

2010

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Hackbart-Dean, Pamela. "Unions and Labor Archives: Donor Relations" *How to Preserve Union Records*, Michael Nash, ed. (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2010): 17-31.

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### Recommended Citation

Hackbart-Dean, Pamela S. "Unions and Labor Archives." (Jan 2010).

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# Unions and Labor Archives

PAMELA HACKBART-DEAN

LABOR ARCHIVES HAVE BEEN COLLECTING THE PAPERS OF WORKING PEOPLE AND THE RECORDS OF THEIR TRADE UNIONS AND ALLIED ORGANIZATIONS SINCE THE EARLY YEARS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. Collecting repositories play several overlapping roles, assisting unions in constructing a usable past, preserving the movement's heritage, culture, and traditions, and making labor archives accessible to the public. Labor archivists, like most of their colleagues who preserve the records of living organizations, often act as intermediaries between the unions whose records they administer and the research public. Developing strong relationships with individual unions and the labor movement is critical to the success of all labor-archives programs. If collecting repositories want to build strong labor collections, they must develop good and trusting relationships with unions and their members. Unions must be convinced that the archivist can be trusted with their internal records and that the labor archives are an asset to the labor movement. Collecting repositories need to demonstrate that archives and the labor movement's historical memory have real value from the union's perspective: it is important to

preserve the evidence of past decisions; historical records can help in orienting and recruiting new members; and they are important for legal purposes. Labor archives also preserve documentation about the many contributions that unions have made to American life.<sup>1</sup>

In the era of declining resources and escalating processing and preservation costs, building strong relationship between repositories and union donors has become even more important as most labor archives find that it is essential to seek union financial support. Union archives, like the records of most modern bureaucracies, are often large, complicated, and costly to process. A growing number of labor repositories, including the Walter P. Reuther Library (Wayne State University), the Southern Labor Archivists (Georgia State University), and the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives (NYU), are now receiving substantial union support for basic archival work. While most union officials are sympathetic to the general idea of preserving labor history, this rarely justifies in their mind an investment in archives. A commitment of scarce resources requires that union decision makers recognize that archival programs serve a useful business purpose. This may involve records management, compliance with government regulations, contributions to worker education programs, public relations, or political action.

George M. Furlong's article "Sky High!" provides some practical advice for the labor archivist.

1. Building relationships: Get to know the unions, what interests them, what excites them, and how they can become engaged with the archives. Why does the union value its history and archival record? Do key officers see this as a way of promoting solidarity and orienting younger workers to union culture? Labor archivists need to demonstrate how the archive can be used for this purpose. If, on the other hand, union officials see the archive as playing more of an administrative function, making documents accessible so the union can comply with Department of Labor regulations, the archivist should stress that this is a service that labor archives can provide.

2. **Staying connected:** Archivists must be passionate about their collections and must communicate that passion to donors through personal visits and invitations to activities in the library. Make it clear why it is important to preserve the historical memory of the labor movement and that this is something that you strongly believe in.
3. **Networking:** With unions and union members, inform them what a labor archives does and familiarize them with the nature of the archives collections and what exciting projects are on the way. The archivist should talk about successful projects and how other unions are supporting the archives. Ask union officers with whom the archives has built strong relationships to speak on your behalf. Perhaps the repository should consider a newsletter or website to communicate with its labor constituencies.
4. **Financial support:** Make it clear that other unions are supporting the labor archives project and that this is essential to your program. You should also explain that without financial support it will be impossible for your repository to process the collection in a timely fashion. It is important to assess how much support each union can provide. Some unions will fund the entire cost of a processing project if archivists clearly explain why this has value and that it is much more economical than establishing an in-house archives. Other unions are only willing and able to fund student workers. Know what the possibilities are and craft your proposal accordingly.<sup>2</sup>

Developing strong relationships with trade unions is critical for all labor-archives programs. Unions, like all living organizations that are opening their records to the public, have legitimate concerns about privacy, proprietary information, publication, and how their records will be reproduced and used over the Internet. These must be addressed in a forthright manner that balances archival ethics and our professional responsibility to make collections accessible with a willingness to respond to the concerns of

unions who are considering turning over their archives to a public repository. If unions conclude that certain record groups contain confidential information, archivists should mention that it is possible to restrict access for a period of time. It should also be explained that unions can donate a collection and retain copyright. This will give them some control over publication and often goes a long way to alleviate concerns. Archivists may find that building trust takes time. Once unions have established a long-term relationship with a repository, they usually can be persuaded to donate copyright.

