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"KEPT RIGHT ON FIGHTIN' . . . " African American Women's Economic Activism in Milwaukee

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During and after World War II, many African Americans migrated to urban areas in the North and West in search of economic opportunities. Although they faced widespread job discrimination, Black women struggled for employment in offices, factories, and stores. Black women in Milwaukee organized in an autonomous club for working women, La Circle, and also submitted formal complaints attesting to injustices. Although unsuccessful, their resistance had both local and national dimensions, especially when considered within the context of a surge in new scholarship that investigates the economic dimensions of mid-twentieth-century Black freedom struggles. These freedom fighters sowed the seeds for later activism by Black working women in the city, including union leader Nellie Wilson, who forced one of Milwaukee's largest manufacturing companies, A. O. Smith, to eliminate gender discrimination from its hiring practices. These examples represent not only the persistence of Black women's economic activism in postwar Milwaukee but also the nationwide emergence of such resistance during the civil rights era.

Black Working Women and Industrial Labor in Milwaukee

During and after World War II, many African Americans migrated to urban areas in the North and West in search of economic opportunities. Although they faced widespread job discrimination, Black women struggled for employment in offices, factories, and stores. Black women in Milwaukee organized in an autonomous club for working women, La Circle, and also submitted formal complaints attesting to injustices. Although unsuccessful, their resistance had both local and national dimensions, especially when considered within the context of a surge in new scholarship that investigates the economic dimensions of mid-twentieth-century Black freedom struggles.[1] These freedom fighters sowed the seeds for later activism by Black working

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women in the city, including union leader Nellie Wilson, who forced one of Milwaukee's largest manufacturing companies, A. O. Smith, to eliminate gender discrimination from its hiring practices. These examples represent not only the persistence of Black women's economic activism in postwar Milwaukee but also the nationwide emergence of such resistance during the civil rights era.[2]

Although Milwaukee was home to many successful urban industrial workers, Black women aspiring to postwar careers in the city's manufacturing firms, like Sylvia Bell and Willhemenia Berry, often experienced a different reality.[3] Bell migrated to Milwaukee from Louisiana in 1947 but could never obtain a manufacturing position, despite coming because she thought jobs there would be plentiful. Companies simply would not hire her because of her race, gender, and lack of education. Bell stayed in the city, nevertheless, becoming a community leader after her brother was killed by police.[4] Berry left Louisiana and migrated to Milwaukee in the mid-1940s. Milwaukee, she said, "really wasn't anything like they came back and said it was. It was not that good. I'm not disputing what've said—but people who were living here would tell you that it was much better than it was. But, after we came here, it just wasn't that way."[5] Bell and Berry both came to Milwaukee from rural Louisiana, expecting to find employment in Milwaukee's heavily advertised manufacturing industries, but instead took jobs as nursing assistants—a typical, physically demanding, low-wage job that many Black women in Milwaukee had to take because they were excluded from factory positions.

The discrimination faced in Milwaukee by these Black women resonated with longstanding national patterns where Black female workers had the hardest time getting jobs. Although many Black women left farms and domestic service to successfully find manufacturing work, they were still underrepresented in factories. Examining employment-related census data from the period 1860–1960, sociologist Enobong Hannah Branch found that, although the numbers of Black women employed as operatives in manufacturing industries steadily increased, their percentages—when compared to white men, white women, and Black men—have historically been the lowest (see Figure 1). Although some Black women had manufacturing jobs, many of them were still impoverished. Men received high-enough industrial wages to escape poverty, but not necessarily working women, especially African Americans, who were relegated to the lowest-paying positions.[6]

Milwaukee was one of the most industrialized cities in the urban Midwest, and although, when it came to manufacturing jobs, Black women there did better than Black women nationally, the number of Black women employed

