

The History of the Brotherhood of Utility Workers of New England Inc.

The Utility Workers' quest for representation amongst the ranks of organized labor is indeed a long and sorrowful story. Their period of adolescence or the realization of that quest, however, is not so old a tale. And the real champions of their cause, whom they sought so fruitlessly in the leaders of the larger and already well established labor organizations, were finally discovered in their own echelon ranks. Consequently we have today, to thank only our very own leaders for the great strides made in the past, for the laboring men and women in the public utility field. Contrary to popular impression, currently being thrust upon us by the representatives of the various National Labor Organizations, the utility workers were for more than half a century, one of the most sadly neglected groups of laboring people in the country.

The history of the American Labor Movement, dating from just before the beginning of the Industrial Revolution is one of drama, and for those who have written of it, as well as for those who read about it, it is certainly packed with romance and excitement. We cannot help but admire those unknown heroes, who lost their jobs, their homes and, in some case, even their lives, for their efforts to improve the lot, of the people they represented.

There is unfortunately, another side to the story. With due respect for the comparatively few sincere and unselfish men and women who gave unwaveringly of all they had for a just cause, the American Labor movement, was also beset from within, by blunders, set backs and failures. It is quite true that the Industrialist did much to hinder the growth of organized labor, but it cannot be denied that most of the failings of the movement, must be laid in the laps of those of its self-seeking leaders. — Those who blundered in and out of politics--those who sought social reforms and monetary reforms--those who advocated strong arm methods--and above all those who failed to recognize, willfully or otherwise, the plea for organization and representation of the semi-skilled and unskilled worker. This group constituted then and does now, the bulk of the working force in America, and was invariably left behind, unwanted and uncared for in any drive to organize the skilled workers. Such sheer neglect is the greatest sin and in our opinion the leading contributing factor in the failure of the American Labor movement to come of age until the early 1930's after a century and a half of trial and error.

The utility workers were a part of the semi-skilled and unskilled force of laborers, who were unorganized until this time.

Now, after years of success in organizing within our own field, we are met with the greatest solicitude by those who would have nothing to do with us, when we so badly needed their attention. They would have us believe, that without their efforts we could never have met such success. Indeed our memories are fortunately not so short and the truth of the matter is just the opposite. It was not until we met with success, that our bigger brothers, belatedly realizing what they'd missed, decided to compete in the field and they've been riding our coattails since.

We shall, however, be concerned here with our own progress. There are

countless independent unions in organized labor today. In the Utility field in New England the oldest and largest is our own. **The Brotherhood of Utility Workers of New England, Inc.** We had our beginnings at about the same time that the C.I.O. separated from the A.F.of L.. We are therefore, a comparatively young labor union and we pay ourselves a compliment where we admit our youth, for when we consider the road we've traveled and the progress we've made, our record becomes almost unbelievable. Our competitors and admirers alike have all they can do to follow our lead.

Shortly after the late President Roosevelt first took office in 1932, you will recall that he set up along with his famous alphabetical agencies, the N.R.A. [National Recovery Act].

In section 7a of this act, the rights of Labor to organize and bargain collectively were recognized. Many industries, however, refused to honor 7a of the N.R.A.. Amongst those who did, though, were more than a few who invited their employees to join company unions. The Electric Utility Industry fell into this category. With the Edison Institute [an association of managements in this field] as its guiding light, a formula was set up for the industry, under which company unions were recognized bargaining agents of the employees. In New England these company unions, were an outgrowth of the old Athletic Leagues or clubs which the company supported financially. All employees were eligible for membership including supervisors and officers although it is doubtful if the companies' executive officers attended the meetings, their representatives certainly did. Under such a paternalistic setup it was inevitable that those on the inside would become the unions' officers. That is exactly what happened. Meetings were held on company properties and all activities of the unions were sponsored and financed by the companies. Outings, banquets, tournaments and ball games were just about the limit of their accomplishment. What then do you suppose

would become of a proposal by a member of one of these unions to seek an increase in wages or an improvement in working conditions which would entail considerable expense on the part of the company?

If such a proposal were not actually smothered on the floor of the meeting by the companies representatives, there would be certain death on its way to the executive offices. In consequence, these so called unions degraded into nothing but fraternal organizations.

