Community unionism: the Toledo Auto-Lite Strike of 1934

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A Thesis
Entitled

Community Unionism: The Toledo Auto-Lite Strike of 1934

By
Nathan D. Delaney

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The Master of Arts Degree in History

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The University of Toledo
May 2010
An Abstract of
Community Unionism: The Toledo Auto-Lite Strike of 1934

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This thesis reviews the community of Toledo during the Electric Auto-Lite Strike in 1934. The interpretation offered here is that the strike was not only a class struggle, but a community struggle as well. Some of the groups that made up the “worker community” were auto-parts workers, unemployed citizens, small business owners, and various ethnic groups. The main idea of the thesis is that through this struggle the Toledo worker community helped shape the eventual concrete conception of organized labor in the late 1930s.
# Table of Contents

Abstract iii

Table of Contents iv

I. Introduction 1

II. Ethnic Neighborhoods 33

III. Worker – Management Relations 40

IV. Catholic Connection 48

V. Unemployed Leagues 52

VI. Blacks Active During the Strike 64

VII. Strikebreakers 72

VIII. National Guard, Police, and Special Deputies 77

IX. Small Business Hookup 82

X. Conclusion 85

XI. References 88

XII. Bibliography 96
Chapter 1

Introduction

There appears to be a crisis of identity among labor history scholars today. At the heart of the issue are the staggeringly low figures of union participation in the United States. Economist and historian Gerald Friedman put it best in 2006: “Today, we have a deeper problem that requires a still more demanding rethinking of our approach to labor history. The collapse of the labor movement throughout the advanced capitalist world forces us to reconsider a vision of organized labor as the cutting edge of the future democratizing of society. . . [Instead] we must consider the possibility that other social groups and other factors may be more important in history than we had imagined in the past.”¹ The fact that under 10 percent of the American labor force is unionized is troublesome for labor history; its foundational base of legitimacy is fleeting. But perhaps there is a way to reinvigorate labor history by approaching the subject matter from a different angle.

Though labor history has come a long way from its days as an offshoot of economics, it has continued to hold on to the notion that class is the dominant fault-line against which the major forces of society clash. One of the strengths of class interpretation has been its ability to expose the American myth of capitalism for what it really is – a system that concentrates wealth into the hands of a relative

¹
few. Class historians have also been prolific in exploring and understanding labor’s institutions, as well as exploring the social environment of the worker. Class interpretation also typically divides history into two familiar blocs of people: workers and owners.²

Although the idea of class is a convenient lens through which to view labor history, it can overlook the complexities of specific communities in favor of a more manageable and clear-cut approach. For example, the 1934 “Battle of Toledo,” as it came to be known, has traditionally been interpreted as a model example of class conflict. This struggle between workers and owners raged throughout that spring over the company’s recognition of the newly formed Federal Labor Union (FLU) local 18384.³ Yet as a class interpretation, the historiography of the Auto-Lite strike has failed to take into account the intricacies of the numerous groups that were involved in the strike. The “battle” in reality was a community undertaking by Toledo’s diverse citizenry; it involved workers, owners of businesses, the unemployed, parish priests, policemen, unions, and neighbors of differing ethnic and racial backgrounds. All their collective participation converged in an attack on the Electric Auto-Lite Corporation plant in late May 1934.⁴ As one participant put it in The Modern Monthly in March 1935: In Toledo “victory for unionism was achieved . . . through an uprising of the community.”⁵

The idea that this strike can be interpreted along class lines is too simplistic. For one, this focus limits the conflict to the “old” labor history paradigm of a struggle between employees and employers within the confines of
the business structure. A more representative piece would incorporate not just the struggle of the workers with their managers, but also the community from which they came, and it would analyze how the general population responded to the picketers. What was the general attitude of the citizenry towards the strike? Where did sympathies lie? When one segregates diverse populations using constructed labels of either “worker” or “owner,” there is no allowance for the gray area in which most people live.

A class interpretation can create a polarity of good guys versus bad guys. The historical figure becomes trapped by such labels, which may not reflect the identity of the many groups involved. Often concealed is the uniqueness of the individual actor. How might one classify an owner of a small shop that supplied workers with free food while on strike against a corporation? Simply forcing them into the mold of owners distorts all reasoning for their actions. Perhaps small-business owners felt bullied by their creditors, who often owned and controlled the large chain stores or corporations in the community. Is it not in the small-business owner’s best interest that workers make more money and have stable jobs so they are able to reimburse him for the credit he extends them? Conversely, do not the workers frequent the small-business owner’s shop because she is a neighbor and they depend on her for credit during tough times?

A class analysis can also fall short if it fails to examine the complex ethnic interactions that often exist. When striking employees are presented as a united bloc, as they often are in the history of the Auto-Lite strike, the intricate and evolving relations among the workers are glossed over. How did foreign workers
get along and form bonds? When and where are ethnic groups more inclined to support a strike? How do black workers fit into this mix?

The study of the “scab” or strikebreaker during Auto-Lite has often been glossed over as well. The strikebreakers’ side is usually left underdeveloped by labor historians, since they are difficult to define and locate in the owner-versus-worker dichotomy. Generally they are seen as “sell-outs,” or poor ignorant immigrants. Is it possible to understand the strikebreakers and explore the societal forces and environment that put them in such a position? How do strikebreakers fit into working-class communities? If they do not, why not?

In Toledo in 1934 there existed a worker community whose relationships transcended traditional class antagonisms during the major labor conflict at Auto-Lite, forming the basis for what will be known in this essay as community unionism. Community unionism (a phrase borrowed from Elizabeth Faue) is the spirit of altruism and reciprocity that existed among various community groups during the strike at Auto-Lite. Some examples of altruistic actions by those within the circle of the worker community were exhibited when the unemployed refused to take the strikers’ jobs or when small-business owners contributed food and provisions to the strikers. Another example would be the local police force during the strike, who chose to be restrained instead of aggressive in their actions, out of respect for the power of the picketers. By contrast, those who served their individual interests were generally regarded as outsiders by members of the worker community. The groups who fall into this category include the National Guardsmen called in during the strike, the management at Auto-Lite, the
strikebreakers who took the jobs of the striking workers, and the private deputies empowered by the sheriff and paid for by Auto-Lite. In 1934, the linkages among all these groups and their choices for or against community were illuminated most brightly during the Auto-Lite strike. It is the intention of this paper to explore these social connections mainly from the perspective of the worker community.

The Auto-Lite strike, of course, did not take place overnight. To understand the cause of the strike, it is necessary to look back and recall the history of the city of Toledo. The city itself was founded in 1833, shortly after construction began on the Wabash-Erie Canal, which was to link the Great Lakes with the Ohio River via the Maumee River. Toledo’s location at the westernmost point of Lake Erie made it a good distribution center, and “by the late nineteenth century, Toledo was known for its port facilities, particularly for the shipping of bulk cargoes.” Though the railroad was introduced around 1837, major rails did not begin to run until the 1850s. This enabled Toledo to trade directly with Chicago and parts of Michigan, and its population grew as a result.  

By 1880 Toledo’s population was 50,137 as job opportunities were burgeoning. Toledo became a place where “raw materials, cheap power, and a market for the product came together.” Not only was it a strategic point for the distribution of coal (from Columbus, Ohio, and Northern Michigan) and natural gas (Findlay, Ohio), but it also gained a reputation for refining goods. Toledo had a sound brewing industry, which continued to grow through the 1880s, thanks to Buckeye Lager Beer (incorporated 1878) and Toledo Brewing and Malting
Company (incorporated 1881). The Milburn Wagon Works began its operations in Toledo in 1875, and “soon became the largest manufacturer of farm wagons in the world.” The famous Libbey Glass Company came to Toledo in 1888 and thus established the city’s glass industry. Both skilled workers and common laborers were needed to fill these jobs; as a result “manufacturing essentially provided the base of the city’s continued growth through the twentieth century.”

Toledo’s population climbed from 168,000 in 1910 to over 290,000 by 1930 and this was no doubt due to the employment opportunities. By the 1920s the automobile industry had exploded, and as domestic consumption of cars increased, the number of people working for auto-parts and automobile manufacturers increased as well. Toledo historian Tana Porter recounted that “in 1916 one-third of Toledo’s wage earners worked in the automobile industry, one-fifth of them for Willys-Overland Company. Thirty-five smaller plants made parts and accessories for Willys-Overland, as well as for other automobile manufacturers.” Wages were on the raise as producers like Willys-Overland were turning solid profits, but that did not placate workers’ dissatisfaction with working conditions.

Labor turmoil in Toledo before the 1930s was not as lively as in other cities, but this is likely due to the vigorous campaign for “open shops,” by local business owners throughout the early twentieth century. Except for the Toledo-Pope Motor Car strike of 1906-1907 and the Willys-Overland strike of 1919, labor unions in Toledo were effectively bottled up until the eruption at Auto-Lite in 1934.
Created in 1911, Auto-Lite’s purpose was to manufacture electric starters for the automobile giants in Detroit. Before electric starters, headlights on cars were powered by acetylene gas, and they were known as carbide lamps. In 1911, a former pharmaceutical salesman, C. O. Miniger, bought the rights to a patent which would replace gas-powered headlamps with electric headlights. This proved to be a wise investment, as Miniger founded the Auto-Lite company in Toledo and eventually sold his lighting, starting, and ignition systems to many of the largest car manufacturers including Packard, Nash, Willys-Overland, Ford, and Chrysler. By the late 1920s, Auto-Lite had grown into one of the largest independent suppliers of automobile parts in the United States.\textsuperscript{11}

In 1929, the collapse of the economy was felt in Toledo, but it was not until the banking crisis of 1931 that Toledo went into a tailspin. This is best described by Irving Bernstein in \textit{Turbulent Years} (1970):

The depression decimated Toledo. Willys-Overland, which had employed 28,000 people in 1929, collapsed into bankruptcy. The auto suppliers cut back severely on employment. The Ohio Bond & Security Back [Miniger’s bank] closed its doors to its thousands of depositors. The city was unable to meet payrolls; among others, 150 policemen were laid off and the survivors had their wages cut. The allegedly corrupt Republican machine . . . which had long dominated local politics, was wiped out in the Democratic landslide of 1932. By early 1934 unrest was epidemic in Toledo and Clem Miniger was the most unpopular man in town.\textsuperscript{12}

By 1934 Auto-Lite was employing roughly twenty-five hundred people and had a high turnover rate. The conditions for the workers at Auto-Lite were intense. Pay was low, foremen and foreladies were tough, and the speed of work was fast. Philip Korth and Margaret Beegle found this to be true in their

The factory operative enjoyed no inherent power, for he or she could be moved from job to job or speedily replaced because the machine performed the skilled functions while the operative tended it. The parts industry, like the automobile assembly industry itself, experienced the seasonal cycle of production and lay-offs, even in the best of times, so operatives at Auto-Lite faced constant uncertainty . . . . Under observation even into the toilets, workers found themselves sneaking a bite to eat or a puff on a cigarette, aware that they would be fired if discovered . . . . Supervisor[s] had the unrestricted power to choose the workers to perform the jobs available that day. The most vivid symbol of that power, the bench, stood along the wall in the punch press room [department two]. There workers sat until the supervisor chose them to do a specific job, and they returned there when that job was finished. There they sat until chosen again. They earned no money sitting on the bench. The only virtue of the bench in the punch press room was its safety. One can often identify punch press operators from this era by the joints, fingers, or other pieces missing from their hands.13

The owners and managers of the Auto-Lite had found a niche in the auto industry, and they could continue to turn a profit only as long as their products were cheap enough to avoid becoming obsolete by the internal manufacture of auto parts by customers like Ford and Chrysler. This, of course, served as an additional incentive to pay workers low starting wages, while also encouraging higher productivity. The system instituted was known as the Bedeaux system, named after Charles E. Bedeaux, which provided bonuses to workers who exceeded the minimum quotas set by management. The only catch was that if one exceeded his or her normal limit, the quota would be changed to match the higher production number, hence increasing the work standard. “That pressure,” according to Korth and Beegle, “inevitably would result in an oppressive work
pace, less bothersome to the young and agile but exhausting to the average or slower worker.”

The union representing the industrial workers of Toledo, known as Federal Labor Union (FLU) 18384, formed in mid-1933. The FLU 18384 represented semi-skilled workers from a number of Toledo businesses. Others involved in this federal union included workers from Bingham Stamping and Tool Company, Spicer Manufacturing Company, and Logan Gear Company. All of these companies were affiliated with the auto-parts industry and were therefore represented by the union.

The curious thing about FLU 18384 was that the workers whom it represented had yet to be parceled off into separate trade unions. This was the usual method for any union that was a subsidiary of the craft-based American Federation of Labor (AFL), which FLU 18384 was. The AFL chose instead to organize the Toledo auto-parts workers along industrial lines, so as to insure that the AFL would be a part of the future of this burgeoning industry. The first group organized from Auto-Lite came from Department Two, namely, Charles Rigby, Lester Byrd, Chester Dombrowski, and John Jankowski, among others. These men, who came from different ethnic backgrounds, would later make up a group known as the “Captains,” who served as the lead organizers of Auto-Lite.