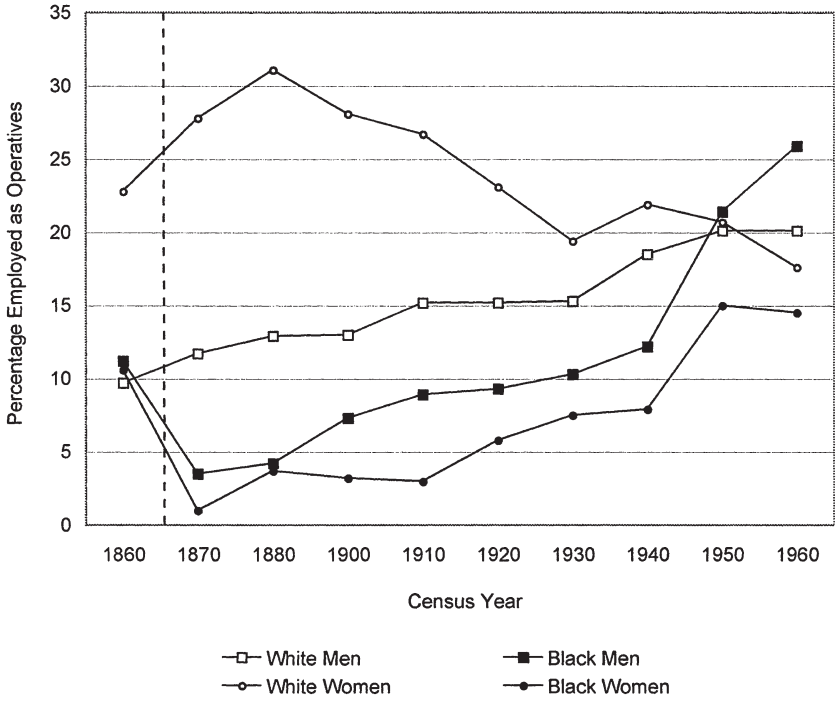

Figure 1. Proportion of White Male, Black Male, White Female, and Black Female Workers Employed as Operatives, 1860–1960. Source: Enobong Hannah Branch, "Figure 4.2," in *Opportunity Denied: Limiting Black Women to Devalued Work* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 73. Copyright © 2011 by Enobong Hannah Branch. Reprinted by permission of Rutgers University Press.

in Milwaukee's manufacturing industries was still far fewer than Black men, which followed the national trend. In 1940, 66 percent of Black men in the Milwaukee labor force worked as skilled, semiskilled, or unskilled workers, but only 21 percent of Black women. Most Black women workers (64 percent) were domestic workers or service workers like beauticians, barbers, charwomen, janitors, cooks, waitresses, or elevator operators. As a result of World War II, by 1950 the number of Black women employed as industrial operatives increased to 30 percent, but still 52 percent worked in domestic or other service work, while 79 percent of men in the labor force worked in manufacturing positions. By the 1960s, Black women had lost many of the gains they had made in the manufacturing industries while holding relatively steady in service industries at 48 percent. Black men lost positions in the

manufacturing industry as well, although 70 percent remained employed as skilled, semiskilled, or unskilled workers.[7]

While in 1950 and 1960 Black women in Milwaukee outpaced white women as industrial operatives, this was because white women in the city took on an increasing number of higher-paying and less physically demanding clerical jobs, which Black women struggled to obtain (see Table 1). Historian William Thompson wrote of the period, "But in all the Milwaukee metropolitan area, only eighty-eight of the 4,444 typists, forty-six of the 9,721 secretaries, twenty-four of the 3,146 stenographers, thirty-eight of the 1,996 telephone operators, sixteen of the 4,970 bookkeepers, 129 of the 4,268 professional nurses and sixty-six of the 13,283 retail clerks were black women."[8] Although African American women made minor gains in post–World War II Milwaukee, these statistics back up Bell's and Berry's experiences and substantiate that Black working women never really gained a foothold in Milwaukee's manufacturing labor force. The majority of Black working women in Milwaukee remained locked out of the manufacturing and clerical labor forces and were circumscribed to low-paying service occupations. Those who resisted these inequalities from the 1940s through the 1960s faced powerful institutional opposition; their efforts dovetailed with the contemporary civil rights movement.

La Circle Club for Working Women

The Milwaukee Urban League (MUL) focused much of its energy on Black workers, with its main effort geared toward helping newly arrived migrants get acclimated, find housing, and apply for jobs. The MUL stood at the center of Black community life and had long supported and encouraged Black working women.[9] In 1920, a year after it was founded, the MUL partnered with the Milwaukee Young Women's Christian Association (MYWCA or the "Y") to create La Circle Club, a group designed to meet the social, cultural, political, and religious needs of African American industrial working women. Although created via this joint partnership, La Circle Club fell under the auspices of the Y's Industrial Program and its Colored Work Department. As such, it became similar to Y industrial clubs across the nation in that it was highly organized, self-governing, and committed to community work through activities and events.[10] Because La Circle was a Y program, its members became connected to a broad network of working women who organized community programs, engaged in labor activism, and participated in conferences. La Circle members interacted with Y industrial program

Table 1: Female Occupation by Sex and Race for Wisconsin and Milwaukee, 1950 and 1960

	1950			1960		
Occupation	**Total Female (Wisconsin) (N=359,429)**	**Black Female (Milwaukee) (N=2,708)**	**White Female (Milwaukee) (N=110,875)**	**Total Female (Wisconsin) (N=457,307)**	**Black Female (Milwaukee) (N=7,263)**	**White Female (Milwaukee) (N=161,463)**
Craftsmen	1.6%	1.2%	3%	1.3%	.8%	1.4%
Operatives	17.3%	30%	20.2%	14.7%	23.7%	16.3%
Professional	12.2%	2.5%	11.4%	12.6%	6.1%	11.1%
Clerical	25.3%	5.1%	33.8%	28.4%	7.4%	34.2%
Private Household Workers	5.2%	23.3%	3.42%	5.2%	16.3%	3.8%
Service Workers	13%	28.5%	12.6%	16%	32%	14.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *1950 Census of Population: Volume 2: Characteristics of the Population, Part 49*: Wisconsin, Tables 74 (49–174) and 77 (49–189) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952); U.S. Census Bureau, *1960 Census of Population: Volume 1: Characteristics of the Population, Part 51*: Wisconsin, Tables 121 (51–386) and 122 (51–401) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961).

members on the state, regional, and national levels. By the end of the 1940s, La Circle Club was well known in the city as an organizing space for African American female workers.

