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Organizing the United Automobile Workers: Women workers at the Ternstedt General Motors parts plant

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The United Automobile Workers' Union (UAW), like most of the industrial unions formed in the 1930s, had a predominantly male constituency. But there were also some factories in the UAW's jurisdiction – in the auto parts branch of the motor industry – where women were quite numerous. In this chapter, Ruth Meyerowitz analyzes the role of women in the UAW's organizing drive in one such factory, the Detroit Ternstedt General Motors parts plant, which played an important role in the union's broader General Motors (GM) drive. Drawing on archival material and extensive oral history interviews, Meyerowitz analyzes the social and political composition of Ternstedt's female union activists, and demonstrates their critical role in the organizing drive's success. Although these women were organized along with their male counterparts, in accordance with the logic of industrial unionism, the UAW gave little attention to the special needs of women workers. There was no systematic effort to encourage women's union leadership, and most of the women activists involved in the Ternstedt drive gradually disappeared from the scene. Their story is part of the contribution of the 1930s generation of rank-and-file women activists to building the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a contribution which has never been fully recognized.

In 1937, men and women at the Ternstedt General Motors parts plant in Detroit organized a unit of the UAW. Women made up half

of the total labor force in this factory, which employed between 12,000 and 16,000 workers. Such a large female labor force was unusual in the automobile industry, and as a result of male prejudices, union drives at sites with so many women workers were rare. But because the Ternstedt women were employed in a strategically important factory, the UAW's desire to organize male auto-workers led union men to organize their female co-workers.

The union drive at Ternstedt was typical of many such drives in basic industries in the 1930s, despite the plant's unusually high proportion of females. The organizing occurred during the period of economic recovery, between 1935 and 1937, when conflicts between labor and management escalated throughout the nation. As employment increased in the auto industry in 1937, workers became more confident of finding work and were more willing to risk union activity. There was an upsurge of unionization throughout the auto industry at this time, culminating in the UAW's first major victories in 1937.

General Motors was the UAW's primary target in its drive to establish a national union of automobile-workers. The prototype of the huge, modern corporation, GM was by this time larger than Ford, and also seemed less intransigently anti-union. By September 1936, the UAW's national leadership had decided to concentrate on unionizing GM. The dramatic Flint sit-down strike against GM in December 1936 and January 1937 was only the first stage of the struggle to organize GM. The UAW's victory in Flint encouraged the unionization of other plants in the GM empire, including the Ternstedt parts plant in Detroit.[1]

Auto union organizers, like other CIO unionists in the 1930s, organized women along with men in mass production industries. When given a choice, however, they preferred to organize workers of their own sex, and the plants and industries they targeted for unionization were predominantly male. Women workers were generally left in the position of either unionizing themselves or remaining unorganized.

Although UAW men were reluctant to organize them, women – both as wives and as workers – made central contributions to the union's victories in the late 1930s. Without them, the UAW might have failed to win some of its key battles. What explains women's activism, in the face of union hostility or indifference? During the

1930s, unionists from union families or from the ranks of the Socialist, Communist and Proletarian Parties, provided the leadership which encouraged wives and women workers to organize. These organizers were predominantly women, though there were some men. Whether male or female, however, they were not feminists: they sought neither equal rights nor female emancipation. The absence of an independent feminist movement in this period also meant that women were ill-equipped to organize in their own interests. Within the labor movement, for both men and women, a politics of class prevailed over a politics of sex. Even the communists, who were most sensitive to the greater exploitation of women, and periodically raised 'women's issues' within the unions, did not do so consistently. Nor did they encourage women to aspire to union leadership; those who did win such posts were not actively maintained in office.

The history of the Ternstedt organizing drive illustrates both the strengths and the weaknesses of the UAW's relationship to women workers in the 1930s. It shows that plants in mass production industries with large numbers of female employees could be unionized, and that a few dedicated men and women could organize thousands of workers. In spite of resistance from the all-male executive board of UAW Local 174, a handful of organizers from the amalgamated local on Detroit's West Side, where the Ternstedt plant was located, unionized this factory. They employed what was then an unusual tactic – a slow-down, rather than the more dramatic and popular sit-down strike. Developed as a creative response to the no-strike clause in the national contract signed by the UAW and GM in early 1937, the slow-down was very well suited to organizing women workers. As a tactic of on-the-job resistance, it occurred during work-time and thus interfered minimally with women's family responsibilities.

Women played a leading role as rank-and-file organizers at Ternstedt, and the role of the organizer – both male and female – was critical. Although conditions in the plant were poor, they were better than at many other factories employing women at this time. Workers' grievances alone did not spontaneously generate a union. Rather, the successful drive at Ternstedt was the product of hard work by skilled organizers who, in 1937, secured union recognition, and then went on to consolidate the union's power over the next four

years – despite renewed recession, layoffs, and intense managerial resistance to the UAW.

The Ternstedt drive reveals the limitations of the UAW leadership's attitudes toward women, as well as the obstacles women activists faced within the union following the initial campaign for recognition. In addition to serving as organizers, women became rank-and-file union leaders, stewards and sat on committees in the UAW of the 1930s. Several were elected as delegates to union conventions, and a few went on to win union office. But the absence of a feminist consciousness within the UAW in this period meant that efforts to sustain women labor leaders in official union positions were minimal. As a result, women dropped out of union activities far more frequently than their male counterparts. By the end of World War II, most of the generation of women activists who had first helped to organize the UAW had either left the plants or dropped out of union activity. Younger women in the plants therefore had few models of successful female labor leaders.