This initial cadre began clandestine recruitment of men and women on the shop floor at the Auto-Lite; their base of support remained small, but strategically significant. They organized the entire Department Two, which made the bulk of parts that went into every ignition system Auto-Lite produced. Without these one
hundred or so workers, the factory ownership would not be able to continue the production of goods. In February 1934 the members of Local 18384 decided to strike in order to gain recognition of the union in a number of manufacturing plants throughout Toledo, including Spicer, Bingham, and Logan Gear. The members from Auto-Lite were approved to join this planned strike, but their numbers were quite small in comparison with the others. On February 23 the FLU 18384 workers went on strike demanding recognition, with fewer than twenty picketing in front of the Auto-Lite Company. By February 28 the union workers from each plant had obtained an agreement that was to last for thirty days, after which more negotiations would ensue. On April 1 the companies refused to negotiate with the union-appointed business agent Tom Ramsey, so the workers from all four plants went on strike on April 13. This time a thousand workers walked out of Auto-Lite demanding pay increases and recognition of the union.17

On April 18 Toledo Judge Roy Stuart of the Court of Common Pleas issued an injunction that limited the number of picketers to twenty-five per entrance (fifty total) of the Auto-Lite plant and required all pickets to wear identification so that no outsiders could interfere. As a result the pickets had limited success because their numbers were too thin to intimidate any strikebreakers and keep them from crossing the line. While on strike the FLU and the employers of the various companies continued to talk, but the employers would not grant any of the union demands, only offering those on strike preference in rehiring. Eventually Electric Auto-Lite filled all its positions by
early May; thus the management of Auto-Lite thought the strike was over. It was around this time that the local unemployed league approached the captains of the Auto-Lite picketers and offered their assistance. As the strike was in jeopardy of failing, the captains accepted, changing the dynamic of the strike almost instantly.\textsuperscript{18}

The Lucas County Unemployed League, a branch of A. J. Muste’s National Unemployed League, was a non-orthodox Marxist group, whose leaders chose to help the dispossessed at the street level instead of preaching revolution. Immediately the LCUL local organizers decided that the workers and their new unemployed allies should defy the injunction that had been set by Judge Stuart on April 18. From May 7 until June 4 the injunction was constantly violated by striking workers, unemployed league members, some local communists, and large groups of men, women, and children from around town. Some showed up just to observe the strike, while others went there to get involved.\textsuperscript{19}

During the month of May, many picketers were arrested by police and tried before Judge Stuart for violation of the injunction, but as soon as they were released, they would return to the “festival” in front of the Auto-Lite building. The massive crowds that had swelled around Electric Auto-Lite overwhelmed the local authorities. On Wednesday, May 23, Lucas County Sheriff David Krieger and his host of special deputies (paid for by the owners of Auto-Lite) were stationed on and around the building, which was surrounded by a crowd of six thousand who were there supporting the strikers while also enjoying speeches by labor activists. The demonstration erupted into a full-blown assault on the
factory, when someone from inside the building “threw a heavy steel bracket” and hit a female picket, Alma Hahn, in the face. A battle the ensued between the Auto-Lite “police” and the citizens outside. John Jankowski described the following scene:

What started the worst thing of all was one of them scabs from the fourth floor threw a piece of steel – we called it a cold piece – that was inside of a generator in a coil, dropped it, and hit a woman on the head. Right on the side of the head. Cut her head open while she was on the picket line. That’s what started it. Blood started streaming down her head. All them people, all them women around there, they were just screaming like mad. . . . They were ready to tear them screens down to get into that building and get that person who threw that down. So, that’s when the war started. The sheriff brought tear gas and everything; it was just flying around there. Well then, you can imagine a riot like that; all of Toledo started gathering around from all these other factories. Especially these people from Spicer’s and Willys-Overland at that time. They all come to see the picture, to see the scenery. Some of them were unemployed; they were laid off. They come over. Well, that’s where you got your help, your sympathy – from these people that didn’t even think of a union; they’d come over. . . . People [got] riled up so bad. 20

The “civil war” lasted until May 30 and during that week over 1300 National Guard troops were called in by Sheriff Krieger to end the demonstration. The Auto-Lite plant remained closed until June 5, when the workers and the employers finalized an agreement. The riot left tens of thousands of dollars in damage to the building and the surrounding area, hundreds of people injured and wounded, and two dead. The strikers received a pay raise, improved conditions, union recognition, and access to their old jobs. The strike became legendary. On the memorial plaque that was set to commemorate the site after the building was
torn down in the late 1990s, it reads that the Auto-Lite strike was home to “one of the three greatest strikes in American history.”\textsuperscript{21}

Because of its timing, the Auto-Lite strike has assumed an interesting position in American history. The strike took place in 1934, before the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) as an independent industrial union. This is significant because of a debate among historians that surrounds the impact of the CIO.

Some labor historians contend that the CIO accomplished great things for the working class and, in many ways, pushed the Roosevelt administration to pass more progressive legislation than it had originally intended. These historians have been labeled as conservative because of their endorsement of the CIO, a labor institution which functioned within the confines of collective bargaining and did not challenge either mainstream political party during its twenty-year tenure.\textsuperscript{22}

As Robert Zieger argues in \textit{The CIO 1935-1955} (1995), the CIO was militant at the grassroots level while its conservative leadership sided politically with the Democrats. This was a good thing, in Zieger’s opinion; had the union embraced a more radical approach, it would have alienated significant parts of its base.\textsuperscript{23}

Lizabeth Cohen in \textit{Making A New Deal} (1990) notes that the CIO was not only a powerful union politically, but also had a profound effect on ethnic and race relations in Chicago during the mid 1930s. Cohen does criticize aspects of the CIO, such as its centralization of power, which weakened the union’s responsiveness to its rank-and-file base. The most insightful part of her book
describes the evolution of consumer culture that paralleled the rise of the CIO – essentially, how chain stores benefited more than small shops as a large portion of the American working class began to embrace consumption. However, her main argument is that the CIO helped encourage better relations between blacks and whites at a time when equal treatment was exceedingly rare.\textsuperscript{24}

David Brody, one of the early New Labor historians in North America, predates both Zieger and Cohen (his student) but makes similar assertions. He contends that the CIO was indeed a progressive organization, but also a pragmatic union. Because of its size, it was capable of standing up to corporate America.\textsuperscript{25}

Leftist labor scholars have been more critical of the CIO’s history. They argue that the early 1930s was the high point of American unionism, because of the degree of democracy that was implemented with the CIO at that time. The labor activity during this period functioned on a smaller, more localized scale, and it was able to negotiate with corporations free of binding contracts or opportunist leaders. These “community-based” or “alternative” unions displayed an effectiveness that stemmed from the courage of their members, who chose to utilize wildcat strikes and direct negotiations with employers to get their demands met.

The most noted proponent of this idea has been Staughton Lynd, as evidenced by his books \textit{Rank and File} (1973), which he co-authored with Alice Lynd, and \textit{“We Are All Leaders”} (1996). In \textit{Rank and File}, the Lynds conducted interviews with the “committed persons who work[ed], day in and day out for years, to bring unions into being . . . and to better the lives of others.” In these
interviews the Lynds found voices that supported their belief that the labor movement in twentieth-century America was driven not by the “famous leaders” and “faceless masses,” but rather by those “committed” individuals whose experience and descriptions of local unionism seemed to debunk the idea that the CIO was a progressive institution. This sparked a wave of criticism, much of it from David Brody, who asked the question: why did a once-popular idea of labor militancy “fade away so quickly?” The Lynds had stressed in Rank and File that local labor militancy was essentially defeated by external factors, but critics asserted that this was not a sufficient explanation. Brody hit the mark when he turned the Lynds’ assumption around with the follow-up question: “What was there about the labor militancy itself during the 1930s that inhibited a permanent rank-and-file movement?” This was eventually answered in Lynd’s case study “We Are All Leaders.”

In “We Are All Leaders,” Staughton Lynd laid out his definition of an alternative union: it should be “democratic, deeply rooted in mutual aid among workers in different crafts and work sites, and politically independent.” Lynd’s essential theory is that the labor movement before the CIO was historically significant because of its devotion to democratic principles. He wrote: “One must be prepared to lay aside the notion that the real labor movement, the labor movement that mattered, began with the formation of the CIO in 1935. [Instead] one must view the 1930s from the perspective of rank-and-file workers who were active in 1932, 1933, and 1934.” The many contributors to Lynd’s study documented this local union activity in a persuasive manner, and pointed to
“external factors” as the problem that caused these “alternative-unions” to disappear. 27

In response David Brody conceded that these community-based unions existed and were effective, but the “community mobilization” had “nothing like the significance [that Lynd] attached to it.” The debate remains at this impasse, more or less.28

While the Auto-Lite strike could be interpreted as “community mobilization,” a term Brody has applied to other pre-CIO strikes, the entities that initiated this movement do not so easily fit Lynd’s examples of alternative or community-based unionism. Lynd does mention in his introduction of “We Are All Leaders” that “organizational forms of alternative unionism include federal labor unions,” and Rosemary Feurer makes the claim that “such a style of unionism can be seen in the major strikes of 1934, especially the Toledo Auto-Lite strike,” referencing the LCUL. However, the groups involved in the strike do not fit perfectly into the mold of alternative unionism.29

Take, for example, the Toledo Federal Labor Union 18384. It represents a most interesting paradox. The FLU was in fact an affiliate of the AFL. Started in Toledo in 1933, the FLU charter represented workers not just from one company, but also from a number of auto-industry plants from all over the city. The AFL’s strategy was to organize the auto-parts workers before any other union could, but this could only be done quickly if the workers were organized along industrial lines as opposed to craft or trade lines. Traditionally the AFL only organized skilled-trades workers, but perhaps the fear of losing out on a huge
portion of industrial workers trumped tradition. That and the fact that the Committee of Industrial Organization (precursor to the Congress of Industrial Order), which supported the idea of organizing workers on the basis of industry, was gaining momentum within the confines of the AFL. If the AFL ignored the demands for support, the workers might have turned to another union to represent them. The national leadership of the AFL decided that dividing up the workers into trades was something that could be figured out later, whereas the most important thing was to bring the workers immediately into the AFL. As a result, federal labor unions like 18384 were left to function as industrial unions during the interregnum.

Because the AFL did not support FLU 18384 financially during this interim period, the FLU enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. This proved crucial during the strike as the workers from the various striking plants did not have to seek the advice of the AFL leadership nor did they obey it when it was eventually provided. The strikers at the Auto-Lite plant in particular were committed exclusively to one another, and only after the strike – and after money was sent to pay for the legal fees – did the local union members defer to the decisions of the AFL leadership. These circumstances present an interesting dilemma when attempting to classify the FLU as an alternative union. Theoretically, the FLU 18384 might not meet Lynd’s suggested requirements that it must be “democratic,” “rooted in mutual aid,” and “politically independent,” as its parent organization the AFL was neither “democratic” nor prone to offer “mutual aid.”
Yet, if the FLU is judged independently of its parent, the actions of the striking members certainly seem to embody the alternative-union spirit.

The second group – the LCUL – represents an entity that is entirely local in orientation. Even so it is hard to say definitively whether it meets Lynd’s requirements for an alternative union. With regard to the idea of “democratic,” it is not clear how the leaders or organizers were elected. According to Steve Nelson, an active organizer for a rival unemployed group, “the league tended to be run from the top down.” Though this may be true, the head agitators were not far removed from the members and proved very active at the street level. One could say with confidence that LCUL organizers at the very least commanded the respect of the members. As for mutual aid, the LCUL met that requirement by participating in the Auto-Lite strike and by fighting and picketing alongside the auto-parts workers. Was it politically independent? That was true up until 1936, when the group leaders shifted their goals from assisting the needs of the unemployed to embracing ideological argumentation in an effort to radicalize the unemployed through words rather than deeds. The LCUL in 1934 meets every requirement for Lynd’s idea of community-based union, except that it did not represent workers of the Auto-Lite plant in any official capacity.

Toledo’s FLU and the LCUL are thus directly in the middle of the controversy over large-scale unionism versus community-based unionism. What these two groups, the FLU 18384 and the LCUL, really represent are significant rank-and-file militant movements and “pragmatic” organizations. Although the Auto-Lite strike and the community that supported it do share more in common
with Lynd’s interpretation than Brody’s, the event in Toledo does not lend itself precisely to either account.

What compounds the problem of interpretation is that both Lynd and Brody are in a sense making their case for a current plan of action to ameliorate the weakened condition of contemporary labor’s state. Brody expresses his view in *Labor Embattled* (2005): “What in the American fabric of ideology, jurisprudence, and politics enabled a law intended to liberate workers to be transformed into a law that oppresses them? Questions like this spring from the troubled present, but the answers require a reading of the past.” Unlike Lynd, Brody does not see the CIO as having failed the workers of America; for him the question lies with the law. Today’s malaise will be cured by reform in labor law and reinvigoration of the labor movement, much like what took place in the middle 1930s. Since the Auto-Lite strike occurred before the formation of the CIO, Brody has little use for it.32

Lynd also believes that the current state of labor today is fractured, but he does not see a remedy in rebuilding labor institutions like the CIO. Lynd regards the CIO as an undemocratic bureaucracy that “from the beginning cheerfully operated within the parameters of that law” – the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935, which was introduced to promote federally-supervised collective bargaining. He is in full agreement with Christopher Tomlins, a labor law historian who believes the national labor unions during the late 1930s trapped themselves when they embraced collective bargaining. In this scenario, national unions exchanged short-term benefits (i.e., higher wages) for long-term defense
tactics (i.e., the right to strike), which led to their capitulation to corporate interests. Lynd quotes Tomlins as saying: “what the state offered workers and their organizations was ultimately no more than the opportunity to participate in the construction of their own subordination.” Lynd includes the CIO as in part responsible for the eventual demise of the American labor movement. It is his belief that we should look back to the period before the rise of the CIO and embrace the community-based union approach. “Local unions and their rank-and-file members, again prepared to be ‘all leaders,’ are needed to develop new forms of alternative unionism. We will not know if it is possible unless we try.”

As suggested by Gerald Friedman in the quote that opened this chapter, there is a middle way between these two poles – “other social groups and other factors may be more important in history than we had imagined in the past.” My approach, then, is an exploration of various social groups that have helped create a worker community. Not only are the two main groups of the Auto-Lite strike examined, the FLU and LCUL, but so are a number of other community subgroups, who loosely aligned against an array of outsiders whose interests can be best described as self-serving. Perhaps by looking back to this strike, groups that have traditionally been thought of as enemies of the working class will be reconsidered, while those designated as outsiders might at the very least be included in a way that actively attempts to understand their motivations and actions.

**Historical Writings on the Auto-Lite Strike**
Most writings on the Auto-Lite strike itself have appeared in local studies in the form of master’s theses and Ph.D. dissertations, and in books and articles that deal with the historical event as a part of the national unionization process of the 1930s. It was the first of three crucial, successful strikes during 1934 and was the only strike to affect the daily lives of Toledoans since the Willy-Overland strike that was a part of the great 1919 strike wave. To put this interpretation in the proper context, a review of the past historiography is in order.34

The first major writing devoted to the Auto-Lite strike was a chapter done in a dissertation by William Haskett, titled “Ideological Radicals, The American Federation of Labor and Federal Labor Policy in the Strikes of 1934.” His version of the strike has served as the main foundation for all other writings on the Auto-Lite strike to date. Haskett’s account was dictated by his sources, which may have been limited because he was studying at Berkeley. His sources include stories from the New York Times and Wall Street Journal, letters from industrial, political, and union officials, articles written by A. J. Muste and Louis Budenz, and an interview with Muste in 1953. Haskett relied heavily on official documents and newspaper accounts, and as a result there is very little information about what actually happened beyond the arbitration hearings in February, April, and May.35

Where Haskett does his best service is his organization of events. He makes clear the chronology of the strike, while explaining the role of the workers and the various companies that were asked to recognize FLU 18384. Haskett does mention the function of the LCUL, but he does little to explore its structure.
or its involvement. Overall, Haskett’s main concern is when the strike started, when it was finished, and the legal gains that were made in between. He concludes as follows: “Intrinsically . . . the auto-parts strikes in Toledo were not very important. To a considerable degree, the importance which has been assigned to the Electric Auto-Lite strike has been retrospectively created by ideological radicals . . . Of course, both the immediate effects of the participation of the American Workers’ Party [affiliate of the LCUL], and the longer-term interpretation of the strike by radicals are important here.” Essentially, Haskett argues that the strike itself did not serve to change the economic situation of the workers. The deal they received was tenuous and the only lasting legacy of the strike was the involvement of the radical groups that defied the law to revive the strike.\(^{36}\)

In *The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle* (1964), Sidney Fine, the next historian to address the strike, built on Haskett’s research and added some much-needed detail. Fine brought to life the battles that would make the strike famous and relevant for years to come. His analysis coincided with the emergence of the New Labor History, which in the mid 1960s tended to focus on union formation and the violent clashes with the authorities that helped change the course of the country’s political direction.

