Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System: Race, Work, and the Law* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 206.

25. McBride, letter to President Carter.

Figure 2. Oscar Pretlow and Ellis Cofield, two of the four original activists for the union, celebrating their NLRB election win. United Steelworkers of America Collection, 1936–2005, Communications Department Records, Box 7, AX/HCLA/02179. Courtesy the United Steelworkers of America Archives, Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections Library, University Libraries, Pennsylvania State University



crimination in trying to get the shipyard to live by the Civil Rights Act, but we didn't have anybody backing us. . . . To say we are going to go out there and take on the company on civil rights, the PSA was not the union. They wouldn't do it," remembered Coppedge.²⁶ The group of four men secretly reached out to the USWA in October 1976 to explore having the union represent the yard workers. The USWA was already working with a group of twelve hundred ship designers who had bolted from the PSA a few years earlier.²⁷ They formed an organizing committee, which

26. Coppedge interview, October 27, 2010.

27. A group of twelve hundred professional and technical workers decided to leave the PSA in 1971. They formed a separate bargaining unit, called the Designers' Association of Newport News (DANN), which the company recognized for bargaining purposes. In 1976 they held an internal vote, chose to affiliate with the United Steelworkers, and made that decision official in a 1977 NLRB election. When the company refused to bargain seriously with the designers, they struck in April 1977. See "Chronology of Events Leading to Shipyard Strike," *Times-Herald* (Newport News, VA), January 21, 1979; McBride, letter to President Carter; Sheman Lafayette Demoss, "Retired Yard Workers Reviews Strike Issues," *Times-Herald* (Newport News, VA), February 26, 1979.

began slowly expanding over the next year, reaching out to likely supporters and building its strength behind the scenes.²⁸

The yard was about half black and half white in the late 1970s, and Coppedge and his cohorts found that the black workers were much more likely than white workers to support the USWA. Black workers had a long history of being more supportive of unions than whites in the South. Throughout the postwar period, a union won through the Wagner act offered a federally backed route to win real power in a racially stacked southern political economy.²⁹ Black workers at Newport News were quick to see the advantages and turned to the union to win the economic gains the civil rights movement had not secured. By 1978, black people in the South still earned only 60 percent of what whites earned.³⁰ Despite the EEOC efforts, black workers were not treated equally within the yard. “It was just a lot of blacks in the brute . . . nasty, dirty jobs,” remembers Alton Glass, a young welder who years later served as local union president.³¹

Workers such as Glass and Coppedge had one huge advantage over the generations of men and women who preceded them: they had seen real change happening through the civil rights movement. Because of this, they had higher expectations. Nelson Lichtenstein labels this as “rights consciousness,” a new sense of empowerment among working people that grew out of the civil rights and women’s movements.³² Scholars have not yet fully examined the ways that rights consciousness and the civil rights movement energized workers’ union organizing and activism in the 1970s and have given especially short shrift to industrial workers’ organizing efforts.³³ An organizing lens—rather than a lens that focuses only on existing unions—offers

28. Edward Coppedge, “On the Road to Success,” in *Local 8888: Proud with a Purpose*, a brochure created by Local 8888 for the dedication of the union hall on June 26, 1985 (in author’s possession).

29. Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Barbara Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

30. US Census Bureau, *Historical Income Tables: People*, www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/people/index.html, tables P-7W and P-7B (accessed December 26, 2012).

31. Glass interview.

32. Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 192–99.

33. Some historians have focused on how African American and women workers used Title VII to force open doors that had been closed to them and how this activism often led to new unionizing. See Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Much of this attention has been on public-sector and service workers. See Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009) on African American hospital workers who organized with 1199 Service Employees International Union. Consult Kathleen Barry in *Femininity in Flight* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) on women flight attendants. Also see Joseph McCartin, “‘Fire the Hell out of Them’: Sanitation Workers’ Struggles and the Normalization of the Striker Replacement Strategy in the 1970s,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 2, no. 3 (2005): 67–92. The studies on industrial workers are more limited. See, for example, Timothy Minchin in *Fighting against the Odds* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005) on black textile workers at J. P. Stevens in Roanoke Rapids, NC.

a fresh perspective. It was no coincidence that after various unions tried four times to overthrow the company-led PSA, the group of Newport News workers who finally succeeded included more African Americans and women than ever before. For these workers, the union was a tool they could use to both shore up their newfound civil rights and win economic security.

Organizing Drive Kicks Off

The USWA sent in three organizers in 1977—Jack Hower, Roosevelt Robinson, and John Kitchens—who began to meet individually with workers. They were careful to build a mixed-race leadership group, which meant spending extra time developing white leaders, a task they often accomplished at a Moose lodge and local bars.³⁴

Key issues included wages that were about \$2.50 less than the national shipyard average and poor retirement benefits. The PSA had signed a retirement agreement in 1969 that counted people's service only from that year forward. People who had already put in forty years, such as Oscar Pretlow, stood to earn as little as \$52 a month on retirement under this system.³⁵ Many people were particularly upset that Tenneco had cut a paid twenty-minute lunch break period; they saw this as emblematic of a larger lack of respect from the conglomerate.³⁶

By the end of July 1977, the USWA had built a committee of five hundred yard workers ready to spearhead an effort to oust the PSA. One hot August morning, they began passing out Steelworker authorization cards at the nineteen gates the workers used to enter the yard. The workers' union campaign was now out in the open and moving quickly.³⁷

