

I N T R O D U C T I O N

On Wednesday, January 8, 1964, only seven weeks after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson stood before a joint session of Congress to deliver his first State of the Union Message since being installed as president. The next morning, a *New York Times* headline dutifully publicized the now-famous White House call for an “unconditional war on poverty in America.” Little noticed by the *Times*, but prominently featured in a *Wall Street Journal* headline, was a second announcement: “Johnson . . . Spurns a 35-Hour Work-Week.” “I believe the enactment of a 35-hour week,” said the President, “would sharply increase costs, would invite inflation, would impair our ability to compete, and merely share instead of creating employment.”¹

The president’s opposition to the shorter workweek did not come entirely as a surprise. Both the idea of a War on Poverty and the opposition to the shorter workweek were inherited from the Kennedy administration. Indeed, Kennedy, in his 1963 State of the Union address, had declared his opposition to the movement for a

shorter workweek. Kennedy stated that he looked forward to “an end to the growing pressures for such restrictive measures as the 35-hour week, which alone could increase hourly labor costs by as much as 14 percent, start a new wage-price spiral of inflation, and undercut our efforts to compete with other nations.”²

Today, there is almost no memory of shorter hours as a road not taken on the way to Johnson’s Great Society. What ever happened to the idea of a shorter workweek? What ever happened to the future in which progress was to be marked by growing abundance and diminished work? What ever happened to organized labor’s perennial demand for shorter hours and higher wages?

The juxtaposition of Kennedy and Johnson’s repudiation of shorter hours and the simultaneous initiation of a War on Poverty illuminates some of the ways in which social policy discourses in the United States were transformed during these years. Nobody today remembers what the War on Poverty *was not*; but in the early 1960s Kennedy and Johnson were crystal clear that it was not a shorter workweek. At the start of the Great Society debates, the War on Poverty was a state-sponsored alternative to a labor-led shorter hours initiative. Four decades later, the War on Poverty has many critics and defenders, but no major competitors—least of all the forgotten shorter hours movement. Scholars have argued for forty years about the benefits and liabilities of particular Kennedy and Johnson administration social policy initiatives, but the most enduring influence of the War on Poverty may well be the framing of political discourse itself, including the almost complete displacement of the idea of a shorter workweek as a mechanism for mitigating unemployment and increasing wages.

Comparison of the forgotten discourse of shorter hours with the inherited politics of the War on Poverty also illuminates a surprising and relatively unexplored dimension in the interaction of race and labor in the postwar era. It is commonly asserted that the liberal leadership of the industrial union movement supported civil rights and

the War on Poverty, even as these progressive efforts often were undermined by the racial bigotry of the old skilled trade unions. As Jill Quadagno has explained, “the War on Poverty—especially Federal initiatives to pressure craft unions to open apprenticeship programs to minorities—inflamed a long-running conflict between these two Democratic party constituents—trade unionists and African Americans—triggered a backlash among resentful skilled tradesmen . . . and [created] a constituency of Reagan Democrats in the 1980s.”³ According to this scenario, the backlash was represented by the leader of the skilled trades unionists, George Meany, “a former plumber who envisioned a narrow role for trade unionism and who ruled the AFL-CIO with an iron fist.” By contrast, United Automobile Workers (UAW) president, Walter Reuther, was represented as the progressive alternative to Meany, an advocate for a more expansive vision of organized labor, a union official who ruled his organization with a velvet glove, and “a man deeply committed to civil rights and to organizing the unorganized.”⁴

But this common refrain about Reuther and Meany, and about the politics of labor and race, is rendered suspect by the lost history of the shorter hours struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. One unalterable fact at the core of this book must be made explicit from the start: Walter Reuther *opposed* the movement for a shorter workweek. He did not simply neglect the movement. As president of the UAW, Reuther used every weapon at his disposal to subvert the movement for a shorter workweek throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.⁵ When Kennedy and Johnson were compelled to address “growing pressures” for shorter hours during the early 1960s, the source of that pressure came, not from Walter Reuther, but from George Meany and the skilled trades unions of the old American Federation of Labor. It was Meany, with his narrow vision of trade unionism, not Reuther and his allegedly expansive commitments to the unorganized and the unemployed, who led the agitation for a 30-hour workweek in response to the unemployment of the early