Fine’s is a history of the National Recovery Administration (NRA) and its handling of labor disputes from 1933 to 1935. The NRA, which was nicknamed after its symbol of the Blue Eagle, was a federal arbitration institution established as a result of the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which
lasted until it was deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in May 1935. The Auto-Lite Strike happened during the reign of the Blue Eagle and therefore came under its jurisdiction when arbitration to help bring about a compromise between company and union was encouraged, but not enforced under its Section 7(a) which for the first time acknowledged workers’ right to form independent unions.37

Of particular interest to this study, Fine credits the LCUL for its role in the strike. Fine contends that “the Lucas County Unemployed League . . . played a key role in support of the strikers.”38 Because of the lack of support by its AFL affiliate, the strike began to falter towards the end of April. This, Fine explains, may have been the point at which the workers of Federal Labor Union 18384 sought the involvement of the local unemployed league.

Fine’s approach to this period is top-down history or “old” labor history, as it is mainly concerned with the policies and decisions of heads of government, corporate leaders, and union officials. His discussion of the Auto-Lite strike and its impact, however, is concise and to the point. His primary sources include a thorough perusal of Toledo newspapers from 1934. Though the book does not explore the social aspects of the conditions in auto-parts plants or the city, it does get beneath the initial political layer of the strike.

Published a year after Fine’s political account was Arthur Preis’s more personal history -- Labor’s Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO (1964). Written by an active labor agitator, Labor’s Giant Step combines a general history of the CIO years with firsthand social analysis of an active participant.
Of particular significance is Preis’s retelling of the Auto-Lite strike, a description that is almost completely devoid of larger political happenings. Though he was an actual participant in the strike as a member of the Lucas County Unemployed League, Preis does not include local workers or unemployed citizens in significant detail, and as a result the people of the community largely remain faceless.39

Preis’s account contains many stories and statistics about the CIO, but absent are any references to documented sources. *Labor’s Giant Step* both lauds and defames national institutions like the AFL and CIO, who “at every step of the way . . . sought to subordinate the interests of the workers” and yet still accomplished the “tremendous historical achievement” of uniting the AFL and CIO in 1955.40 All of this is recorded in the tradition of the old labor history except when Preis’s experience affords him a first-person social angle.

In a similar vein with Sidney Fine’s study, Irving Bernstein’s *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941* (1969), continues the tradition of labor history that is focused primarily on the political level. His main thesis in this book was that American business was removed from its pedestal of command during the years 1929-1941. Bernstein argues that collective bargaining was the result of those “turbulent years,” and the more radical labor elements that emerged during this period had no lasting effect.41

Bernstein’s discussion of the strike focuses on the leaders of the various political, corporate, and social entities active in Toledo at that time. He is detailed in recounting the involvement of LCUL leadership in organizing and energizing
the wavering strikers of Auto-Lite. Bernstein’s story of the strike is mainly concerned with the possibility of a general strike in Toledo, which never came to fruition. Bernstein’s conclusion is banal: he states rather blandly that collective bargaining was “inaugurated” as a result of the strike. Had Bernstein chosen to stay more true to his title and explore the “history of the American worker,” he might have uncovered some of the lasting social and cultural effects the strike had on the business community and the working-class community at large.42

These first three authors all predate the social-analytical methods of E. P. Thompson, which eventually became to known as the New Labor History. Thompson’s exhaustive study *The Making of the English Working-Class* (1963) is generally regarded as the seminal work in labor history, because it proved the idea of class-consciousness among the working-class of England. Instead of discussing the history through the eyes of the union leadership or political figures of the time, Thompson takes the reader to the level of the “masses,” effectively humanizing the working-class.43

The focus of Old Labor History looks beyond the episode at Toledo, to celebrate collective bargaining. Fine and Bernstein, and for the most part Preis, all accept this school of historical thought. Like Preis and especially Fine, Bernstein sees this period of the early 1930s and as a prelude to the eventual “success” of the labor movement. For Bernstein, and Fine to a lesser extent, the success was the realization of collective bargaining, which was legitimized by the National Industrial Recovery Act and later the National Labor Relations Act (1935). The effort for this accomplishment Bernstein attributes to both the labor
institutions and the government at the time, who after much pressure from the
“American worker” acted in a responsible manner.

By contrast, Preis believes it was the effort of the workers that created the
national unions, which he sees as a great improvement from the past. Although
he does not paint a vivid social picture in Labor’s Giant Step, he is explicit about
the fact that it was the courage and commitment of the workers in America that
forced business and government to recognize the right of labor to be involved in
the economic destiny of the country. Fine and Bernstein also recognize the
workers’ efforts, but they are not presented as the driving force behind the
decision making. While Fine and Bernstein are proud of the legal tradition of the
1930s that protected the rights of workers to organize, receive fair treatment, and
the right to an eight-hour day, Preis is not. For Preis, one gets the sense that
nothing short of social revolution is worthy, as he notes in his concluding
remarks: “So long as this immense inherent power of organized labor exists, the
American workers are bound to ask themselves . . . Why should we not use this
organized power that lies so ready to our hands to effect our own solution of the
impasse of modern society, to direct our own destiny?” For him, the formation of
these “industrial organizations” is only the first step. While Preis’s history
encourages the workers of his day to finish the job, Fine and Bernstein are giving
the reader a congratulatory history tour, as if to say “look at how far we have
come.” 44

Regardless, these traditional labor histories became outdated with the
advent of the New Labor History and the social history explosion of the 1970s.
Thompson’s method of exploring the cultural realm of the working class inspired others across the Atlantic in the United States. Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery were among the first Americans to embrace the new social approach.45

The democratic radical spirit of the 1960s permeated the minds of scholars who became interested in the entire world of workers, not just the institutions and people who spoke for them.46 An early example of this new social approach as it relates to Auto-Lite strike is in an article by Roy Rosenzweig, “Radicals and the Jobless,” published in 1975.

Rosenzweig’s piece remains the most comprehensive account of the National Unemployed League (NUL), the national affiliate of the LCUL. He tracks the evolution of the unemployed leagues from the beginning of the Conference for Progressive Labor Action to its transformation in December 1933 to the American Workers Party (AWP) and then to the NUL.47 It is Rosenzweig’s contention that when the Musteites (followers of minister A. J. Muste) organized on a “broad, nonpolitical and ‘immediate demands’ basis” – as opposed to strictly adhering to the views of its leading members – it “built an unemployed movement, but not a revolution.” Rosenzweig suggests that historians should not overlook the great efforts made by radicals during the Depression, even if one is inclined to see their movement as a failure.48

Rosenzweig was one of the first to focus squarely on unemployed groups. He was concerned with exploring an integral question that groups like the LCUL were attempting to answer: “Should [unemployed leagues] focus on the
immediate needs of the jobless worker for relief, jobs and food or should they concentrate on permanently eliminating unemployment, itself, through a socialist revolution?"49 Rosenzweig concluded that initially the leaders of the unemployed groups focused on the immediate needs of those people they had recruited. By petitioning government officials to distribute food and housing subsidies and by collecting goods from local people, they sustained the respect and support of the unemployed. However, between 1934 and 1936, some unemployed groups “began to turn that mass movement into an explicitly revolutionary body. They abandoned their previous undogmatic appeal and flexible approach,” and thus began losing the allegiance of the unemployed as a result.50

The most significant part of Rosenzweig’s *Radicals and the Jobless* is that he brings the reader into the world of the unemployed organizers. Although they were ideologically Marxists who were looking to “bring about the new American revolution,” they were in fact most effective when serving the community. By reaching across lines of race and occupation to assist people, unemployed leaguers were able to undo some inequalities, like halting evictions and destroying injunctions, during the depths of the Great Depression. They were dealing with community problems from the bottom up, effectively winning the hearts and minds of disenfranchised citizens through direct action that was more radical than any revolutionary rhetoric.51

Probably the most substantive piece devoted to the Auto-Lite strike is Phillip Korth and Margaret Beegle’s *I Remember Like Today: The Auto-Lite Strike of 1934*. The book is based on interviews conducted during the summer of
1973. Korth and Beegle compiled a list of several thousand people present during the strike in 1934, and using a directory, they found five hundred who were still reachable. Their oral history was a new social-history tool that was popularized in the 1970s, a way of interviewing the last of the generation who made up the American working class during a time when change was happening from the “bottom up.” Though Korth and Beegle conducted the interviews in 1973, the book was not published until 1988.52

The oral history by Korth and Beegle is an adventure into the complexity of the social forces of the Auto-Lite strike. The variety of people interviewed is intriguing, not only workers and owners, but managers, white collar employees, families, bystanders, radicals, police, and politicians. However, questions remain as to how to interpret the responses. Even though their oral history followed very specific rules to avoid adulterating the interviewee responses, the very fact that they included such a wide range of people implies the involvement of the whole community. Yet the authors do not develop the relationships among different community groups that were active during the strike. What does become clear is the intensity of participation by the Lucas County Unemployed League during the strike, especially in gathering support from citizens and assisting the union members of the Auto-Lite factory in organizing the picketing. *I Remember Like Today* does provide good insight into the multiplicity of experiences during the Auto-Lite strike, but it avoids the complex issue of fitting those experiences into a common theme.
In his 1993 dissertation, Roger Hansen Hall studied “Sam Pollock, Labor Activist: From Radical to Reformer, 1932-1972.” Working-class activist Sam Pollock was not formally part of the leadership of any organizations in his early days, but he was an agitator and an activist during his tenure in Toledo while with the LCUL. While this dissertation devotes its second chapter to the Lucas County Unemployed League (LCUL), it is apparent that Hall has borrowed his opinions from Rosenzweig. Hall’s biography of Sam Pollock is informative, but he offers little new insight or interpretation about LCUL beyond its relationship to Sam Pollock’s life.53

Gregory Miller’s thesis from 2000, “A Short History of Automobile Workers in Toledo, 1907-1935,” has a sizable portion devoted to the Auto-Lite strike and the Lucas County Unemployed League. Miller’s main contention is that the Auto-Lite strike and the Toledo Chevrolet strike of 1935 are connected via the LCUL. This essentially contradicts both Hall’s and Rosenzweig’s assumption that the unemployed leagues were fading from the political stage. Miller does provide ample space to the many workers involved in the strike, but he touches only briefly on the actions of women and other minority groups during the strike. A more thorough exploration is needed if the history of the Auto-Lite strike is to reflect the complexity of the actual event.54

As the object of this thesis is to understand the Auto-Lite strike through the lens of the worker community, the first chapter orients the reader to the various ethnic neighborhoods in Toledo in 1934. The most notable pockets of
communities that pertain to this discussion are the ethnic groups, many of which were located near parishes throughout the city. The second chapter addresses the Catholic churches and complements the discussion about the main ethnic groups involved in the strike: the Hungarians, the Poles, the Germans, and the Syrians. In the third chapter the focus shifts to the unemployed and a union that was formed to represent them. The Lucas County Unemployed League (LCUL) played a major role during the strike and proved to be a great ally of the picketers. The fourth chapter discusses the once-dismissed role that African-Americans played in the strike. Although Auto-Lite did not employ any black workers at the time, there is ample evidence that blacks did participate in the strike in 1934. Chapters six and seven review industrial relations at Auto-Lite, demarcating the line that distinguished workers from management and strikers from strikebreakers. The final two chapters consider the relationships between workers and local police, workers and small-business owners, and workers and the National Guard. The first two relationships proved to be critical in sustaining the worker community during the time of the strike. The third proved to be an outside force, invading the city in support of the large business interests.

The road to understanding smaller groups is less well-marked and therefore less well-known. But thanks to the efforts of a number of local archival institutions to develop their collections on the Auto-Lite strike, this task of uncovering the voices of the average citizens in Toledo in 1934 has become more feasible. The numerous oral-history interviews regarding the strike have afforded historians a great opportunity to develop a vivid narrative of the community
during the Auto-Lite strike. United States Census reports of 1920 and 1930 help recreate the make-up of neighborhoods, as do lists of participants in the strike, found in local newspapers – the Toledo Blade, the Toledo News-Bee, and the Toledo Times. Letter collections of strike participants and local leaders like Sam Pollock, James Roland, Art Preis, and the Rev. Karl Alter allow for a much more personal and in-depth assessment of the correspondence of organizers. All of these materials are remnants of the Toledo community that came alive against the hegemony of the owners and managers of one of the largest corporations in town.

Few historians have discussed the worker community that made the strike influential. If one chooses to observe this event from within the confines of worker versus owner, too many complexities are glossed over. The Auto-Lite was more than a struggle between classes; it was a battle against power. To echo Michael Kazin and Murray Bookchin: For movements struggling for a truly democratic society, “the language of class” may prove to be a barrier if we intend to speak “for the general interests of society.”