Deposit agreements are another way to build a relationship between labor repositories and trade unions. This is a controversial area and many archivists have mixed feelings about accepting collections on deposit. Some repositories will not take collections that they do not own because deposit agreements come with the risk that repositories will invest in a collection, which a union will then demand be returned. This is a long standing policy at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives and many other labor archive repositories. The Kheel Center at Cornell's New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations has another approach that is worth considering. The Kheel Center has been accepting collections on deposit for decades. Former Director Richard Strassberg has argued that when unions own their collections they are invested in them, which helps build good relationships between repositories and the labor movement. According to Strassberg, deposit agreements ensure that the repository and the union will be in close and regular contact, because the union will need to sign off on permission to publish requests. This type of contact can open a door for funding. If labor repositories are doing a good job, unions will have no reason to remove collections. It is also possible to craft deposit agreements so that if a union removes a collection it will be obligated to compensate the repository for processing and preservation costs.<sup>3</sup>

When repositories demonstrate that they are responsive to union requests and concerns, funding often follows. Most repositories seek to establish ongoing relationships with donors so that they can establish systems to review records at regular intervals and document a union's continuing history. Good donor relations require that repositories provide

timely reference service (perhaps free photocopying) and process union records efficiently. Better still, in the age of encoded archival description, finding aids can easily be downloaded to union websites. Thinking creatively about outreach opportunities, doing workshops for labor education classes, mounting exhibits, embarking on a retiree oral history project, and helping to celebrate union anniversaries all contribute to building strong relationships with the trade union movement.

Unions and their members are intangible assets that should not be overlooked. They can assist labor archives by promoting the value of labor and working-class history. If a union has already established a relationship with a repository, officers and staff can help the repository find additional materials for donation and introduce archivists to members or local union leaders that may have documents to preserve.

## **Donor Relations at Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University**

Many of the important labor collections held by Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, were acquired with the assistance of Walter P. Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) from 1946 until his death in 1970, and other UAW officers.<sup>4</sup> According to Dr. Philip Mason, former director of the Reuther Library, this relationship started in 1960 when the UAW became concerned that its older records documenting the origins of the union in the 1930s were at risk. Wayne State established the Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs in 1960 (“History” was later dropped from the title). When the archives started to collect the papers of the UAW pioneers, Walter Reuther contacted the library to explore how the union could support its program. He saw the value of preserving the history of the UAW, and after his death this commitment was continued by his brothers Roy and Victor. In 1962 the UAW made the Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs the official repository for UAW archives. Two conditions were established: the collection would be a permanent loan rather than a gift and there would be a ten-year restriction on access

to the records. In 1966, with the support of the Reuthers and other members of the union's leadership group including future presidents Leonard Woodcock and Doug Fraser, the UAW donated \$1.3 million to construct the Reuther Library—although it was not named for Walter Reuther until after his death in 1970.

The Reuther Library has always worked hard to cultivate its relationship with the UAW. For example, archivists provide records-management consulting and reference services, as well as ongoing collecting program. The Reuther staff also curates exhibitions for UAW conventions and local unions, supports video projects, and collects nationally among UAW regions, locals, and affiliated individuals.<sup>5</sup> Support to preserve labor's history, especially from union leadership, is powerful!



*Walter P. Reuther Library Online Newsletter. Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library.*

## Donor Relationships at Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University

### Local Level Example: The Georgia State AFL-CIO

In 1969, leaders of the Georgia State AFL-CIO and labor historians at Georgia State University in Atlanta jointly proposed the creation of a regional labor archive at the university. Following its authorization by the university's board of regents, the Southern Labor Archives officially opened in 1971. The labor community immediately embraced the archive and assisted it in locating locals and international unions willing to donate historical materials. In 1995 the archive started an oral history project to record the personal experiences of the men and women who participated in the local labor movement. Through the years, local labor leaders have

often suggested individuals to be interviewed, sometimes contacting them directly and encouraging them to participate in the project.