Organizing Newport News posed an incredible logistical challenge. To file for a union election, the workers would have to file cards with the government signed by more than six thousand workers; only then would the NLRB schedule an election. Shipyard workers lived in communities scattered all over the Chesapeake region. Many commuted from as far as fifty miles away on buses or in carpools. Workers began to gather union cards any way they could—on the gates at 6 a.m., in people's homes, even in the vans that brought workers to the shipyard from as far away as North Carolina. "We would sneak behind the toolbox racks, behind the machinery" to get the cards signed, remembered Hooks. "Sneaky. In the bathrooms. Lord, some of the conversations we had in the bathrooms. That's where we did a lot of our orga-

34. Glass interview. Hower and Kitchens were white; Robinson was African American.

35. "PSA: The Give-Away 'Union'" and "Vote for USWA Expected to Go above 60 Percent," in *Vote USWA*, Shipyard Organizing Committee [USWA campaign literature], January 1978, United Steelworkers Communications Department, box 165, folder 5, Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Pennsylvania State University.

36. Daniel D. Cook, "Union Organizers Savvy Strategists," *Industry Week*, August 7, 1978; Dewar, "A Major Victory for Big Labor in Virginia"; and "Tenneco Can Afford the Very Best" [undated leaflet], USWA Legal Files, Pittsburgh, PA.

37. Glass interview; Coppedge interview, October 27, 2010; and Cook, "Union Organizers Savvy Strategists."

nizing.”³⁸ The USWA organizers began to branch out far from the shipyard and held meetings with groups of workers where they lived as well as in local recreation centers, churches, and hotel conference rooms.³⁹

The USWA organizers soon put together a meeting just for women. Women had entered the shipyard in 1973 following an EEOC settlement and by 1977 made up between 10 and 15 percent of the workforce. Many women took the job because it was the best opportunity around, even though the going was rough. “It wasn’t my intent to go down in the shipyard and get dirty and crawl through tanks, but that’s where the money was and I had a child so that’s what I did,” remembered Peggy Carpenter, who pointed out that many of the women were single mothers like herself. Jan Hooks, a crane operator, came into the shipyard in 1976 and remembers “the women were really treated bad the first three to five years. . . . the supervisor, people would come up to you and call you silly. . . . they called us shipyard whores.”⁴⁰ The Steelworker organizers asked the women to play an outsized role in the organizing campaign. “Women could draw crowds. . . . we had social events we had set up, like dances and what not,” remembers Carpenter.⁴¹

At each shift change, PSA supporters would gather outside the gates to counter the USWA committee and organizers as they gathered cards. Wearing special PSA decals emblazoned on their white helmets, they would challenge and taunt the USWA supporters, who often wore their union ball caps. The USWA supporters gathered enough signatures to file for a NLRB election in December 1977—they filed with cards signed by 11,687 of the 19,244 workers in the yard. The date of the election soon was set for January 31, 1978.⁴²

The Campaign Hits High Gear

Tenneco immediately began a heavy campaign to convince the workers to vote against the union—a campaign that was orchestrated by Seyfarth-Shaw, one of the largest management-side law firms in the nation. Seyfarth-Shaw joined the surge of growth among anti-union consultants and firms in the 1970s. It quadrupled in size in the last five years of the decade and also represented both the lettuce growers (in their efforts to fight the United Farmworkers) and the *Washington Post* (in a bitter pressman strike).⁴³

Under the law firm’s direction, Tenneco pulled workers into closed-door meetings to talk against the union, fired and harassed workers, and threatened that workers would lose their jobs and benefits. Danny Keefer remembers that supervi-

38. Hooks interview.

39. Interview with Edward Coppedge by the author, Castalia, NC, March 22, 2011.

40. Hooks interview.

41. Peggy Carpenter, phone interview by the author, September 30, 2010.

42. Cook, “Union Organizers Savvy Strategists”; and “Organizers Provided the Key Element for the ‘Mission Impossible’ Challenge at Huge Shipyard,” *Steel Labor*, March 1978, 8.

43. National Organizing Coordinating Committee, AFL-CIO, *Report on Union Busters*, March 1979 and October 1980, Alan Kistler Papers, box 11, RG 95-009, GMMA.

sors would hold meetings “and they would be letting you know that if you go that way instead of keeping the PSA, things are going to be different here. Not to your best interest.”⁴⁴ PSA delegates spoke with Peggy Carpenter’s work group, but USWA supporters were not allowed to speak up. “I recall saying, ‘Well, you had a chance to speak, let me speak.’ And that was a no no.”⁴⁵ Robert Moore was still a PSA delegate at this point and voted for the PSA in the election. He remembers having free rein to walk the yard with his PSA buttons, armband, and decals on his hard hat. After one of the frequent PSA campaign meetings with the company, Moore remembers that the PSA “gave us all a little piece of paper . . . with what you’d lose (with the union), that type of stuff. When you walked around and someone asked you a question you just more or less read it off to them.”⁴⁶