The views of those “on top” have been heard throughout the history of the Auto-Lite. The voice of the people “below” has been theorized by social historians. What we need now is to hear from the people directly.
Chapter 2:

Ethnic Neighborhoods

In order to better understand the idea of a worker community, we shall begin by examining which groups of peoples shared symbiotic relationships while employed at Auto-Lite. Who was involved in the Auto-Lite struggle, and what was their ethnic identity? Were there any patterns correlating people’s identities and their level of involvement? By reviewing the ethnicity and culture of the people involved, one may potentially uncover some of the community connections that were replicated during the strike.\(^{56}\)

Of the thirty wards in the city of Toledo, approximately four are the concern of this thesis. The first and most ethnically mixed section of town that participated in the strike lined the waterfront of the Maumee River, sitting south of Champlain Street and east of Cherry Street (see Map 1). This area contained German, Syrian, Hungarian, and French, most of which were first or second generation immigrants. These groups frequented the parishes of St. Mary’s (Cherry and Erie), St. Joseph’s (Erie and Lagrange), and the Syrian Melkite Mission (Ontario). Although St. Mary’s and the Syrian Mission’s congregations were ethnically homogenous, St. Joseph’s contained mixed crowds.\(^{57}\)
St. Mary’s Cathedral, located on Cherry Street, was positioned at the geographical center of Toledo at the time. In 1934 the parish’s yearly report, the *Status Animarum*, listed its size at 2,576 “souls” and also described its congregation as “of German descent.” While many German families had come to Toledo before 1900, most of them had scattered throughout the city. Those German families living around St. Mary’s would have most likely arrived after 1900. Also, this group probably made up a fair portion of those employed at Electric Auto-Lite, as the building was less than a mile away from any of those living east of St. Mary’s.\(^58\)

The parishioners of the Syrian Melkite Mission on Ontario Street were exclusively Syrian immigrants. Just a few blocks northeast of St. Mary’s Cathedral, the Syrian Mission had a membership of only 300. This number was probably not proportional to the Syrian population in and around the area. In 1934 the Rev. Paul K. Malouf of Syrian Melkite mentioned in his yearly financial report to the bishop that his numbers were down because the Syrian immigrants were attending other larger parishes close by in an effort to assimilate. Syrian neighbors were known to have been employed at Auto-Lite, but their relationship with other ethnic groups was not seamless. Similar to other newly immigrated groups, Syrian workers were known to lobby for employment of other Syrians.\(^59\)

This proved a point of contention for Auto-Lite employee Elizabeth Nyitrai, who noted in an oral-history interview her dislike of Syrians who were always getting preferential treatment when her department was hiring. One could assume that
Syrians were active during the strike, but there is little evidence that describes their affiliation with the general mass of striking workers at Auto-Lite.60

One ethnic group mainly concentrated on the East Side of the city was Hungarian. The Hungarian immigrants had arrived around the turn of the century and continued to settle in this region up until the First World War. Initially the establishment of the National Malleable Castings Company, which had relocated to Toledo from Cleveland, brought some 60 Hungarian employees and their families to settle East Toledo. Shortly after this settlement, St. Stephen’s Cathedral was raised on Genesee Street, and the area around the church came to be known as Birmingham. Conveniently located across the Maumee River from the Auto-Lite plant, this section of Toledo had a population of over 45,000 by 1920. The Rev. Eordogh, the priest who resided at St. Stephen’s, had on his block alone twenty households with family members working at the Auto-Lite plant.61

The Hungarian workers at the plant made up approximately ten percent of the workforce at Auto-Lite, depending on the department, with only the Poles constituting a larger portion of the workforce. Of particular importance to the eventual success of the strike was the relationship between these two ethnic groups. By some accounts first-generation Poles and Hungarians were not so fond of one another; their linguistic differences may have played a role in determining that. This appeared to be shifting as the second generation began joining the ranks. One woman recalled that her mother never wanted her to associate with Hungarians, for unspecified reasons. The woman later found out
that her best friend at Auto-Lite was Hungarian; she kept the friendship, but her mother was not pleased.\textsuperscript{62}

The Poles of Toledo were the largest ethnic group after 1900. Most Polish immigrants to Toledo had arrived before 1918, which meant that they were in fact from a region in Poland that had been annexed by either Russia, Prussia (Germany), or Austria. Most of the Poles who came to Toledo were from the German-speaking areas and thus settled on the outskirts of the traditional German-speaking section of town. Polish immigrants who settled out on the northern end of Toledo lived in the part of town that was known as “Lagrinka” and those who settled west of downtown, on Nebraska Avenue, lived in an area nicknamed “Kuschwantz.”\textsuperscript{63}

The Lagrinka neighborhood contained two Catholic churches with significantly large congregations. St. Hedwig’s and St. Adalbert’s served the large concentration of Polish immigrants who were some of the most active during the Auto-Lite strike. Both parishes had over four thousand members who regularly attended. Both listed their congregation as “all Polish” when filling out yearly description reports. In the fourth ward, the block on which St. Hedwig’s sat, there were twenty-five individuals who worked at Auto-Lite or at one of the major auto-parts manufacturers. St. Adalbert’s neighborhood, which is just north of St. Hedwig’s, was also surrounded by auto-parts workers. Both neighborhoods had significant numbers arrested during the strike, and a number of the labor captains lived in the area. John Jankowski lived on East Oakland up near St.
Adalbert’s. Interestingly, those Poles from the north side of town did not traditionally get along with Poles from Kuschwantz.\textsuperscript{64}

Though the Polish immigrants on the west side who attended St. Anthony’s Cathedral had their own unique community, distinct from the Lagrinka crowd to the north, it seems likely that those from both Lagrinka and Kuschwantz who worked together at the Auto-Lite factory may have found ways to make cultural connections. At least one worker who had lived in both Polish communities overcame the cross-town rivalries. Chester Dombrowski, one of the first Auto-Lite workers to join the FLU 18384, grew up on Central Avenue near St. Hedwig’s but by 1934 was living in the heart of the Kuschwantz community. Though Dombrowski was born in Ohio, his parents had come from the Russian portion of Poland and settled on Central near LaGrange Street in the heart of the northern Toledo Polish community. Around the age of 25, Dombrowski moved to the Kuschwantz Polish community and later emerged as both a leading unionist and member of the community near St. Anthony’s. Dombrowski’s story provides evidence that second-generation Poles were socially not as closed to outsiders as their parents. The convergence of these two communities would be solidified on the picket line at Auto-Lite.\textsuperscript{65}

This solidification is most apparent when one compares the home addresses of those who were arrested during the Auto-Lite Strike. The main concentration of citizens (as seen on Map 1) known to have been the most active during the strike came from the four neighborhoods previously listed. Police and court records verify this fact. If one looks at the map provided, it is clear that
those arrested and those banned from the Auto-Lite area by injunction are from these areas. A list of over two hundred names was compiled from two public record lists, one published in the Toledo News-Bee and the other issued by the court and posted in public. Published on Wednesday, May 16, was the arrest sheet for that day and the previous day, totaling 130 names. The next list was an injunction approved by the Lucas County Court of Common Pleas from Wednesday, May 23, banning approximately 92 individuals from “picketing, loitering or congregating at the plant of The Electric Auto-Lite Company.” The injunction was a continuation of one that had been ordered in mid April, which stated that only 25 persons were permitted to picket at each gate of the plant. Of these two hundred names, not including names counted twice, the breakdown by neighborhood is as follows ("neighborhood" means within one mile of the cathedral):

**Church (Neighborhood): Number:**

- St. Mary’s and Syrian Melkite: 50 arrested or individually banned;
- St. Hedwig’s and St. Adalbert’s (Lagrinka): 35 arrested or banned;
- St. Steven’s (Birmingham): 16 arrested or banned;
- St. Anthony’s (Kuschwantz): 21 arrested or banned;

**Total:** 121 out of 200 from these four neighborhoods

The citizens of the five ethnic neighborhoods made up the majority of those both employed at Auto-Lite and arrested during the course of the strike.
Among those people who had recently immigrated, there existed common threads, and it seems logical that these threads were significantly strengthened during the Auto-Lite Strike. The lines that distinguished the worker community from the interlopers did not divide the uniquely varied communities previously mentioned. The evidence supporting this fact is that Polish, Hungarian, German, and Syrian workers shared in their rank-and-file duty of getting arrested. Still other factors persisted to define the Auto-Lite worker community, such as religion. The connection of a common religion, Catholicism, and a centralized figure, the bishop of Toledo, appear to have helped define the community of the Auto-Lite worker.
Chapter 3
Worker – Management Relations

To understand working experience at Auto-Lite and how that affected the formation of community, a review of the relations between the rank-and-file workers and the Auto-Lite managers is in order. It is also the object to understand not only the worker, but also the thoughts, feelings, and responsibilities of those “above” him. If left only to generalizations, management and its place in the Toledo community would be incomplete.

If there was one single individual who inspired such indignation which brought the people of Toledo together at that time, it was then-president and part owner of Electric Auto-Lite, C. O. Miniger. Miniger was one of the founding members of Auto-Lite and had helped build it into one of the largest independent suppliers of automobile parts in the United States. While Miniger employed over 2500 Toledoans at his Auto-Lite plant, he also employed their hard-earned savings in his bank, Security-Home and Trust.

In the summer of 1931 Miniger had been a part of a banking scandal that resulted in the closure of over a dozen banks and robbed thousands of patrons of their life savings. As Timothy Messer-Kruse states, Miniger, “perhaps the richest man in the city and a director and majority shareholder in several banks,”
withdrew over $140,000 from Security-Home bank, while the mass of people came away with little or nothing at all. Miniger was not the only one withdrawing funds, though he certainly had easier access to it, walking straight into the vault from his office. Of those able to withdraw their money, some could not stomach the “guilt” that followed when their neighbors were out of luck.

One man took out $1,400 and walked around the block. Drawn back to the doors of the bank, he hesitated, then walked around the block again, until finally, he gave up, stood back in line, and redeposited his money. Another made it home with his life savings of $4,000 but couldn’t sleep that night and returned his cash to the bank the next day.67

These selfless acts by ordinary middle-class Toledoans served as prime examples of what it means to be a part of a community. When set side-by-side with the actions of C. O. Miniger or other “bankers with commercial interests and others” who “quietly removed” huge sums of money with little or no regard for the well-being of their neighbors, one can again see the definition of the community line, separating those who felt a kinship with their neighbors from those who did not.68

Miniger’s power and influence at Auto-Lite was often camouflaged by his public acts of seeming generosity. Many office workers remembered him as a dear old man (while others thought much less of him). Robert Campbell, a skilled machinist, recalled Miniger as “a very nice man . . . I started [with] Auto-Lite in December and didn’t have a paycheck coming; and he come around personally and . . . give everybody a five dollar bill at Christmas time and shake your hand and wish you a merry Christmas.”69

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Miniger may have indeed been a likable person, but when it came to business at Auto-Lite, especially in the early 1930s, kindness was not his first priority. Auto-Lite’s main customer, Ford, withdrew its account in 1934 and decided to manufacture their electrical systems internally. This left Miniger in a tight spot and as a result, he looked to squeeze every dime he could from the workers.\(^{70}\)

Employment at Auto-Lite was particularly precarious during the depression years of the early 1930s. The conditions were difficult, if not overwhelming especially for those who were older. Many men and women complained that as soon as they hit the age of forty, they were no longer employable: too old to work, too young to retire.\(^{71}\) The pay was low and not equal for men and women. Workers had little or no job security. The system of power in place at Electric Auto-Lite was top-down and tyrannical. If one were to describe this system visually, it would be a pyramid, but with an additional layer over the president representing the share-holders, many of whom worked in upper management.\(^{72}\)

Eating on the job was strictly prohibited by foreman. Except for a brief lunch break, workers back then did not enjoy the luxury of toilet breaks or snacking during the nine-hour day. One female worker recalled the reaction of her “cranky boss” if she was caught eating on the job: “This isn’t no restaurant. This is no place to eat . . . This is your job . . . You’re supposed to do your work.” There were ways around these rules, according to Chester Dombrowski: “I remember keeping a sandwich behind my shirt, and I’d see the foreman going up
to one end of the building or up to the department. You’d get behind your shirt, quick take a bite, and shove it back.”

Pay could also be lowered without cause, as Carl Leck recalled during the midst of the Depression. His boss Red Vollmer informed him that his pay would be cut by one-third by the end of the month: “Carl, how much you making, sixty-five cents an hour? Starting tomorrow, fifty-five cents an hour.” About a month later Vollmer approached him again, “Carl, you’re making fifty-five cents an hour, tomorrow forty-five cents an hour.”

On the factory floor, one could either work a dangerous job at a punch-press machine, which paid a higher wage, or work on the assembly line, which paid less. If one chose the assembly line, but was not selected immediately to work, then it was expected that the worker would sit and wait on a bench until notified by the foreperson to fill in a vacant position. Sometimes up to five hours would pass before the worker was sent home without pay.

Working in the pressroom was less competitive than the assembly line, but was exceedingly more dangerous. In the press room, workers controlled machines that pressed small cubical metal segments called dies into parts that later formed the automatic-light starter motors. Many of the machines were not equipped with safety guards, and with the required high rates of production, the fingers of tired workers became particularly vulnerable. In one instance while demonstrating the machine to a state inspection employee, an assistant foreman actually cut off his own finger. This was not a unique occurrence. Mary Aberling
recalled witnessing a man having his thumb “pulled out.” After that she would only do assembly work “because there was no danger of getting hurt.”

These were the kind of issues that encouraged unionization at Auto-Lite. When the workers first approached C. O. Miniger and Auto-Lite’s vice-president J. Arthur Minch about union recognition, they met staunch resistance. The workers were convinced they had the legal right to organize because of Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Relations Act of 1933. Charles Rigby, one of the initial captains of FLU 18384, recalled this first conversation between the workers and management:

The management invited us in, and they said, “Our door is always open to you to sit down and discuss problems.” And I [Charles Rigby] said, all right we’re going to discuss some of them . . . . We’d like to work out a contract – wages, hours, and so forth – according to law [Section 7(a)]. They said, “Well, we have no objections to Section 7(a), but we’re not going to recognize any union . . . . We have at least a million dollars to break your union.” This was J. Arthur Minch that said that, the vice-president of the Electric Auto-Lite Corporation. He said, “We got over a million dollars to break you, Charlie . . . You might as well forget it.” We had a great many meetings – oh, we had one meeting after the other to try to get that company to just bargain with us. They wouldn’t . . . . So, I said, well, I guess, Mr. Minch, you’ll have to spend that million bucks you got there . . . . “No,” he said, “we’re not going to recognize a union.”

The Auto-Lite owners, of course, considered their treatment of the workers as justified. As an independent auto-parts producer, Auto-Lite was heavily dependent on automobile corporations like Chrysler and Ford. If they were going to stay in business, their products must be cheap, or Ford and Chrysler would produce their materials in-house (which Ford eventually did).
The foreman and foreladies at Auto-Lite held a considerable amount of responsibility relative to their level on the business pyramid. The foreperson not only had to meet his or her order figures set each day for shipment, but s/he was also responsible for delegating jobs to the available labor pool that presented itself each day at the altar of Auto-Lite. The foreperson was management’s representative at the floor level, and while there was a great deal of pressure from management to meet their quotas, there was also much incentive in the form of bonuses.

Jack C. Lathrop, a foreman in Department Two, summed up his experience of selecting workers for jobs while at Auto-Lite: “When you’re the foreman of a line, let’s say – maybe you’ve got a dozen operators - it’s up to you to get production. You get the orders and that’s it. So, I tried to the best of my ability to pick who I thought was a capable man and who had had experience. I picked who I thought.”