Women workers in the Ternstedt plant

In 1937, the Ternstedt General Motors parts plant was the largest GM parts factory in Detroit, and probably in the nation. Composed of five buildings, the plant was in the heart of Detroit's West Side. Ternstedt first hired women in large numbers during World War I and continued to employ them in accordance with the sex-stereotyped view that females could easily handle the small parts – mostly door handles and chromium trim – it manufactured. The company could also pay them less than men. Although auto work has generally been considered a male preserve, women actually worked in a range of jobs throughout the automobile industry well before the shift to war production swelled the ranks of the female labor force during World War II. The auto industry's 'female' jobs were primarily in the factories of the small parts suppliers, like Ternstedt, where wages were lower, as well as in sex-segregated jobs in the major auto plants.

A handful of the women at Ternstedt were in their fifties and sixties when the organizing began in the mid-1930s. These women had worked in factories from the age of ten or eleven – long before

Alva K. Ternstedt established the company in 1917 – bringing in falsified birth certificates to circumvent the compulsory schooling and child labor laws. When Stanley Nowak, the Ternstedt organizer on the staff of the UAW's West Side local, arrived in Detroit in 1924, he found women employed at Dodge, Packard and Ford, as well as at GM. But with between 6,000 and 8,000 women workers, Ternstedt alone employed approximately half of all the females in Detroit's auto industry's workforce in 1930. The figures were very high even in comparison with other types of female industrial employment in the 'Motor City.' For example, the cigar plants where many women worked were relatively tiny, employing only 200 or 300 women.[2]

The women workers at Ternstedt came from several distinct ethnic and cultural groups. The native-born had migrated to Detroit from depressed farm and mining regions in the 1920s, in response to the successful labor recruitment campaigns the city's manufacturers had conducted, which swelled auto industry employment by 30 percent in that decade.[3] Among the women were a large group of southerners, called 'hillbillies,' including both rural migrants and the wives and daughters of coal miners from the anthracite regions of Kentucky and southern Illinois. Those from mining families were familiar with unionism, and would prove to be the most likely to support the UAW. There were also women who had previously lived in Michigan's farming areas, as well as Eastern European immigrants, predominantly second-generation Poles. Like those with mining backgrounds, the Polish women were more likely to join the union than were those of other ethnic groups. Some German and Hungarian women also worked in Ternstedt. Most of the latter lived in Del Rey, a Hungarian neighborhood near the plant.

Until the Depression, most of these women saw themselves as temporary workers, and were not likely to press for higher wages, steady employment or job security. But these patterns changed in the 1930s, as male unemployment and underemployment forced more and more women to enter the workforce. By 1940, 35 percent of all working women were married. The old rule that a woman should quit her job as soon as she found a husband broke down. Yet wives faced widespread prejudice, since they were viewed by many as taking jobs from male heads of households. Although few working-class families contained two steadily employed breadwinners, the prejudice against hiring married women persisted. To get jobs, many

married women pretended to be single. They were fired if their employers discovered the truth. Ternstedt, however, was one of the few workplaces in Detroit willing to employ married women.[4]

Only a minority of women were employed in basic industries in this period, and so in that respect Ternstedt's women workers were atypical.[5] Otherwise, though, their experience was generally representative of the female workforce as a whole. Most had less than an eighth-grade education, and many probably could not read. Becky Laing Kimsley, one of Ternstedt's rank-and-file organizers, thought that even among the second-generation ethnic workers, few of the women had gone past the second or third grade. They all worked out of economic need. Nearly all were part of a family economy. Many were the first generation of women in their families to work regularly outside the home for wages.

Because of Ternstedt's unusually liberal policy in regard to marital status, a majority of the factory's female employees were married. Others, widowed or divorced, were heads of households, while single women worked to help support parental families. Ternstedt worker Ann Dankowitz believed many of the single girls were totally under the domination of their families and turned all their earnings over to them, receiving only a small allowance in return. Others worked because of changing conceptions of an adequate standard of living. They took jobs to buy the material possessions they wanted. For working-class families to acquire such goods as automobiles, daughters and sometimes wives had to work. Nevertheless, Ternstedt's managers expressed the conventional view that women worked only for 'pin money.' When Becky Laing Kimsley complained about women's low wages in the 1937 negotiations, an assistant to plant manager Skinner proposed that those women who could not make ends meet on their own wages find a man to support them. But under Depression conditions, even if a woman followed this advice, she was likely to be forced periodically to seek work outside the home.[6]

On the job, women workers faced many of the same conditions which their male co-workers complained of – seasonal work and frequent layoffs; competition between ethnic groups; widespread abuses of authority; tyrannical foremen; favoritism; job insecurity; low wages and long hours; the shapeup and the arbitrary shifting of workers from one machine or job to another; work that was

dangerous and unhealthy; complex piecework and incentive pay systems; and the infamous speed-up. In addition, most women experienced sexual harassment and abuse.[7]

At Ternstedt, each plant had its own structure and personality; yet the work in the five plants was similar. Plants 16, 18, Main and Fleetwood each housed a tool and die operation, punch presses, and assembly divisions. Employees in the Main Plant and Plant 18 were overwhelmingly female, while Fleetwood had a large concentration of women workers. On the second floor of Plant 18, for example, there was hardly a man to be found. More than half of this female majority were second-generation Poles and Hungarians in their late twenties.