La Circle was one among many groups that Black women joined, participated in, or created in Milwaukee for community development and uplift. Women dominated the membership rolls of Black churches, for example, divided by economic class and denomination. For many working-class Black women, community development and activism revolved around their churches. Via these institutions, Black working women gave money in tithes and offerings, devoted their time, and served their communities. Social, civil, political, and educational clubs also proliferated among African American women in Milwaukee, part of a long national history that dated back to the 1890s and was known as the Black clubwomen's movement.[11] By the 1930s, some of Milwaukee's clubs were affiliated with the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), with members attending NACW meetings and some becoming NACW officers. La Circle Club, therefore, emerged and grew out of a rich social and cultural milieu.[12]

La Circle Club evolved structurally over the years. When it was formed, middle-class community leaders at the MUL and the MYWCA determined its programs and course of action, especially in the early days of recruiting Black women to participate. Soon, however, the involvement of MUL and MYWCA staff lessened, as La Circle fell in line with the national structure of Y industrial clubs and began electing officers from its own membership and deciding without interference the nature of its programming. The emergence of La Circle Club, and its resulting popularity, demonstrated that it filled a need for Black working women in Milwaukee. Although there are no extant official membership lists for the La Circle Club throughout the 1940s, MYWCA records note club attendance between thirty to forty members each year of the decade.[13]

La Circle Club was originally established to support Black women employed in the city's manufacturing industries, but, because factories largely excluded African American women, it had to expand its mission to remain viable. La Circle, therefore, redefined the Black urban proletariat as more than just industrial workers; it included also women who worked in domestic service, at stores and shops, and in various other jobs. Prior to examining La Circle's activities, then, it is important to note the occupations of its officers. In 1942, for example, Vice President Thelma Johnson worked as a "stockman" at Bitker and Gerner Company. The People's Cooperative Association employed La Circle Club Secretary Hortense Chaney. The treasurer of La Circle, Nell

Thomas, worked as a "maid." An important force among Black women within the urban proletariat, domestic workers not only existed among La Circle's ranks but also as its leaders. La Circle's inclusiveness thus challenges historian Joe Trotter's narrow definition of the new, World War II–era proletariat in Milwaukee as mostly industrial. That La Circle Club's membership included Black women engaged in domestic service was not unusual; it mirrored a national trend among the Y's African American industrial clubs. According to historian Dorothea Browder, by the 1930s, Black domestics made up half or more of the memberships of some clubs and were among the most active members. Many Black women who served as leaders in the national Y's Industrial Program were household workers. Browder also asserts that Black domestic workers attended and actively participated in the Y's national and regional Industrial Program conferences. La Circle Club was no different; domestic workers were among its conference participants and leadership structure.[14]

As one of Milwaukee's oldest African American clubs and the only one aimed specifically at Black working women, La Circle provided a unique opportunity to organize along class lines. Its activities reflected the middle-class traditions of the Black clubwomen's movement while also pursuing the interests of working women, as evidenced by the club's commitment to various community-service projects and fundraising. La Circle also engaged Milwaukee's Black community in education and politics. For example, La Circle sponsored community-wide book clubs, such as a reading and review of the important *A Time for Greatness* by Pulitzer Prize–winner Herbert Agar.[15] Agar's book critiqued the United States for its failure to hold true to founding principles of equality, opportunity, access, and protection of its citizens. La Circle followed up with an "old-fashioned political rally" to educate members about the differences between the platforms of the Democratic and Republican parties.[16] Club members also participated in apolitical activities. They volunteered at the Soldiers' Home, a hospital and recuperation facility for veterans. They served as hostesses at the joint United Service Organizations venture between the MYWCA and the Milwaukee Young Men's Christian Association. Club members also donated money to various projects such as the Y's book and family welfare funds. One year, La Circle women "made a complete Christmas for four old ladies who were on old age pensions and without families."[17]

Finally, La Circle created fellowship opportunities. The social life provided by La Circle Club meant a lot to Black working-class Milwaukeeans. Their events were affordable and family-oriented, and provided club members

opportunities for leisure and to interact with the wider African American community. La Circle held an annual mother/daughter banquet and also sponsored a theater outing to see the motion picture *Shine on Harvest Moon*—a biography of the famous Broadway acting couple, Nora Bayes and Jack Norworth. After viewing the movie, attendees lunched in Milwaukee's Chinatown. Such events exposed club members, some of whom were young women in their twenties, to older women who had been where they were, had similar experiences working in a harsh urban environment, and who eventually triumphed, despite the obstacles.[18]

La Circle Club politicized Black working women, becoming a space they controlled, where they planned, organized, implemented programs, created, gave back, educated, and fellowshipped. They resisted common stereotypes that depicted Black workers as lazy and unorganized and Black female workers, specifically, as unladylike and masculinized. They also resisted an urban industrial environment that daily tested the dignity and self-worth of Black women. Through La Circle Club, these Black working women saw, recognized, and celebrated themselves. Outside La Circle Club, they translated this experience into community politics and economic development, as in the case of Mattie DeWese.