The company leaned on the PSA to help it defeat the USWA. The Newport News head of personnel, D. T. Savas, was a featured speaker at the first-ever PSA convention soon after the USWA drive began. He urged the members to “reject the Steelworkers; don’t be coaxed or pressured into signing a Steelworkers card.”⁴⁷ The Steelworkers filed charges with the NLRB after the company fired one USWA supporter for circulating a letter critical of the PSA. The NLRB judge found that the company had broken the law and that its attitudes “disclose[d] a desire on its part to shore up the fortunes of a labor organization with whom it had achieved a comfortable relationship and whose status was being challenged by a potential rival.”⁴⁸

The larger African American community was divided on the unionization issue and local black leaders had a lot of potential sway. Newport News was a relatively small town of about one hundred fifty thousand people in 1978 and was about 30 percent African American.⁴⁹ These leaders’ opinions could make a real difference in how workers voted. After all, while black workers were more supportive of the USWA than the white workers, there were still many who were undecided. In past campaigns, the black ministers’ associations helped defeat the outside union and supported the PSA. In this effort, however, dueling black ministers’ groups came down on either side of the issue. Carpenter remembers that much of the support in the black community for the corporation came from the middle class. “You’ve got to take into consideration probably they never worked in the plant and a lot of their people could have been management. They are not going to buck them.”⁵⁰

Reverend Martin Luther King Sr. was scheduled to speak at a massive pro-union rally two days before the vote, but he cancelled after being urged to do so by

44. Danny Keefer, interview by the author, October 28, 2010.

45. Carpenter interview.

46. Moore interview.

47. “Shipyard Official Speaks,” *Daily Press*.

48. Brief on behalf of the intervenor USWA, Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, No. 78-1900, NNS v. NLRB and USWA, p. 4, box LD-254, USWA Legal Files, Pittsburgh, PA.

49. US Census Bureau, *Section 1: Population*, www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1981-02.pdf, table 24 (accessed December 26, 2012).

50. Carpenter interview.

some local black ministers. The USWA immediately dispatched a group of supporters and leaders to Atlanta to meet with King. He nevertheless bowed out because of ill health and sent his aide, Rev. Littleton Price, in his stead.⁵¹

More than twenty-five hundred workers came together at that rally in the Hampton Coliseum two days before the vote.⁵² Price urged the workers to vote for the USWA: "It is my recommendation, and I believe I have the endorsement of Daddy King, that you vote for the United Steelworkers of America." Harold Ford, a two-term African American congressman from Tennessee, praised the USWA. In reference to the controversy over King's absence, Ford hinted at a generational difference within the civil rights movement. He said he wanted Tenneco "to know Dr. King is 78 and I'm 32 and those threats won't work."⁵³

January 31, 1978, election day, was cold and clear. The voting started at 5:30 a.m. and ended at 6:00 p.m. A total of 17, 210 workers voted, first lining up at one of fifteen polling places and then voting in booths before dropping their ballots in boxes. Sixty-five NLRB staff people oversaw the massive election, joined by official observers from the company, PSA, and USWA, including Jan Hooks.⁵⁴

As voting wrapped up, the PSA held an early victory party at its new \$1 million headquarters, complete with a dance band and catered food. The USWA supporters anxiously gathered at the Steamfitters' hall. At 10 p.m. the television news announced that PSA was ahead 55 to 45 percent in the vote count. Spirits sunk. At about midnight, a local photographer rushed into the Steamfitters' hall and asked why the mood was so glum. He announced that the USWA workers had just won, 9,093 to 7,548. Workers hoisted him to their shoulders and rushed him to the microphone where he made the official announcement as the room erupted in hugs and tears. At noon the next day, the USWA supporters hosted a victory march in the yard to celebrate their new union.⁵⁵

Within five days of the January election, the company and PSA filed nearly identical objections to the election, arguing that the NLRB officials mishandled the elections. In May, the regional director of the NLRB recommended that the union be certified and that the objections should be dismissed. Tenneco and the PSA demanded a review by the full NLRB in Washington, DC, which also recommended certifying the USWA union.⁵⁶ "It is obvious that the election was not error free,"

51. Cook, "Union Organizers Savvy Strategists"; Elmer Chatak to Al Treherne on Newport News Shipbuilding Campaign, "Newport News Shipbuilding Campaign – Rev. Dr. M. L. King, Sr. Involvement," March 1, 1978, LD-989, file 35, USWA Legal Files, Pittsburgh, PA; and Yolanda Jones, "Health Blamed for King Absence," *Daily Press*, January 30, 1978.

52. "Faceless, Nameless Numbers' Became Real People When Shipyard Workers Voted at Newport News," *Steel Labor*, February 1978, 8–9.

53. Jones, "Health Blamed for King Absence."

54. "Newport News: USWA Wins Election to Represent 19,000!," *Steel Labor*, February 1978, 3.

55. Dewar, "A Major Victory for Big Labor in Virginia"; "How the News of USWA's Biggest Election Win Came," *Steel Labor*, March 1978, 10.

56. "Chronology of Events Leading to Shipyard Strike," *Times-Herald* (Newport News, VA), January 31, 1979; and McBride letter to President Carter.

wrote the three-member panel. “However, in our judgment the free choice of these workers was not thwarted.” The panel members pointed out that the magnitude of such a sizeable election caused logistical problems, but those were not sufficient to jeopardize the election.⁵⁷ Tenneco followed by appealing the decision to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. In a letter to its workers, company officials explained why “we, unlike the NLRB, cannot accept election misconduct and irregularities in free elections.”⁵⁸

The USWA supporters, meanwhile, were beginning to build their union even as their case wound its way through the courts. They held their first officer election in late August and voted in a slate of eleven officers from a field of sixty candidates.⁵⁹ “Even though the company didn’t recognize us we elected our officers. We set up and got ready to meet with the company,” remembers Peggy Carpenter, the Local 8888’s new financial secretary. In mid-November, they held another massive union meeting at the Hampton Coliseum, in which seventy-five hundred workers stood together and were officially sworn in as members of the newly named Local 8888 of the USWA.⁶⁰

Strike!