A sexual division of labor pervaded the organization of work. Most of the men were skilled and semi-skilled; most of the women, semi-skilled or unskilled. The few skilled jobs at Ternstedt were in tool and die and in polishing, and both were exclusively male. Although women worked in every other area, they were clustered in the semi-skilled punch- and drill-press jobs, and in assembly where work was 'unskilled.' They also handled stock, worked as bench hands, on clip lines and on weatherstripping. In the graining and spraying departments in Plant 18, they handled stock and blew holes.[8]

However, the existence of separate job classifications for men's and women's work did not mean that women and men necessarily worked in separate sections of the factories. They often worked side by side, and they cooperated in the slow-downs and wildcat strikes which marked this period. This was especially true on assembly lines and in the polishing sections, where one group could not stop work without affecting all the others. Although a few Ternstedt women worked in traditionally 'male jobs,' rigid segregation of tasks along sex lines was usually maintained, and the jobs accorded to women were always assigned lower rates of pay.[9]

The union drive

When the West Side local first discussed the possibility of organizing Ternstedt, the UAW's drive against GM was at its height. Yet the union had not made any attempt to unionize Ternstedt, the largest

plant on Detroit's West Side except for the Ford Motor Company. The UAW considered the plant impossible to organize, simply because half of its employees were female. In spite of many examples to contradict this presumption, the male executive board of West Side Local 174 believed that women were harder to organize and less militant than men.

There was general debate within the labor movement at this time about the possibility of organizing the 'backward stratum' of women workers. Some argued that women could actually set the workers' movement back if they were incorporated into unions in large numbers. They claimed that women were essentially conservative, due to their family responsibilities and social conditioning, and warned that women would retard men unless special appeals were made to them. On the other hand, other organizers suggested that, precisely because of their different roles in the family and the community, women could play a leading and unifying role in labor struggles. Dramatic instances of this occurred in the 'auxiliaries' and 'emergency brigades' created by wives and women workers during the organizing drives in auto. Women in Flint, for example, played a central role in winning the sit-down through organizing strike support as an extension of the kind of support they felt they owed to their men as wives, mothers and family members.[10]

Throughout the history of labor in the US, unions have generally agreed to organize women only after outbreaks of militancy and independent organizing by the women workers themselves. Ternstedt was unusual in this respect, for it was a male unionist who pressed the UAW to undertake the project of organizing the plant, despite its large concentration of women workers. Stanley Nowak, the union's Polish workers' organizer, believed the plant could be unionized, because of his previous successes in organizing women workers in Detroit's cigar factories. But when Nowak first suggested organizing Ternstedt to the executive board of the West Side local, he was met with many objections. Not only were half of the workers in the plant women, but, the board members pointed out, a majority were rural southerners, presumed to be anti-union. Nowak believed this last impression was incorrect. He thought that about half the women were southerners, but the other half were Poles.[11] And because most of the Poles were American-born, he thought, they would be relatively easy to organize. But not even Nowak recognized

that among the 'southern women' in the plant were a number of migrants from mining areas, many of whom had had experiences with the United Mine Workers' union. Their background would lead these women to become the backbone of the Ternstedt drive.[12]

In spite of their reservations, the executive board agreed to assign Nowak the task of organizing the plant. The drive began while the Flint sit-down strike of 1936–7 was still under way. It went through several distinct stages.[13] Nowak's first step was to identify pro-union workers inside the plant, to create an organizing committee, and to identify and publicize the workers' grievances. He followed workers into local bars and restaurants and talked to them about problems in the shop. After learning what the issues were, he wrote about them in the next morning's leaflets. In his contacts with Ternstedt workers, the organizer observed that the men responded more than the women, although his approach to workers in bars and restaurants necessarily excluded most of the women, who went home after work to their daily round of family and child-care chores. While other drives included visits to workers in their homes, Nowak concluded these calls would take too much time. Home visits, however, might have proved an effective way of reaching female employees. As soon as three of the women organizers – Irene Young Marinovich, Becky Laing Kimsley and Martha Strong – enlisted, it became easier to approach women.

The organizers

Ternstedt's rank-and-file organizers tended to be men and women in their twenties and thirties. More militant than the older workers, who had experienced significant working-class defeats after World War I, they were survivors of the Depression and had managed to retain jobs and reasonably steady employment even in the depths of the years 1929–33. Most came from the upper strata of the working class. They tended to be white, native-born of Northern European descent, and more educated than their co-workers. Most of the women organizers were the wives and daughters of coal miners who had migrated north to Detroit after the union defeats in the mining regions of the country in the 1920s and the collapse of the coal industry in 1929. The women were either semi-skilled or unskilled

workers, in contrast to the male organizers, who tended to be either skilled tradespeople working in tool and die, or former coal miners.

Irene Young Marinovich, Martha Strong, Becky Laing Kimsley, Irene Kotlarek, Margaret Lipscomb, Lena Saline and Mary Kaluszak were among the women who became rank-and-file organizers, union activists and stewards. They identified themselves to Nowak early in the drive, and were quickly assigned to official union tasks. They were all highly disciplined, committed organizers. All were elected stewards in their departments; all played leading roles in the slowdown. Most of them had learned about unions before taking jobs at Ternstedt. Irene Young Marinovich and Martha Strong experienced unions in the mining regions of the country in the 1920s, while Becky Laing Kimsley's father was an organizer. They brought their union sympathies and the skills acquired in the struggles of the 1920s and early 1930s to the organizing drive. In addition, Irene Young Marinovich was a member of the Communist Party, whose small presence at Ternstedt belies its tremendous influence in the organizing drive.

