

GENERATIONS OF WORK

North Carolina's working people stand ready to fix the problems that the pandemic has so starkly revealed

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orth Carolina's history is rich with examples of working people organizing to demand dignity in the workplace and economic security for their families. From union organizing to strikes and protests, North Carolinians have long understood the value of working together to confront unsafe and inhumane conditions on the job. Particularly in the face of a global pandemic, it's of vital importance to celebrate how working North Carolinians — past and present — have changed their lives for the better.

GOING ON STRIKE

Strikes are an extremely powerful way for working people to show their collective strength by withholding their work, disrupting the operations of an employer, or both. While often associated with unionized workforces, many groups of non-unionized working people in North Carolina have deployed strikes to push back against problems in their workplaces.

General Textile Strike of 1934

North Carolinians played an underappreciated role in securing many of the basic protections that working people across the country enjoy today. The General Textile Strike of 1934 was the largest work stoppage in the United States at that point and played a pivotal role in the creation of the National Labor Relations Act.

Fed up with stretch-out practices to boost productivity — practices that have roots in plantation-style time management — 400,000 textile mill workers up and down the Eastern Seaboard walked off the job. Striking workers demanded decent pay and an end to oppressive working conditions. Roughly 65,000 North Carolina textile workers participated in work

stoppages in September 1934, drastically expanding labor organizing, 1, 2 with many new members coming from Southern cotton mills where working people previously had little or no organized voice at the bargaining table. Mill owners, particularly in

the Southern states, responded with violence, threats, and In the 1940s, workers at R.1. Reynolds Tobacco Company staged a strike and voted to join Local 22 of the retaliation against organizing In the 1940s, workers at R.1. Reynolds Tobacco Company staged a strike and voted to join Local 22 of the leaders. The actions of mill owners, the plight of mill workers, and the threat to the nation's economy at large helped convince President Roosevelt and many leaders in Congress that industry leaders could not be trusted to negotiate peaceably with their workers. This concern ultimately led to creating the National Labor Relations Board to protect workers' right to organize

and mediate labor disputes.

In a cruel twist of historical irony, Southern workers helped to usher in an era of unionization that provided far more benefits to working people in other parts of the country. Workers in North Carolina effectively used the leverage provided by the NLRA to secure better pay and working conditions for several years, but state legislation passed in 1947 substantially undermined the ability of unions to secure concessions from business owners in North Carolina.

T WAS TIME

Local 22: Building multiracial worker power in Jim Crow North Carolina

One chapter of North Carolina history to keep close to mind during these difficult times is the story of Local 22, one of the most remarkable and unlikely examples of working people fighting for their rights.

Winston-Salem in the 1940s was a company town. Three families effectively ruled over the economic and political life of the city, and they enforced a strict racial and class hierarchy. Against all odds, Local 22 became one of the most successful organizing efforts in North Carolina history. While the gains were only partial, and some were eroded by the elites' efforts to break the growing base of worker power, the episode helped chart a path forward and remains a shining example of what is possible when working people fight for justice.

Jonathan Murray, "Textile Strike of 1934," in North Carolina History Project, accessed July 18, 2020, https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/textile-strike-

Special to People's World, "Today in Labor History: 1934 Textile Workers Strike Begins," People's World (blog), September 18, 2012, https://www.peoplesworld. org/article/today-in-labor-history-1934-textile-workers-strike-begins/.

Efforts to organize started in 1941 and reached a crucial moment in June 1943 when workers in the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, led by women who worked stemming tobacco leaves,

staged a sit-down strike. The strike quickly spread to other parts of the R.J. Reynolds facility, grinding production to a halt and sparking stoppages in nearby companies. When workers voted to ratify Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agriculture, and Allied Workers, it became one of the largest multiracial unions anywhere in the country. Negotiations with R.J. Reynolds management ultimately secured significant concessions, including recognizing legal holidays, seniority-based promotions, bathroom breaks, and a more robust process for addressing worker grievances.³

Local 22 was also remarkable in being decidedly more egalitarian than many other unions, with representatives of the lowest paid occupations having the same vote in union decisions as their peers with more technical and better paid positions. From the earliest moments of the first strike in 1943, women were far more prominent in Local 22's leadership than most unions at the time.

"After we built our union, we told the people that just to build a union is not going to solve all of our problems. ... If you are going to defeat these people, not only do you do it across the negotiating table in the R.J. Reynolds Building, but you go to the City Hall, you elect people down there that's going to be favorable and sympathetic and represent the best interest of the working class," said Robert Black as presented in *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* by Robert Korstad.

The leaders of Local 22 recognized that strength at the negotiating table had to be paired with political power to truly change the conditions for working people. Local 22 founded a political action committee; educated local residents about how political power at the federal, state, and local levels shapes people's everyday lives; conducted voter registration campaigns; mobilized networks in the Black community to get people to the polls; and sent delegations to lobby Congress. Local 22 also played a key role in strengthening the local NAACP chapter, which had only 11 members in 1941. Within a few months of starting an NAACP membership campaign, the local chapter had swelled to nearly 2,000 members, making it the largest in North Carolina at the time.⁵

Local 22 posed such an existential threat to the status of Winston-

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³ Philip Gerard, "Workers Unite," Our State, August 27, 2018, https://www.ourstate.com/workers-unite/.

⁴ Robert Korstad, Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South (University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁵ Korstad.

Salem's leading families and to white supremacy more broadly that it immediately became a target. City fathers stoked racial tensions and preyed on fears of communist influences in the union. After leaders were arrested on the picket line and sentenced to hard labor on chain gangs, Local 22 was dissolved just a few years after it had been formed. Worries among white elites that Local 22 would lead to a wave of multiracial labor and political organizing also motivated subsequent state laws to undermine unions in North Carolina.