While Lathrop portrayed capability being rewarded, a different interpretation is offered by the workers around this time. During this work schedule workers were expected to push out a certain number of pieces an hour per week to receive their projected wage. The average wage per week, which was less than the NRA code minimum in 1934, was around $20 for men and $15 to $18 for women. While a worker could earn up to a few dollars extra per week by keeping his/her numbers high, foreman were rewarded with bonuses in excess of a thousand dollars year.
Some forepersons were accustomed to receiving gifts from their workers, and this was one of the ways workers secured their jobs before the union was introduced. Steve Zoltan, a set-up man at Auto-Lite who walked out during the strike, recounted that he “knew a foreman that whenever he needed his home painted, he would lay off two or three operators, then offer them the job back if they painted his home.” Some workers would pay the foreman for job security, around ten percent of their take-home pay as a kind of job insurance. One Auto-Lite forelady had a fine appreciation for jewelry and would come to work “dolled up” with lots of rings on her fingers. When the workers failed to supply these, she would make life so bad that they would eventually quit.80

Protections for the workers were superficial. Workers had opportunities to join the Auto-Lite Council, an in-house union that was more like a club than a democratic institution. The council did allow for members to voice their concerns, but generally no formal action was ever taken. Those who joined were mostly office workers. The Mechanics Educational Society of America (MESA) union was a skilled trades union that was not officially recognized by the company, but nevertheless, it was able to make demands of the company. Their members were considered the most “skilled” and held positions that were not as easily replaceable as assembly workers or press-punch workers. Although the workers in Department Two were semi-skilled, and initially approached MESA to be recognized, they were instead referred to the Toledo Central Labor Committee. Since MESA workers represented only a small section of the 2500 workers at Auto-Lite, it was not a practical outlet for most employees. In order to obtain
redress for their grievances, workers needed an independent union that would bring their voices together.81

Most of the workers’ contact with the company before the establishment of FLU 18384 was with the foremen and foreladies at Auto-Lite. Most workers, even those who did not go out on strike in April, agreed that their supervisors were exceedingly tough on the individual workers for an array of reasons. And although foremen had pressures and incentives from higher up the business pyramid, it is clear that these power figures on the shop floor had succumbed to self-interest and showed little empathy for their fellow citizens. The foreperson’s dedication to the community ended the moment s/he entered the Auto-Lite plant. Whether or not the foremen and foreladies had gone through the experience of working at the semi-skilled level or whether they came from the skilled trades sector is unknown. To locate the origins of the forepersons would be a logical next step if one wished to further understand their role in Toledo’s worker community.
Chapter 4

Catholic Connection

One grand arch that likely connected many if not a majority of workers at Auto-Lite would have been their common religion. As other historians have pointed out, during the 1910s and 1920s, a strong connection between the various ethnic community churches probably did not exist, even if they were all Roman Catholic. Cultural differences carried over from the “old country” and served as defining characteristics. An authority figure such as the bishop of Toledo would not have wielded the power to coerce local parishes of different origin. But with the onset of the Depression, cooperation between ethnic parishes and the bishop’s seat would have increased. As churches became more dependent on funding from outside the congregation, the bishop, more than likely, would have demanded greater compliance to his demands. This increased centralization of power within the Catholic community of Toledo probably brought churches from the opposite ends of the town to a more unified understanding of the Catholic faith, and in turn help further illuminate the worker community.

In 1934 Toledo Bishop James K. Alter petitioned Bishop Schwertner of Kansas City for increased funding. Alter complained that car manufacturer Willys-Overland Company was in receivership because of the Depression
economy, and that their funds had grown exceedingly thin as a result of their attempt to feed and house the people. Increasingly, the local parishes were looking to Bishop Alter to pick up the tab, and increasingly the bishop demanded a more uniform adherence to his policies.83

One example of this revealed itself in the records collected by the Diocesan Chancellor of Toledo in 1934. The financial reports indicate that St. Stephen’s of Birmingham was not keeping accurate track of its debts. The reports pointed out several miscalculations and stated that all debts must be settled. Whether St. Stephen’s encountered such boldness in the 1920s is uncertain; however, it is certain that the bishop was in communication with parish officials quite frequently during the mid 1930s. How the bishop advised other parish heads during the strike is a different story.84

During the strike the bishop made a public statement, which condemned “industry” for standing “silent and deserted” during the last four years of depression. He also asked all citizens and workers to “stay out of the danger zone” and added that all people should “cooperate to the fullest measure with the military and civil authorities . . . [to] restore our good name before the country.” The public statement by the bishop also warned against the use of a general strike, as was highlighted in the newspaper article entitled: “Bishop Alter Appeals for End of Violence; Warns Against Move for General Strike.” Certainly the bishop was connected to the established leadership of the city and was therefore expected to encourage civil obedience. Yet perhaps his private feelings and those
sentiments he communicated internally to other parish heads were different from his public statements and more sympathetic to the strikers.85

For example, in an intriguing response to Auto-Lite public relations advisor Sam M. Jones, the bishop proved to be less supportive of the company’s management than they expected. On June 8 Jones had written Bishop Alter fishing for his vocal support of both the Auto-Lite Company and its president, C. O. Miniger. Jones also petitioned the bishop to support the company’s new clandestine public-relations strategy to mollify public discontent with the company. In reply the bishop stated: “I have read them [PR plans] with a great deal of care and in my judgment they should not only meet with the approval of the company but also the community in general.” The bishop seemed to imply that the company’s plans deserved public scrutiny.86

Regardless of the bishop’s position, it is also possible that priests chose to express privately their interpretation of church doctrine and the Bible. For many strikers, particularly Polish-Americans, the approval sought from their local parish priests was critical for their long-term commitment. For Poles in Toledo their faith was an integral part of their culture; as one striking worker at Auto-Lite put it, “the Polish speaking was religious as hell at that time.” Workers like Lester Byrd (one of the striking captains in the FLU 18384) lobbied the advice of his local priest when he was unsure whether or not to disobey the injunction ordered by Judge Stuart. As Byrd’s wife recounted in an interview years later, the priest told him that picketing “was acceptable to the church.” Though the Byrds were
not of Polish descent, they were Catholic and working class, and they found that
the church endorsed their actions. 87

Unlike many of the radical fringe groups working for the success of the
strike in 1934, most of the workers who were a part of the FLU 18384 were very
susceptible to the opinions of their religious leaders. Though the public message
promulgated by Bishop Alter was neutral at best, it seems likely that many parish
priests supported the efforts of the strikers. The fact remains that most workers
were members of the Roman Catholic Church, and this was likely an area that
they found they had in common.
Chapter 5

Unemployed Leagues

The Lucas County Unemployed League was an unemployed “union” of transient men and possibly women, who were displaced as a result of the Great Depression. The group was created in 1933 under the auspices of A. J. Muste’s National Unemployed League (NUL), which itself had been formed at a labor conference in Columbus, Ohio, earlier that year. The National Unemployed League served only an advisory role to the LCUL and as a publication organ for the leagues throughout the midwestern United States, which were strongest in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Indiana, and West Virginia.

The origins of the LCUL are more deeply seated in Toledo than those of the National Unemployed League that was begun by A. J. Muste. Although the LCUL was a chartered group by the Musteites, most of the members started working with the unemployed beforehand. One key organizer, Ted Selander, started his career with the Toledo Unemployed Co-operative League (TUCL). The group’s main function was as a “barter exchange where unemployed men and women may trade work for needed supplies or services.” The TUCL was founded in January 1933 by Joseph Walton, Samuel Sponseller, T. G. Selander, and S. V. Barnhart. Of these members only Ted Selander would go on to help found the
Lucas County Unemployed League later that year, along with Sam Pollock, a biology student at Toledo University who was working with the unemployed during his summers off.88

Historians have tended to classify the LCUL as a leftist radical group that was “Marxist in theoretical orientation and sought to work directly with laboring people, both employed and unemployed.” Most have written about the LCUL within the confines of the Toledo Auto-Lite strike or mention it in passing in histories on the NUL. While scholars agree that the LCUL played an important role during the strike, the depth of the discussion on the unemployed league has been limited. Mostly, the LCUL is credited with the idea to defy the injunction in an attempt to revive the strike.89

Most of the primary information on the unemployed leagues in Toledo is written by three known agitators – Ted Selander, Sam Pollock, and Art Preis – and a few other oral history interviews and newspaper accounts, which allow some reconstruction of their experiences. The whereabouts of the official records for the organization is unknown.

One of the first public demonstrations by the LCUL took place in 1934 and is a good example of how this group brought workers of the community together. Early that year the county commissioners of Toledo made a ruling that required all single transient men to spend their nights in a homeless shelter, also known as a “flop house.” Members of the newly formed LCUL, namely Sam Pollock and Ted Selander, were asked to visit the shelter by men who were forced to sleep there in order to observe the conditions. In Pollock’s words, what they
found resembled “the poor houses of the British Empire back in the 1830s [and] 1840s.” They were “very degrading places.” The LCUL pledged to help to organize the men into a union, which became known as the Single Men’s Protective Union (SMPU). 90

Following the creation of the SMPU, demands were submitted to County Commissioner John Quinlivan for food and rent subsidies. This request was subsequently denied on the basis that the city had no such funds. For Pollock, the most irritating fact was that the men were not receiving adequate nutrition. Pollock, a student of science and biology, worked in 1932 at a summer camp for malnourished children, and as a result was well informed on the subject. Upon inspection of the single men’s homeless shelter, he was particularly appalled by the food. In protest to the denial of funds and the conditions of the flop house, the LCUL and SMPU set up tents in front of the county courthouse. For approximately eight days, they continually rang a bell. Sam Pollock recalled in an interview some of the details of that demonstration:

I remember that we had a cracked bell that was very much like the cracked liberty bell [of Philadelphia]. It was virtually the same size of that bell that somebody had donated and a dismal dirge was rung on that bell day and night until finally the police descended upon us... [They asked that we stop as] the sound carried into where people were living... In those days, of course, cities were not as large... So we agreed because we did not want to assault the ears of the people themselves whose support we obviously were seeking and in most instances had. 91

After eight days the workers changed tactics, as they were not “getting any results.” The LCUL petitioned local businesses for donations and many responded, though it was not enough. The union members again changed tactics.
This time they designed a plan that would ensure a decent meal for all members at the expense of the county. The LCUL split up into groups of 40 and the unemployed were taken to breakfast at a small diner across from the county courthouse where the more prominent city employees typically enjoyed lunch.

Pollock described:

We got everything all set up and in a very orderly way, I took my group over to the restaurant at approximately 8:00 in the morning. I opened the door, advised the restaurant owner that I would be responsible for all of the bills and that all were to be fed. The restaurant owner was very cooperative. He put a number of tables together so that we were able to use three tables which would seat approximately 10 to 15 people if set up. They ordered breakfast and we walked around and told them, if you need seconds, go ahead and order up another and I would say that very frankly the minimum breakfast eaten by these people were two complete breakfasts and there were those that still obviously had a capacity for more and they had a third breakfast. After they finished, we said nobody was to leave the table, we were going to leave together, we want you to stay here no matter how fast you eat your meal, just sit around, have your coffee and relax. This we did. This might be considered to have been the first decent meal these workers had during this depression. When they went out they each gave me their check for their breakfast... I meticulously went through each one and signed my name on each check, then signed on a slip of paper...[that] this [check] is to be submitted to the county commissioners for payment and I signed my name and I put the date on the slip.^2

The slips were given to the county commissioner later that day as he came in for lunch, and he very quickly got in contact with the unemployed groups. When Commissioner Quinlivan told them he could not find the money to pay for the checks, the LCUL and the SMPU asked for his resignation, to give Toledo citizens an opportunity to appoint someone who knew how to take care of the
dispossessed. Three weeks later the commissioner rescinded the order that all men were to spend the night in flophouses.93

Clearly the LCUL was described accurately by James Lorence in Organizing the Unemployed, when he stated that their primary concern was “meeting the immediate needs of the jobless.” The group had embraced the idea of “self-help,” which had generally been condemned by most radical groups, for reasons that remain unclear. The self-help that the LCUL prescribed was different from that of the mainstream in that they actively confronted institutions of power. From 1933 to 1935, the unemployed leagues throughout the Midwest remained very active at the street level, consistently eschewing the path that embraced propaganda over direct action. This was a harder path to follow, but it earned the respect of the unemployed, and their membership numbers are evidence to this: they increased to 150,000 in Ohio alone in during this time.94

The organizers of the LCUL commanded the respect of the worker community in Toledo for many reasons. For one, Toledo suffered from a tremendous amount of unemployment during the mid 1930s. Figures recorded in 1937 put Toledo’s unemployment at around 32,000 out of a population of around 280,000. Though the numbers were slightly inflated that year because of the increased unemployment as a result of Roosevelt’s reduction of temporary jobs, one can safely assume that the unemployment figure in 1934 was over 12 percent. The members of the league were many times people between jobs or those working on the government payroll through programs like the Works Progress
Administration (WPA) or the National Recovery Administration. As Sam Pollock described them,

Never [having] had this experience before, [m any] were unemployed only because of the depression that we were going through, not because they weren’t trying to work. They weren’t winos, they were those who had either been so deprived or destroyed by the system that they were in that they were unable any longer [able] to pursue a viable course in terms of getting out of the circumstances they were in and had to be spoon-fed, led by the hand in order to provide them with the absolute minimum needs to survive in the society of that period of time. These were people that were accustomed to better things.  

The people who joined the unemployed leagues represented a variety of economic levels; they ranged in occupations from white collar to blue collar. Salesmen, accustomed to the good life during the 1920s, were now digging trenches with laborers on WPA projects. Independent entrepreneurs and small businessmen were forced out by big business. The main point here is LCUL members likely ranged in their previous work experiences, and thus the group was more reflective of the working Toledo community.

The LCUL was active was during the Auto-Lite strike in April of that same year. The strike itself was called on April 13 by the organized workers of the Auto-Lite plant because of poor working conditions, poor pay, and, most importantly, to gain union recognition. The company immediately began hiring strikebreakers, and a local judge issued an injunction, limiting the number of pickets at each Auto-Lite entrance to twenty-five. Sometime between the April 13 and 18, the LCUL approached the “captains” and offered their support. This greatly boosted the strike’s numbers by the hundreds, and by the eighteenth Judge
Ray Stuart banned all “non-workmen” from the picket site, particularly those associated with the LCUL. 97

The union committee of FLU 18384 agreed to abide by this injunction because they were pursuing legal action: they thought they could force the company to submit to arbitration because of the legislation passed in the National Industrial Recovery Act a year earlier. This concession proved to be unwise as within a few weeks the company was back to full employment while the strike itself was dwindling.