1960s.⁶ The Kennedy administration—including the president himself—was repeatedly forced to reiterate his opposition to shorter hours in response to Meany's public agitation.⁷

Meany was neither a labor militant nor a vanguard force for interracial solidarity and Quadagno is probably right to assume that Meany's own inclinations were probably hostile toward the demands of black and Hispanic workers. But Meany was not immune to grassroots pressure politics from an emboldened civil rights movement. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, civil rights activists inside and outside the labor movement began to press Meany regarding the growing crisis of black and Hispanic unemployment.⁸

The effectiveness of minority grassroots pressure on Meany was enhanced by conflict among a divided union leadership.⁹ Meany would have been largely insulated from grassroots pressures inside and outside the labor federation if not for the fact of an ongoing leadership feud between Meany and Walter Reuther. Meany's position as AFL-CIO president was not secure so long as Walter Reuther repeatedly flirted with the idea of challenging Meany's leadership of the merged labor federations. Furthermore, analysts predicted that any contest could be close, with both sides potentially dependent on the support of African-American trade unionists in a battle for dominance.¹⁰ Meany's shorter hours agitation was completely opportunistic and was carefully aimed to exploit Reuther's major vulnerability as a labor leader: his repudiation of the classic demand for shorter hours. Not surprisingly, Meany's own shorter-hours activism seemed almost perfectly timed, not only to the ebb and flow of the labor market, but also to the periodic flare-ups in his ongoing battle with Reuther.¹¹

Within organized labor, the discourse of shorter hours was traditionally used to defuse the social panic that accompanied frantic competition for work during periods of rising unemployment. It was a market strategy that aimed to meet diminished demand for labor with diminished supply. Most other populist gestures toward labor

solidarity aimed to mitigate job competition by conjuring imagined communities (of men, of whites, of Americans) for the protection of privileged labor market positions, chiefly through immigration restrictions and race and gender-based limitations on access to skilled trade apprenticeships.¹² But the core logic of these labor supply strategies necessarily generated ferocious market exclusions (of women, of people of color, of “foreigners”).¹³ By contrast, the logic of shorter hours was unique in its capacity to articulate a vision of diminished job competition on the basis of less work for all rather than protected work for the anointed.¹⁴

Historically, the movement for shorter hours within the old AFL was by no means sufficient for transcending racist restrictions on union eligibility. Indeed, the historic campaigns for a 10-hour day and an 8-hour day were largely undertaken in order to maintain intra-union solidarity *within* a context of racist exclusion, rather than as part of an effort toward interracial solidarity within the working class.¹⁵ However, when emboldened civil rights activists rebelled against these racial restrictions in the 1960s, vulnerable trade union leaders like Meany embraced the shorter hours demand as a plausible way to respond to the rising call for racial justice within and beyond the house of labor.

Meany was not the only skilled trade unionist to respond to the demands of civil rights groups with appeals to the unifying power of the shorter hours movement. Indeed, beginning in the late 1950s, Harry Van Arsdale, president of Local 3 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in New York City and head of the Central Trades and Labor Council in the City, responded to pressure from local civil rights activists by arguing for a shorter workweek “as the answer to growing unemployment in the city . . . particularly among Negroes and Puerto Ricans.”¹⁶ In 1962, Local 3 made national headlines when it initiated an unprecedented and ultimately successful strike for a 25-hour workweek. Prodded by civil rights groups and local politicians, the Local agreed to include “a

substantial number of Negroes and Puerto Ricans among its apprentices. In the end, more than 200 were admitted.”¹⁷ President Kennedy responded to the national headlines by announcing that he was opposed to Local 3’s drive for shorter hours.¹⁸

There was also a popular movement for 30 hours’ work at 40 hours’ pay in Walter Reuther’s UAW during the 1950s and early 1960s. It was based in the largest UAW local, the massive Ford Local 600, with over 15,000 African-American members of a total 1950s membership of approximately 60,000. The 30-40 movement at Local 600 attracted a broad-based movement of African-American militants, along with Irish, Italian, and Polish skilled tradesmen, and a broad array of semi-skilled mass-production workers, all of whom supported the demand as a progressive response to the challenge of automation and the threat of technological unemployment. This book is a study of that movement. The fight for shorter hours within the UAW, however, faced the determined opposition not only of the White House and the automobile industry, but also the leadership of the union itself.

