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Collection 54
Labor Unions of Trenton Collection
1904-1989

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History

The first attempts to unite American laboring men of all trades into one federation began in 1869 when seven clothing cutters in Philadelphia, led by Uriah Stevens, formed the “Secret Order of Five Stars,” or the “Knights of Labor.” Labor unions had been in existence for a number of years prior with the first national trade union being formed by printers in 1850.

All trade unions were of a secret nature at first, and it was not until 1881 that the Knights of Labor abolished the oath of secrecy that members had been obliged to take. Prominent among the leaders of the organization at that time was Terrence V. Powderly who, with other union men, advanced the principle that labor was entitled to the fullest enjoyment of the wealth it created. His name and work became as well-known in the 1880’s and early 1890’s as did the leadership of Samuel Gompers in the following years.

Trenton began associating with the Knights of Labor in the spring of 1882 when a charter was granted for a lodge called Local Assembly, No. 1362, K. of L. It was a “mixed assembly” and represented various branches of industry and trade, including journalists, potters, printers, iron workers, cigar makers, rubber workers, carpenters, and plumbers.

George Holcombe, an active member of Typographical Union No. 71, and first foreman of the *Trenton Sunday Advertiser* was the chief sponsor of the new federation of local unions. With the help of many other proponents of unionism, the new organization grew so large that it was decided to establish separate trade branches. The potters were the first to withdraw and create several new

assemblies based on the various branches of the pottery industry, such as the Packers' Assembly, the Mouldmakers' Assembly, and the Decorators' Assembly. Following the potters were the rubber mills employees. In order to coordinate the work of these different assemblies, District Assembly, No. 90, K. of L. of Mercer County was chartered, and delegates from the various locals were elected.

Eventually, there was a demand for an official mouthpiece for the organization, and the *Trenton Sunday Advertiser* was designated with its office becoming the headquarters for their important meetings. Mercer County Central Labor Union Secretary Reuben Forker edited the *Trenton Trade Union Advocate* in the early 1900s. In the 1930s in Trenton, Louis P. Marciante, long-time president of the New Jersey Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (the forerunner of the State AFL), published *The Labor News*. This was succeeded by *The Trentonian* put out by the International Typographical Union as the result of a strike of the *Trenton Times*. *The Trentonian* was later sold to a private publisher.

Soon, there were discussions to build a Central Labor Hall and \$3,000 was raised during a Labor Day picnic held in Hetzel's Grove, East Trenton. This sum increased to \$10,000 and the Robert S. Dowling hotel property on South Broad Street was purchased and renovated with lodge rooms, reading rooms, and a library. Potters on the east side of Trenton became dissatisfied since the hall was an inconvenience to get to for them, and petitioned that a hall be built in their section of the city. The Broad Street property was sold, the proceeds were equally distributed, and the potters established Cooperative Hall at Grant and Clinton Streets.

Over the years, there were troubles within the unions that brought about new unions and the formation of the Mercer County Central Labor Union in 1900, which affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Its membership was 1800 from eight organizations. With one of the potters' strikes (1890), the National Brotherhood of Operative Potters was formed.

Scope and Content Notes

This collection contains information on various Trenton-based labor unions. For the most part, each union is represented in its own folder. While this collection does not encompass all labor unions that were active in Trenton, the information contained herein is what has been located in the Trentoniana Department at the current time. Material will be added as it becomes available. Some of the items in this collection (mainly correspondence) had been removed from two existing Trentoniana collections prior to 2015, the Trenton Free Public Library Administrative Records and the Arthur J. Holland Papers. It was decided to leave these items within the Labor Unions Collection as the union letterheads contain information that may be difficult to find elsewhere.

Series Description

The Collection is divided into series by respective labor union name.

Series I. #731 United Auto Workers (1956-1957)

This series contains information regarding Amalgamated Local No. 731, United Automobile, Aircraft, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America. The items include by-laws of the union (1956); a souvenir program for a dedication day (1957); news release on “My Job Contest” (n.d.); and *Punch Press* newsletter (July 1957) and *Bomber* newspaper (July 1944). The by-laws outline the structure of the local union as an affiliate of the international UAW, giving clear membership criteria, guidelines and duties. In addition, the details of the by-laws also include the organization within the union and methods for election and operation. The souvenir program celebrates a new union headquarters as well as the Ternstedt plant’s 20-year anniversary. Of particular interest in the program are the retelling of the union’s history, which began in 1937, survived the Great Depression and World War II, and celebrated its progress through the years; a note from the chairman of the dedication day committee; and the many advertisements from political parties, local businesses and other local unions.

Series II. Rubber Workers’ Local (Chartered w/ A.F. of L.) and Congoleum-Nairn Inc. (1928-1961)

This series records the work of the union at different instances, including a Labor-Management Agreement (1957); a letter from a union worker; an internal union letter; a standard New Year’s greeting card sent from another local union; and a program for a testimonial dinner in honor of Herbert Bennett (1961). The Labor-Management agreement was signed by the company and union, which provided for the recognition and security of the union, a mechanism for addressing grievances and guaranteed certain working conditions and employer and employee rights. The letter from a union worker was sent to the union meeting. The worker addresses the union meeting and pleads for help regarding his prolonged absence due to tuberculosis. The internal letter details the suspension of a secretary-treasurer due to embezzlement and provides a course for future actions.