Tenneco knew that it could buy time by appealing the NLRB’s decision to the Fourth Circuit. Even NLRB officials admitted their process could take years.⁶¹ Nine months after they voted for their union, the Steelworkers supporters grew impatient with the glacial pace of the nation’s labor law.

Newport News workers had a decision to make by the end of 1978. Should they let their case lumber through the courts? Or did they have the strength to walk out? Their decision would come in the context of a year marked by massive strikes. If they chose to strike, theirs would actually be small compared to the other strikes in 1978 among coal, railroad, and grocery store workers.⁶²

“We won count-wise, we had won every court case,” remembers Jan Hooks. “You get to the point where you have had all you are going to take and the hell with them. The only thing that a working person has to withhold is their work.”⁶³ More than seventy-five hundred workers gathered in December 1978 and authorized a strike at any time. At that rally, Undersecretary of Labor Robert Brown called the Tenneco situation “a classic case for labor law reform” and promised the Labor

57. “NLRB Overrules Objections, Certifies Steelworkers in Newport News Shipbuilding Election,” NLRB press release, November 1, 1978, box LD-257: General, USWA Legal Files, Pittsburgh, PA.

58. Letter from Ralph W. Cousins, president, to “Dear Fellow Employees,” November 10, 1978, box LD-257: General, USWA Legal Files, Pittsburgh, PA.

59. “Newport News Finally Has Real Union as Shipyard Local Elects,” *Steel Labor*, September 1978, 5.

60. “7500 Tell It as It Is to Lawbreaking Tenneco Bosses,” *Steel Labor*, January 1979, 16.

61. Ernie Gates, “Yard Appeal Leaves Workers without Pact,” *Daily Press*, November 3, 1978.

62. US Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Analysis of Work Stoppages, 1978*, Bulletin 2092, table 5. Nearly thirty-five thousand coal workers struck in March, more than three hundred thousand railroad workers struck in July, and fifty-five thousand grocery clerks in southern California struck in August.

63. Hooks interview.

Department would do what it could to bring labor peace. Meanwhile, US Labor Secretary Ray Marshall asked the union and company to meet in his offices to discuss the issues at hand. Forty-three newly elected bargaining committee members traveled to Washington, DC, for the meeting, but the company refused to participate.⁶⁴

The workers began their strike on January 31, 1979, one year to the day after they voted for their union. They carefully organized the picket lines with twenty-one stations within a 2.5-mile radius and used CB radios to communicate. The governor of Virginia sent in more than one hundred state troopers to monitor the picket lines and bolster the city police. The company, meanwhile, armed security guards with .38 caliber pistols, mounted a water cannon on the gates, and gave its guards specialized military training.⁶⁵ There was some cause for concern as a wildcat strike eleven years earlier had injured nine officers and twenty-one workers.⁶⁶

The second day of the strike became chaotic. State and local police moved in on the pickets with police dogs, one of which attacked Betty Johnson, a USWA picketer. At one gate there were twenty state and local police in riot gear with four dogs to control seventy-five pickets. When the police refused to allow the picket line to cross the plant's driveway at the Sixty-Eighth Street gate, Wayne Crosby, Local 8888's president, put on a placard and boldly walked across the drive. He was promptly arrested for violating the state's right-to-work law.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, one picketer used a knife to threaten workers crossing the picket line until another picketer told him to stop. One man drove through the line in his car with a motorcycle helmet on his head. Another calmly strolled through with his hands in his pockets.⁶⁸

64. "7500 Tell It as It Is to Lawbreaking Tenneco Bosses," *Steel Labor*; and Mike Schaffer and Bill Sizemore, "Yard Dispute Reaches Cabinet Level," *Times-Herald* (Newport News, VA), December 29, 1978.

65. Ernie Gates, "Federal Mediators Fail to Avert Yard Strike," *Daily Press* (Newport News, VA), January 30, 1979; Newport News Shipbuilding Strike Bulletin No. 1, February 5, 1979, USWA Local 8888 Records, Newport News, VA.

66. The wildcat strike happened in July 1967. Crane operators and truck drivers were particularly upset with the PSA because it had dropped their incentive rate increase in negotiations. Two hundred thirty-nine workers walked out in a wildcat, and soon half the yard was on strike. The crowd outside on the picket line erupted in what the press variously termed a "riot," "mob," and "melee." Thirty police called to the scene could not control the angry workers, who overturned a police car and shattered windshields. After some workers were fired, the PSA struggled to catch up with its workers and cobbled together a strike vote. The workers voted 5,253 to 1,229 to strike, and the walkout lasted a week. See "Rioting Erupts at Shipyard," *Harrisonburg Daily News-Record*, July 12, 1967, "1967 Strike-Walkout Changed to Riot," *Times-Herald* (Newport News, VA), January 31, 1979; and Demoss, "Retired Yard Worker Reviews Strike Issues."