It was Reuther, as much as Meany, who insisted on a narrow, even fatalistic conception of the role of collective bargaining, especially in the battle against unemployment. As Nelson Lichtenstein has suggested, Reuther “lectured” his rebellious membership about the limits of collective bargaining. “You can’t solve the problems of unemployment at the bargaining table,” he said.¹⁹ And it was Reuther, as much as Meany, who sought to rule with an iron fist, even if it meant using repressive tactics to undermine an interracial movement of local union dissidents who championed a shorter workweek throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.²⁰

Reuther’s suppression of the shorter hours demand during the 1950s and early 1960s had significant consequences for the political discourses of race and labor in the postwar era.. As David Roediger has suggested, “Reduction of working hours [can become] ... an explosive demand because of its unique capacity to unify workers

across the lines of craft, race, sex, skill, age, and ethnicity.”²¹ Roediger has also suggested that any framework for understanding the intersection of race and labor must move “beyond explanations based on the labor market” toward investigations of the interactions between cultural discourse and possessive investments in whiteness.²²

To be sure, the historic shorter hours discourse demonstrated only a limited capacity to alter the investment climate for identity formation and its influence left untouched deep investments in whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality. Within the workplace, the movement for shorter hours has never substituted for militant mobilization against racist and sexist divisions of labor.

Nevertheless, there are important ways in which a comparative analysis of the contrast between the discourse of shorter hours and the War on Poverty can contribute to Roediger’s demand for explanations that move beyond a simple labor market analysis to an examination of work, desire, and race.

The ultimate aim of the shorter hours movement, as John R. Commons suggested at the start of the twentieth century, was to disarm the “whip of unemployment,” and in this regard its aims seemed to accord with the subsequently articulated goals of the War on Poverty. But unlike contemporary anti-poverty crusades, the strategic basis of the shorter hours movement rested on notions of “joint aggrandizement,” rather than paternalistic discourses of moral obligation and pity.²³

Michael Harrington’s book *The Other America*, a central text in the construction of the anti-poverty discourse of the 1960s, took no notice of the shorter hours movement.²⁴ For Harrington, the Other America “cannot really speak for itself.”²⁵ In place of joint aggrandizement, and what George Rawick called “working class self-activity,” Harrington’s discourse appealed directly to the paternalistic inclinations of his audience. “How long shall we ignore this underdeveloped nation in our midst? How long shall we look the other way while our fellow human beings suffer? How long?”²⁶

Harrington's anti-poverty discourse depends, ultimately, on an exaggerated distinction between the obligated subject and its passive object. "The poor," Harrington concluded, "are not like everyone else."²⁷

One might suggest that Harrington's harangue was an assault on privilege, especially the privileges of whiteness. And, indeed, those who felt most threatened by such an assault took refuge in an illiberal backlash against racial change. As George Lipsitz suggests, this ongoing backlash is championed by "demagogic politicians [who] try to reassure white people that whatever else they lose, they will retain the possessive investment in whiteness."²⁸

Harrington's discourse not only reinforced investments in whiteness among the illiberal opponents of his anti-poverty crusade, but also reinforced the possessive investment of whiteness among his most conscientious liberal supporters. As Rawick argued in reference to slavery, "The entire view of . . . Victim and Object is related to the matter of guilt. Only those who feel themselves innately superior can feel such guilt about the conditions of others."²⁹ Harrington explicitly embraced the necessity of promoting a discourse of "shame" and insisted that "the fate of the poor hangs upon the decision of the better-off."³⁰ Lipsitz is correct when he concludes—against the grain of discourses like that of Harrington—that "liberal social welfare policies" cannot "solve the 'white problem' in the United States" insofar as they "reinforce the possessive investment in whiteness."³¹