On May 5 the LCUL members decided they would ignore the injunction set by the judge and return to the picket line. They sent Judge Stuart a letter to inform him of their action, and in turn he notified the police and the media, who published the letter in the Toledo Blade on May 7. This same day arrest warrants were issued for four men of the unemployed league, including Selander and Pollock. As quoted in the Toledo News-Bee: “The four were charged with carrying banners . . . in front of the plant urging violation of Judge Stuart’s injunction.” By the fifteenth the anti-injunction party was in jail. Nearly forty-six had been arrested for violating the injunction, a mix of unemployed leaguers and workers from different plants across the city. All had joined in solidarity with the pickets. 98

To make matters worse for the leagues, the judge who was presiding over the hearing had apparently been drinking. A lawyer for the union observed “[Judge Stuart] had received many threatening telephone calls and letters. Probably his shattered nerves needed the booze, but he was a sad sight when he...
was finally lifted to the bench.” On May 16 the courtroom was lively, and there was much singing and shouting as the attorneys of the company attempted to speak. When the judge announced that he would continue the injunction and that Ted Selander and Sam Pollock were to be jailed for “disturbing the trial,” those present in the courtroom had a different idea. The crowd, which was sympathetic to Selander, Pollock, and the other forty-four on trial, ignored the judge’s decision and reportedly “lifted [the defendants] to their shoulders and bore them off as heroes.” Immediately the crowd returned to the picket line.99

From this date on the union strikers, unemployed leaguers, and many Toledo citizens chose to ignore the injunction set by the judge, as did the local police, who at the time had their pay reduced by the city, and as a result sympathized with the strikers. Until May 23 most pickets and protestors were peaceful, though a number of exceedingly energetic speeches by American Workers Party (AWP) and NUL member Louis Budenz from May 21 through 23 seemed to draw more people to the area outside the factory.100

The crowd turned violent the morning of May 23 when one of the workers inside the building hurled a large steel bolt from a window and hit a woman in the head. The six-thousand-strong crowd began attacking the building with bricks and prevented the strikebreakers and administrators from leaving until the Ohio National Guard arrived the next day. From that point, the plant was closed for a week and the “Battle of Toledo” between the National Guard and the Toledo community ensued.101
Though this effort was not entirely coordinated by the LCUL, its members were active in keeping the anti-Auto-Lite fervor alive. Describing the role of the some of the town’s unemployed, Roy Howard of the Scripps-Howard national news bureau reported to a White House staffer the following:

The point about Toledo was this: that it is nothing new to see organized unemployed appear on the streets, fight police, and raise hell in general. But usually they do this for their own ends, to protest against unemployment or relief conditions. At Toledo they appeared on the picket lines to help striking employees win a strike, tho you would expect their interest would lie the other way – that is, in going in and getting the jobs the other men had laid down.102

This statement is crucial to understanding the coalescence of the unemployed and employed picketers during the Auto-Lite strike. The author demarcated the usual antagonism that typically divided workers and the unemployed, and then noted how that division had been circumscribed along a new parallel. The unemployed were standing alongside the strikers at the picket line, not walking past them. This illustrates the essential character of what might be called community unionism.

Other times LCUL members were more militant than some of the “captains” of the FLU appreciated. A union organizer at Auto-Lite, John Jankowski, recalled in I Remember Like Today that Ted Selander and Sam Pollock asked him and a few other leaders of the Auto-Lite workers union to come to a meeting off of Jefferson Avenue. Selander asked the men if they would join the unemployed league, and they agreed, paying 50 cents per person. The LCUL group then proposed an idea to the workers. As Jankowski remembered it:
The strategy [they proposed] was, approximately, they wanted to burn the place down. I said, I want to go back to work over there if I possibly can . . . They gave us ideas. They organized a group of men, their own group, I guess. They took electric bulbs, cap off, and filled them up with some kind of an acid or something and put a cork in there. Then they’d go along the building and throw them inside the plant. That’s supposed to eat up steel and everything – dangerous to human beings.\textsuperscript{103}

At this same meeting the LCUL members also asked the workers for donations for the Loyalists and Republicans who were gaining in power in Spain at the time. The response of the Catholic Polish-Americans was not reassuring. One man, Alex Donachevsky, reacted to the request: “That son-of-a bitch is a goddamn Commie! What the hell are you talking? What, help the Loyalists? You can stick this [membership card] up your . . . .” The striking workers proceeded to walk out of the meeting, throwing their LCUL membership cards to the floor. Jankowski and his “captains” were clear: “We didn’t want no part of Communists because they were anti-religion.”\textsuperscript{104}

Clearly the LCUL had overstepped its boundary by revealing its political allegiances to the workers of Auto-Lite. Selander and Pollock were young devoted radicals itching for revolution, and here it was at their Toledo doorstep. Perhaps they were out of touch with the religious sympathies of workers at the time. Other historians have remarked that communist and socialist organizers were more cautious of workers’ attitudes toward ideas that had become taboo in American society. A Chicago communist organizer explained how some got around this bloc: “You didn’t talk about socialism per se . . . . You talked about
issues and saw how people reacted. You talked about how one could attain these
things.”

That was a learning experience for the young radicals of the LCUL, but
they did not give up the fight against the Auto-Lite company. As Jankowski also
mentioned: “They kept a-coming. Helping here and there. And when that big
riot started, they were the ones that pushed the people.” During the battle with the
National Guard, Jankowski observed the following: “I’m standing against the
building, protecting myself against the tear gas. I remember like today. They
were pushing people:

Grab that chair, grab that watchman, grab him by the head. Pull
his hair, girls... And when [the ] big fist started, I looked over at
the big advertising signs. They were sitting on top of the signs
watching – the two agitators, Pollock and Selander, they were
sitting up there watching the show. While all these people were all
lit up, [were] fighting the guards and everything.

Although Jankowski’s memories of the unemployed league were not flattering, in
many ways the LCUL were the ones pushing the envelope for the community. By
most accounts the workers and friendly protestors were inexperienced in the art of
protest. The LCUL members had been perfecting their methods for about a year.
They were accustomed to confronting authorities and were the most qualified to
direct people during a strike. The road was not always so easy for these
unemployed league organizers. Shortly after the end of the Auto-Lite strike, some
LCUL members vowed to strike with meat cutters in Toledo in late 1934. While
picketing, Pollock was lured by three men into an alley and beat up, with “one
man jump[ing] on his body and fracture[ing] his back.” This put Pollock out of
order for nearly a year. John Jankowski’s exclamation was true: “Them birds were really fighters.”

Though the Lucas County Unemployed League’s role in the Auto-Lite strike is well known, their membership lists are not. Membership to the league was probably open to all people. It is known that women and blacks did participate in many of the national events that LCUL members attended, and so it can be assumed that this notion of equal treatment extended to northwest Ohio. In the section on African-American involvement, there is further evidence to support these conclusions, but there is little empirical evidence of what women did with LCUL or what the percentage of women was.

The most important idea that the LCUL stood for was the notion of combining the workers with the unemployed. In this respect the focus of the community was not so internally focused on the confrontation between workers and scabs, but externally focused on their primary antagonist, the corporation. It was this allegiance, though not in perfect harmony, which really propelled the spirit of a Toledo worker community forward, and it was most apparent during the strike.
Chapter 6

Blacks Active during the Strike

African-Americans had been trickling into Toledo from 1900 through the Depression. Although some blacks were retreating from the crowded industrial cities of the Northeast, most were moving north from states like Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. Upon arriving in Toledo, most black migrants settled in the northeast portion of Toledo on Stickney Avenue, on the south side of the city off of Dorr Street; or across the Maumee River on the East Beach, south of the Hungarian Birmingham district. Those living “out Stickney” were closest in proximity to the industrial heart of Toledo, but that did not guarantee them employment.108

The likelihood that blacks were employed at the Auto-Lite factory is quite slim, meaning they were also unlikely to join the Federal Labor Union (FLU) 18384. Although it would be unwise to dismiss black union participation altogether, the evidence in favor of that possibility is tenuous at best. A telephone survey conducted in 1936 revealed on average 2 percent of the industrial workforce in Toledo was black. Electric Auto-Lite employed 3,500 people at that time, and the number of black men or women working at Electric was listed as zero. One black Toledo resident remembered that most of the Auto-Lite jobs
belonged to “the polish people” who had those positions “sewn up.” She recalled that blacks had known “better than to apply because they were not welcome.”

This was also confirmed by Norville Hissey, an electrician at Auto-Lite who was quoted as saying that “the company didn’t have no colored at the time, but then nearly everybody that worked at the Auto-Lite lived here in Toledo.” Historian Gregory Miller interpreted the last half of this quote as “striking,” because “Toledo by this time had a large (and growing) African-American population.” It is his contention that blacks were largely “invisible” to whites who did not even see them as neighbors, as blacks were segregated from white society. Miller believes that “the only places for African-Americans in Toledo industry were janitorial positions.” He also claims that blacks faced “the same old indignities in Toledo . . . [as] they had faced in the South. Their biggest challenge was ‘getting past the factory gate.’”

In general Miller is probably correct to paint such a dismal picture of the Toledo black community during the Great Depression. Despite the difficulties most blacks faced, however, they did not just give in to impoverishment. They found other ways to make lives for themselves. They too helped formed the general fabric of Toledo society at the time, and although a disproportionate number struggled to live at a subsistence level, the black community in Toledo during 1934 should not only be defined by the hardship and poverty they endured.

African-Americans made up only a small percentage of the population in Toledo, so it should not come as a surprise that only a small percentage of those employed in industrial jobs was black. Those employed at these industrial sites
usually served as janitors and laborers, but many others were finding small business opportunities to provide for themselves and their families.

Kimberly Cadwell, in her dissertation: “From Africatown to ‘Out Stickney’: Reminiscence of a Toledo, Ohio, African American Community 1919-1960,” devotes a good portion of her work to the exploration of how black residents on Stickney Avenue supported their families and communities. Through a series of interviews, Caldwell recreates the community of the first, third, and fourth wards, describing a number of residents working in both industrial facilities and small-business positions throughout Toledo. Some of the residents that Caldwell found gainfully employed were Marie Boyd at Toledo Machine and Tool Company, Sam Kasle of Kasle Iron and Metal Company, Tom Bell at Spicer Manufacturing, Horace and Bill Astin at Inter-Lake Iron Company, and Charles Bennett, who owned a fruit stand. Henry Lawson, Jr., who may have played a crucial role in the Auto-Lite strike itself, owned a truck with his brother William, and both were self-employed. The Lawsons sold coal from the truck bed, worked part-time for Kuehnle Lumber Company and for the City of Toledo. L.A. Goings was among the African-American professionals, serving as the neighborhood attorney.112

All of these people lived on or near Stickney Avenue, which was the third largest black community in Toledo in 1935, with just over a thousand citizens. It is likely that this section was not the most impoverished, as that crown belonged to the “Belmont Area,” according to John Rinehart in his sociological study entitled “The Negro in a Congested Toledo Area.”113 Rinehart notes that
“according to the City Plan Commission a total of 2,500 negro families were on relief in June of 1935. These 2,500 families represented 8,970 persons on relief in addition to the 2,937 Negroes employed on W.P.A. projects.” These figures indicate that many blacks were unemployed and that many were receiving unemployment relief from the government. Toward the end of 1933 and through 1934, the United States government had instituted a relief program that was to be the precursor to the Works Progress Administration (WPA), known as the Civil Works Administration (CWA). As it is documented that many African-Americans took advantage of the WPA in Toledo, it could be assumed that many also took advantage of the CWA.\textsuperscript{114}

While the CWA was in effect, it served communities by employing millions of Americans temporarily and providing wages that would ease the pain of the Depression. Depending on the duration of a public project, those working for the CWA would be let go after a few months and return to search for more permanent work. In many ways this temporary solution put groups like the Lucas County Unemployed League (LCUL) in an auspicious situation for approaching and recruiting new members. Louis Budenz observed in December 1933 that for these workers, “shuttling back and forth between unemployment, CWA jobs, and industry . . . there is no substitute for the unemployed leagues in such a picture.” Among these new members, some African-Americans may have been recruited.\textsuperscript{115}

Although such evidence is circumstantial, there remains a strong possibility that blacks were active in the LCUL. For example, the National
Unemployed League (NUL) newsletter *Mass Action* stressed that “all unemployed are invited to join the Leagues.” In addition, one of the NUL’s main organizers in Pennsylvania was black. Ernest McKinney, graduate of Oberlin and veteran of World War I, commented about his experience in the NUL: “When we organized the NUL . . . that was a full-time business for me. I learned something from them. Here I was a Negro, head of that organization in Pittsburgh with 60,000 members and only 15 or 20 of them black. All the rest of them were white. I was the head of that organization and never had a race problem.”

As the Ohio unemployed leagues continued to grow, hovering around 100,000 to 150,000 members through 1934, and with the high percentage of unemployed in Toledo, particularly within the African-American community, it seems likely that blacks became more involved in the labor struggle, particularly through an outfit as liberal as the LCUL.

Was there any chance that some blacks belonged to the local FLU at this time? Most scholarly evidence points out that African-Americans were not active in unions during the early 1930s, except for some Communist-influenced unions and a smattering of trade positions that were dominated heavily by African-Americans. However, there are two accounts of African-American participation on behalf of the picketers during the Auto-Lite strike.

The first is a story by Mary Lehman who recalled the events of the riots on Thursday, May 23, during an oral history interview with Juliette Fleenor in 1983. Lehman was a night student working towards a nursing degree at Toledo University at the time and was working part-time at the Auto-Lite building as a
receptionist for the assembly distributors. She remembered that on that day, the entrance to the building was particularly hard to get through as “the union was using some large black men to block the entrance.” Of course it was not unusual for picketers to do their best to keep strikebreakers out of the factory, but the fact that black men had been employed for such a job is interesting for a number of reasons.\textsuperscript{119}

Those African-American men who put themselves in front of the entrance to the Auto-Lite plant would have been aware that they were defying an injunction; they would also have been aware that their image or proposed function – to deter the white female workers of the plant – was in a way reinforcing a common stereotype. Maybe they were being used by the labor movement; however, what these men were also doing was forcing the Auto-Lite workers to recognize new allies in their labor struggle. How else might have blacks involved themselves in this strike?

A second account of African-American action during the strike is about the owner of a truck that was used on May 24 to stockpile bricks. The owner was a “colored guy,” who had assisted loading “half bricks” taken right out of Champlain Street into the bed of his truck. The truck eventually ended up strategically parked in front of the Auto-Lite building. Eyewitness Jack Lathrop, a company foreman who was working during the strike, testified to this, as did many others. Both Mary Lehman and Margaret Jacobs spotted the truck outside “loaded up with bricks . . . driving around all afternoon.” Who was this man? Did he involve himself in the strike to help the unionists? Or was he forced by
the picketers to help them? It is a curious story. In Lathrop’s version “the boys” had gotten to him and “fixed him up,” perhaps slashing his tires and leaving his truck positioned right in front of the building. At the same time, is it impossible that the truck driver, who might also be an independent business owner, identified with the workers out on strike?120

Though the evidence is spotty, it remains a possibility that blacks were involved in the FLU 18384 around the time of the strike. Past evaluations of the evidence have suggested that blacks were not part of the union, based mainly on the fact that so few were employed at the large industrial companies of downtown Toledo.121 With the introduction of new evidence that some black men were on the picket line, one cannot deny the prospect. Though no black people worked at the Auto-Lite factory, some did work at other industrial plants in Toledo, and perhaps were able to get into FLU 18384 that way. Even more likely is the involvement of African-Americans in the Lucas County Unemployed League. The high rates of black unemployment and relief, coupled with the fact that the LCUL had no racial qualifications would make for an advantageous relationship for both parties. Moreover, many blacks likely took advantage of the CWA program, and one of the major goals of the LCUL was to pursue these individuals as good potential members. The LCUL likely coordinated the presence of African-American males standing in front of the Auto-Lite entrance. Whether or not the “colored” man who drove the Ford truck was an enthusiastic part of the resistance remains obscure. However, if he were not an active collaborator, it is not likely that he would have been so willing to put his truck in the line of fire.122
Though black Toledoans did not play as large a role as some other ethnic
groups, they were part of the laboring class, even if less vocal, and thus
potentially part of the Auto-Lite struggle. Though white superiority and
segregation were ingrained social norms for most people, it was clearly not so
internalized as to prevent African-Americans themselves from seeking to
participate in a worker-community struggle of which they had every right to be a
part. The racial block that was imposed by white America was not ubiquitous;
there were holes in the economic and social normative system. Just as blacks had
found ways to employ themselves outside mainstream job avenues, they likely
also joined alternative groups like the LCUL. Though there is much room for
future studies to define the degree of involvement of African-Americans, the
evidence in this thesis suggests blacks were an active part of the Auto-Lite
struggle.\textsuperscript{123}
Chapter 7

Strikebreakers

The Great Depression arrived in Toledo 1929, but the city was not hit especially hard until 1931. The banking crisis of 1931 devastated the local economy and although the crash in Toledo was not the largest, proportionally it was “unprecedented.” The city did not soon recover, but by 1934 industrial businesses were hiring again. Wages paid by most of the local companies were exceedingly low, while turnover of employees was high. The fact that there was quick turnover meant that people could get work, provided they were willing to wait hours and even days for a spot on the line. These possibilities alone made auto-parts cities of the north a magnet for migration.

