

## Laundry Workers Union Education Director

I have previously written about my six years at the Jewish Labor Committee (1956-62), and the move to Washington DC in December 1964 to be the Education Director of AFSCME. But I have not yet described the time between: my two and a half years as Education Director of the Amalgamated Laundry Workers Joint Board. Here it is.

But first, how I got to the Laundry Workers: At the JLC, I was the National Field Secretary, the link between the field and the national office. I also edited Labor Reports and other JLC publications, set up JLC exhibits and spoke at union conventions, and represented JLC on committees and at meetings dealing with Jewish, labor and civil rights issues. I loved my job, and wanted to do more. I suggested to my boss, Manny Muravchik, that I could take on a role similar to our field staff by working with the NYC AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee. The chairman of the Committee was Louis Simon, manager of the Amalgamated Laundry Workers Joint Board.

I called Jack Sheinkman who, at the time, was General Counsel of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, and an active member of the JLC. I asked him to arrange a meeting with Louis Simon so that I could offer my services as unpaid staff to the Committee. I met with Simon, who was dubious at first. I explained that our field staff played a similar role in several cities including Boston, Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago. Los Angeles and San Francisco. Since it didn't cost him anything, Simon agreed.

Simon introduced me to the members of the Committee, many of whom I knew. I attended the Committee meetings, took the minutes and reproduced them for the members, met with Simon before meetings and helped draw up the agenda, and followed up on actions to be taken as a result of decisions made at the meetings. The Committee had initially been "window-dressing." I was able to get them to move on important civil rights issues affecting labor. Simon began to look like a real champion of civil rights. We pressured the Building Trades Unions into opening up their apprenticeship programs to minorities, which did not endear me to the President of the NYC AFL-CIO, Harry Van Arsdale of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. In fact, he resented me and questioned Simon about my role. By this time, I had made myself indispensable.

In the spring of 1962, Simon asked me if I would be interested in serving as Education Director of his union. I had been at the JLC for six years, and had been thinking about returning to the labor movement, even going back to the ILGWU. The year before, I was asked if I would be interested in the position of education Director of the Rubber Workers Union. I mentioned it to Sylvia who asked where we would live. I said Akron, Ohio. She looked at me as if I was crazy.

The Laundry Workers Joint Board, with its offices on Fifth Avenue and 21<sup>st</sup> Street, was a big union with a largely black and Puerto Rican membership. It was a low-paying industry, and the work was hard, hot and dirty. The big push to organize laundry workers came in the mid-thirties. There was a jurisdictional dispute with the Teamsters over the laundry drivers, and an ideological dispute within the newly formed union between the

Communists and the Socialists. Finally, the union affiliated with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers in 1937, and won contracts with the large linen supply companies and the family and wholesale laundries. Over the years, the union grew, wages increased, contracts were renewed, conditions improved, and the union even established its own health center.

I thought long and hard about Simon's offer. Yes, it was time to move on, but to the Laundry Workers? I'd make a few bucks more; I would continue in my role with the NYC AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee; I would be back in the labor movement working in labor education. I would be able to work with a group of workers that could use a meaningful education program. OK. In the summer of 1962, two big events: My daughter Martha was born, and I accepted Simon's offer.

The transition went very smoothly. I received a warm send-off from the JLC, and was enthusiastically welcomed by almost everyone at the Laundry Workers. (One of the shrewder Business Agents realized that I might be a threat to his ambitions.) Over the next few months, I got to know the industry, accompanying the Business Agents as they made their rounds of the shops and factories. It was quite an education for me: the "production" workers who worked in hot and suffocating wash kitchens and who ran the mangles and ironing equipment, the engineers, and maintenance workers who kept the laundry equipment running, the clerks and office workers, and the drivers, or routemen, the aristocrats of the industry.

As a result of my work with the JLC, and with the NYC AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee, I had gotten to know most of New York's labor leaders. I was particularly close to Jerry Wurf, director of District Council 37 of the AFSCME. I ran into him several weeks after I had gone to work for the Laundry Workers. He seemed annoyed. "What is it, Jerry?" I asked. He answered, "If I knew you were thinking of leaving the JLC, I would have offered you a job. Why the hell did you go to work for that lousy union. They don't do shit for their members." I said I am hoping to make a difference. He shrugged. We shook hands. He said "Good luck."

I spent the next two and a half years trying to make a difference. I worked closely with ACWA's Education Department staff, whom I had gotten to know while at the JLC. I developed after-work classes, and participated in the Amalgamated summer schools, both recruiting members to attend, and teaching sessions. I helped Irene Simon, the manager's wife, structure the programs she ran for retirees. I even promoted a low-cost trip to Puerto Rico for members and their families.