Nowhere is this phenomenon more transparent than in the racial politics of work. At the heart of the shorter hours movement, asserted John Commons in 1906, is the allure of "more wages and less work."³² Half a century later in 1962, the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* reached the same conclusion. "The drive for a shorter workweek may have the appearance of a 'more jobs' campaign, but what it comes down to is a plan to get more pay for less work."³³

But what happens when the desire for less work is obstructed and repressed? Writing about the nineteenth century, Roediger

called attention to the ways in which “whites could . . . use Blacks as a counterpoint to come to terms with their own acceptance of steady and even regimented labor.”³⁴ As white workers repressed the desire for less work and more wages, compensation could be found in the category of whiteness wherein the desire for less work was first disavowed, then pathologized, and finally projected onto Others. As Rawick explained, “The Englishman met the West African as a reformed sinner meets a comrade of his former debaucheries . . . He must suppress even his knowledge that he had acted that way or even that he wanted to act that way. Prompted by his uneasiness at this great act of repression he cannot leave alone those who live as he once did or as he still unconsciously desires to live. He must devote himself to their conversion or repression.”³⁵

In the twentieth century, the War on Poverty reinforced the inclination to conversion among its liberal supporters and repression among its illiberal opponents, but in both cases, it drew upon and reinforced the nineteenth century valorization of whiteness and work, disavowing pleasure and play among whites; pathologizing it among blacks. The illiberal opponents of the welfare state lashed out at signs of laziness and pleasure. But the liberal defenders did not differ from the illiberal opponents in their disdain for laziness and pleasure. Instead, liberals went to great lengths either to deny that the Victims preferred pleasure to sacrifice and work (as when Harrington confided that “on the surface of Harlem life . . . [you] will find faces that are often happy, but always, even at the moment of bursting joy, haunted”³⁶) or to insist that those who do parade such preferences were ripe for conversion (as when Harrington lamented that the Other Americans “do not postpone satisfactions . . . When pleasure is available, they tend to take it immediately,” but conversion remained possible insofar as “their sickness is often a means of relating to a diseased environment”³⁷).

Scholars seeking to explain the backlash against the War on Poverty often assume that a coalition of racially sensitive labor

elites, liberal politicians, and African-American civil rights activists was undermined by the intractable racism of the entire skilled trade union movement and the white rank and file of the industrial union movement. Kennedy, Johnson, and Walter Reuther come up smelling like roses, while the remainder of the labor movement is dismissed as having been always already destined for Reagan country.

Tom Sugrue argues that the "UAW's record on race relations was mixed . . . On the national level, the UAW was on the cutting edge of civil rights activism throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s . . . On the other hand . . . white rank-and-file union members, often abetted by local leaders, worked to protect the color line in many plants. [Because of the] organizational structure of the UAW—especially its localism . . . UAW International officials were reluctant to interfere with the internal affairs of union locals."³⁸ Reuther, according to this view, was a great progressive whose one flaw was that he was either unable or unwilling to impose his progressive will on autonomous union locals.

If Sugrue emphasizes the illiberal culture of racism among white rank-and-file workers, scholars like Judith Stein blame the decline of liberalism on the "narcissism" of civil rights activists who diverted attention from the underlying class interests of all workers.³⁹ Sugrue has rightly accused Stein of minimizing the grievances of African Americans in an effort to subordinate race politics to an abstract politics of class. Yet, for all the important differences between Sugrue's culturally sensitive assessment of the racism of Detroit's white rank and file and Stein's scandalous attempt to minimize the grievances of African-American workers, Stein and Sugrue—like Quadagno—exonerate Reuther. Stein makes the exoneration explicit, concluding that it was "not Reuther's policies, that doomed labor and liberalism."⁴⁰

Sugrue and Quadagno blame the breakup of progressive politics on the racism of the white rank and file, and Stein pins the blame on the narcissism of civil rights activists, but all three pin their

hopes on Walter Reuther. These hopes, however, are entirely misplaced. Although it would certainly be a mistake to underestimate the racism of the white rank and file, Reuther's contribution to the politics of postwar labor and race relations can only be celebrated if one is either unaware of his opposition to the movement for a shorter workweek, or unmoved by the eclipse of a progressive alternative to the path of intense racial polarization that ultimately undermined both the labor and civil rights movements.