During this period the members of the Atlanta chapter of the Workmen's Circle, a Jewish fraternal order, joined with Atlanta trade union leaders to form the Organized Labor and Workmen's Circle Banquet Committee, which in 1996 became the Organized Labor Awards Banquet Committee. Since its founding, this committee has annually paid tribute to outstanding leaders from within the ranks of organized labor and has raised thousands of dollars to support the Southern Labor Archives and labor studies programs at Georgia State. By helping the archive to acquire collections and by providing it with the funding to manage these collections and undertake special projects that promote its work, the Georgia State AFL-CIO and Atlanta labor community continue to play an important role in the program.

### **National Level Example: The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers**

Founded in Atlanta in 1888 at the Atlanta, Georgia, railroad yards, as the Order of the United Machinists and Mechanical Engineers, the IAMAW now represents workers in more than two hundred industries and is one of the most important unions in aircraft and aerospace manufacturing. As part of its centennial celebration in 1988, the machinists union designated the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University as its official repository. In response, numerous IAMAW local and district lodges, as well as the union's international headquarters in Maryland, sent their records to the archive. In the first four years, the Southern Labor Archives received 209 cubic feet of materials from the machinists union, including office files, official minutes, research materials, contracts, negotiation files, audiovisual materials, photographs, and artifacts. Four thousand printed volumes from the IAMAW library were also added to the collection. Additional materials were transferred to the archives between 2001 and 2004. The original donation, which consisted of materials deemed "historical" or inactive, was well organized and in good physical condition. The processing of these

records was completed in 2000. Small amounts of material continue to be shipped to Atlanta and added to the collection.

The IAMAW has provided financial support for the archive over the past twenty years, and the repository and the union have worked together on a number of public projects. The Southern Labor Archives hosted a booth at the 2004 IAMAW Grand Convention, held in Cincinnati, Ohio. The IAMAW Local Lodge History Project, initiated in 2001, was designed to help IAMAW members learn how to uncover and tell the history of their local lodges. A week-long training session, held annually at the William W. Winpisinger Education and Technology Center in Hollywood, Maryland, covers such topics as how to organize a history project, how to do an oral interview, and how to manage and preserve local lodge records. Workshop participants have completed a number of history projects, including collecting oral histories, developing websites, and creating historical displays. Other projects have focused on preserving local and district records and donating these historical materials to the Southern Labor Archives. All of the materials generated by these workshops are deposited with the Southern Labor Archives.

In 2005, Georgia State University proposed to the IAMAW a project to microfilm and digitize the complete run of the *Machinists' Monthly Journal*, the IAMAW's official journal, published from 1889 to 1956, and *The Machinist*, a newspaper published from 1946 to 1994.<sup>6</sup> The Southern Labor Archives received \$100,000 for the project from the IAMAW. This project realized two goals: to create preservation copies of the union's journals and to provide searchable online versions of the journal and newspaper so that they could be made accessible to IAMAW members, scholars, and anyone interested in labor history. The project was unveiled in 2006 to the IAMAW leadership. Robert Thayer, General Vice President, stated, "This project uses the latest technology to take us back to our earliest days. We want our members to use this site and to learn about our past and our struggles so we can stay strong in the future."<sup>7</sup>



Classification assemblers work on airborne thrust controllers for Titan Missile, Aerojet-General Corporation, Sacramento, Calif., 1961.

Reserve  
your  
place in  
history.