67. According to the Virginia Right to Work Law, enacted in 1947 and revised in 1970, article 3, section 40.1-66, workers on strike were in violation of the law if they tried to prevent other workers from going to work.

68. Terry Carter and David Nicholson, "Crosby Arrested at North Yard," *Times-Herald* (Newport News, VA), February 1, 1979; "Four Steelworkers Arrested in Picket Line Dispute," *Times-Herald* (Newport News, VA), February 1, 1979; and David Nicholson and Mathew Faust, "Eight Pickets Arrested Friday, Including Husband and Wife," *Times-Herald* (Newport News, VA), February 3, 1979.

More arrests followed in the next few weeks. Strikers began scattering jack rocks (welded-together nails) around the shipyard gates to flatten the tires of employees attempting to go to work. By mid-February, there had been thirty-four arrests.⁶⁹

Much of the workforce, community, and even families were split over the strike. Ricky Pike remembers, “Out of my whole family, I was the only one who didn’t cross the picket line. . . . I was very much the outcast of the family.” His father and uncle both crossed the line. Pike’s daughter was born during the strike and he remembers that because of the tension in the family, his relatives did not visit the hospital to welcome the new baby.⁷⁰

The USWA held a massive march of support on March 2, bringing in union members and supporters from around the country. More than four thousand people marched through the streets of Newport News chanting, “Eighty-eight close the gate.”⁷¹

In the early weeks of the strike, Local 8888 had been able to squeeze Tenneco. Though the company claimed that 60 percent of the workforce was reporting to work by mid-February, a local newspaper found that the figure was closer to 20 percent.⁷² The USWA had a \$90 million strike fund at the time and began sending weekly benefits to the striking workers. Nevertheless, as the strike wore on into weeks and then months, it became much more difficult for the members of Local 8888 to hold the line. By mid-April, even the union admitted that half the workers were reporting to work, while the company put the figure at three-quarters.⁷³

The USWA, meanwhile, was under a myriad of pressures to end the strike. Ray Marshall, US secretary of labor, had urged USWA president Lloyd McBride to wait until the company’s appeal was heard by the Fourth Circuit.⁷⁴ The strike was expensive, as the USWA headquarters not only provided strike benefits—as much as \$3 million—but also funded a massive infrastructure support system.⁷⁵ The legal support was larger than anything the USWA had undertaken in twenty years, and at least fourteen lawyers were working nearly full time on various aspects of the case.⁷⁶

69. Regan Kerney, “Strikers at Newport News Urged to Return to Work,” *Washington Post*, April 12, 1979; *Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, v. National Labor Relations Board and United Steelworkers of America*, 738 F.2d 1404 (US Court of Appeals, 4th Cir. 1984); and *Newport News Shipbuilding Strike Bulletin*, February 19, 1979, no. 3, page 4, USWA Local 8888 Records.

70. Ricky Pike, phone interview by the author, October 14, 2010.

71. “Part of a proud union . . . making it more proud,” *Steel Labor*, March 1979, 16. The workers’ “Eight-Eight Close the Gate” slogan was a reference to their local union’s number, 8888. This also became the title of a USWA-produced video about the strike.

72. “High Stakes for Labor in a Shipyard Strike,” *Business Week*, February 26, 1979, 49.

73. Kerney, “Strikers at Newport News Urged to Return to Work.”

74. “A Make or Break Strike in the South?,” *US News and World Report*.

75. Kerney, “Strikers at Newport News Urged to Return to Work.”

76. Carl Frankel, interview by the author, Pittsburgh, PA, August 17, 2010, and undated memo by Carl Frankel with notes for speech to AFL-CIO Legal Services Meeting, LD-990, USWA Legal Files, Pittsburgh, PA.

By the end of March, two months into the strike, McBride admitted that it had been a “tactical blunder” to paint the strike as a major breakthrough.⁷⁷ He began to put pressure on the district director, Bruce Thrasher, and the local staff running the effort to end the strike.⁷⁸ On April 13, six thousand workers once again packed the Hampton Coliseum and voted to suspend the strike in a week and to wait out the board process. The decision was hotly debated, and many strikers did not want to return. These dissidents won one concession—they demanded that the company not call their offer to return to work “unconditional.” The company agreed, and workers were scheduled to return to work on April 23.⁷⁹

Bloody Monday

Though the picket line was officially ended on Sunday night and workers were scheduled to return to work a week later, many strikers turned out on the gates Monday morning, April 16. They were angry they had lost, and they did not want to go back to work. In a kind of wildcat action, workers began marching through the parking lots and through the town to the PSA headquarters, throwing rocks and breaking windows. “They did some damage. Rocks, bottles, anything we could get, we busted windows and everything. But we never touched anybody. We never hurt anybody,” remembers Jan Hooks, who contrasted the strikers’ property damage to the personal violence they suffered at the hands of the police.⁸⁰

A confrontation began at the Fiftieth Street gate. A crowd of strikers locked arms and sang, “We shall not be moved,” while blocking workers attempting to enter the gate.⁸¹ Meanwhile, the city and state police reacted in a massive show of force to quell the strikers. The police massed on Washington Avenue in full riot gear. To one young striker, they looked like a wall of black.⁸² Jan Hooks stood in a local storefront watching the police form a phalanx with their batons ahead of them and rush up Washington Avenue through the masses of strikers. “They started running, they started hitting, shoving, pushing. . . . They shoved me, started beating me across the back and kidneys with a baton, there was three of them.”⁸³ The police beat and arrested strikers and bystanders indiscriminately. Four police, including the chief of police, beat one lone striker with batons as another dozen officers and police dogs surrounded them.⁸⁴ Other police knocked one local reporter to the ground. They rushed the union hall and pushed one striker through the front plate-glass window. The police caught one of the local union officers at the foot of the stairs, where they

77. Kerney, “Strikers at Newport News Urged to Return to Work.”

78. Frankel interview.

79. “Eyewitness from Newport News,” *Steel Labor*, May 1979, 3.