As the drive progressed, Nowak held public meetings. With women's growing attendance, the problem of reaching them lessened. As more women organizers were recruited, they built support for the union among workers of both sexes. Although several of the women activists left their factory jobs when their husbands or families could afford to keep them at home, the fact that they were temporary workers did not make them less militant while they were in the plants. At times, their sense of indignation about deteriorating conditions and less fear of the consequences of losing their jobs if their husbands were employed, or if they could return to parental families, made them the best organizers.[14] Nowak believes that, in general, women were more militant and more effective organizers than the men:

> One thing about women in a place like Ternstedt, once they are convinced, they are sometimes more courageous, in some respects, than men are. They have more nerve. They are more aggressive in approaching men and asking them to join the union. When a woman approached a man that was hesitant and urged him to join, it was less likely to turn into an argument that could get physical than if a male organizer did it.[15]

Irene Young Marinovich attributed the pro-union sentiment among the Poles to Nowak's work and to the character of Detroit's Polish community. Nowak had solid ties to this community with its strong leftist component centering on the Polish-language newspaper, *Glas Lodowy* (*People's Voice*), and several ethnic halls. Slovenian Hall and Dom Polski Hall, two of these cultural centers, became union meeting places during the drive. A number of Poles became stewards in the union's early days, and their example probably encouraged their compatriots. In addition, Nowak held special meetings for the Polish women workers. The Hungarian community, in contrast, proved more difficult to recruit. When Hungarian women joined the union, they paid their dues but rarely became active. No Hungarian organizer played a role similar to Nowak's; no union meetings seem to have been held in Hungarian, nor were there any special efforts to reach Hungarian women. Fewer Hungarians became rank-and-file organizers.[16]

Women workers had to overcome greater obstacles than their male counterparts to join the union or to become active. Their difficulties stemmed from the commonly held assumption that the women were temporary workers and, more important, from the union's own indifference to the special problems of women workers on and off the job. Few community facilities eased the burdens of housework and child-care, so women found it difficult to participate; married women and single parents encountered the greatest barriers. The pressures to accomplish all their work made the women feel they had no time to stop for meetings, although they supported and participated in the strikes. Kimsley recalls:

> You didn't hear women say, 'My husband or my father doesn't want me to go to the meetings.' The women had a lot of things to do at home and didn't have time to stop either before or after work for meetings. It was essentially a function of having two jobs. None of our women got that actively involved. It was the men who could attend the meetings.[17]

For the handful of women activists, the conflict between union and family demands was often painful. Both called on precious time which had to be squeezed out of the few hours remaining after the standard working week of fifty-four hours. A good husband 'allowed' his wife to participate actively in the union – as long as she

carried out all her other responsibilities. An unusual husband 'encouraged' her union activities. In neither case did the husband expect, nor did his wife insist, that he help with housework or child-care. The only help a mother and wife could usually get with these tasks came from daughters, but these girls often deeply resented a mother's union activities for that reason.[18]

Union work in these years took time. A woman serving as a steward or sitting on a committee could expect to spend at least two nights a week in long meetings handling grievances. Moreover, there were additional union meetings to attend. Several of the activists would have participated more had their families not drained their time. Even though she was a committee member, Becky Laing Kimsley recalls that caring for her daughter as a single parent limited her participation in the union. When stewards' classes were established, she could not attend because she had no one to care for the girl. Although some of the men from her section attended, virtually no women did. Yet even activists who would have participated more extensively had they themselves had help with family and child-care responsibilities, failed to integrate an analysis of their own situation into their understanding of why women had lower rates of participation in the union. Instead, they repeated the traditional explanations. Kimsley considered women 'pretty much home-bodies' who were hard to drag out to meetings after work. Nor were there financial incentives for union work or rewards in the form of higher status among one's peers. Many of these positions required much work without pay or status, and it was therefore hard to recruit people to fill them.[19]

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that it was the single women who found it easiest to be active. Martha Strong's experience illustrates the way in which single women could choose to organize their lives around the union:

> I worked the midnight shift and lived alone in an apartment near my job, so I had more time. I could go to meetings during the day and still do my job. Well, not many people would have given that much time, but I was happy to do it because I believed we needed that union.[20]

Most women with families, however, found Strong's level of commitment impossible. Most of Ternstedt's female activists were unmarried, had no children, and were inspired either by a political commitment to a workers' society, or by a history of unionism in their families. Of the women rank-and-file activists, only Becky Laing Kimsley and Irene Young Marinovich had children at the time. Kimsley's activism was especially remarkable, as she was a single parent, and under considerable pressure from her child to stay at home 'like other mothers.'