Series III. International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and Crescent Insulated Wire & Cable Company (1937-1956)

This series records the activity of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers within the Crescent Insulated Wire & Cable Co. The folder contains a 1956 agreement between the union and the company, the charter and by-laws of Crescent Employees’ Association, and a registration form for joining the Crescent Employees’ Association. The labor-management agreement recognized the AFL-CIO affiliated union as the sole and exclusive bargaining representative and regulated employment-employee relations, including creating mechanisms for settling grievances, standards for worker evaluation, stipulations for working conditions and rules regarding labor and employer actions. The charter and by-laws provide information regarding the structure, organization and procedural details of the Association. Of interest is the registration form, which demonstrates how workers could join the Association, and is included with the charter and by-laws.

Series IV. SWOC–Steel Workers Organizing Committee, Lodge 2110 & 2111 (c.1938-1940)

This series includes information on the Steel Workers Organizing Committee, which operated within the Roebing Company. The series contains leaflets attacking the company union; newsletters by the SWOC (n.d.); and the certificate of incorporation of the company union. The leaflets in the series attacked the company union, the Roebing Employees Association, Inc. for siding with the company and forcing its members to tolerate the company's abuses, and also mentioned the AFL for not fulfilling its promise. By referring to court cases and corruption within the company union, the SWOC used the leaflets to persuade workers to join the union. The newsletters expressed different attitudes towards labor relations. One described the union's mission to gain a contract for the workers of Roebing plants and informed union members of new managements in both the union and the company, expressing hopes for better relations. Another newsletter attacked the company union by citing its court case with the National Labor Relations board and reported on the success of other lodges. In addition, the newsletter also attacked non-unionized workers who benefitted from SWOC actions and contained a small section that encouraged female workers to join the SWOC. The certificate of incorporation of Roebing Employees' Association, Inc., the company-affiliated union, detailed information regarding the incorporation, including the purpose of the association and the members on the union board.

Series V. United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America (1937-1962)

This series contains two folders of information on the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America (U.E). The first folder contains information of Locals 108, 409, 433, and 455, including the Constitution and By-Laws of the union; a history of the union in Trenton; and newsletters from its organ, "U.E.R. & M.W. of A. News." While the Constitution was typical of unions from the time period, the history and contribution of each Local were clearly and separately described in the other book. Of special interest are the four newsletters from 1937 and 1938, which reported news about labor movements, included jokes and sports sections, and also contained harsh criticism of Mayor Hague, even making comparisons between "Hagueism" and Nazism.

The second folder contains information from Locals 409, 443, 449, and 469, which was later renamed International Union of Electrical Radio and Machine Workers, partially covering the period from 1947 to 1959. Apart from the yearly agreements between the Kramer Trenton Company and locals 409 and 469 of the union, the series also contains a program of the second annual Christmas party held in 1947 by Local 443. The 30-page program contains articles written by leadership of the union, which mentioned the recently passed Taft-Hartley Act and many of the union's achievements, and details the welfare services provided by the union. Also included is a 20th anniversary dinner program (1957) from Local 469; and a letter to Arthur Holland, and a copy of his reply, thanking him for attending Local 449's Christmas party (1962).

Series VI. Central Labor Union of Mercer County and Vicinity (Affiliated w/ A. F. of L.) (1952-1954, 1989)

This series consists of the Labor Directory and Magazine that were published by the Mercer County Central Labor Union for its anniversaries in 1952, 1953, 1954 and 1957. The editions were similar in

purpose and formatting, containing commercial and political advertisements, news articles pertaining to labor issues, and congratulatory letters sent by public offices and other labor organizations for its anniversary. Of particular interest is the variety of articles regarding communism, politics and national movements from the AFL, local unions and individual writers. Also included are copies of their constitution (n.d., 1952, 1989).

Series VII. International Brotherhood of Operative Potters

This series contains four folders of information regarding the Trenton Local of the International Brotherhood of Operative Potters. One folder contains newspaper clippings with handwritten notes appearing to be related to research that had been done using the clippings. Taken from different local newspapers, the articles include a broad spectrum of topics, including debates on “Right to Work” legislation and general news regarding the union, as well as details on a 300-man strike at the Trenton Lenox China Company. Another folder includes correspondences regarding historical research into the Brotherhood in 1962, which might relate to the prior folder of newspaper clippings. The series also contains information on the 1958 strike, separated into two folders. After a disagreement in wages, 600 workers in the Trenton Potteries, a plant under the Crane Company of Chicago, walked out in May, and the strike continued for four months until the union members voted to accept a compromise with the company. The folders contain union newsletters that provided weekly updates and maintained the morale of pickets, and newspaper articles chronicling the event.