DeWese was a licensed cosmetologist trained in Chicago who migrated to Milwaukee in the late 1930s. After opening a thriving salon in the Black community, DeWese decided to help other Black women achieve this same goal. Because cosmetology training was segregated in Milwaukee, DeWese took the matter into her own hands. She opened Pressley School of Beauty Culture, the only African American beauty school in Milwaukee, to offer Black women the training they needed to become licensed beauticians and eventually salon managers and owners. DeWese had been a longtime member of La Circle Club. At its twenty-fifth-anniversary reunion, she was recognized as one of the club's special guests. By then, DeWese's Pressley School was a thriving venture with many graduates who had passed the state cosmetology examination.[19]

DeWese was also a fierce proponent of the construction of a public housing project on the north side of Milwaukee, where most African Americans resided. She was elected president of the Sixth Ward Better Housing Committee, a grassroots organization whose main goal was to pressure city and state officials to provide adequate, affordable housing to the African American community. From La Circle's membership, Black working women emerged as community leaders who responded to the economic injustices African Americans faced in an urban environment teeming with racial and gender

inequalities. La Circle Club continued until 1950, when the MYWCA forcibly integrated all of its programs and fired its African American executive director, who had overseen the administration of La Circle Club and other programs that served African Americans.[20]

The Cases of Virginia Jackson, Frenchie Bell, and Anna Mae Finney/Bobbie Chappel

Although the MYWCA officially dissolved La Circle Club, Black women locally and nationwide continued to oppose urban economic injustice. Because of structures put in place during the 1940s to address economic and employment discrimination, Black working women had increased opportunities to register formally the mistreatment they endured while attempting to secure and retain positions in Milwaukee's industrial labor force. In the early 1940s and 1950s, Black working women would register their complaints with the Milwaukee Urban League or the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter, whose officials then decided which cases they would back. By the 1960s, however, Black women would eschew these middle-class brokers and instead register complaints on their own behalf. Black working women in Milwaukee, like many Black working women around the nation, insisted that state institutions hear their stories.

The Fair Employment Practices Division of the Wisconsin Industrial Commission (WIC) heard cases of employment discrimination. The state legislature "authorized the Industrial Commission to receive and investigate complaints charging discrimination or discriminatory practices and give publicity to its findings with respect thereto."[21] If WIC found "probable cause" to believe discrimination had occurred, "it was authorized to immediately endeavor to eliminate the practice by conference, conciliation, and persuasion."[22] WIC held hearings, determined and publicized findings and also recommended action. Although the Wisconsin State Assembly passed legislation in 1957 that strengthened labor laws, a newly organized and radical Milwaukee chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality asserted that companies had "wriggled out of discrimination charges," thus leaving the Black community "apathetic" to WIC.[23] This apathy emerged because, in a vast majority of the cases that African Americans submitted, WIC found that it was "not probable" that racial discrimination had occurred. Despite the Industrial Commission's poor track record regarding African Americans, Black working women had to use this channel to register their complaints.

In 1951, Virginia Jackson, an African American female, applied for a job at Nunn-Bush Shoe Factory in Milwaukee. Two weeks after submitting her application, Nunn-Bush phoned Jackson and asked if she was still interested in working for the company. When she answered yes, Jackson was told to report to work the following week. Upon her arrival, though, there was confusion because Nunn-Bush had not realized that Jackson was African American when it hired her over the phone. First, she was told to fill out another application. Then she was told to remain in the lobby. While waiting, she noticed two white women filling out applications who were hired on the spot, and she mentioned this when a representative from Nunn-Bush came out to tell her that there were no longer any open positions at the company. The representative then asked Jackson how much she weighed. The official reason for her disqualification was that Jackson was too small to work for Nunn-Bush, weighing 120 pounds when the company only hired women who weighed at least 150 pounds. She registered a complaint with the MUL. Unfortunately, no record of Jackson's case exists in the WIC files, and it is not clear if the MUL resolved the case.[24]

In 1952, supported by the MUL, Frenchie Bell filed a complaint against her previous employer, Colonial Tanning Company, which she believed had fired her because of her race. WIC heard the case. While at the Colonial Tanning Company, Bell worked in the Leather Trimming Department. Workers trimmed leather in two different phases. During the first phase, workers trimmed large pieces that hung on a line that moved at a regulated speed. During the second phase, workers cut individual, smaller pieces of leather at a table at their own pace and were paid by the piece. Men most often worked the line because of the size of the pieces and the speed at which the work needed to be done. Women usually did piecework. According to Bell, the foreman George Nance placed her on the line without proper training. Consequently, she had trouble with the work. Nance accused Bell of slowing down the line and discarding a large amount of usable leather during the trimming process. Nance submitted a complaint to Colonial's advisory committee, which arbitrated such grievances. The advisory committee heard Bell's case and considered firing her, but, because this was Bell's only official reprimand, the committee instead warned her and decreased her rate of pay. After this first hearing, Bell continued to face difficulties with George Nance at Colonial. He again accused her of being careless in her trimming. Even though Bell told Nance she preferred piecework, he placed her back on the line and then complained that she requested assistance from her male coworkers, hung fewer pieces, and decreased the department's productivity.