80. Hooks interview.

81. *Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, Petitioner, v. National Labor Relations Board, Respondent and United Steelworkers of America, Intervenor*, 738 F.2d 1404 (4th Cir. 1984).

82. Glass interview.

83. Hooks interview.

84. Photo by Bruce Colwell, *Virginian Pilot*, as shown in *Steel Labor*, May, 1979, 3.

beat him and then broke his leg as he lay unconscious on the floor.⁸⁵ Cindy Boyd was inside the union hall working on the financial books and watched in astonishment as union members began throwing furniture down the stairwell to block the police from coming up.⁸⁶ The local deputy chief reportedly told officers on duty to “make sure you add charges of breach of the peace and resisting arrest on everyone who went to the hospital to cover our asses.”⁸⁷

What later became known as “Bloody Monday” did not turn the tide, however. A week later, the strikers went back to work as planned and suspended their eighty-two-day strike. Hooks remembers, “I cried every step of the way.”⁸⁸

The Law Is on Trial

If the workers’ strike had taken place a decade later, the story of their union probably would have ended there, but in 1979, the NLRB had a Democratic majority appointed under Carter and, unlike the Reagan and Bush boards, did give real weight to its mission to protect workers’ freedom to form unions.⁸⁹ Even though the wheels of justice were frustratingly slow and employers mucked up their gears at every chance, the workers still had a chance to win in the courts.

During the strike, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals judge had decided that at least one of the company’s and PSA’s charges had possible merit. The Fourth Circuit sent the case back to the NLRB and ordered it to hold a hearing into whether the election could have been fraudulent.⁹⁰ The new NLRB hearing began in mid-March and revolved around the allegation that the NLRB officers’ conduct left open the possibility that there could have been chain voting.⁹¹ Though no one ever testified that chain voting took place, the shipyard brought in witnesses who testified that they had seen blank and torn ballots floating around the polling places. The hearings spanned three weeks and included about ninety witnesses. If the judge decided in the company’s favor, he would most likely call for a new union election.⁹²

85. “Police Unleash Vicious, Unprovoked Attack,” *Newport News Shipbuilding Strike Bulletin*, April 23, 1979, no. 12, Local 8888 USWA Records; Cindy Boyd, interview by the author, Newport News, VA, October 28, 2010; “Police Run Amok, Attack Strike Headquarters,” *Steel Labor*, May, 1979, 3.

86. Boyd interview.

87. Mathew Paust, “Two Acquitted of Charges in Yard Strike,” *Times-Herald* (Newport News, VA), January 12, 1980.

88. “Strike Suspended; NLRB Decision Awaited,” *Newport News Shipbuilding Strike Bulletin*, April 30, 1979, no. 13, USWA Local 8888 Records; and Hooks interview.

89. James A. Gross, *Broken Promise: The Subversion of U.S. Labor Relations Policy, 1947–1994* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 242–46.

90. Ernie Gates, “Court Takes Middle Ground in Shipyard Election Appeal,” *Daily Press*, March 3, 1979; and Carl Frankel, interview by the author, August 17, 2010, Pittsburgh, PA.

91. Chain voting is when a voter leaves a voting place with a blank ballot which is then marked by one organization outside the voting place. Another voter would then deposit that marked ballot and bring another blank ballot to be marked, and so forth.

92. Ernie Gates, “Torn Blank Ballots Found, NLRB Hearing Judge Told,” *Daily Press*, March 29, 1979; Frankel interview; and Carl Frankel personal notes, January 28, 1980, speech file, LD-257, USWA Legal Files, Pittsburgh, PA.



Figure 3. A local reporter, Yolanda Jones, was knocked to the ground by police who confronted striking workers on “Bloody Monday.” United Steelworkers of America Collection, 1936–2005, Communications Department Records, Box 7, AX/HCLA/02179. Courtesy the United Steelworkers of America Archives, Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections Library, University Libraries, Pennsylvania State University

On May 2, the NLRB’s administration law judge upheld the workers’ victory. The company appealed the decision to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, which heard oral arguments in September before considering the case yet again.⁹³

For the Newport News workers, the law itself was increasingly on trial. “Most Americans are probably not even aware that many corporations today simply ignore the law,” noted Local 8888 President Wayne Crosby. “It’s a law without penalties.”⁹⁴ Nearly 150 Newport News workers were cheered at a massive USWA rally for labor

93. “A Chronology of Events That Led from Courtroom to Bargaining,” *Steel Labor*, April 1980, 10.