The joint board once had a newspaper but it had not appeared in years. I revived it, and became its editor, consulting with the staff of ACWA's newspaper, *The Advance*. I knew Burt Beck, its editor, through the JLC, and I got to know the members of the staff, as well. (A long aside: Ed Murray was one of the staff writers with whom I was friendly. We would get together for lunch from time to time, and he told me that he was working on a book. I was impressed. I wished him luck. When I left for Washington and AFSCME at the end of 1964, we kept in touch, and a few years later, he followed me to

Washington. Ed eventually found a job which got him to Ethiopia, and then to Iran, doing PR for the Shah. Toward the end of 1967, he called me to announce that his book, "The Passion Players," had been published. I congratulated him, and made the rounds of the bookstores to get a copy. I couldn't find one, but told the stores to order it because it is going to be a big seller. It had a recommendation from Mario Puzo, author of The Godfather, and a friend of Ed's. I finally found a copy; it wasn't such a big seller, but I liked it, and was very proud to have a book by an author who was my friend. Ed wrote a couple more books. We lost touch with each other. I Googled him and learned that he died in 2007.)

In trying to understand the contract, its legal ramifications, and the economics of the laundry industry, I met with the staffs of ACWA's legal and research departments. I spent a lot of time at ACWA headquarters on Union Square. (Another aside: I always thought that it was called Union Square because the Clothing Workers and Textile Workers Unions had their offices there. I learned that was not the case. It had something to do with the Civil War.)

A big challenge for all unions is leadership development. In a low wage industry, few members want to take the time, or have the energy or interest, to serve as shop stewards, or on their local's executive boards. Among the after-work classes that I created, were classes in leadership training: how to be a shop steward, and understanding, interpreting and enforcing the contract.

As I visited the shops with the business agents, and attended union meetings, I got to know many of the workers. One fellow I met at a large linen supply company, really impressed me. He attended one of the classes I ran, and we became friendly. The shop steward in his plant was leaving and I urged him to take the position. He said he couldn't. I asked why. He told me that he was the numbers taker in the plant, and that if he was the shop steward and was caught, it would reflect badly on the union. He wasn't going to give up the numbers. He made more money from that than from his salary. I heard stories about the many workers who headed for the bars after pay day on Friday and blew their entire salary drinking and buying drinks for everybody, and then having to borrow money to live for the rest of the week. But they were king for a night. I was surprised to learn that one of the business agents, who had a lovely wife and a house in Queens, also had a girl friend and a child in an apartment in Harlem. I was introduced to a very different world.

I tried to use my position as Education Director to involve our members in areas that went beyond union membership. I contacted "Pocket Books," the paperback book publisher, and had them deliver a book rack and books which would be of interest to our members. It was prominently placed in the union office next to the dues window. I also called Consumer Reports, which had been distributed in my high school at a reduced rate, and arranged for them to deliver the magazine to the union each month at the same reduced rate.

Our newspaper, The Amalgamated Laundry Workers Bulletin had a new masthead, and layout, designed for me by the great Bernie Seaman. I would run his cartoons which he did for the JLC. I also had a separate page in Spanish, and when we hired a Chinese organizer, I asked him to put together a Chinese page. I enjoyed putting the paper together, and made sure that the Business Agents brought them to the shops and plants and distributed them. It was an extra burden for them which some didn't enjoy. Our manager, Louis Simon, who I now was calling Louis, supported pretty much everything I was doing.

I continued to serve as the staff person for the NYC AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee, but now as a staff member of the Laundry Workers Union. I may have had more credibility with Harry Van Arsdale, and the President of the Building Trades Union, Peter Brennan. I saw them frequently at labor functions and they were friendly enough. I have often told the story of Van Arsdale's remarkable ability to relate to four different people at the same time: He is talking to one, shaking hands with another, looking at a third, and waving to a fourth (with his left hand.) I know this because on a few occasions, I was one of the four.

Peter Brennan, who was fighting a losing battle to keep minorities out of the building trades, once tried to explain to me that this is all that building tradesmen can pass on to their children and nephews—entry into their trade. I talked at length with him about the harm the exclusion of minorities was doing to the building trades unions, to the labor movement and to society. Peter looked at me, smiled and said: "Jake, don't try to bullshit a bullshitter." During this period, we forced the building trades unions to publicize when the applications for the apprenticeship programs were to be submitted, enabling minorities to apply. Peter, a Democrat, who supported Nixon in 1972, managed to bullshit his way into the Nixon Administration as Secretary of Labor. Who was using who is a question. He didn't last long.

Though the wages paid to most of the laundry workers were low (as Jerry Wurf pointed out) they did have a contract which provided for holidays, sick leave, vacation, retirement, and treatment at their own health center. Part of my job was to make the members aware of the contract provisions. For the first time, a Handbook was given to the members, which I prepared, explaining the contract in language they could understand. It contained a brief history and structure of the union, rates of pay, and a description of the insurance, retirement program, health center, and the names of the union officers and staff. The booklet was attractively printed with layout and illustrations by Bernie Seaman, and was distributed to all the members, with extra copies available in the office.