Reuther's opposition to the shorter workweek, although perhaps surprising to some, was part of the public record during his tenure as president of the UAW and the CIO, and his repudiation of the demand has been noted, if only in passing, by several scholars, including Reuther's recent biographer, Nelson Lichtenstein.⁴¹ Furthermore, rejection of the shorter hours movement was far from incidental or arbitrary. Rather, it marked a key point of departure for Reuther's more general break with the syndicalist tradition in the American labor movement and the development of his own brand of union corporatism.

According to the syndicalist theories of figures like John Commons, "A trade union is simply a combination to get a larger return."⁴² This "pure and simple" notion of a labor union maintained that any authentic labor movement must abandon "the field of production" and focused exclusively on the terms and conditions of the sale of labor-power to employers. By contrast, corporatist unionists seek a far more expansive role for labor, including direct participation in the management of production.

In the classic terms of organized labor, a syndic—a delegate or agent in a business exchange—represents organized combinations of workers in the sale of labor-power. As George McNeill explained in 1887, the shorter hours movement constituted a centerpiece of syndicalist labor philosophy. According to McNeill, workers "desire to sell the smallest portion of their time for the largest possible price. They are merchants of their time. They feel that, if they flood the

market—that is, sell more hours of labor than the market requires—stagnation will follow.”⁴³ The entire bargaining process was to be mediated through market exchange and shop-floor bargaining with the simple aim of winning more wages, less work, and better working conditions.⁴⁴

The leading figures of American corporatism explicitly repudiated the syndicalist worldview, especially the idea that labor should abandon the field of production.⁴⁵ Jacob Benjamin Salutsky (J.B.S.) Hardman, the most articulate defender of American corporatism and a great admirer of Walter Reuther, never missed an opportunity to heap scorn on the syndicalist traditions of the American labor movement. In 1928, Hardman protested against the triumph of syndicalism.

The chieftains of labor were bargainers, shrewd politicians, and, save for rare exceptions, they were totally unrelated to the fundamental processes and problems of industry. The opportunity . . . lay in a direction more significant than collective bargaining. Labor could, if it would, assume responsibilities for production and ascend to active participation in the control of industry. But leaders of labor stuck to what they thought was their God-ordained job: they would sell labor for as good a price as they could command, but exercise control of industry they would not. They brushed aside the power that lay in their reach. They lacked the will to power.⁴⁶

Commons was, in turn, as critical of Hardman's perspective as Hardman was of Commons. Commons complained that if a union underwent “the changes necessary in the character” required for it to “direct its energies to the production of wealth,” it would “cease to be a trade union.”⁴⁷ Commons was not simply fearful that corporatist experiments might not work. In fact, he was more concerned with the consequences for workers, if corporatist labor leaders *succeeded* in establishing their agenda within organized labor. Any union that concerned itself with “the risks and responsibilities of production . . .

raises up [a leadership] element interested in profits rather than wages . . . and, sooner or later, [it] goes over to the . . . employers.”⁴⁸

Although the anti-corporatist discourse of syndicalism has often been understood to imply business-friendly labor relations, while the audacious and even revolutionary rhetoric of corporatist discourse seems to point in the direction of labor militancy, these caricatures tend to obscure some of the underlying tendencies of the two labor philosophies. The syndicalists, in fact, were convinced that there was a constitutive antagonism at the core of the relations between the buyers and sellers of labor-power. Commons, for example, spoke of “the irrepressible conflict of capital and labor . . . The methods of unions cannot be understood except in terms of conflict.”⁴⁹

The defenders of corporatism were also keenly aware of these conflicts between labor and capital, but they argued that such employment relations were *needlessly* antagonistic. Clinton Golden and Harold Ruttenberg, two great defenders of corporatist labor relations, described the “almost universal desire of workers to tell the boss ‘to go to hell,’” a desire accompanied in practice by workers who possess “the freedom to quit when the boss insulted or humiliated them, or when the work was not to their liking.” But Golden and Ruttenberg interpreted this proto-syndicalist rebellion not as “a revolt against the authority of management as such, but against its arbitrary use and abuses.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, when management had “the vision and courage to share . . . responsibility with its workers through their unions, then, and only then, will full production be achieved.”⁵¹