94. “Newport News: Strikers Hold while Tenneco Scofflaws,” *Steel Labor*, April 1979, 3.

law reform in July in Washington, DC, as the Senate considered a key labor law fix.⁹⁵ Despite having been watered down, the reform bill had only unenthusiastic support from the Carter administration and came up against heavy opposition from newly energized right-wing business groups who formed the National Action Committee for Labor Law Reform.⁹⁶ The bill was filibustered to death by a joint effort of Republicans and Democrats from states with low unionization rates.⁹⁷

Meanwhile, the Newport News workers continued building their union. They were not deterred by the endless court delays, the defeat of labor law reform, or the fact that the economic crisis was deepening for working people by the late 1970s. By June 1979 they had expanded their organizing committee to nine hundred members and had 530 temporary stewards wearing buttons in the yard. The workers also held new officer elections, and thousands voted in the elections using special balloting machines. They elected Edward Coppedge president of Local 8888 and elected a majority of African Americans to the local's leadership positions.⁹⁸

Finally, on October 11, 1979, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the NLRB's decision that the Newport News workers had fairly chosen the USWA as their bargaining representatives. The company chose not to appeal any further. It had taken twenty-one months and four legal rulings, but Edward Coppedge, Peggy Carpenter, Jan Hooks, and their coworkers had finally won their USWA bargaining rights. That night three thousand people packed the Hampton Coliseum yet again as the organizing team and lawyers received a standing ovation.

The Contract and Beyond

Negotiations began in early November 1979 at the local Holiday Inn. Key issues included pensions, guaranteed raises, health and safety, and wage increases. Twenty-six workers were elected to the bargaining committee, and among their ranks were three of the four men who had first reached out to the USWA in 1976.⁹⁹ The workers' union and the company finally reached agreement in late March the following year. "We went from one of the lowest paid shipbuilders in the industry to the highest paid, and better benefits," remembers Edward Coppedge.¹⁰⁰ Pay rates for a first-class mechanic, for instance, went up from \$6.90 to \$9.15 during the three-year contract,

95. "Newport News 'Victims' Spark USWA Rally for Labor Law Reform," *Steel Labor*, July 1978, 5.

96. David Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 154–57. The new group was staffed by officials from the National Association of Manufacturers, the US Chamber of Commerce, and the National Federation of Independent Businesses.

97. Stein, *Pivotal Decade*, 185–89.

98. "News Update for Tenneco Shipyard Workers from the USWA," Vol. 1, No. 10, September 27, 1979, LD-257, USWA Legal Files, Pittsburgh, PA.

99. "Newport News Negotiators Report Progress in Shipyard Talks," *Steel Labor*, January 1980, 6; *Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company and United Steelworkers of America Local 8888, Collective Bargaining Agreement for the Term March 31, 1980, through Midnight October 31, 1983*, 2971/14, Special Collections and Archives, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta.

100. Coppedge interview, October 27, 2010.

and by 1985 were up to \$11.50.¹⁰¹ The workers and company signed their agreement on March 31 with a big yellow pen in front of an audience of television cameras and reporters.¹⁰²

The members of Local 8888 used their new union contract as a base to build an organization that fought for a progressive agenda and nurtured a culture of activism. The PSA had not involved workers in decisions about politics and actually endorsed the Republican John Dalton for governor of Virginia in 1977 despite the fact that he was a strong supporter of the state's right-to-work laws.¹⁰³ In their new USWA local, workers who were part of an active political action committee quizzed dozens of candidates before issuing an endorsement.¹⁰⁴ They lobbied at the state capitol for improved laws on unemployment compensation and sat on statewide committees on job training.¹⁰⁵ Newport News workers often had not engaged in wider political dialogue before they became active with the USWA. For example, shipyard worker Jan Hooks remembers that before she joined the USWA, she had never voted. After joining, she traveled to Washington, DC, for numerous rallies, helped get her coworkers to vote, and organized workers in unorganized workplaces. She remembers that more men than women marched alongside her at an ERA rally in Richmond.¹⁰⁶ Jan Hooks was cut from the same cloth as the white working-class women whom one scholar described as helping to bring in a God- and employer-based conservatism in the 1970s. A major difference, however, is that Jan Hooks was involved in a union that prioritized political education and involvement.¹⁰⁷

Democracy was alive and well in the union, and at times the union itself became the terrain for progressive action. For example, Local 8888 initially had a tradition of having only men in the top positions, including the key position of trustee. "That just gave me all the drive and determination in the world because we just left a union that wouldn't let us do what we felt like we wanted to do. I wasn't going to have that," recalls Cindy Boyd.¹⁰⁸ She threw her hat in the ring in 1983 and was elected the first woman trustee.

The Newport News story reveals the importance of organizations—including labor unions—to a thorough exploration of working-class radicalism in the 1970s. Even though wildcat strikes and gas riots marked the 1970s working-class dissidence,

101. *Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company and United Steelworkers of America Local 8888, Collective Bargaining Agreement for the Term March 31, 1980, through Midnight October 31, 1983*, appendix D, 2971/14, Special Collections and Archives, Southern Labor Archives; *Local 8888: Proud with a Purpose*, 6.

102. Eric Herst, "Labor Confrontation Ends as Yard, Union Sign Pact," *Daily Press* (Newport News, VA), April 1, 1980; USWA, "Eighty-Eight Close the Gate."

103. "Legislative Committee Endorses John Dalton," *PSA Shipbuilder*, November 1977, box 2, Al Treherne Files, USWA Legal Files, Pittsburgh, PA.