Series VIII. Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of America, Local Union 301 (1955)

This series contains a labor agreement between the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of America and the Mercer County Chapter, Painting & Decorating Contractors of America.

Series IX. Pattern Makers’ League of North America, Local 821 (1904-1914)

This series includes a record of attendance with dues stamps (1913-1914) and receipt for 1% assessment on indemnity in the Mutual Aid Society (1904).

Series X. Journeymen Bricklayers’ and Plasterers’ Protective Association, No. 9, N.J.I.U. (1911)

This series includes a handwritten letter on union letterhead to Trenton Free Public Library librarian Adam J. Strohm from union secretary George A. Smith, asking that 100 library catalogs be sent (July 1911).

Series XI. International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers #1130

This series includes “1130 IBEW News” (n.d.); and a typewritten letter on union letterhead to Arthur Holland from financial secretary Walter A. Shelmet, congratulating Holland on his appointment as City Commissioner (1955).

Series XII. United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Local Union No. 31

This series includes the by-laws of the local union (1911).

Series XIII. United Rubber, Cork, Linoleum, and Plastic Workers of America, Local No. 69

This series includes a guest ticket and a members ticket to the 10th Anniversary Banquet (1949).

Series XIV. Trenton Metropolitan Area Local American Postal Workers Union AFL-CIO

This series includes the booklet “Local Memorandum of Understanding between the Trenton Metropolitan Area Local APWU AFL-CIO and the U.S. Postal Service, Trenton, N.J.” (1984).

Series XV. Central Jersey Industrial Union Council, CIO

This series includes the testimonial dinner program honoring Charles E. Kovacs (1958); a handwritten letter on union letterhead to Arthur Holland from director Anthony Zuccarello (and a copy of Holland’s response) about clippings regarding labor polls under President Eisenhower (clippings are attached) (August 1956); and a typewritten letter on union letterhead to Arthur Holland from president Charles Kovacs (and a copy of Holland’s response) about giving Holland a subscription to the union’s “AFL-CIO News” (June 1957).

Series XVI. New Jersey Labor Herald (1957-1962)

This series contains correspondences between the managing editor of the *Labor Herald*, a newspaper endorsed by the New Jersey State Federation of Labor, and a contributor to the paper who belonged to a local union. Records of the correspondences began in 1957 and lasted to 1962, in which the two referred to articles in the *Labor Herald*.

Series XVII. Miscellaneous Labor

This series encompasses separate documents pertaining to different labor movements in Trenton, including a newsletter, “Plain Talk,” by Peter James, Inc. (1961); an undated newspaper directory of local unions; a proclamation of a “Union Label Week” (1955); “Important Events in American Labor History” by the U.S. Department of Labor (1958); “Labor’s Role in Industrial Expansion” by the Mercer County Industrial Commission (1961); and a printed summary about the Roebbling strike.

Also included in this series are several unidentified labor union buttons, including H.M.B.A. and C.E. Union Steward 741, and H.M.B.R. and C.E. Union Steward 741

Container List

Box / Folder / Title

1 / 1 / #731 United Auto Workers [see also Oversized Box #6]

1 / 2 / Rubber Workers’ Local (Chartered w/ A.F. of L.) and Congoleum-Nairn Inc.

- 1 / 3 / International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and Crescent Insulated Wire & Cable Company
- 1 / 4 / SWOC–Steel Workers Organizing Committee, Lodge 2110 & 2111
- 1 / 5 / United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, Locals 108, 409, 433, 455
- 1 / 6 / United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, Locals 409, 443, 449, 469
- 1 / 7 / Central Labor Union of Mercer County and Vicinity (Affiliated w/ A. F. of L.)
- 1 / 8 / International Brotherhood of Operative Potters – Newspaper Clippings
- 1 / 9 / International Brotherhood of Operative Potters – 1962 Research
- 1 /10 / International Brotherhood of Operative Potters – 1958 Strike: Newsletters
- 1 /11 / International Brotherhood of Operative Potters – 1958 Strike: Newspaper Clippings
- 1 /12 / Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of America, Local Union 301
- 1 /13 / Pattern Makers’ League of North America, Local 821
- 1 /14 / Journeymen Bricklayers’ and Plasterers’ Protective Association, No. 9, N.J.I.U.
- 1 /15 / International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers #1130
- 1 /16 / United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Local Union No. 31
- 1 /17 / United Rubber, Cork, Linoleum, and Plastic Workers of America, Local No. 69
- 1 /18 / Trenton Metropolitan Area Local American Postal Workers Union AFL-CIO
- 1 /19 / Central Jersey Industrial Union Council, CIO
- 1 /20 / New Jersey Labor Herald
- 1 /21 / Miscellaneous Labor
- 2 / Union buttons

Bibliography

Trenton Historical Society. *A History of Trenton, 1679-1929*. Chapter X. Industries and Trade, by John H. Sines; II. Labor, pp.544-555.

Troy, Leo. *The New Jersey Historical Series: Organized Labor in New Jersey*. Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1965.