

# The Progressive

## Milwaukee's Forty-Year War On Unions

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Forty years ago the owners of Milwaukee's meat packing plants launched a war on unions. Milwaukee's working class is still suffering from losing that war.

On January 25, 1975, over 700 members of Local 248, Meat and Allied Foodworkers Union, struck Milwaukee area meatpacking plants in response to a proposal that would cut their wages.

For generations, Milwaukee boasted of a large, unionized, blue-collar middle class. It was a place to put down roots and raise a family. Neighborhood culture was often defined by industrial bowling leagues and neighborhood taverns owned by former factory workers seeking to be "their own boss" and escape assembly line drudgery.

While highly segregated, economic inequality was at historic lows. Milwaukeeans enjoyed the nation's second highest median household income in 1969. The black poverty rate was twenty-two percent lower than the US average in 1970, and African American median family income was nineteen percent higher than the US African American median.

As the 1970s began the *Wall Street Journal* dubbed the city the "Star of the Snowbelt." In large part, this reflected the high rates of unionization among workers laboring in Milwaukee's foundries, tanneries, meatpacking plants, and at manufacturing firms like A.O. Smith and Allis Chalmers.

Skilled tradesmen and foundrymen, teachers, retail clerks, unskilled and semi-skilled workers were represented by unions at the bargaining table, on the job and in elections. Because of union wages and benefits, they could buy their own homes and maybe a cabin up north or a fishing boat. While neither management nor workers sought strikes, they were tolerated as a legitimate, although undesirable, part of contract negotiations.

In the late sixties and early seventies, Milwaukee unions participated in a national strike wave as workers sought salary increases in response to war-induced inflation. In 1969 Schlitz workers and Milwaukee Area Technical College's faculty union struck. In 1973 workers from A.O. Smith, Briggs and Stratton, and Harley Davidson, three of Milwaukee's manufacturing elite, struck at the same time. These strikes were eventually resolved, new contracts signed, and none of these companies attempted to bust the unions.

All of this changed in 1975 with the Meatcutters' strike. The very day the strike began, the eight companies represented by the Milwaukee Independent Meatpackers Association began hiring replacement workers, some recruited from as far away as Nebraska and Texas.

In response to this first attempt by Milwaukee employers to bust a union since World War II, the Menominee Valley filled with angry picketers—black, Latino, and white—rallying to protect their jobs.

After fifteen months the employers association had their victory and decertified the union. Hundreds of hard-working union members lost their jobs. Full-time permanent employees were replaced by low-wage workers frequently hired through temp agencies.

The strike legitimized replacement workers, beginning waves of attacks on unions and the city's working class. When UAW workers struck Master Lock in 1979, Milwaukee police officers escorted replacement workers across the picket line. Two years later A.O. Smith built a non-union plant in Tennessee, the first nail in the coffin of its Milwaukee Automotive Works, which had dominated the city's north side since the early 1920s.

While many associate the war against labor with President Reagan's firing of the nation's striking air traffic controllers in 1981, it actually began much earlier.

In 1971, Lewis F. Powell Jr., a Republican corporate lawyer, called the business community to arms with his memorandum to the National Chamber of Commerce. He wrote: "The American system is under attack. Business must learn . . . that political power must be assiduously cultivated . . . and used aggressively and with determination—without embarrassment."

Powell urged "American business" to demand "equal time" on college campuses and the nation's airwaves. His memorandum inspired the founding of conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, Milwaukee's Bradley Foundation, and the Cato Institute. Wealthy businessmen like the Koch Brothers poured tens of millions of dollars into right-wing initiatives. *Business Week* put it bluntly when it declared in its October 12, 1974 issue: "Some people will obviously have to do with less . . . it will be a bitter pill for many Americans to swallow the idea of doing with less so that big business can have more."

Milwaukee's meatcutters had the misfortune of being Milwaukee's first victims in this war to redistribute income. Subsequently, replacement workers were used at Master Lock and to break the union at Patrick Cudahy in 1987. After these bitter defeats Milwaukee area union membership plummeted, and so did real hourly wages.

Bernie Peck, the owner of the largest meatpacker, Peck Meat Packing, bought up most of the smaller meatpacking companies during the strike. He eventually sold them to Emmer Foods and became a celebrated philanthropist. While the community enjoys the buildings named after him, Milwaukee's working class paid such a very heavy price that many cannot afford to buy a home, much less a cabin up north.

The corporate class war against Milwaukee's workers that began with Local 248's defeat is one of the principle reasons Milwaukee has declined from a relatively prosperous, blue-collar, middle class town to one of the nation's poorest cities.

Since 1979 private sector union membership has plummeted while Milwaukee's median household income has fallen by a staggering 25.4 percent.

Milwaukee's African American poverty rate is now forty-nine percent higher than the African American national average, and median income is 30 percent lower.

Local 248 was one of many industrial unions organized by the Greatest Generation that turned low-paying jobs into stable, middle class employment. Today, many of Milwaukee's large unionized manufacturing plants are gone, replaced by low-paying big-box retail and service sector jobs.

If Milwaukee is to enjoy a broadly shared renaissance, the current generation of underpaid workers will need to learn from history and create twenty-first-century unions that turn low-paying employment into middle class jobs.