For corporatists, the syndicalist retreat from responsibility for production was an understandable but avoidable response to the arbitrary and capricious misuse and abuse of managerial authority. Enlightened or sophisticated management should meet little or no resistance from labor once responsibility is shared on a cooperative basis. Corporatists embraced “a prophetic vision” of industrial relations founded upon “workers’ participation in responsibility for the conduct of business.”⁵²

As C. Wright Mills explained, "Ideally, if all management personnel did not show up for work, the plant could be effectively operated by the workers and their unions."⁵³

In many respects the corporatist vision of full production on the basis of shared responsibility and industrial democracy is consistent with both middle-class discourses of anti-market republicanism and socialist visions of worker control. Like the independent, self-employed, yeoman farmer, the industrial worker is called upon to stand apart from the haggling of the market and participate fully in the self-management of society. As Mills suggested, "Classic socialism shares its master purpose with classic democracy. The difference between Thomas Jefferson and Karl Marx is a half century of technological change."⁵⁴

The syndicalist discourses of George McNeill and John R. Commons, however, stand in stark contrast to these corporatist schemes that aim to transcend the market in the name of an expansive industrial democracy. McNeill's merchants of time aimed to find leverage within the market; Hardman and the corporatists envisioned an industrial democracy able to transcend the market. The shorter hours movement, as both sides understood, was firmly rooted in the syndicalist tradition of the American labor movement.⁵⁵

Corporatist ideology tends to assume an underlying social harmony, but should such harmony fail to appear on cue, the establishment of corporatist labor relations is secured by structural transformations that establish new mechanisms of authority in the relations between unions and members.⁵⁶ As Golden and Ruttenberg explain, "Police powers or disciplinary powers are vested in the union in direct proportion with the amount of responsibilities it assumes . . . To fulfill these responsibilities the union must have sufficient authority to discipline those workers who, for example, may stop work in violation of the contract."⁵⁷ Similarly, corporatist labor relations also rely on a transformed business and legal environment

in which labor unions are provided with the institutional security that makes union-employer collaboration possible.⁵⁸

The eclipse of the shorter hours movement within the American labor movement was one of the central manifestations of the triumph of corporatist labor relations in the United States. Within the UAW, in particular, the victory of the Reuther administration over the syndicalist movement for a shorter workweek was achieved primarily through the increasingly pronounced disciplinary powers that were vested in the union as a result of the historic, structural transformation of organized labor.

For more than two decades, UAW president Walter Reuther managed to resist popular pressure to put the syndicalist demand for a shorter workweek at the top of the postwar union bargaining agenda. A biographer might hope to gain some sympathetic insight into the psychic life of Walter Reuther in order to explain the pattern of his leadership activity, but for a sociohistorical analysis of the UAW and the shorter hours movement, the question of Reuther's motivation recedes in importance relative to the *structural* and *historical* factors that allowed Reuther to take the positions that he did without losing his leadership position within his own union.⁵⁹ As David Brody once suggested, it is not enough for labor history to simply publicize or criticize the intentions of corporatist labor leaders like Reuther. "Who would deny what [the leadership of the CIO] made abundantly clear in the public record? But why did they succeed?"⁶⁰

Within the UAW, the fate of the shorter hours movement functions as a kind of proxy for the corporatist transformation of the union: the more vulnerable the leadership, the more voluble the syndicalist discourse of shorter hours; the more secure the leadership, the less effective the shorter hours agitation. How did Walter Reuther accumulate sufficient institutional power to make *his* corporatist ideology count despite the enthusiastic syndicalism of the union rank and file?