Many small farmers and coal miners from Kentucky, Tennessee, and southern Ohio had been devastated by the depression, and as a result they were forced to foreclose on their farms and move to find jobs. Farmers learned about jobs thanks to advertisements in newspapers and over radio waves paid for by employers’ associations of the North. Moving to Toledo was in many ways an easier adjustment for the southerners as the pace of work and life in Detroit was often overwhelming. So by way of opportunity, Toledo became the home of destitute rural folk and miners during the early 1930s. Here the industrial owners
of Toledo – in particular those at Auto-Lite – saw opportunity and welcomed the competition between laborers as a result.  

Much to the chagrin of working-class native and ethnic Toledans, these workers drove down the wages and available hours. As a result, many of these recent arrivals felt alienated from other “native” Toledo workers and tended to befriend other migrants from more rural areas. In April 1934 these same marginalized workers felt less compelled to join a strike that was called by workers who had lived in Toledo and been immigrants themselves or their descendents. The fact that most of the workers at Auto-Lite were relatively recent settlers themselves did not seem to have engendered any empathy towards the new migrant class from the South. Elizabeth Nyitrai, a migrant from southern Ohio and daughter of a coal miner, recalled that workers were not to kind to the newcomers who had flooded the labor market. While her father had been a member of a coal miners union, there was little family support for her to join the FLU 18384 at Auto-Lite. Nyitrai had this to say about her fellow workers in Department Six: “many of the girls who stayed in [during the strike] were from Tennessee or Kentucky . . .[and] we were stuck because we were so dependent on the money.”

The workers who “stayed in” were referred to as “scabs” by those who chose to strike. And like Nyitrai, this classification weighed heavily on their minds – yet they felt they had to continue to work to support their families at home. Though one should not forget the humanity of the “scabs,” these people must be classified as outside the Auto-Lite worker community. They not only
continued to work during the strike, defying perceived class interest, but they also reinforced perceived cultural differences, because most had been recent arrivals from the countryside. As a result, scabs were often shamed by workers as a way to dissuade them from continuing to work.

In one case a group of picketers discovered that Steve Kardos was a strikebreaker. On May 26, Kardos had made the remark that he could not get his paycheck for working the previous week because the riots had closed the Auto-Lite building. Apparently he was unaware that the crowd around him, mostly made up of young women and men, was composed of strikers. Kardos did make an effort to escape into a cab that had just dropped off a reporter, but to no avail. He was snatched up by a hysterical crowd, stripped of all his clothing except for a tie, and forced to march down Jackson Street, in front of the white-collar workers of downtown. The next day the owners of Electric Auto-Lite offered a reward of $1000 for “the arrest and conviction” of the perpetrators. Although nonviolent, it should not overshadow the fact that this was public scarring. The strikers meant to humiliate a young man who they thought had betrayed his own class and community.128

One young strikebreaker was followed home by a group of picketers – a common occurrence that led numerous strikebreakers to request pick-up service by the company in order to avoid such harassment. The young strikers refrained from aggravating the woman until she reached her neighborhood, but then as Mary Louise Heban recalled, “her skirt was lifted over her head.” This was a deliberate maneuver done in front of her neighbors as a way of shaming her for
scabbing. Heban recounted this story with a laugh, but she also remembered a time when her father was striking the mines of Breckenridge, Colorado: “My father used to say, ‘don’t look that way, they are scabs, they are scabs!’ And you stop and think, they are human beings too.”129

Other stories of strikers sneaking in during the first months of the strike and leaving bits of cheese on the work stations of the workers who crossed the picket line were also common, implying that they were rats for putting their own self-interest over the interest of their fellow workers.130 All of these stories attest to the idea that workers had a sense of community, and when that was violated, they reacted. The fact that most strikebreakers came from outside the community is significant and should be noted. After the strike was over and the union opened up, many of those who had scabbed during the strike did indeed join.

Certainly one cannot ignore the predicament of the strikebreakers. They were merely looking out for their most immediate interests. With the depression in full force, families were powerless against the reality of potential poverty and misery. Some people were forced to borrow from friends and family, while others put their children to work, and still others kept gardens on small plots of land.131 It is likely these problems affected most workers at Auto-Lite, but how was it that certain people were in a position to act with foresight and join a union, risking economic destitution, while others chose to look out for their immediate interests and cross the picket line? Evidence suggests that those who chose to walk off their job felt they had the backing of their community. This support system was not as pronounced as a state welfare system; rather, it was a kind of
community net, woven through the development of neighborly relationships that kept the spirit of the strikers intact. This was the main advantage of those who had lived in Toledo since the early 1900s. Small farmers and coal miners answering the call of the advertisements in their local newspapers arrived during the Depression and were foreign to established communities, regardless of their ethnicity. And to established worker communities, they were interlopers.
Chapter 8
National Guard, Police, and Special Deputies

Of the three policing forces that were involved during the strike at Auto-Lite, only one represented the interests of the community. During the strike the municipal police would seem to have displayed fair judgment in balancing the will of the strikers to express their displeasure with management while also controlling the crowd for public-safety reasons. After the crowd was provoked by the bolt thrown from the roof of the Auto-Lite plant that the citizens below turned aggressive. The intervention of the National Guard continued to fuel the aggression of the crowd from May 23 for nearly five days. At the end of May, the real blame lay at the feet of County Sheriff Krieger, who both deputized the strikebreakers and called on the National Guard.

On May 11, the total number of Toledo policemen had been reduced by fifty and the remaining patrolmen on duty had had their pay slashed. Most of the officers were earning around $200 per month in the late 1920s, but because of mounting city debts, their pay was reduced to $130 per month, with most of that paid in scrip. Needless to say, the morale of the police force was not high at the time of the strike.132
Depleted of funds and numbers, the city police were called upon by Mayor Solon T. Klotz and the Lucas County Common Pleas Judge Roy Stuart to control the picketers around Auto-Lite during that spring. The injunction set by the judge stated that the strikers were allowed twenty-five pickets per entrance at the plant, and it appears the local patrolmen executed this order strictly during the early half of the strike in April. By May 7, a number of pickets and unemployed league members vowed to “smash” this injunction. The police seemed to continue to follow their orders initially, but as arrest numbers started to mount and the jail cells filled, they loosened their reins.¹³³

During the middle part of May, the police chose to be strategic in their arrests and instead of antagonizing the mounting crowds, they left them to vent their displeasure against the Auto-Lite leadership. It does not seem unreasonable that these policemen felt a certain bond with the workers, as both groups were struggling to make ends meet. As one striker recalled: “There were police around, but some of the policemen – bless their souls that are alive yet today – they themselves was in sympathy with the strikers.”¹³⁴

During the afternoon on May 23 the crowd around Auto-Lite had swelled to six thousand people. Some were there to picket, others were listening to speeches that ranged in topic from revolution to reform, and still others were just stopping by to see what was going on. Late in the afternoon, the steel bolt was thrown from the top of the Auto-Lite plant that sent the crowd into a frenzy.¹³⁵

The police were likely overwhelmed for a few hours as the workers and their fellow citizens began throwing bricks through the windows of the building,
while at the same time the special deputies on the roof of the Auto-Lite plant were launching tear-gas bombs into the crowd below. One policeman recalled his response to the scene: “There isn’t too much you can do. Let it burn. If you did too much, you would endanger more lives than you’d help.”

The police eventually got the crowd under control, but the scabs and the management of Auto-Lite were still locked inside, terrified to leave the building for fear of being mobbed. Sheriff Krieger, who happened to be good friends with C. O. Miniger, the owner of Auto-Lite, eventually called in the National Guard around midnight. When they arrived, the “Battle of Toledo,” as A. J. Muste called it, was born.

On May 24 the National Guardsmen set up shop around the perimeter of Auto-Lite at major street corners, wielding machine guns to protect the building. They eventually helped rescue those who had been trapped inside Auto-Lite during the riot. The National Guardsmen were met by an unwelcoming crowd with whom they “battled” for the next five days.

From the perspective of most Toledoans, the guardsmen were seen as an invading force. The entire regiment had come in from Fremont, Ohio, and while most were quite young (many were still in high school), the National Guard did plenty of damage. Unfamiliar with the circumstances, the guardsmen found their stay in Toledo very unpleasant.

The size of the influx of the National Guardsmen was unprecedented in Ohio history. At around thousand it was the largest deployment of guardsmen in history to that date. The opinions of Toledoans ranged widely regarding the
guard’s demeanor. Some recalled them being young and scared and untrained. Others felt bad for them, as they were tormented day and night by flying bricks and slingshot rocks. Others found the guardsmen to be abusive and indiscriminate when using violence. By May 26, three days after the militia’s arrival, two men had been killed, twelve others wounded by bullets, and around fifty others were hospitalized from gas grenade explosions, bayonet wounds, or smoke inhalation from gas. At least twenty guardsmen had also been injured, mostly by bricks. Many in the community protested the use of the gas grenades, since the smoke tended to drift into the neighborhoods surrounding the plant.138

Eventually the National Guard was withdrawn by Governor George White on June 1. The community of strikers and neighbors found the National Guard to represent an outside entity that was not welcome (except by the scab workers and management personnel who had been locked up overnight at Auto-Lite on May 23). In contrast, the local police force represented moderation to the people of the Toledo community. It served the city in a variety of ways that were both fair and humane to all involved in the picketing of Auto-Lite. With the strikers the police force may have felt a “fraternal concurrence” and yet they did not join the protest. They did, however, rescue those who were injured and attempted to hold those accountable who were violent.139

The mayor of Toledo at the time complimented the police force for its efforts and condemned Sheriff Krieger’s appointed deputies as the cause of the violence. In mayor Klotz’s words, “The crowd was orderly before the gas was
thrown and later in the evening the police had everything under control except when bombs were hurled from the plant.”

While calling the police allies of the strikers might be stretching the reality of their relationship, they did use discerning judgment that earned the strikers’ respect. The other two policing groups did not endear themselves to the strikers, and thus both should be considered to lie outside the worker community.
Chapter 9

Small Business Hookup

Many small businesses in Toledo helped sustain the strikers as they walked the picket lines. The reasons behind these decisions remain obscure, but for the strikers this community support was crucial. This was the codification of worker and community coming together. Traditionally these efforts by small-business owners have gone unnoticed in labor history, perhaps in part because of the language that is used in describing their different positions in American society. Owners, one might think, would want to work together against workers. But this was not the case during the strike.

Margaret Byrd, wife of union organizer Lester Byrd, remembered many workers going around the city and collecting food from different small businesses in an effort to sustain the strikers and their families. “They had a food committee. And they would go to the bread company and get so many loaves of bread, and they would go different places. There was hams and meat shops would give hamburger and different things like that.” The greatest ally the owners of Auto-Lite had in their efforts against the strike was the hunger. As religious workers’ and ethnic institutions ran out of funds, small businesses were next on the list to be solicited.  

141
Carl Leck recalled receiving support from a local hardware store when workers and citizens were fighting it out with hired deputies around the Auto-Lite building. The deputized strikebreakers were positioned on the roof of the plant and were raining down smoke canisters on the pickets, probably on May 23. According to Leck, “When they started throwing the tear gas, there was a little store the next block up, and there was about ten of them went in there and told this guy, ‘We need your work gloves.’ They just took his whole stock of work gloves.” The gloves were used to retrieve and throw flaming tear-gas canisters back into the Auto-Lite plant.142

Through the months of April and May, many workers took turns picketing the entrance to Auto-Lite throughout the day. Although only twenty-five were legally permitted at any one time, many strikers chose to stick around the downtown area to wait for their turn to march. During these times, Buddy’s Box Lunch, which was owned by Virgil Gladieux, provided food free of charge. John Jankowski remembered that “Virgil Gladieux had a beer joint on the corner there. His dad put him in the business. He was giving us coffee and doughnuts in the morning for nothing. The pickets were getting lunch along then and hot dogs and stuff like that.” On May 23 Virgil Gladieux received a call from the management at Auto-Lite requesting food for those locked inside. The owner refused the order and from that day forward, Gladieux endeared his shop to those who were pro-union.143

Margaret Byrd also recalled how generous Buddy’s Box Lunch had been to the strikers, “Gladieux’s – Buddy’s Box Lunch – was very wonderful with the
strikers. They donated their coffee and sandwiches to the ones on the picket lines, all for free. And they had a small place. They really couldn’t afford it, but they were sacrificing themselves at that time.”144

One sandwich shop did not turn down the Auto-Lite order May 23 and the union members of FLU 18384 remembered that for a long time. “Homemade had a concession in there, too, with a wagon in there. They volunteered to give the scabs the food they wanted. Once the strike ended, anybody buy from Homemade, they’d push that sandwich down his throat . . . Oh, yeah, they were vicious against him, because they knew he was feeding them scabs in there when they were trying to get them out of the plant.”145

Small shopowners in Toledo at this time should also be included as a part of a worker community. Some might be inclined to associate small-business owners’ interests at odds with workers because of the capitalist framework they both live under. However, in 1934 Toledo workers and sympathetic owners made a connection that served both their interests.
Chapter 10
Conclusion

The interpretation that has been presented in this paper is meant to challenge conventional preconceptions of worker friends and foes. Before and during the Auto-Lite strike, connections were formed among workers and between workers and their community. It was these connections that helped shape the reality of the worker community in Toledo during 1934.