Irene Young Marinovich believes that political affiliation was the most important factor in the self-selection of union activists, among both men and women. She estimates that at least 75 percent of the stewards and committee members in the early days of the union were members of a leftist political organization. The most active such groups in Ternstedt and in West Side Local 174 at this time were the Socialist, Communist and Proletarian Parties.[21]

In the early days of the Ternstedt drive, there were two small but important victories which did much to allay workers' fears that those allying with the union would be fired. After being elected steward, Martha Strong openly wore her union and steward buttons in the plant and began signing up members. When she was confronted by plant superintendent Jim Pirtle and asked why she had joined the union, she told him it was because of the speed-up, which had forced her to triple production over a five-year period, without any increase in pay. She fully expected to be fired, but Pirtle did not even threaten her with the loss of her job. This was a turning-point in the organizing drive, for it persuaded other workers in Plant 16 that they, too, could join the union and keep their jobs. People who had union application forms began signing them and paying dues. Women took application forms home to their husbands employed at Ford and began to bring in dues from them, as well.[22]

Although the struggle to keep Irene Marinovich employed was more difficult, that victory, too, galvanized the drive. Marinovich was elected steward for her plant at the first union meeting she attended. When she began to distribute union buttons and cards the next day at work, she was immediately fired for falsifying company records, since she had joined the plant under her maiden name. It was clear that the real cause of her being fired was her union activity, however. She reported the incident to the local; as a probationary employee, however, she did not expect the fledgling UAW to fight for her reinstatement. Nevertheless, the union did press the case, fearing

that they would never succeed in organizing the plant if she was not rehired. Although the company transferred Marinovich immediately upon her reinstatement to another job in a different building, the result of the victory was that every worker on her floor signed a membership card. 'They got me back to work,' she recalls, 'and I was a probationary employee. So the women there thought, "If they could get her back to work, and she didn't have seniority, then there's a chance for us!" '[23]

The slow-down

The UAW's victory in Flint in February 1937 gave further impetus to the drive in Ternstdt, and created new challenges. As a subdivision of GM, Ternstedt was covered by the master agreement GM signed, recognizing the UAW for the first time. The agreement provided that management must recognize and negotiate with the union throughout the corporation. But many local plant managers, including Skinner at Ternstedt, refused to comply with the agreement and meet with union representatives. Meanwhile, the new agreement prohibited the UAW from striking.

As Ternstedt's management persisted in its refusal to recognize the UAW, the organizers sought new tactics to force it to come to the bargaining table. While the sit-down strikes which had proved so effective in Flint seemed the logical method, the no-strike clause in the new GM–UAW agreement ruled out similar action, since the union wanted to show its responsibility and good faith. In addition, the organizers faced the problem of persuading more workers at Ternstedt to join the UAW, in the face of management's intransigence. By March 1937, only one-third of the workers had signed union cards.

As the organizers discussed tactics, Nowak recalled having read about a slow-down in Vienna. American workers in the garment trades had used the slow-down, but it had not been used as a unionizing technique in auto. Nowak feared the workers would not have the discipline to stay at their machines and continue to produce at the lower rate. This method did cut production at the same time as meeting the formal requirements of the contract. The slow-down presented another difficulty for management: they would have to

pay workers, but would not get production. For the workers, the financial sacrifice was less than in an ordinary strike. Although they could not earn piece-rate bonuses, they would receive their hourly wages. In March 1937, the UAW called a stewards' meeting at Ternstedt to plan this action.[24]

Although all the Ternstedt buildings were represented at this planning meeting, most of the stewards attending were from union strongholds in the Main Plant and Plant 18. Openly planning an illegal tactic in this way was an unusual action, for the plan could easily have been sabotaged had any of the stewards attending the meeting informed the company. But in contrast to the Ford Motor Company and other GM plants where there were stool-pigeons, Ternstedt had no leaks. Nowak thought the company spy system was weak at Ternstedt because Skinner had an unrealistic view of the loyalty of the workforce, and relied entirely on his supervisors for intelligence. This allowed the union to plan and execute the slow-down under optimal conditions.[25] Marinovich recalls: 'We met together with a few of the stewards and the committeemen and decided how we would do this and keep it from the company. It was one of the best-kept secrets ... The company was really taken by surprise.'[26]

Most workers had never heard of a slow-down and did not understand the legal significance of the contract. Although they favored forms of struggle with which they were familiar – either an outside strike or a sit-down – Nowak was able to persuade them to adopt this new technique. Marinovich and other leaders built support. They told trusted men and women that on a certain morning they would go to work, but cut production back by half. On the second day, they would cut back by another half – and so on, until they produced practically nothing. Marinovich warned them against taking breaks and sitting down. People were expected to be at their machines and at work all day so that the company could not fire them. Most important was to stay at their machines and cut production back to nothing.[27]

For ten days between April 1 and April 10, the workers cut production back to a fraction of their normal output. Several female stewards took the lead – Irene Kotlarek, Margaret Lipscomb, Lena Saline, Becky Laing Kimsley and Mary Kaluszak. From the initial planning group of 200 stewards and committee members, the action

spread by word of mouth. Sustaining the slow-down and insuring its success required constant organization, hard work, persuasion and an ability to recognize and cope with the additional stress created by the new pace of work and the constant demands by foremen to increase production. 'The slow-down was one of the most magnificent things I have ever seen,' Marinovich recalls. 'All my life I will always remember how *hard* it was and how I couldn't believe before it really happened that the women would really participate like that.'[28]