There were employees though who for varying reasons failed to join these unions, Some could see through the veil of hypocrisy, others were just lackadaisical, and still others were working toward something better.

In the meantime, the Wagner Act, which had become law in 1935, outlawed the company unions. Specifically the law forbade any company to interfere in any way whatsoever, financially or otherwise with the union activities of its employees.

The workers of the Narragansett Electric Co. Immediately took up the search for a labor organization to represent them. They found it in the Brotherhood of Utility Employees of America. This union had its inception in the Independent Union of Consolidated Edison Workers of New York. In the spring of 1934, a man by the name of Paulson organized the employees of the Narragansett Electric Co. In Providence. Lowell Electric, Fall River Electric and the Montaup plant in Fall River were organized at about the same time. The Brotherhood of Utility Employees of America had in 1934, three other locals apart from Consolidated Edison.

They were locals in Terre Haute, Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio. It maintained an

office in N.Y. City. Its executive officers were: Pres. Bernard Lamb, Secretary-Treasurer Tom O'Shaughnessy, National Representative Jim Toher, and Organizer Paulson. It was a loosely knit organization whose books and financial affairs were poorly administered and whose legal department was ultimately found to have Communistic sympathizers. Under the guidance of Jim Toher, the first working agreement with Narra. Elec. Co. Was put into effect. Toher was a very capable individual; he was better than an average speaker and debater and commanded the respect of both Union members and Company representatives. He was formally employed by the Railroad Brotherhood and was, while acting as the National Rep. Of B.U.E.A. also a delegate for all the non operating employees of the N.Y.,N.H. & Hartford .R.R.. That accounts in part for the similarity in places of our agreements with that of the Railroads.

Able as Toher was, he was by no stretch of the imagination a one man show. We had some very distinguished leaders of our own. The name of Bill Gavigan, has for a long time been recognized, even by our detractors as a leading authority on labor, management problems in the Public Utility industry.

Of him it must be said that he was unselfish, tireless and zealous, that worked long hours for what he deemed a just cause. When the going was difficult and there was never a thought of compensation for his efforts--not even a "thank you". His leadership was unerring. He still points the way--in spirit. There were others to whom we owe a debt of gratitude: Herb Robarge, Tom McGovern, Joe O'Brien, Frank Monroe, all of them from Providence.

In June 1934, the first agreement was entered into between the Narra. Elec. Co. And those of its employees who were members of the Brotherhood of Utility Employees of America. This agreement covered only working conditions and wages. A general

wage increase was not negotiated at this time, but standardization of wages, wherein some jobs were adjusted as to wages, was agreed upon. Since a seniority system was new and therefore an unknown quantity on this property it was agreed to put one into effect for only a six month trial period. It was extended in Dec. 1934 to June 1935 at which time it became part of the agreement. In those days three separate contracts were negotiated and signed--one for wages, one for working conditions and a third for seniority. It wasn't until 1937 and the bars of suspicion and mistrust were let down somewhat, that all of these provisions were incorporated into one contract and signed only once.

At the convention held in Providence in 1935, the Lowell, Fall River and Providence Locals, under the leadership of Bill Gavigan, withdrew their affiliation with the Brotherhood of Utility Employees of America. There were several reasons for the withdrawal. General dissatisfaction with the organizations failure to obtain a wage increase, no doubt contributed greatly. Also the inability of the local officers to obtain financial records from the National Office and the looseness with which traveling delegates handled funds, prompted the break. But of prime importance was the fact that we were suddenly made aware of a Communistic stigma attached to the legal department of the Brotherhood.