Workers developed relationships – created communities – through their interaction at their jobs and in their neighborhoods. As the Depression played a huge role in forcing people out of their comfort zones, more working-class individuals came into contact with one another outside the confines of previously tight-knit communities.

The workers’ relationship with other members of their communities shone brightest during the strike. Although many had come from different ethnic backgrounds, these workers overcame differences in language and culture. Unemployed citizens formed coalitions with striking workers. Black Toledoans picketed alongside white auto-parts workers. Policemen showed respect and sympathetic local businesses recognized the value of community over profit. This
development is something the short-sighted big businessmen were made to understand by the collective will of the real workers of Toledo.

Those outside the framework of the worker community were seen as selfish or invasive and not always treated with respect. Strikebreakers, foreman, big business owners, and the National Guard were among these groups.

This paper has suggested supplementing a class interpretation with a broader community one in an attempt to make clearer the variety of groups that play a role in labor struggle. Strikes for union recognition and wage increases were not just the business of those workers who would directly benefit. All members of the wider community of 1934 Toledo were involved.

What can the Auto-Lite struggle offer in response to Gerald Friedman’s challenge to labor historians to “reconsider [our] vision of organized labor as the cutting edge of the future democratizing of society,” how does one do this? To answer this question we must first go back and see how the people of Toledo reconsidered their vision of organization. As past historians have observed the Auto-Lite strike, they have done so with the foreknowledge of how unions and labor institutions would turn out. Perhaps these ideas were not set in stone, but were more fluid and more of a reflection of the forces within the community. We must remember that the institutionalization of Labor came later.

In 1934 and during the Auto-Lite struggle, one can see that labor unions were only just beginning to form in the burgeoning industry of the automobile. The federal labor unions were an attempt to tap into the ferment at the time that existed not only in the auto-industry, but throughout the community. During the
Auto-Lite struggle the forces of community and union mixed and created something that has been designated in this paper as a worker community. Perhaps such a construct can shift the perspective, to consider how the Auto-Lite event helped organize labor at a time when ideas about auto labor institutions were not clearly formed?

In order to answer Gerald Friedman, we must go back and continue to study these labor struggles in their own time and their own context. As A. J. Muste suggested, labor should be “drawing in the broadest forces” possible, in order “to insure the broadening of all struggles.” Historians might imitate Muste’s challenge by also “drawing in the broadest forces possible” in their study of strikes and community struggles like that of the Auto-Lite.
The phrase “organized labor” has multiple definitions. There are many different ways labor has been organized throughout history, for example, some would say in the 19th century labor was organized by capital. When one talks of unions as organized labor, then one might be referring to a vast array of organizational methods, for example: industrial unionism, which organizes workers based on the industry in which they work; trade unionism, which organizes workers based on the type of skill they possess; IWW’s one big unionism, is an attempt to organize all workers, both skilled and unskilled (vertical integration), across all industrial lines (horizontal integration). The most effective in the United States has been trade unionism, which also happens to be the most preferable to business.


3 The reasoning and origin of FLU’s local numbers 18384 remain unknown. One Toledo union member suggested that they may have been the original number of members in the union.

4 The name Electric Auto-Lite Corporation is the formal title of the company. In this thesis, for brevity sake, it shall be referred to as Auto-Lite.


6 I borrow the term community-unionism from Elizabeth Faue, but my definition is different. Faue credits Mary Heaton Vorse as having all but coined the term, and sees Vorse’s definition of, “new unionism” as synonymous with her definition of “community unionism.” In Labor’s New Millions (1938), Vorse refers to “new unionism” as something that did “not stop at the formal lodge meeting . . . [rather] as a way of life which involved the entire community.” Faue’s “Paths of Unionization: Community, Bureaucracy, and Gender in the Minneapolis Labor Movement of the 1930s,” in We Are All Leaders replaces the phrase “new unionism” with “community-unionism” and then applies the idea to reveal the crucial but often overlooked role that women played in the Minneapolis labor movement during the 1930s. My definition of community-unionism differs in that the main focus is on the social groups within the community. The union functions under the umbrella of the worker community. Elizabeth Faue, “Paths of Unionization,” in Lynd, ed., We Are All Leaders (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 172; Mary Heaton Verse, Labor’s New Millions (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1938), 234.

7 Charles N. Glaab and Morgen J. Barclay, Gateway to the Great Lakes (Tulsa, Ok.: Continental Heritage Press, 1982), 41-43; Tana Mosier Porter, Toledo Profile: A Sesquicentennial History (Toledo: Toledo Sesquicentennial Commission, 1987), 36-38. Telegraph came to Toledo in 1848 compliments of Lake Erie Telegraph Company.

8 Porter, Toledo Profile, 46-53; Glaab and Barclay, Gateway to the Great Lakes, 41.

9 Porter, Toledo Profile, 72-74.
12 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 48-49.
16 Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 8.
17 “1000 Walk Out At Auto-Lite: May Appeal To Labor Board,” Toledo News-Bee, 13 April 1934, page 1; Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 9-10, 217.
18 “Hope Is Seen For Returning Strike Parley,” Toledo News-Bee, 24 April 1934, page 1; “Parts Strike Terms Are Set By Employers,” Toledo News-Bee, 25 April 1934, page 1. On 16 May 1934 the Toledo News-Bee quoted Arthur Minch as saying: “As far as we are concerned the strike is over. All the jobs have been filled.”
20 Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 152, 154.
21 Fine, The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle, 276-79; Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 10-17. The strike plaque and memorial stands at Champlain and Elm streets in Toledo.
22 Historians, who have accepted the CIO as a viable union in American history, escape the question Werner Sombert posed in 1906 Why Is There No Socialism in the United States? A question that continues to haunt the profession until today.
28 Brody, Labor Embattled, 21. Brody uses “community mobilization” as a blanket term for Lynd’s varied vocabulary of alternative-unionism and community-based unionism. Lynd applies these to groups and unions that meet his requirement of democratic, politically independent, and providing mutual aid.
29 Lynd, “We Are All Leaders,” 3; Rosemary Feurer, “The Nutpickers’ Union, 1933-34,” in Lynd, “We Are All Leaders,” 40.


Lynd, “*We Are All Leaders,*” 24n54, 18.

The other two major strikes of 1934 include the San Francisco General Strike and the Minneapolis Truck-drivers Strike, both occurred shortly after Auto-Lite and had profound implications. For a good general history of all three, see Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker 1933-1941*, 217-317.

William Haskett, “Ideological Radicals, the American Federation of Labor and Federal Labor Policy in the Strikes of 1934” (Ph.D. diss, University of California, Los Angeles, 1957), chap. 5.

Ibid., 181; Haskett’s conclusion makes sense given the fact that he had very limited access to primary sources. Intrinsically the strike greatly affected conditions on the shop floor, but Haskett would not have known this unless he had explored local newspapers or interviewed local people from Toledo.

Toledo’s example provides great evidence that the legislation passed during this period had no teeth. Even though Section 7(a) stated that workers had the right to organize, it did not make it mandatory for business to recognize the workers union.


Ibid., xviii-xix, 519.


Ibid., 220-29.


A number of young agitators who were active in the National Unemployed League (NUL) and the LCUL would eventually work with the new left radicals of the late 60s in the USA. Most notably A. J. Muste.

Rosenzweig, “Radicals and the Jobless,” 66-68.

Ibid., 77.

There are a number of books and articles that deal with the unemployed councils of the day. Unemployed councils differed from the unemployed leagues
in that they were communist-run. For a good explanation of the differences and a history of Midwest unemployed councils, see James J. Lorence, Organizing The Unemployed, 56. Also see Roy Rosenzweig, “Socialism In Our Time: The Socialist Party and the Unemployed, 1929-1936” Labor History 20 (Fall 1979): 485-509; Daniel J. Leab, “United We Eat,” Labor History 8 (1967): 300-15.

50 Rosenzweig, “Radicals and the Jobless,” 76.

51 Ibid, 77.

52 Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, epilogue.


57 “Status Animarum: 1934,” located at Archive for the Catholic Diocese of Toledo. A “Status Animarum” contains a general report from each local parish, which is sent and then bound into a book by the chancellor’s office. These primary documents contain information relating to the demographics of the congregation, including ethnicity, marriage and baptism figures, size, and general financial updates. There are no page numbers

58 Porter, Toledo Profile, 57; “Status Animarum: 1934.”

59 Glaab and Barclay, Toledo: Gateway to the Great Lakes, 71.


62 Mary Lehman interviewed by Juliette Fleenor, 18 February 1983, Auto-Lite Oral History Collection, Toledo-Lucas County Public Library Local History Department, Toledo, Ohio.

Porter, Toledo Profile, 47, 57; also see Marvin Jay Glockner, “Assimilation of the Immigrant in the United States as Characterized by the Poles in Toledo” (master’s thesis: University of Toledo, 1966). “Status Animarum: 1934.” Used for both St. Adalbert’s and St. Hedwig’s.

Philiposki, Toledo Polonia, 7; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930, sheet number 27a, Lucas County, Ohio, Ward 4, Block 89. “Status Animarum,” 1934 for St. Anthony’s.

“In the Court of Common Pleas, Lucas County, Ohio” issued on 23 May 1934, Arthur Preis Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries; “List of Jailed Strikers,” Toledo News-Bee, 16 May 1934, page 2. The percentage of people involved in the strike from those areas would have increased by 10, if the range around the churches was raised to 1.5 miles.


Messer-Kruse, Banksters, Bosses and Smart Money, 70.

Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 43-44.

Ibid., 45.

Ibid., 192-93.

Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 219.

Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 57, 61.

Ibid., 60-61, 62.

Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 60.

Ibid., 59.

Ibid., 218-19.

Ibid., 56.

Ibid., 62; Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 219.

Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 53-54.

Elizabeth Nyitrai interviewed by Juliette Fleenor, Auto-Lite Oral History Collection, Toledo-Lucas County Public Library Local History Department, Toledo, Ohio.

Mary Lehman interviewed by J. Fleenor; Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 67-70.


“Karl Alter’s Personal Correspondence 1934,” 29 June 1934, Box 3.12, Archive of the Catholic Diocese of Toledo.


“Auto-Lite Strike Statement: May 1934” in Collection of Bishop Alter’s Publications, Archive of the Catholic Diocese of Toledo; Sam M. Jones to Rt.

87 Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 154. Margaret Byrd interviewed by Juliette Fleenor, Auto-Lite Oral History Collection, Toledo-Lucas County Public Library Local History Department, Toledo, Ohio.

88 “Barter Group Is Organized By Toledoans,” Toledo News-Bee, 16 January 1933, page 1; “Jobless League Gathers Produce From Own Farm,” Toledo Times, 11 June 1933. TUCL member Sam Sponseller wound up forming his own unemployed group, the Lucas County Unemployed Council, which was also active in the community in 1934 during the strike. Sponseller’s name appeared on the famed injunction list that Judge Roy Stuart posted on the 23 May, the day of the riot.


90 Sam Pollock, interviewed by Bill Miller, transcript, June 20, 1973, page 20, Sam Pollock Papers, 1932-1982, Center for Archival Collections, Bowling Green State University.

91 Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 26.

92 Ibid., 28-29.

93 Ibid., 30.

94 Lorence, Organizing the Unemployed, 56; Folsom, Impatient Armies, 351-52.

95 Sam Pollock, interviewed by Bill Miller, transcript, June 20, 1973, page 22, Sam Pollock Papers, 1932-1982, Center for Archival Collections, Bowling Green State University.

96 Cohen, Making a New Deal, 157.


100 Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 222.


103 Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 153.

104 Ibid., 153-54.

105 Interview with Stella Nowicki in Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, Rank and File, 85.

106 Korth and Beegle, I Remember Like Today, 154.
110 Miller, “A Short History,” 26. This quotation is likely listed in the unabridged version of Korth and Beegle’s *I Remember Like Today* (1988). Jack C. Lathrop also confirmed that blacks did not work at Auto-Lite “until after the union organized”; ibid., 55.
111 Ibid., 26.
112 Caldwell, “From Africatown to ‘Out Stickney’,” 94-5.
113 Though the title of Rinehart’s master’s thesis includes the pungent and antiquated phrase “Negro,” his research contains sound statistical information relevant to study of African-Americans of Toledo during the Great Depression. Rinehart, “The Negro in a Congested Toledo Area,” 26. The total black population in Toledo in 1934 was around 15,000.
114 Ibid., 26.
115 Louis Budenz to Art Preis, page 2 of 6, December 18, 1933, Arthur Preis Collection box 2, folder “Correspondence-1,” Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, call number AX 238.
119 Mary Lehman, interviewed by Juliette Fleenor, 18 February 1983, Auto-Lite Oral History Collection, Toledo-Lucas County Public Library Local History Department, Toledo, Ohio.
120 Korth and Beegle, *I Remember Like Today*, 135; ibid., 133; Lehman interview by Fleenor.
122 It is a problem that this piece discusses Black action with little direct quotation of Toledo Blacks themselves; this is definitely one area upon which this essay could be greatly improved. Kimberly Caldwell’s *Out Stickney* has some wonderful oral history accounts, but detail is limited on the Auto-Lite event.
123 In case the reader is left wondering why Black Toledans would become involved in the strike event on the same side of a group like the FLU that
excluded them from becoming members, perhaps the fact that Auto-Lite did not provide one job out of at least 2500 positions is in part the reason.

125 Ibid., 61-2.
126 Miller, “A Short History,” 24-5.
129 Mary Louise Heban interviewed by Juliette Fleenor, 23 February 1983, Auto-Lite Oral History Collection, Toledo-Lucas County Public Library Local History Department, Toledo, Ohio.
130 Elizabeth Nyitrai interviewed by Juliette Fleenor.
131 Korth and Beegle, *I Remember Like Today*, 163.
132 Ibid., 27.
133 Sam Pollock to Judge Stuart, 5 May 1934, Arthur Preis Collection box 2, folder “Correspondence-1,” Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries.
134 Korth and Beegle, *I Remember Like Today*, 151.
135 *Toledo News-Bee*, 23 May 1934, 24 May 1934, pages 1-2. Most accounts attribute the injury of Alma Hahn as the beginning of the attack on the Auto-Lite building, however according to Irving Bernstein it was the assault of an “old man in the street” by a company deputy that triggered the crowd’s reaction. Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 222.
136 Korth and Beegle, *I Remember Like Today*, 137.
138 “Casualties of the Riot,” *Toledo News-Bee*, 26 May 1934, page 2; “Gas Hazards Are Protested,” Toledo Blade, 28 May 1934. One guardsman was wounded by a sniper and several others reported being shot at.
139 The phrase, “fraternal concurrence” was coined by Karl Marx at the Inaugural Address to the International Working Men’s Association in 1864.
141 Korth and Beegle, *I Remember Like Today*, 165.
142 Ibid., 183.
143 Ibid., 155.
144 Ibid., 166.
145 Ibid., 155.
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