Nothing illustrates the urgency of a structural, rather than a motivational, analysis of Reuther's postwar opposition to the shorter hours movement than the fact that he had once been a leading promoter of the shorter hours demand. In 1938, when Reuther was himself an opponent of the incumbent UAW administration, he served as the chief spokesperson for a dissident insurgent caucus in the UAW and led a campaign for a 32-hour workweek in the automobile industry.⁶¹ One might conclude, from this fact, that the young and militant Reuther understood the importance of the syndicalist shorter hours demand, but that he subsequently lost his nerve and knowingly betrayed the movement. One might just as easily conclude, however, that as a young Socialist, Reuther was deeply committed to corporatist visions of work and self-discipline and that even in the early years, he never actually believed in shorter hours or shared the syndicalism of the rank and file. But as an anti-incumbent insurgent in the UAW of the 1930s, even a would-be corporatist like Reuther was compelled to give lip service to syndicalist schemes in order to win the support of the membership. Only later, when Reuther was the leader of the incumbent administration and had established his authority within the union, could he successfully impose his own corporatist vision on the life of the union. How, then, did he succeed? What changed, structurally and historically, between 1938 and 1958 that allowed Reuther to reverse his public position on the question of shorter hours? In what sense might Reuther have been more insulated from rank-and-file pressures in the late 1950s and early 1960s than he had been in the 1930s?

In some cases, the union bureaucracy became insulated from the rank and file through changes to its own organizational structure. In one such instance, a change in membership rights helped to relieve pressure for a shorter workweek within the UAW. In October 1938, when Walter Reuther proposed that the International Executive Board of the UAW seek a 32-hour workweek throughout the auto-

mobile industry, a *Wall Street Journal* article announced, “32-Hour Week Idea May Become Troublesome Issue.”⁶² In seeking to understand the base of support for the shorter hours movement, the *Journal* pointed to the question of union membership rights and the pressure to reconcile the demands of the employed and the unemployed members. “The actual voting membership of many locals (those members who regularly attend meetings) are in the majority still unemployed. It is the pressure of these,” the *Journal* explained, “which is causing presidents of locals to back the ‘spread-the-work’ plan. At the same time . . . local leaders are now trying to convince the working membership that 40 hours pay for 32 hours of work will be obtained for them if they agree to the plan.”⁶³ *Ward’s Automotive Reports*, an industry newsletter, suggested that “the persistent 32-hour week agitation for a six-hour, five-day week . . . would undoubtedly be accompanied by a demand for wage raises proportionate to the decreases in working hours.”⁶⁴

As a union that was, for the most part, established and led by skilled trade unionists, the UAW allowed members to retain membership rights during periods of unemployment.⁶⁵ As one early student of the UAW noted, “The strength of the unemployed in controlling union decisions may be important in the determination of policy . . . [In] the UAW-CIO [a person who has lost a job] can continue indefinitely as a member in good standing . . . As a result of this general situation, policies of the UAW-CIO with reference to such questions as seniority and work-sharing will, as time goes on, be influenced more and more by the unemployed members, unless the constitution is changed.”⁶⁶

Reuther was already thinking along these same lines. He suggested that, in light of the massive number of unemployed in the auto industry, the union “should be careful not to bring in a large section of these people into the union. If they do, they will be creating a very difficult position for the union because . . . we can’t make more jobs and we should be careful not to organize all of these people in

the hope of getting them back in the plant.”⁶⁷ With little fanfare, the convention adopted a constitutional provision that a union member “must, at the time of application, be an actual worker in and around the plant.”⁶⁸

The structure of union membership also influenced the fate of the shorter hours movement in more immediate ways at Ford Local 600, which provided the primary institutional base for shorter hours agitation throughout the 1950s. During the height of World War II, the Ford Local 600 membership swelled to include more than 80,000 Ford employees. After the war, Ford embarked on a massive initiative to reduce its dependence on the militant and centralized workforce at the Rouge through a combination of automation (Ford engineers coined the phrase in the early 1950s) and plant relocation (called “decentralization” at the time). By the end of the 1950s, Local 600 was a mere shadow of its former self. Those older members who managed to hang on to their jobs were either retired or near retirement and they ultimately outnumbered the actively employed element of the membership. Among retirees, the attention shifted from shorter hours to early retirement. Local union officers discovered that they could ignore the shorter hour demands of actively employed workers with impunity so long as they carried the vote of the retirees.