A charter was immediately applied for under the laws of the state of Rhode Island. It was signed by Bill Gavigan, Sam Hunter, Jack Young, Herb Roberge Tom McGovern, Dan Sullivan, and others. Thus the Brotherhood of Utility Workers of New England, Inc. came into being in the summer of 1935. Tom Gill, an electrician, employed by the Narra. Elec. Co. Was the first National President. A man by the name of Dan McOsker was hired as Organizer. He had an enviable record as a labor leader, which dated back to the Knights of Labor. Under him the organization grew rapidly and in four

short years had attained large stature in the industry. John McMahon from Lowell was the second National President. He was followed by Fred Clark, an Attleboro substation operator; then Bill Davis from Fall River. The next National Organizer was Ed Meeker, and the next National President was Ellsworth Holbrook from Quincy, then Mr. Blanchard of Gloucester, Mass. also occupied the chair before Bernie Smith of Gardner then John J. Earley, Hugh Foley, Joseph E. Moitoza a crew leader from Newport, R.I., and the present National President, Phillip A. Trombly a Substation Leadman from Freetown Mass. All of them great men including our current National Organizer, the great George "Bing" Fogarty from Narragansett R.I. and the many more men and women too numerous to mention are deserving of a portion of the credit for giving of their time and effort to make of the Brotherhood what it is today.

It is quite true that we haven't grown in numbers nor at the pace which was set during the first years of our growth, but that could hardly be expected, for the field was green then and there were a great many utility employees who were anxious to have representation. In the succeeding years, the field in New England has gradually narrowed and the competition has been keener. There are still however, utility employees in this region outside of the Brotherhood. Some are in independent unions, others are represented by the larger National organizations.

In Summary: In 1936 The New England Power Association, represented by Mr. Robert Jamieson, recognized the Brotherhood as the sole bargaining agent of those of its employees who were members.

This was accomplished in the Fall when a scale of wages was adopted and an agreement signed to be effective January to December 1937. A wage reopening rider was attached to the agreement however and Bill Gavigan was able to take advantage of

it in September of that year to exact a 7.5% general wage increase. This was the first of many succeeding increases. Increases based on the ability to pay were obtained in 1941,46,47,48,49 and 50 and succeeding contracts.

Cost of living increases were bargained for in 1951. An amount totaling many millions of dollars annually has been added to the payrolls of the N. E. Electric System Co.s since 1934. It is indeed impossible to estimate how many more millions of dollars were caused to be added to the payrolls of other utility companies because of the leadership of the Brotherhood in the same period. Nor was that the limit of our accomplishments. At the time of recognition our members were working under abominable conditions. Hourly paid employees enjoyed two or three paid holidays per year. They could take a vacation, only at their own expense. The sick benefit plan was worth little or nothing. There was no group insurance or retrogression plan or retirement--not even a seniority plan worthy of the name. A 40 hour week or premium pay for overtime work was unheard of. In short, the utility employee had no security, social or otherwise.

The electric utility companies in those days, spent more time and money in consideration of their machines and properties than they ever dreamed would be spent on the welfare of their employees.

We all know what the record of accomplishment is. Hindsight is better than foresight, and now that we have a record to be proud of, we should appreciate it. After years of the very best leadership in the business and arduous negotiations with New England Elec. Co., Commonwealth Electric Co., Boston Gas, Bay State Gas, Commonwealth Gas, Fitchburg Gas & Electric and Eastern Utilities, we have a record on which we stand. It speaks for itself.

There isn't a labor organization in the country which can show a better one. And for those of our neighboring competitors, who think they can come close to it, They can thank the Brotherhood of Utility Workers of New England for showing them the way.

**PROGRESS OF THE B.U.W.N.E
GRAPHICALLY OUTLINED**

- 1937 First Labor Contract
- 1946 Brotherhood Membership Requirement
Disability Retrogression Plan
- 1947 3 weeks vacation for 20 years
Minimum payment for call out \$4.50
Premium wage for hot line work
- 1949 3 weeks vacation for 18 years
Vacation--Holiday allowance
- 1950 3 weeks vacation for 15 years
Retirement benefit improvements
Sick pay policy: 4 weeks pay for less than 10 yrs., 20 weeks pay over 10 yrs.
- 1951 Holidays for shift workers
Seniority protection while in the Armed Forces
- 1954 Minimum payment for call out \$6.00 and \$8.00 after midnight
Disability Retrogression Plan improvement
Leave of absence for Union activities
- 1955 New Business Department Contract
- 1956 Health Insurance
Inclement Weather
Jury Duty
Funeral Leave
Change of Watches
Rest Period
3 weeks vacation for 10 years
- 1958 Cancellation of Planned Overtime
Job Award Steps established
Minimum Payment for Call Out \$8.00 and \$10.00 after midnight
Funeral leave [grandparents]