## The Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University

Official repository of the  
International Association of Machinists  
and Aerospace Workers

University Library • 100 Decatur Street SE • Atlanta, GA 30303-3202  
404/651-2477 • 404/651-4314 (FAX) • liblak@langate.gsu.edu

Online at [www.library.gsu.edu/spcoll/labor](http://www.library.gsu.edu/spcoll/labor)

*Advertisement for the Southern Labor Archives distributed at state and national labor conventions.*

## The Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University

In the late 1960s, Harry Van Arsdale, president of the New York City Central Labor Council, began to recognize that the City's labor heritage was at risk. Records going back to at least the mid-nineteenth century were being stored in union attics and basements. At a time when many unions were becoming increasingly aware of their histories and making a commitment to labor education, there was a growing recognition that these records needed to be preserved and made accessible. Van Arsdale viewed the Wagner project as part of a larger commitment to worker education. His union, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 3, had always invested in educational programs. In the early 1970s, Van Arsdale was able to persuade the New York state legislature to establish Empire State College as a center for worker education in Manhattan. He viewed the Wagner Archives (named after the senior Senator from New York who was responsible for the National Labor Relations Act) as an adjunct to this labor education initiative. In 1975, working in close coordination with Stephen Vladeck of the Tamiment Institute, Van Arsdale convinced NYU to establish the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives program at the Tamiment Library, a special collection at NYU devoted to the history of labor and progressive politics. The idea was that the Wagner collections and the Tamiment Library would play an important role in supporting worker education throughout the city. Shortly thereafter the Central Labor Council passed a resolution making the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives the recommended repository for its records and those of its member organizations. With initial funding from the labor movement, the Wagner began building an archival collection documenting the history of organized labor in New York City. The Tunnel Workers Union became the first union to donate records to the Wagner, which was quickly followed by the Social Service Employees Union, the United Taxi Workers Organizing Committee, the United Automobile Workers Union, District Council 65 of the United Automobile Workers, the United Federation

of Teachers, and the New York City Central Labor Council. In 1979, a National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grant made it possible to conduct a citywide records survey. Debra Bernhardt was hired as project archivist and very quickly built strong relationships with unions throughout the city, which resulted in five hundred surveys taking place over fifteen years. When NHPRC funding expired, the Central Labor Council worked with NYU to secure continuing support through the New York State Department of Labor. Today, the Wagner is the repository for the records of more than 570 New York unions, including the Transport Workers Union of America; the American Federation of State County and Municipal Workers, District Council 37; Actors Equity; the New York State Federation of Labor; and the locals of numerous building trades.

The Wagner Archives has always had a very close working relationship with its trade union constituencies in New York. An advisory board, chaired by Central Labor Council President Jack Ahern meets twice a year to discuss collecting priorities, union programs, oral history projects, outreach, and fundraising. The labor movement is a generous supporter of the program. In the early years the Central Labor Council made annual contributions to the Wagner Archives. In 2003 it began sending out annual letters under its president's signature to solicit its members for financial support. The Wagner advisory board has established guidelines that have encouraged unions to contribute to the costs of processing and preserving their records. Today, two full-time Wagner archivists are supported by project funding, along with several part-time assistants and student workers.



# NEW YORK LABOR HERITAGE

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Number 12
Issued by the Robert F. Wagner Archives

Winter 1987-88

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## Archives Celebrates 10 Years

On May 13 over 200 friends and supporters gathered in NYU's Ben Snow dining room – where the Tamiment Institute hosted the dinner which launched the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives 10 years before – to review the Archives' accomplishments and make plans for the future. NYU President John Brademas and NYS AFL-CIO President Ed Cleary presided over the dinner which raised \$25,000 to establish the Harry Van Arsdale Memorial Endowment for the perpetuity of the Archives. Special recognition was given to Archives activists Louis Albano, Jeannette DiLorenzo, Martha Greenhouse, and E. Howard Molisani, and



*(Left to right) Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives founding archivist Debra Bernhardt; Howard Molisani, President of the Italian-American Labor Council; Martha Greenhouse, American Federation of Television and Radio Artists; Robert F. Wagner, former Mayor of the City of New York; Jeannette DiLorenzo, United Federation of Teachers; and Louis Albano, Civil Service Technical Guild, celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives.*

These projects have succeeded and been sustained over time because they were based on a foundation of close and trusting relationships between the labor movement and collecting repositories, and based on an understanding by the archivists that they needed to offer a real service to the labor movement. The unions for their part recognize that the archive programs are of real operational value and preserve their history, heritage, and traditions. Unions will support archival programs if they believe that the labor movement is receiving value for their support. Mike Smith, Director of Reuther library, states that as of 2009, “Five unions support three full-time positions and two part-time positions at the Reuther Library, and over the years have supported a number of defined projects.” The Southern Labor