Nance submitted another complaint, and the advisory committee held another hearing. This time, Nance brought in fifteen pounds of scrap leather that he claimed Bell had carelessly discarded. Bell denied this charge and insisted that there was only one box in the shop used to discard scraps. She accused the foreman of framing her; Bell claimed she "watched George Nance when he picked up all that leather. He picked it from the floor, from around and from that box." Bell continually asserted that she did her job as best she could with the minimal training she had received from Nance. Despite this testimony, Colonial Tanning Company fired her. During the WIC hearing, the examiner asked Bell why she thought Colonial had terminated her; she stated, "I think because purely Mr. Nance's dislike for me." Bell recounted an exchange with Nance where he stated that "if [you] didn't like [the job], you can get the hell out of here." Bell testified that Nance kept asking her why she remained at Colonial Tanning Company and, during one episode, told her, "You're not doing this right. . . . [Y]ou people don't know how to work." Bell correctly understood "you people" as "you colored people." Despite Bell's testimony, WIC decided that probable cause for racial discrimination had not been proven. Frenchie Bell's case against the Colonial Tanning Company is representative of the oppression and repression Black working women experienced in Milwaukee's manufacturing industries and in factories across the country. It is also telling that Frenchie Bell's witness, Ella Mae Thomas, another African American female worker who worked in Nance's department, supported Bell's complaint, and Colonial Tanning subsequently fired her as well.[25] Colonial's white bosses had responded with a devastating blow and a clear message: Black women who resist are not welcome.

The local context in Milwaukee emboldened Black working women to press for economic justice. Throughout the 1960s, Black and liberal white Milwaukeeans engaged in what historian Patrick Jones has described as militant civil rights insurgency. Engaging in civil rights activism and employing their own brand of Black power rhetoric, activists demanded school integration, fought for desegregation of private social clubs that excluded African Americans, and demonstrated for fair housing. In 1967, African Americans rebelled against police brutality and the repressive urban conditions they experienced on a daily basis, in what the press labeled a "riot," one of many that summer. The environment was volatile, but African Americans across the nation and in Milwaukee were fed up with inequality. Black working women joined the movement and put their bodies on the line in the street and at work.[26]

On September 7, 1967, Anna Mae Finney and Bobbie Chappel submitted a complaint to WIC against their former employer, Kromer Cap Company.

They accused Kromer of firing them because of their race. Their case revolved around statements made by their union steward, Grace Russo. According to Finney and Chappel,

> On September 5, 1967, at our union meeting, at the end of the work day, the shop steward [Grace Russo] made the statement 'Why don't you people [Negroes] stay up on the north side on 10th Street where you belong' and repeated it several times during the meeting. Afterwards when we were outside, we asked the steward to repeat the statement; she refused and ran in the building and upstairs claiming that we hit her.

As a result of the quarrel, Kromer Cap Company terminated all three women—Finney, Chappel, and Russo. Finney and Chappel filed a complaint with WIC because they believed their termination was race-based and without due cause. Although Finney and Chappel met with Kromer Cap Company President Richard Grossman to get their jobs reinstated, he refused to reverse the decision.[27]

WIC investigated and spoke with Grossman to hear his side of the story. Grossman confirmed that Russo did, in fact, make the statements Finney and Chappel described.[28] Grossman also stated that five workers witnessed the assault on Russo. After the meeting, Grossman wrote a letter to WIC and explained his decision to terminate all three women. According to Grossman, the "incident had an extremely disruptive and upsetting effect on the rest of the work force" and caused some workers to fear for their safety. Grossman explained that all three women had been terminated because of employment misconduct. He insisted that race did not factor into his firing the women. Instead, he said, their "unlady-like behavior" caused their termination.[29]

On October 4, 1967, WIC decided that, because Kromer fired all three women, race had not played a role in their termination.[30] But race absolutely played a major role in the incident. Wrapped up in the complaint against Kromer Cap Company was a demand to hold Russo responsible for the racial comments she made repeatedly and the impact this had on the work environment. Finney and Chappel asserted to Grossman that this was not the first time Russo made comments like this. By refusing to acknowledge the complaint, firing all three women and accusing them of "unlady-like behavior," Grossman downplayed the role that racial slurs played in the incident and recused himself from having to deal with the real issue at hand: the racist working environment of his company. The Wisconsin Industrial Commission ruled that racial discrimination had not occurred and upheld Grossman's sexist rationale for termination. It is also important to contextualize Russo's

inflammatory accusations of physical assault within the immediate context of the urban rebellion that had taken place in Milwaukee that summer. Tensions remained high; Finney's and Chappel's response to Russo's racist and inflammatory language illustrates this. From the records of WIC, it is clear that there was a history of verbal harassment at Kromer Cap Company. Knowing there were few structures that could help them, Finney and Chappell tried to resolve the issue on their own by first approaching the union steward directly and only then WIC. But WIC continued to reinforce the same lesson as before: Black working women who resisted were not welcome in Milwaukee's manufacturing industries.