The slow-down became an organizational strike to get people into the union. It was particularly effective given the ethnic and sex divisions among Ternstedt's employees, the fact that such a large portion of the workforce was female, their fear of unions, and the general reluctance among both male and female employees to challenge management. Marinovich speculates that Ternstedt's large group of female employees meant that it could not have been organized with traditional methods. Since it occurred during worktime, the slow-down interfered least with family responsibilities; it also gave employees a sense of their power:[29]

> Stanley was right when he said we could not have organized that plant if we hadn't had a slow-down. That showed the workers the strength that they had there. It gave them confidence that they had the ability to close down that damned plant because that's what we did. We didn't walk out because of the contract. But we slowed it down until they realized we had the power to do it – girls who never joined the union, who didn't intend to join the union, and a lot of men, too. It really caught fire. They weren't losing any wages, they were working, they came in every day.[30]

After recognition: women at Ternstedt

The slow-down won the UAW recognition from the company and brought management to the bargaining table. This, however, was only the first step toward a viable union. Within the plants, support was strong but uneven, and varied from department to department depending upon the consciousness of the workers and their informal

leaders. Union leaders at this point had a dual goal – to win concessions from management which would improve wages and working conditions, and to create full support for the union among Ternstedt employees. Throughout the following year of tedious work, the union continued to gain members by building on the support it had won during the slow-down.

Although management had now recognized the union, it remained reluctant to negotiate with the UAW or to implement the concessions it had promised. Less than two months after the company had agreed to collective bargaining in response to the slow-down, management once again refused to meet or negotiate with the bargaining committee. Workers and unionists had to resort to new pressure tactics several times in 1937 in order to force the company to deal with the union. In June, afternoon shiftworkers initiated a spontaneous sit-down, which brought new concessions from management. The corporation agreed to abolish piecework and instituted a day rate. This not only eliminated rate disputes, but also significantly reduced the power of the foremen. Now, foremen had fewer opportunities to demand favors or to distribute jobs and overtime on the basis of their personal preferences.

Women at Ternstedt made some real gains as a result of unionization. Sex differentials remained, but working conditions improved. Sexual harassment and sexual abuse diminished as unionization weakened the power of the foremen to demand favors in exchange for employment. While these changes were significant, they resulted from changes primarily designed to ameliorate conditions for men. Few problems which specifically affected women workers were addressed, and improvements in the workplace affecting females only were rare.

There were many reasons for this. First, women had little power or influence in the UAW. From the local up to the international, power lay in male hands. Few women in the UAW achieved leadership positions, and even fewer retained them for any length of time. In comparison with their numbers in the union, they were underrepresented. Those women who did win leadership positions usually remained in the lower ranks as stewards and committee members while men occupied the more powerful union positions in vastly disproportionate numbers.[31]

The organizers of the UAW in the 1930s also lacked a feminist

consciousness. In comparison with both earlier and later periods, the absence of special attention to women's concerns on the part of labor organizers is especially conspicuous during this time. While activists did sometimes raise issues of particular relevance to women workers, they lacked any systematic analysis of women's social position. Because they failed to understand the way the structures of society and of the union perpetuated male supremacy, they did not see the need for fundamental change. Instead, they identified a handful of issues affecting women and raised them in a manner uncharacteristic of their organizing on other union issues. They did not attempt to coordinate their efforts with other advocates, or to win support from women. Rather than building caucuses and undertaking some form of political preparation, they simply raised these issues at public forums – in meetings and conventions – hoping to find a sympathetic audience. Nor did Ternstedt's female activists appeal directly to women workers for their support on traditional union issues. Given the lack of preliminary work, it is not surprising they had less success than when they organized around concerns affecting both sexes.

Sexism also pervaded the structure and ideology of the UAW. Although some female organizers were more sensitive to the problems of women workers than their male colleagues, many were not. There was no independent mass feminist movement in the 1930s and 1940s. The consciousness of the organizers and the discussion of women's issues in both Ternstedt and the UAW generally reflected this absence. None of Ternstedt's female activists organized around the special problems of women workers, and none consistently incorporated an awareness of women's issues into union work.

At Ternstedt, women activists did not coordinate their efforts in raising women's issues. Although several of them felt women could be unionized more easily if the UAW addressed their particular concerns as women, both in regard to the family and to the workplace, they considered the class issues they had in common with their brothers more important. Both men and women throughout the UAW treated the issues which affected workers as a class more seriously than those which impacted primarily on women. These values left intact prevailing sex biases and male privileges. Beneath the surface, tensions between the sexes simmered and women's resentments over their relegation to a subordinate status remained unacknowledged, sabotaging any real unity between male and female laborers in this generation of unionists.

Women activists at Ternstedt were also isolated from each other. When they did meet, they rarely worked together and did not provide a support system for each other. Moreover, when women became active in the union, they followed a pattern common in all kinds of organizations – they held jobs primarily at the lower levels. Few were rewarded with paid staff jobs or elected to upper-level positions. In the UAW, women activists served primarily as organizers, stewards and committee members, and participated on grievance and bargaining committees. Women were occasionally elected delegates to the GM conferences, and to the state, CIO and international union conventions. Irene Young Marinovich was elected recording secretary of West Side Local 174 in 1938, while Martha Strong was elected one of Ternstedt's two representatives to the local's executive board. Both served on the executive boards of the Ternstedt unit and the West Side local in these years. However, no other women held top leadership posts in either of these units. In contrast, a number of the men who were active in the West Side local at the time – Walter Reuther, George Edwards and Stanley Nowak, for instance – went on to develop careers in the labor movement and in city and state politics.[32]