104. Moore interview.

105. "Political Action," *The Voyager: USWA Local 8888*, February 1983, 4, in author's possession.

106. Hooks interview.

107. Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1–5.

108. Boyd interview.

we also need to look at the ways working people used more traditional worker organizations to take on the nation's power structure.¹⁰⁹

These workers' story also offers a challenge to scholars who see a sharp divide between civil rights gains and unionizing.¹¹⁰ Rather than relying on individual cases through the government, they used their union to ensure fair treatment. Edward Coppedge remembers that before they formed their USWA union, there were "black folks down there that hadn't had a raise in years and couldn't get one. And you know, there was nothing ever done about it. They really didn't move on civil rights until the steelworkers got there. All of a sudden . . . when you say you are going to file a civil rights charge . . . they knew that the union was behind you and the company backed off."¹¹¹ In many ways Local 8888 became an organization of the "long civil rights movement," one that fought for economic gains as it pursued an agenda of equality and justice.¹¹²

Local 8888 also became part of a wider organizing tradition. The workers joined in organizing efforts, reaching out to workers throughout the South who did not already have a union. For example, Ricky Pike later volunteered as an organizer on a campaign among US Airways workers in Charlotte and Jan Hooks helped Smithfield packing workers win a union with a different international union.¹¹³ Most of the local's leaders volunteered in organizing at some point.

When we view the 1970s through an organizing lens, we can interrogate scholars' assertions that postwar unions were trapped in a legalistic framework built to support the post–World War II social compact. According to those scholars, under that compact workers agreed not to protest so much if corporations agreed to share the wealth. However, these historians contend that union workers became satisfied with their share of the pie and did not reach out to expand the benefits more broadly.¹¹⁴ Examining union organizing by workers allows us to see how some workers used their unions to expand the WWII social compact beyond their base, even through the late 1970s.

When labor historians have taken organizing seriously as an analytical category for the 1970s, they have given more attention to government workers and service workers and focused less on efforts by industrial workers such as those at New-

109. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*; David Anderson, "Levittown Is Burning! The 1979 Levittown, Pennsylvania, Gas Line Riot and the Decline of the Blue-Collar American Dream," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 2, no. 3 (2005): 47–65.

110. Bruce Nelson, "CIO Meant One Thing for the Whites and Another Thing for Us: Steelworkers and Civil Rights, 1936–1974," in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940–1995*, ed. Robert Zieger (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).

111. Coppedge interview, October 27, 2010.

112. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1233–63.

113. Pike and Hooks interviews.

114. Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*; Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); and Steve Fraser, "The 'Labor Question,'" *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

port News.¹¹⁵ However, a number of industrial unions, including those representing textile workers, steelworkers, machinists, rubber workers, and others, were trying to help workers form new unions.¹¹⁶

The Challenge

"I think more unions, more working people, are going to get together, statewide, nationwide. We know what we want; we want a fair shake," asserted Peggy Carpenter in a 1981 interview soon after she had won her union.¹¹⁷ Carpenter, of course, was wrong on one level: workers did not come together in unprecedented numbers in the 1980s. In the light of Peggy Carpenter's hope and optimism, however, historians face a challenge. Even late in the 1970s, workers had reason to believe that they could win power. They were successfully organizing unions and building lasting organizations, and they often did so by building on the successes of the civil rights movement.

The Newport News shipyard workers' victory reminds us of the breadth of working people's resistance in the 1970s. Their organizing drive warrants historical attention for its sheer size. It was the largest single-unit NLRB election in the 1970s and the largest in the history of the USWA.¹¹⁸ More workers were involved in Newport News than in the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization strike or in the J. P. Stevens organizing campaigns, for example.¹¹⁹ However, Newport News was not some quirky outlier. Workers were challenging employers all across the nation until the end of the 1970s, demanding a more equitable distribution of wealth and a real shot at long-term security. The 1970s may very well be the most important decade of the postwar years in the struggle over the fate of the working class. The events at Newport News and an organizing lens show that the decade was far more contested than historians previously thought. ■

115. See, for example, Joseph A. McCartin, "Turnabout Years: Public Sector Unionism and the Fiscal Crisis," in Bruce J. Shulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*; and Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 196–200.

116. "Union Membership and Organizing: An Analysis and Perspective," Report of the Department of Organization and Field Services, Alan Kistler, director, July 22, 1980, RG 95-009, series 4, box 6, George Meany Memorial Archives, College Park, MD.

117. Peggy Carpenter quote from Anne Braden, "Shoulder to Shoulder," *Southern Exposure* 9, no. 4 (1981): 93.

118. AFL-CIO, "List of Large NLRB Elections, 1961 to 2010." According to the AFL-CIO records, there was not another NLRB election as large as the Newport News election again until 2010, when the Service Employees International Union won a decertification election against an independent union in California. Steelworker figure from "Resolution Number 11: Organizing," *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Constitutional Convention of the United Steelworkers of America, AFL-CIO, CLC. Atlantic City, New Jersey. September 18–22, 1978*, 113.

119. The J. P. Stevens vote in 1974 was among three thousand workers, according to Mimi Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise: A Portrait of Southern Textile Workers* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1979), 2, and the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization strike involved 11,352 workers, according to Joseph McCartin, "Fire the Hell out of Them," 92.

