

CHAPTER 2: WHY DOES LABOUR ORGANISE?: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

UNIT 5: SOLIDARITY AND FRAGMENTATION: BUILDING WORKERS' POWER IN THE AMERICAN MEATPACKING INDUSTRY

Author: Prof. Rick Halpern, Bissell-Heyd Chair of American Studies; Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto, Canada

SCRIPT OF THE VIDEO LECTURE

Between the mid-1930s and the end of WWII workers in the giant meatpacking plants of the United States built a powerful union that not only raised wages and secured material benefits but fought for racial equality and advanced a progressive politics. To do this, packinghouse workers had to overcome numerous obstacles, including employers who consciously pitted groups of immigrant labourers against each other and a legacy of racial antagonism and suspicion arising from failed organizing drives earlier in the century. Their accomplishments, which delivered security to a generation of workers and their families, carry vital lessons for today's activists who seek to mobilize workforces riven by divides of race, gender, ethnicity, and skill.

Meatpacking, a core industry of the US economy, was transformed by mass production technologies at the end of the nineteenth century. The combination of assembly line workflow in plants and refrigerated railroad cars allowed three Chicago-based companies – Armour, Swift, and Wilson – to dominate the sector. These firms controlled most of the trade in fresh slaughtered meat and byproducts such as leather, fertilizer, glue and gelatine. By the early 20th century, the “big three” packers formed a monopoly, setting prices, administering markets, and squeezing smaller competition.



Chicago in the early twentieth century was a centre of militant labour organizing. The Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) moved beyond narrow craft unionism to organize unskilled workers, women, and immigrants. In meatpacking the Stockyards Labor Council (SLC) brought together various craft unions and unskilled workers, even organizing black workers who before this time had remained aloof from union drives. Their numbers in the industry increased significantly during WWI, with many pulled north from the rural South by wartime labour shortages. The expanding Black presence made inclusive organization imperative but also heightened tensions, as companies hired more Black workers in the belief they would continue to resist union appeals. The organizing drive that began in 1917 aimed for 100% membership and rank and file workers engaged in job actions to force non-union workers to join. These actions, often beginning on the animal killing floors, were precise, with elected stewards carrying out group decisions. However, the campaign further polarized races, as most African Americans remained wary of what they regarded as the “white man’s union,” an attitude rooted in the lived experience of exclusion and discrimination. A race riot in the summer of 1919, one of the worst in American history, spelled the end of the drive and further polarized black and white workers.

The 1920s were lean years for packinghouse workers, characterized by blacklisting and unchecked company power. During this era the companies perfected the use of a split labour market, relying on small numbers of high-paid skilled workers who tended to be Irish and German, and drawing on more recent immigrants from southern and eastern Europe to fill the unskilled ranks. Yet, beneath the surface, forces set the stage for 1930s insurgency. Packing companies continued to hire and promote Blacks, for whom packinghouse jobs were highly sought after for their respectable wages and advancement potential. At the same time, white activists, veterans of earlier struggles, steadily organized in the plants, stressing the need for interracial unity to counter the power of the packing companies.



In the 1930s, black workers were among the most visible leaders of the new union organizing drive that emerged in meatpacking, closely associated with the new Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The progressive New Deal policies of President Franklin Roosevelt paved the way for CIO facilitated worker organization, promoting material benefits and combatting discrimination. Chicago quickly emerged as a union activity centre, as did Kansas City, Sioux City, and East St. Louis.

The formation of the CIO's Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC) in 1937 coincided with new labour regulations that further facilitated organization. The PWOC had a strong presence across major packing companies, relying on shop floor power and direct action. Job actions tackled discrimination, with rank-and-file union members promoting racial solidarity through common struggle and the targeting of specific grievances. Activists made effective use of the new labour laws, but power continued to rest with rank-and-file workers on the shop floor and their ability to stop production in disciplined fashion. Indeed, there was a wariness around relying on the government to secure union gains.

The Second World War had a contradictory impact on this sort of rank-and-file unionism. On the one hand, the imperative of full production for the war effort pushed the government to adopt several union security measures including compelling recalcitrant employers to sign contracts, the automatic enrolment of new workers in the union, and the collection of dues out of payrolls – measures that further solidified union organization. Yet these gains came with a significant cost – a pledge not to engage in strike activity. Packinghouse workers – now unified as the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) straddled a line between respecting the law and working to ensure that power remained rooted in their control of the shop floor. Wary of becoming enmeshed in the legal apparatus of the state, and unwilling to squash the autonomy of local stewards, the UPWA developed an array of internal institutions that, in contrast to



most other CIO unions, sustained democratic processes within the organization and ensured that the locus of power remained at its base.

The 1940 faced severe tests in the late 1940s. A successful nationwide strike in 1946 led to substantial gains, but a subsequent strike in 1948 ended disastrously. The conservative post-war climate led to police violence and strikebreaking. Despite these setbacks, the UPWA did not fracture along racial lines. Younger black activists, many of them military veterans whose rights consciousness had been raised by the experience of fighting a segregated war, rebuilt the union by emphasizing direct action and cautioning against reliance on government industrial relations systems. This mobilized black membership to enable the UPWA to recover in the wake of the defeat.

The 1950s marked the zenith of the UPWA's power. Company-wide agreements with packing companies secured decent wages, job security, and dignity for workers, who also maintained control in the plants. For black workers, the UPWA pushed an ambitious anti-discrimination program that impacted employment and promotion practices in the industry and extended into community integration efforts.

The late 1950s brought significant economic transformations. The rise of an integrated highway network and changes in agriculture allowed packing companies to relocate to rural areas. New technologies and plant designs deskilled much of the industry's work, leading to a younger, predominantly white workforce unfamiliar with unions. Urban plant closures decimated the UPWA, culminating in mergers with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and later the Retail Clerks. Despite these challenges, the UPWA's legacy of militant unionism continued to inspire subsequent labour movements, emphasizing control over the labour process and social engagement.

The UPWA's journey from its formation to its peak in the 1950s and its subsequent decline highlights the dynamic interplay between both labour rights and civil rights activism and the importance of militant, democratic rank-and-file unionism. The union's commitment to racial equality and militant unionism set it apart from other labour organizations, leaving a lasting legacy in the fight for social justice.