- 1960 Negotiated Spares
 - Sunday Premium 20%
 - 4 weeks vacation for 20 years
 - Pension Plan improvement
 - Temporary Upgrades improvement

- 1962 Reduction in Forces Pay Plan

- 1964 Establish Company paid Meal Policy
 - Company to pay for Health Insurance
 - Individual Pension Plan--Widows Benefit
 - Minimum payment for Call Out, 4 hours at straight time rate
 - Grievances: Company must answer in 15 days, 4.5 months time to arbitrate
 - Employee Discounts
 - No Stand-By
 - Split Vacations
 - Subpoenaed Witness
 - Switching- Days of Relief
 - Temporary Transfers
 - Vacation Pay to include upgrades

- 1966 Pension improvement
 - Group Insurance paid by Company
 - Health Insurance- Co. To pay for Family Plan
 - 4 weeks vacation for 15 years
 - Minimum Payment for Call Out [3 hrs. At time and one half]
 - Combination of Crews Premium
 - Height Premium
 - Pole Digger Premium
 - Notice of Contractors
 - Clerical Progression and Pay Plan

- 1968 Employees Savings Plan effec. 7/1/69
 - Master Medical
 - Holiday [Good Friday]
 - Disability Retirement
 - Sunday Premium to 25%
 - Funeral Leave- add brother&sister-in-law
 - Leave of Absence
 - Non-Discrimination

Clothing Allowance
Job Bid Interviews
Equal Rights
Job Postings
Safety Committee
Outside Contractor language
Supervisors working
Standardization of Overtime
5 weeks vacation for 35 years
Inclement Weather improvements 121212

1971 Pension Improvements
Health Insurance improvements
Life Insurance improvements
3 weeks vacation for 5 years
5 weeks vacation for 25 years
Sunday Premium to 30%
Subpoenaed Witness
Funeral Leave- more time needed
Temp. Change in Schedule
Double Time- 2nd day of Relief
Emergency Work Premium
Full pay for Retrogression w/25 years

1973 Delta Dental
5 weeks vacation for 20 years
Funeral Leave [add grandson & granddaughter]
Pension improvement

1975 Sick Pay Policy - 6 months at straight time rate
4 weeks vacation for 12 yrs. effec. 1/1/78
Holiday [day after Thanksgiving]
Minimum Payment for Call Out - 4 hrs. At time and one half
Long Term Disability
Survivor Income Plan
Health, Pension and Insurance improvements
New Business Dept. Into Operating Contract

1978 4 weeks vacation for 11 years
Sunday Premium 35%
Insurance and LTD improvements

“Show and Go” sick policy
Abbreviated Crew Concept, R-4
Pension rule of “75”
Temp. Upgrades [8 weeks for Holiday & Vacation Pay]

1980 4 weeks vacation for 10 years
Survivor Income Plan [Co. Pays 100%]
LTD improvements
Contractor Notices

1983 Delta Dental improvements
Heart & lung Transplant [Co. Pays 100%]
6 weeks vacation for 30 years
1 day vacation for ea. yr. After 25 yrs.; up to 30
Uniforms [gas workers]
Establish Serviceman/Fitter classification
Job award steps improved

1987 Diabetic Supplies [Co. To pay under extended benefits]
Pension Improvement
Hearing Aids & Hearing exam [Co. to pay]
Prescription Plan [\$3.00]
1 week vacation after 6 months
Martin Luther King Day [personal]
30 day assignment to new job
Combination of Crews - \$2.00 per hr.
LTD improvement
Holiday Pay improvement[include shift diff.]

1990 Adoption assistance
Family Leave
Life Insurance improvement
Pension improvement

1992 Options in Health Care
Increase in 401-K match

1996 Re-Organize Customer Service in Northboro Ma.

1997 De-Regulation
Early Retirements

Succession Clauses
Worker Protection in case of mergers
Funeral Leave [step-parents]
Travel Allowance
Licenses [Co. to pay]
Pension Increase

1998 Guaranteed Staffing in Newport/EUA
Pension improvement
Dental improvement