For those women who were socialists and communists, the decision to remain rank-and-file leaders may have been a deliberate choice, influenced in part by the party's desire to disperse its members throughout the union structure while keeping a strong base among the rank and file. Or perhaps it resulted from their unconscious adherence to conventional notions of a woman's place. However, it is clear that few men encouraged women activists to aspire to union office, to think about careers in the upper echelons of the union, or to run for leadership positions. Few women were urged to participate actively in union business beyond the initial struggle to organize the unions.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that only two women achieved top leadership positions within the West Side local. Thus, women's issues received inadequate attention, because men were reluctant either to raise or to endorse demands for the equitable treatment of women workers. Those who did support these issues were usually the same small handful who actively encouraged women to participate in the local.[33] Given the UAW's superficial and

frequently discriminatory treatment of its female members, women workers had even fewer reasons to become active or to aspire to leadership.

Sexism took many other forms at Ternstedt. It affected the vast majority of women who were not activists even more directly. Male unionists were uncomfortable when it came to treating women in the plant and in the union as equal co-workers. Married women, in particular, continued to face discrimination and prejudice: often, their employment was contested by those workers and union leaders who believed that married women belonged at home. Other male unionists found it difficult to take female workers seriously and to prosecute their grievances. Even though the union publicized and opposed the most blatant practices designed to keep women subordinate in the plant and in the union, these efforts were insufficient to make equality for women workers a union priority in the 1930s, or to create equitable treatment in practice.[34]

Conclusion

The experience of women workers and unionists at the Ternstedt plant reveals a great deal about the female experience in the labor movement of the 1930s. Several factors facilitated the unionization of these women. The presence of a male organizer who believed that women could be organized – and who was willing to unionize them – was critical, as was the recruitment of female organizers who spoke directly to the women workers. The presence of women in local leadership positions, both in the organizing and in the union, also played an important role. While Ternstedt's women leaders were atypical in that they had acquired union sympathies prior to coming to work in the plant, they were able to convince other women workers of the value of unions. If women workers had not believed that the union could address their needs, they would not have joined it; and it was the women leaders who effectively won them over to a belief that the union could improve their wage, remedy health and safety concerns, and eliminate favoritism and sexual harassment.

Union victories in the course of the GM drive also encouraged women to join the UAW. The dramatic role of women in the Flint sit-down against GM not only showed that the UAW could win

recognition from a giant anti-union corporation, but also that women could play important roles in union drives. At Ternstedt, the example of several union activists who kept their jobs despite company harassment persuaded others to risk joining the union.

Without the contribution of women with radical political backgrounds, the Ternstedt unit might never have come into being. Most of the active organizers were native-born and from union families. Few were part of the ethnic communities from which the majority of the plant's female workers came. Most of the women leaders came from non-traditional families, and few were married. They were thus not subject to the intense pressures traditional families exerted in favor of conventional female roles and anti-unionism. A large proportion of Ternstedt's activists, both male and female, were politically radical. Their work in the union and their views of women reflected the larger radical movement of the time, and despite that movement's limited vision of equality between the sexes, Ternstedt women workers might never have been unionized at all had it not existed.

The Ternstedt experience illustrates the fact that women workers in the 1930s were neither less easily organized nor less militant than men. But the contribution they made to the building of the UAW was never fully recognized. Indeed, this entire generation of women activists gradually disappeared from the union – either because they retired from the plants once their husbands or families could manage without their earnings, or because of the lack of any systematic support for women union leaders. Despite the critical contribution of women to the building of the UAW, then, their legacy has remained invisible to subsequent generations of women autoworkers.

Notes

1 Sidney Fine, *Sit-down: The General Motors Strike of 1936–37*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1969, pp.121–48.

2 'Some Facts and Figures about Ternstedt,' *The Ternstedt Flash*, April 16, 1940; Margaret Nowak, 'The Making of an American: The Story of Stanley Nowak, Michigan's Pioneer Labor–New Deal Legislator,' unpublished manuscript, p.201, Stanley Nowak Collection, Wayne State University, Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs (hereafter: WSU Archives); Ruth Meyerowitz, interview with Irene Young

Marinovich, Detroit, July–August 1975; Ruth Meyerowitz, interview with Stanley and Margaret Nowak, Detroit, August 1975; US Bureau of the Census, *15th Census of the US, 1930, Population*, Washington, DC, US Government Printing Office, 1933, vol. 3, part 1: *Reports By States*, Table 10, p.1, 164; US Bureau of the Census, *16th Census of the US, 1940, Characteristics of the Population*, Washington, DC, US Government Printing Office, 1943, vol. 2, part 3, *Reports By States*, p.916.

3 Edward Levinson, 'Technology and Employment in the Automobile Industry,' p.1, Edward Levinson Collection, WSU Archives, Box 1, Folder: 'Ford Wages and Finances.'

4 Meyerowitz interviews with Marinovich and Nowak; Ruth Meyerowitz, interview with Martha Strong, Detroit, July–August 1975; William Bryce, interview with Irene Young Marinovich, Detroit, July 1974; 'Sounding Off,' *The West Side Conveyor*, March 1, 1938; Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1980, chapter 5.

5 Nearly half of the women gainfully employed in Detroit in 1930 were concentrated in three occupational groups: domestic and personal services; the wholesale and retail trades (exclusive of automobiles); and hotels, restaurants and boarding-houses (*Fifteenth Census*, vol. 3, p.1,164).