Nellie Wilson's Union Leadership and the Clara Streicher Case

Nellie Wilson was born Nellie Sweet in 1916 and raised in Lufkin, Texas. She was brought up by her grandparents, Emily and Charlie Sweet. As a young person, Wilson learned many lessons about working hard from her grandmother, whom she helped on the family farm. When her grandparents died when she was 11, Wilson moved to Milwaukee to live with her father, who had been a Garveyite and member of the Milwaukee branch of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. He had worked for International Harvester, an agricultural machines manufacturing company, before being laid off during the Great Depression. Living through poverty and needing to accept government assistance was a great motivator for Nellie Wilson.

Even though Wilson worked hard at school, her southern background coupled with racial inequality made her early educational and employment experiences difficult. Wilson had to repeat third grade several times after enrolling in the Milwaukee Public School System. She got the hang of things, though, and eventually decided that she wanted to become a nurse. But, at a high school assembly about nursing school, the teacher told all of the African American students to leave because no such institution in Wisconsin would accept them. After graduation in 1934, her nursing dreams quashed, Wilson pursued a number of odd jobs. She eventually became employed in the sector most common to African American women in the workforce during the time period: domestic service. Wilson married, but the relationship did not last and she was soon a single mother raising two children on her own. She recalled that she "did all sorts of things for an honest living" but that the work was "always menial" and "undesirable."

World War II provided Black women like Wilson with access to industrial jobs and union involvement and created unprecedented opportunities for

them to make changes, even if some were only temporary. When A. Phillip Randolph successfully pressured President Franklin D. Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 8802 banning discrimination in factories with war defense contracts, Wilson, along with many other African Americans, applied for work. The company, A. O. Smith, already had a reputation for hiring and advancing African Americans, although it had done so only for Black men. During the war, however, the company hired and trained Black women, including Wilson, who inspected airplane propellers and read blueprints.

Wilson joined Smith Steelworkers Local 19806 after she realized the ways she benefitted from the union's bargaining efforts, particularly in regard to pay. Wilson recalled the conversation she had with a union steward before joining: "[H]e told me all the benefits the union had, and I couldn't believe every time I looked around I had another check, back pay for something, or an increase in pay." Wilson also added that the union provided workers with "job security—nobody could just come in and fire you." Although she paid her dues, Wilson did not get actively involved until after the war, when A. O. Smith discontinued her job, as well as the jobs other women held, and the union successfully forced the company to recall many of them. Wilson remembers that "A. O. Smith shifted from the diverse needs of military contracts to automotive production," which many workers found more challenging. The work was heavy, dirty, noisy, greasy, and fast-paced. Wilson recalled one foreman who said, "If the women ain't got the brains enough to quit we'll kill 'em." Wilson found the work hard, but keeping her daughters in mind, she kept at it because, "from day 1, [women] made the same amount of money that men made."

Wilson became successful on the assembly line and then as a punch-press operator and eventually became a union representative who fought for women's rights. As a line worker, she became well known for voicing her opinion to the company foreman about pay rates, which led male coworkers to convince her to run for the position of union steward in 1957. These coworkers told Wilson, "[E]very time [they] got a steward, the company either buys them off or promotes them to being a temporary supervisor." Wilson's coworkers figured that because she was a Black woman, "they ain't gonna do either for [her]." A. O. Smith eventually tried to do the former, but Wilson said, "I don't need it" and "kept right on bitchin', right on fightin' grievances." Wilson recalled,

> After I got to be a steward, we had an agreement. If the industrial engineer came out and set a rate, that's what the rate would be today, tomorrow, unless something is changed. If it's a good rate, we'll work with it. If it's a poor rate, we'll grieve

> it. And we did grieve it—over and over again. I filed so many grievances. My grievances were all about money, incentive rates and money.

A. O. Smith eventually laid Wilson off temporarily, a calculated move that resulted in her losing her stewardship. But, in Wilson's own words, "that didn't stop [her]," and she "was still a thorn in their side." Union friends convinced her, after she "came back fired up" from the 1963 March on Washington, to run for a spot on the Local 19806 executive board. This was a bold move—a Black woman had never run for a position on the board. Wilson campaigned under the slogan "In unity there is strength," and won the primary and final elections on her first try, a rarity. Wilson remained on the board until her retirement from A. O. Smith in 1969. Throughout these years, she experienced sexism; many times she was the only woman. She recalled sometimes "an issue would come up and [she'd] state [her] opinion," and other board members would respond, "Well, that's pretty good for a woman." Wilson's "proudest contribution" came in 1966 when she singlehandedly convinced the board to support Clara Streicher. Streicher's, said Wilson, "was a clear case of the company denying a woman a job because she was a woman."[31]