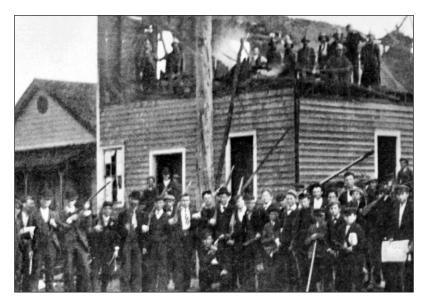
Victories may have been impermanent and one of the reasons white supremacists in the North Carolina General Assembly moved to undermine unions, but the creation of Local 22 showed that working people often possess more power than they recognize. The experience also demonstrated how to overcome racial divides between working people and helped to develop tactics used in the Civil Rights Movement decades later.

ELECTORAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND POLICY CHANGE

Building political power is critical to ensuring that working people are treated with decency in the workplace and have an opportunity to achieve economic prosperity. But, gains made at

the bargaining table and through other forms of collective action often prove to be short-lived in the absence of elected officials who are accountable to the demands of working people.

Across a range of issues, policy choices have the power to support the well-being of workers. Even during challenging times both past and present, key wins are made possible when the lived experiences of workers mobilize broad outrage, galvanize political alliances, and compel policymakers to act. In these ways, public policy campaigns are effective tools in building the systems that can improve outcomes for workers.



In 1898, armed rioters posed in front of the black-owned newspaper, The Daily Record, in Wilmington, N.C., after they set it on fire. White supremacists also killed an unknown number of Black residents and overthrew the elected Black and white leaders of the city's government. Photo source: Public Domain, accessed via Wikipedia.

Fusion Movement

The Wilmington Massacre and coup in 1898 that overthrew a duly elected city government has received increased attention recently, but not enough attention has been paid to the instructive story of how a multiracial coalition of organized Black and white working people managed to gain power in the first place.

When white farmers supporting the Populist Party joined forces with both Black and white members of the Republican Party, a coalition was born that managed to wrest control of the NC General Assembly, NC Supreme Court, and most of the NC Congressional delegation from segregationist Democrats in 1894. That same coalition later won majority control of local government in Wilmington, the state's most populous city at the time. Several important reforms emerged from the 1895 General Assembly, including increased access to voting for Black North Carolinians, increased funding for education, and limits on interest rates for loans.⁶

While this coalition drew on many bases of support, a critical bloc emerged from Black tenant farmers organizing through the Knights of Labor. Even before the political breakthrough of 1894, the Knights of Labor were instrumental in backing the successful candidacy of Henry Cheatham, a man born into slavery who was elected as the first Black member of Congress from North Carolina's 2nd Congressional District in 1888.

Disagreements over economic policy and a sustained campaign of violence in Wilmington and beyond ultimately destroyed this alliance, but the mere fact that it existed is a testament to the power of working people coming together over the boundaries of race, region, and specific economic interests.

BUILDING A BOYCOTT

Boycotts are a way to put pressure on a company by organizing members of the public to stop buying the company's products. This method is intended to hurt a company's profits and public image, and well-organized boycotts can be extremely effective at forcing positive changes in employer practices, as well as workers' pay and benefits. North Carolina has seen several successful boycotts, drawing attention to working conditions and forcing employers to change their behavior.

Mt. Olive Pickle Company boycott

The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) began investigating the working conditions in the North Carolina cucumber industry during the mid-1990s. Because of exemptions to New Deal legislation meant to preserve white supremacy, many migrant farmworkers lacked federal protections that other working people enjoy, including minimum wage and overtime pay. Many workers were paid instead at a piecemeal rate, often a fixed amount for each bucket or flat of crop harvested.

In 1997, FLOC proposed a three-way contract between the Mt. Olive Pickle Company, the North Carolina Growers Association, and the union. Mt. Olive refused the contract, claiming that since the company bought their cucumbers from farmers, they did not directly employ farmworkers. The controversy over who in the supply chain was responsible for working conditions dominated public discussion. After two years without meaningful change

[&]quot;Fusion of Republicans and Populists," in NCpedia, 2006, https://www.ncpedia.org/fusion-republicans-and-populists.

^{7 &}quot;Marker: E-122 – Knights of Labor," in North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program, 2012, http://ncmarkers.com/Markers.aspx?Markerld=E-122.

in the industry, FLOC called for a boycott of all Mt. Olive products. The boycott garnered significant public attention, especially from religious groups like the National Council of Churches. Many grocery stores abided by the boycott and refrained from offering Mt. Olive products.

In September 2004, after nearly six years, Mt. Olive Pickle Company relented and signed a three-part contract with FLOC and the NCGA. The contract established a grievance procedure and the presence of camp representatives, along with better pay and an increased



In 2004, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, the North Carolina Growers Association, and the Mt. Olive Pickle Company signed a contract to end the worker-organized boycott of Mt. Olive's products. The boycott was designed to pressure the Mt. Olive to improve the conditions for agricultural workers in the cucumber industry. Source: NC State AFL-CIO.

price for cucumbers. Furthermore, the contract allowed some 8,000 H-2A workers (temporary guest workers) to unionize with FLOC. Organizers in Mexico ensure that the contract is honored on both sides of the border.

The campaign against Mt. Olive Pickle Company demonstrates the power of public boycotts. It also casts light on important strategies for organizing those workers who earn low wages in the labor movement, including the contract between three parties and transnational organizing.

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Page one: "Mill workers picket," public domain photo via Library of Congress.

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