6 William Bryce, interview with Becky Laing Kimsley, Detroit, 1974; William Bryce, interview with Ann Dankowitz, Detroit, August 1975; Meyerowitz interviews with Strong and Marinovich.

7 Bryce interviews with Kimsley and Dankowitz; William Bryce, interview with Ann Vivian, Detroit, August 1975; Meyerowitz and Bryce interviews with Marinovich; Meyerowitz interview with Strong. Virtually all the women auto-workers interviewed commented on the problem of sexual harassment and the prevalence of exchanging sexual favors for jobs. Women who refused to participate in this exchange reported receiving poorer work assignments, less work, less tractable machines, and constant harassment from foremen. (The term 'shapeup' refers to the selection of a few people to work from a larger pool who have been called in and expect to work.)

8 Meyerowitz interviews with Marinovich and Strong; Bryce interviews with Marinovich and Kimsley. William Bryce, interview with Jack White, Detroit, August 1974.

9 Meyerowitz and Bryce interviews with Marinovich; Bryce interviews with Kimsley, Dankowitz, Vivian and White; Meyerowitz interview with Strong.

10 Patricia Yeghissian, 'The Emergence of the Red Berets,' *University of Michigan Occasional Papers in Women's Studies*, no. 10, winter 1980, pp.30–56; Mary Heaton Vorse, *Labor's New Millions*, New York, Modern Age Books, 1938.

11 This view of the plant's ethnic composition ignored the large number of Hungarian women concentrated in Plants 16 and 18. Bryce interviews with Marinovich, Vivian, Kimsley and Dankowitz; Meyerowitz interviews with Nowak and Marinovich.

12 Former miners were central to other union drives in auto. See John G. Kruchko, *The Birth of a Union Local: The History of UAW Local 674, Norwood, Ohio, 1933–1940*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell ILR Press, 1972.

13 'West Side Local 174, UAW–CIO: A History, 1936–1952,' p.10, WSU Archives.

14 Meyerowitz interviews with Strong and Marinovich. This pattern of militance was common among women who were temporary workers. Other studies which discuss this include: Miriam Cohen, 'The Role of Women in the Organization of the Men's Garment Industry, Chicago, 1910,' in Dorothy McGuigan, ed., *New Research on Women at the University of Michigan*, Ann Arbor, Center for Continuing Education of Women, University of Michigan, 1974, p.81; Thomas Dublin, 'Women, Work and Protest in the Early Lowell Mills,' and Lise Vogel, 'Hearts to Feel and Tongues to Speak: New England Mill Women in the Early Nineteenth Century,' both in Milton Cantor and Bruce C. Laurie, eds, *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1977.

15 Meyerowitz interview with Nowak.

16 Bryce interviews with Marinovich and Vivian; William Bryce, interview with Stanley Nowak, Detroit, April 1974.

17 Bryce interview with Kimsley.

18 Meyerowitz and Bryce interviews with Marinovich; Bryce interview with Kimsley.

19 Bryce interview with Kimsley.

20 Meyerowitz interview with Strong. For a similar finding regarding women in the United Electrical Workers, see Ronald Schatz, 'Union Pioneers: The Founders of Local Unions at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1933–1937,' *Journal of American History*, vol. 66, no. 3, December 1979, pp.559–602.

21 Meyerowitz and Bryce interviews with Marinovich; Bryce interview with Kimsley.

22 Meyerowitz interviews with Strong and Marinovich.

23 Meyerowitz interview with Marinovich.

24 Meyerowitz and Bryce interviews with Nowak and Marinovich.

25 In contrast, the Flint sit-down was planned by a handful of leaders with diversionary maneuvers designed to throw company spies off the track. See Fine, *Sit-down*, p.26. At the Detroit Parts Company, the leadership implemented a slow-down without discussing it with other workers. See Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936–1939: A Study in Class and Culture*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975, pp.87–92.

26 Susan Hartmann, interview with Irene Young Marinovich, Detroit, 1974.

27 *Ibid.*; Meyerowitz and Bryce interviews with Nowak and Marinovich.

28 Elaine Crawford and Judith Longley, interview with Irene Young Marinovich, Detroit, 1975.
29 Bryce, Crawford and Longley, Meyerowitz and Hartmann interviews with Marinovich; Meyerowitz and Bryce interviews with Nowak; Bryce interview with Kimsley.
30 Hartmann interview with Marinovich.
31 See Ruth Meyerowitz, 'Women Unionists and World War II: New Opportunities for Leadership,' paper presented at the Organization of American Historians' meeting, San Francisco, April 1980; Jack Crellin, 'Anti-woman Bias Alleged,' *Detroit Times*, March 1, 1953.
32 Meyerowitz and Bryce interviews with Marinovich; Meyerowitz interview with Strong; Bryce interviews with White and Kimsley; Meyerowitz interview with Nowak; *West Side Conveyor*, August 13, 1938; 'Minutes of the Executive Board of West Side Local 174,' December 2, 1938, and February 10, 1939, in WSU Archives; Robert Conot, *American Odyssey*, New York, William Morrow, 1974, pp.437–8.
33 Meyerowitz interviews with Marinovich and Strong.
34 *West Side Conveyor*, March 1, 1938; Meyerowitz and Bryce interviews with Marinovich and Strong.