Streicher, a white woman, had been working at A. O. Smith since 1946 when she submitted a job-transfer request for an open position in a different department and was told that she was "not qualified [for the job] because [she] was a female." Her other qualifications were never even considered. The company filled the position, but, by August 1965, it had reopened, so Streicher again submitted a transfer request. This time she was offered an interview, which was standard procedure for the transfer process, but then it was cancelled when she showed up for it. The Personnel Department worker who sent her the interview request "stated it was a mistake" and later told Streicher that "the job was one in which the company wanted a male employee." After this, Streicher filed a grievance with Local 19806. Although the union's lawyers recommended that it not take the case to arbitration, Wilson singlehandedly persuaded the executive board to do so.[32]

Unlike most of her predecessors, Streicher won the WIC case, even though A. O. Smith defended its decision not to transfer her. The company attacked Streicher on the basis of her "temperament" by saying she was overly emotional and that she could not handle tough situations. Because the disputed position included public interaction, this lack of emotional control, argued the company, disqualified Streicher from the transfer. Although Streicher admitted to a handful of emotional outbursts during her twenty-years-plus tenure at A. O. Smith, she more importantly asserted that this behavior did not characterize the type of employee she had been for the most part. The

irrefutable fact was that A. O. Smith had denied her a job because of her gender. WIC agreed and ruled in favor of Streicher and the union. It ruled that Streicher was "entitled to be compensated for loss of earnings, straight time and overtime." Additionally, since the open position Streicher had originally applied for had been promoted, the Industrial Commission also ruled that Streicher was owed the seniority and pay she would have accrued had she actually been given the position.[33] This was a lasting victory for the union, for Streicher, and for all women at A. O. Smith—a victory that would not have happened had Nellie Wilson not persisted in convincing the union's board to act on the case.

It is important to situate Wilson's work within a tradition of women's labor unionism as well as the contemporary Black freedom struggle, but it is also significant to highlight that Wilson emerged out of a tradition of Black women's economic activism in the city of Milwaukee that had long been in existence.[34] A force in Local 19806 and later the Wisconsin American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, where she recruited for training programs and apprenticeships, Wilson opened doors for people who were traditionally excluded from industrial jobs, particularly women.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, African American working women actively protested the economic and employment injustices they experienced as members of Milwaukee's urban labor force. They filed complaints against employers for racial and gender discrimination. They challenged their union brothers and sisters, holding them accountable to higher standards of racial and gender inclusivity. The stories included here demonstrate Black women's commitment to racial and gender justice in Milwaukee and to the national Black freedom struggle. While their actions rarely made it to the headlines, or even to most local histories, our remembrance of their struggles and resistance provides a fuller picture of Black Milwaukeeans' experiences in an urban landscape teeming not only with racism but with sexism as well. In many ways, Milwaukee's local civil rights movement was similar to others in that the activists thrust into the spotlight were typically male, with a commitment to direct action and militant masculinity.[35] While Black women in Milwaukee had always participated in the movement, many of them did so in ways largely unrecognized by the public. Years after retiring, Nellie Wilson, who died in 2008, said, "When you know that you're the bridge that takes somebody over, that's a really good feeling."[36] Wilson's own words signify the importance of remembering her story, as well as those of her predecessors Jackson, Bell, Finney, and Chappel.

NOTES

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1. Michael Ezra, ed., *The Economic Civil Rights Movement: African Americans and the Struggle for Economic Power* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Laura Warren Hill and Julia Rabig, eds., *The Business of Black Power: Community Development, Capitalism, and Corporate Responsibility in Postwar America* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2012); Thomas Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Paul LeBlanc and Michael D. Yates, *A Freedom Budget for All Americans: Recapturing the Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in the Struggle for Economic Justice Today* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013). See also Patrick Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Eric Fure-Slocum, *Contesting the Postwar City: Working-Class and Growth Politics in 1940s Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

2. See, for background, Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Julie Gallagher, *Black Women and Politics in New York City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, eds., *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Black Women in the Freedom Struggle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (New York: Beacon Press, 2005).

3. Joe William Trotter Jr.'s groundbreaking work on the development of Milwaukee's industrial proletariat details this. See *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915–1945*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

4. Sylvia Bell White and Jody LePage, *Sister: An African American Life in Search of Justice* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 121–31, 152–63; Jones, *Selma of the North*, 32–41.

5. Berry quoted in Roy Hamilton, "Expectations and Realities of a Migrant Group: Black Migration from the South to Milwaukee, 1946–1958," MA thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1981, 52.

6. Enobong Hannah Branch, *Opportunity Denied: Limiting Black Women to Devalued Work* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 71–96.

7. Paul Geib, "From Mississippi to Milwaukee: A Case Study of Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940–1970," *Journal of Negro History* 83, no. 4 (1998): 242; *United States Census, Detailed Characteristics of the Population, 1940–1960* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943, 1952, 1963).