Archives and the Wagner have had similar experiences. The key is for the archivist to convince the labor movement that historical records are an asset that unions need to invest in. Services may include records management, assistance with publication and film projects, or involvement in workers education programs. Unions recognize that office space is valuable and storage (particularly in large metropolitan areas) is expensive. When archivists clear out closets and file cabinets, transferring files to collecting repositories and identifying others for possible destruction, unions realize that they provide a valuable service for the labor movement. For the archivists, being involved with union records at all stages of their life cycles makes it more likely that that valuable documentation will be preserved. Working with the unions, archivists can develop guidelines, provide consulting services, and teach workshops both locally and nationally on how to care for and organize union records. These services are highly valued.

Labor archives can also help with exhibits, education packets, and documentary films, using the historical materials housed at their institutions and providing documents, photographs, and posters that make for a compelling product. “Work ‘n’ Progress: Lessons and Stories in Southern Labor History” is an online labor history curriculum program designed for middle and high school students. Georgia State University Library’s Special Collections Department, in collaboration with the College of Education’s Middle/Secondary Instruction and Technology program and the Georgia State AFL-CIO, created this online curriculum that offers educators the knowledge and materials to prepare students for the workplace and to teach labor history in the classroom. The program packet includes primary resources from several local union collections, as well as lesson plans and student activities.

Developed in 1998 and updated in 2001, “The Triangle Factory Fire” online exhibit is a collaborative project between UNITE! and the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation at Cornell University.<sup>8</sup> The web exhibit presents original documents and secondary sources related to the 1911 Triangle Factory Fire in New York City, as well as tips for student projects. Similarly, The Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives sponsors a Labor Arts website ([www.laborarts.org](http://www.laborarts.org)) that is largely funded by the unions whose

visual materials are being exhibited. This virtual museum identifies and displays images and cultural artifacts of working people and their labor organizations. A number of unions, most notably UNITE-HERE and SEIU Local 1199, have provided substantial funding.

Unions can usually be relied on to provide financial support for oral history projects, educational websites, and of course the processing of their records. Involving retirees and retiree groups in these projects is a very effective way to build support. Many repositories also have labor advisory boards that include officials from unions represented in their collections. These advisory boards are vital to development work. Board chairs usually sign annual fundraising letters and persuade their colleagues in the labor movement that labor archives deserve financial support. Beyond immediate union contributions, members of a labor archive advisory board usually help lobby state and local governments for funding. Several years ago, the President of the New York City Central Labor Council, who at the time was also Chair of the Wagner Labor Archives Board, helped persuade the city of New York to partially fund the construction of a state-of-the-art storage area for the Wagner collections.

Archives have a variety of relationships to the labor movement. Some archives serve as official repositories for individual labor unions. Besides the Reuther Library, the Southern Labor Archives, the Kheel Center, and the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives are all sanctioned repositories for labor unions. Other institutions, such as San Francisco State University, the University of Texas at Arlington, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and the University of Connecticut, collect the records of organized labor, though not as their sole mission. To complicate matters, some institutions holding labor records may not be the officially designated archive for a national or international labor union. They may only be the repository for certain locals or districts that have decided to keep their records in local communities rather than donating them to a centralized official repository.

Whatever the arrangement, for the relationship between union and repository to work, labor archivists must meet their professional responsibilities to process collections in a timely fashion; meet acceptable schedules

for opening the collection; prepare appropriate announcements, exhibits, and publications; and facilitate research use. Funds raised to support work on labor collections should be strictly accounted for and expenditures carefully documented. Finally, once a donor relationship is established, it is vital to maintain it and to reassure the union that the repository provides secure stewardship of their records.<sup>9</sup> If these guidelines are followed, most repositories will find they can maintain very productive relations with their labor union constituencies, which will make it possible to develop their collections in exciting ways, bring new audiences to their repositories, and provide access to vital funding.