By 1962, the union had a substantial number of retirees, and a retirees program was held in the union hall every month, directed by Louis's wife, Irene. I assisted her in programming, primarily obtaining speakers. As with my mother, Jewish Labor Bund activists at the Atran Center, and the Jewish Labor Committee old timers, the laundry workers retirees had wonderful stories to tell, but I was too young and too self-involved to hear them. Another opportunity missed. Instead of sharing the dramatic story of the

early days of struggle to create the union, and the internal fights between the Socialists and Communists, compounded by the racketeers, Irene celebrated the birthdays of the retirees.

An important part of my job was political education. I was there for two very important elections: 1962, after I had just come on board, and 1964, as I was about to leave. I created a campaign to get our members to register and vote. The big challenge was to get them to register. First, we participated in a city-wide union campaign for firehouse registration, to make voter registration more accessible. I came up with a contest where the names of members who had registered to vote was thrown in a box, and a prize was given to the member whose name was drawn. This gimmick got a few hundred members to register who might otherwise not have registered. We had rallies for ACWA-endorsed candidates and had a big push to get out the vote

In 1963, the contract came up for renewal. There were months of negotiations. Offers and counter-offers. The threat of a strike. Picket signs were prepared and the members were primed to walk out if there was no contract. Finally, a last minute agreement. Simon did it again. So what did the workers get? Most of them got a five cent increase that went into effect December 2, 1963, and another five cents in November 30, 1964. Starting rates for Inexperienced Family and Wholesale Production Workers was \$1.25 an hour, and for Inexperienced Linen Supply and Diaper Production Workers \$1.275 an hour. The Federal Minimum Wage was \$1.15. The figures were in the Handbook I drafted. Jerry Wurf wasn't too wrong. I had trouble celebrating the "victory." But you put the best face on it.

1963 was also the year of the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." I have already written about this, but this was another example of how my job as Education Director, my role staffing the NYC AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee, and my volunteer work converged. It was in the beginning of 1963 that plans for the March on Washington were being developed by Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph. When the call went out for volunteers, I volunteered. For the next several months, I would spend one or two evenings a week at the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters offices on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, the headquarters for the March, doing whatever needed to be done—running off leaflets, stuffing, addressing and stamping envelopes etc. preparing for the big day—August 14, 1963.

I urged participation in the March in the name of the NYC AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee (even though the National AFL-CIO had not endorsed it) , and I put together the campaign to get as many laundry workers as I could to attend the March. This involved making the members aware, getting the Joint Board to allocate the funds to subsidize the members who signed up, and getting members and their families to sign up. We charged a nominal sum (I think it was \$10) for the round trip bus ride and a box lunch. Then I had to find a caterer for the box lunches, a bus company from whom to rent the buses, sign makers for the banners on the buses and the placards to be carried by our members, captains for each bus responsible for the passengers etc. A lot of work. We filled five buses.

And for my next accomplishment: a scholarship program for the children of members. Louis had learned that other unions had such programs. It fell to me to develop it for the Laundry Workers. Several of the union scholarship programs that I reviewed selected the winners solely on their academic record. If we did that, the scholarships would more than likely have gone to the children of the white laundry drivers. I put together a selection process based on a written essay, community service and academic record, and identified a distinguished panel of judges to review their submissions and select the four scholarship winners. It achieved the desired mix. An early example of affirmative action.

When the ACWA celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Convention, the unique contribution of the Laundry Workers was a special concert of the New York Philharmonic at Lincoln Center. The date was May 12, 1964. I prepared a program insert with the history of the Laundry Workers Joint Board and with art reproductions featuring laundry workers, including Degas' Ironers from the Louvre. The Convention delegates from all over the country received a taste of culture, courtesy of the Laundry Workers. It was one of the Convention highlights.

Louis basked in the spotlight: Sponsor of a Philharmonic Concert, Creator of a Scholarship Program, Participant in the March on Washington, Labor champion of civil rights, Political tactician, Negotiator of a new contract. He appreciated everything I did, and hinted that, as time went by, I would be given more responsibility, and if I played my cards right, I might be picked to succeed him.

However, in the fall of 1964, I received a call from Jerry Wurf, who had been elected President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, asking if I would be interested in being the Education Director of AFSCME. Wow! Talked to Sylvia. Washington DC isn't Akron. An opportunity to start a new phase of our life. She said yes. I said yes, and worked out the details with Jerry's assistant, Bob Hastings.

When I told Louis, he was incredulous. I was giving up the possibility of being Manager of the Amalgamated Laundry Workers Joint Board to be the Education Director of AFSCME. Ridiculous! But if that is what I want, he made it clear he wouldn't stand in my way. There was one Business Agent who was happy to see me go, but when the time came for a successor to Louis, he didn't get it. Looking back over those few years, almost 50 years ago, I am pleased with what I was able to accomplish. I wish I could have done more.

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