8. William F. Thompson, *The History of Wisconsin: Continuity and Change, Volume VI* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1988), 363.

9. Michael Ross Grover, "All Things to Black Folks: A History of the Milwaukee Urban League, 1919–1980," MA thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1994.

10. Dorothea Browder, "From Uplift to Agitation: Working Women, Race, and Coalition in the Young Women's Christian Association, 1908–1950," PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008.

11. For more on the Black clubwomen's movement, see Deborah Gray White's seminal work, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: Norton, 1999).

12. Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 128–31; Mary Ellen Shadd, *Negro Business Directory of the State of Wisconsin, 1950–1951* (Milwaukee, WI), 59–65, http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/tp/id/58218, accessed February 27, 2016.

13. "Colored Work Department," Box 37, Annual Reports, Madison Manuscript Collection M89–247, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI (hereafter SHSW).

14. Earle Gray, "Milwaukee News," *Chicago Defender*, October 10, 1942; Browder, "From Uplift to Agitation," 197, 228; Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, especially 226–41. Also see Elizabeth Clark Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestics in Washington, D.C., 1910–1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 2010); *Wright's Milwaukee [Milwaukee County, Wis.] City Directory*. (Kansas City, MO: Wright Directory Company, 1942).

15. "Colored Work Department 1944–1945," Box 37, Annual Reports 1944–1945 Folder, Madison Manuscript Collection M89–247, SHSW.

16. V. C. Benevue, "Milwaukee, Wisc.," *Chicago Defender*, November 4, 1944.

17. "Colored Work Department 1947–1948," Box 37, Annual Reports 1947–1948 Folder, Madison Manuscript Collection M89–247, SHSW.

18. V. C. Benevue, "Milwaukee, Wisc.," *Chicago Defender*, May 20, 1944.

19. "Colored Work Department 1944–1945," Box 37, Annual Reports 1944–1945, Folder MYWCA, SHSW.

20. Earle Gray, "Milwaukee, Wisc.," *Chicago Defender*, May 15, 1943.

21. Thompson, *History of Wisconsin*, 329–30; "Biography/History of the Equal Rights Division of the Wisconsin Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations, and of Its Predecessor, the Equal Opportunities Division of the Wisconsin Industrial Commission," Manuscript Series 1744, SHSW.

22. "Biography/History of the Equal Rights Division of the Wisconsin Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations."

23. "State Criticized in Negro Jobs," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 16, 1964.

24. "Affidavit Charging Discrimination Mrs. Virginia Jackson vs. Nunn-Bush Shoe Company," Box 17, Folder 8, Milwaukee Urban League Papers, Archives Division, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI.

25. Frenchie Bell's story, including all quotes, from "Testimony as given on November 5, 1952, Industrial Commission, Colonial Tanning Company, Frenchie Bell," Box 1, Series 1744, Wisconsin Equal Rights Division, Case Files, Employer Files and General Correspondence, SHSW. No reason was given in the case files for why Ella Mae Thomas was actually fired.

26. Jones, *Selma of the North*.

27. "Industrial Commission of the Wisconsin Equal Opportunities Division, Statement of Employment Complaint, Anna Mae Finney and Bobbie Chappel vs. Kromer Cap Company, September 7, 1967," Equal Rights Division of the Wisconsin Industrial Commission, Box 9, SHSW.

28. "Finney and Chappel vs. Kromer Cap Company, Meeting with Respondent, September 13, 1967," Equal Rights Division of the Wisconsin Industrial Commission, Box 9, SHSW.

29. "Letter to Wisconsin Industrial Commission from Richard Grossman, President Kromer Cap Company, September 15, 1967," Equal Rights Division of the Wisconsin Industrial Commission, Box 9, SHSW.

30. "Initial Determination, Anna Mae Finney and Bobbie Chappel vs. Kromer Cap Company, October 4, 1967," Equal Rights Division of the Wisconsin Industrial Commission, Box 9, SHSW.

31. Nellie Wilson's story, including all quotes, from "Nellie Wilson Oral History Interview," conducted by Joyce Follett for the Documenting the Midwestern Origins of the Women's Movement Oral History Project (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin: 1991). See also "Depression Years Linked Worker, Poor," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 25, 1969.

32. "Clara L. Streicher vs. A. O. Smith Corporation, Proceedings, May 5, 1966," Equal Rights Division of the Wisconsin Industrial Commission, Box 2, Folder 1, SHSW.

33. "In the Matter of the Arbitration between A. O. Smith Corporation and Smith Steelworkers, D.A.L.U. 19806, AFL-CIO, Grievance of Clara Streicher," Equal Rights Division of the Wisconsin Industrial Commission, Box 2, Folder 1, SHSW.

34. For the connections between feminism, workplace struggles, and women's union activism, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Mary Margaret Fonow, *Union Women: Forging Feminism in the United Steelworkers of America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

35. See Steve Estes, *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

36. Wilson quoted in Jamakaya, *Like Our Sisters before Us: Women of Wisconsin Labor* (Milwaukee: Wisconsin Labor History Society, 1998), 35.