Some of the most consequential changes during these years related to larger transformations within organized labor and within the basic framework of industrial relations in the United States. For example, Reuther’s rise to power within the UAW was accompanied by the establishment of the UAW as the legally recognized, sole representative of the autoworkers. In the context of the rivalry between the AFL and the CIO in the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, the authority of the UAW-CIO was directly challenged by the UAW-AFL, a breakaway, rival auto union. It was in the context of this battle that Reuther and his allies had initiated the drive for a shorter workweek.

In January 1940, amidst the union rivalry, *Ward's Automotive Reports* announced with considerable alarm that the industry's worst fears had recently been confirmed "in the announcements from the two UAW camps" regarding "demands for contract revision" in the spring of 1940. "Outstanding in the platforms are 30-hour work-weeks at present 40-hour pay, paid vacations, higher pay levels and others." *Ward's* was quite explicit about the connection between the rival unionism and the demands for less work and more pay. Union competition for the loyalty of the workers "resembles any other election, in which the candidates promise whatever they believe will bring votes their way . . . The difficulty in this development is that . . . the men may seek delivery on the promises made them. Should this ensue, trouble will again be visited on the labor front."⁶⁹ Any prolonged rivalry might force union leaders to be as militant in delivering on contract demands as they had been in formulating those demands. *Ward's* reported, "The general hope is that one side or the other acquires complete dominance and thereby is enabled to exercise control over the men."⁷⁰

If the UAW-CIO ultimately managed to acquire such dominance—and exercise control over the membership—it did so in the context of a changing legal environment for labor relations. In 1940, the "exclusive representation" provision of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 was used by the UAW-CIO and the automobile industry to terminate the rivalry between the UAW-AFL and the UAW-CIO.⁷¹ *Ward's* reported that National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections might contain a "seed of tranquility in them. . . insofar as they may go to end the interunion factionalism."⁷² Immediately after the UAW-CIO was certified as the exclusive representative at General Motors (GM), *Ward's* confidently predicted, "At this writing it does not appear that disagreements which will develop in the new contract over such issues as larger pay, shorter hours, etc. will eventuate in strike action . . . the best opinion in both labor and management circles is that a strike, at least one of large dimensions, is improbable now."⁷³

On May Day, a holiday historically associated with labor's fight for shorter hours, *Automotive Industries* reported "the union's decisive victory" in the NLRB election, along with a statement by Walter Reuther, then director of the GM department of the UAW-CIO, that the demand for "a 30-hour week with 40-hour pay" would not be pursued in the short term, although it remained a "long range goal of the union." It was the explicit aim of the newly certified CIO union, announced Reuther, to negotiate "in an orderly and constructive spirit."⁷⁴ Reuther, already in retreat, was ready to test the limits of his newfound insulation from the challenges of rivals.

The UAW-CIO was, for the most part, unchallenged in its dominance of auto industry unionism after its decisive triumph over the UAW-AFL. The 1950s witnessed a considerable reduction in amount of union rivalry and raiding, aided not only by the altered legal environment, but also by the 1953 no-raiding pact between the AFL and the CIO, and the 1955 merger of the two federations. The *Wall Street Journal* took note of the merger process and affirmed, in a sub-headline, that the truce "Could Help Businessmen, Too."⁷⁵

The National Labor Relations Board continued to protect the peace pact between the auto industry and the UAW-CIO from those rival union challenges that did arise. The NLRB adopted a so-called contract-bar rule that barred, during the life of a contract, petitions for elections that challenged incumbent unions. During the early 1950s, GM joined with the UAW-CIO to fight off one of the most significant remaining rival challenges to the union. The company and the union contended that their pioneering five-year contract—the famous 1950 "Treaty of Detroit"—should serve as "a bar to the requested election" of a rival union.⁷⁶ Mindful of the "salutary and stabilizing effect" of the relationship between GM and the UAW-CIO, the NLRB decided that "the time has arrived when stability of labor relations can better be served . . . by holding as a bar collective-bargaining agreements even for 5 years' duration" and dismissed the petition for a challenge election.⁷⁷ As Christopher