

Milwaukee's Hat Workers: Union Strategy and the Logic of Industrial Capitalism

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Abstract

Institutional studies within the field of labor history have expanded historians' knowledge of how unions operated within political, economic, and legal contexts. These histories tend to present national-level unions as the representatives of workers' interests, and tie workers to the ebb and flow of the political acceptance of unions. Other labor historians have rejected institutional studies, instead choosing to study how laborers understood their relationship to management, how local-level unions organized workplaces and engaged workers in broader political issues, and how worker action could force positive changes within the workplace.

The paper, *Small Beer in the Brew City*, focuses primarily upon Milwaukee's millinery industry during the 1940s and 1950s. I argue that the story of Local 50, which was Milwaukee's branch of the United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers International Union, should cause pause for labor historians because an institutional focus does not provide answers for the deep division between the national- and local-level unions, at the same time that worker action during a strike in 1956, in circumvention of an ineffective union strategy, caused 155 laborers to be without a job. Worker agency and union strategy were just as important to this outcome as employer resistance. This raises questions for historians about movement strategy in local and national contexts; the link among ideology, practice, and experience; and about the interdependence among workers, unions, and employers.

The paper concludes specific local or urban, rather than national or institutional, frameworks enable historians to recognize and evaluate complexities in ideology and experience while exploring their effects. Local and urban contexts also illuminate important demarcations in movement strategies among localities and within levels of movement hierarchy obscured by broader frameworks.

To be a millinery worker at the Slocum Hat Corporation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, during the 1950s was to be underpaid, economically insecure, and without any real protection from one's union, Local 50 of the United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers International Union (HCMWU) because of the affiliated national-level union's attempts to accommodate an

employer that produced goods for a declining consumer market.¹ By 1956, Local 50 had been unable to force Slocum to bargain collectively or sign a new contract since 1952. The contract renewed automatically if yearly agreements could not be met, so workers had not received wage increases or improved benefits for three years because the 1952 contract applied through the middle of 1953. Hat workers at Slocum earned significantly less than their counterparts in the region, such as Chicago or St. Louis, and Slocum's management justified low wages as the consequence of Milwaukee's failing millinery industry and the company's consistent financial losses. But it was not just Slocum that recognized the financial problems of the city's millinery industry, as throughout the 1950s the national-level organizing body of the United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers, the International, repeatedly advised Local 50 and its workers to exercise caution when bargaining with Slocum. Indeed, because the International, as part of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), believed that an employer's and an industry's health were tied to its workers' continued employment and economic vitality, it was feared that any radical action on the part of union members might finally break the Slocum Hat Factory.² The strategy of conciliation during industrial declension resulted in complacency and worker exploitation, as the needs of those that produced capital for both Slocum and the union were subsumed in favor of the employer and the national-level organization.

The lack of a new contract, the fact of low wages, and the inefficacy of Local 50 to negotiate a new contract reached a boiling point on Wednesday, July 18, 1956, as 155 hat makers at the Slocum Hat factory sat down at their workstations, refusing to work for an employer that

¹ Please note that the above acronym will be used occasionally to refer to the International, and should not be confused with its Milwaukee affiliate, Local 50.

² "Slocum Hat Folds in Milwaukee When Workers Demand Rights," *The Hat Worker*, August 15, 1956; Correspondence from Marx Lewis to Rose Maier, June 10, 1954, Records of the United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers International Union, Local 50, Folder 7, Box 4, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (hereafter cited as Local 50 Records).

denied their right to decent wages and economic security. Later that day, the hat makers walked off the job, effectively ending production at the Slocum building. This strike had been somewhat spontaneous, as Local 50 had been aware that its workers were considering walking out. The Local came out in support of its workers, even as in the months and years leading up to the strike, the International continued to urge patience and caution. In retaliation, one week later, the Slocum family and the company's management permanently stopped business and production operations, shutting down Slocum Hat Corporation and leaving 155 men and women, most past the age of forty, without jobs. Representatives from the International went to Milwaukee in an attempt to convince the Slocum management to reopen, but Sidney Slocum revealed that, due to the consistent financial problems the company experienced as part of a general consumer decline within the hat industry, he had planned to stop operations at some point in December 1956. Still, approximately thirty workers returned to the hat factory in order to complete the remaining work, while others accepted the closure of Slocum and the loss of their jobs with what Milwaukee's news media referred to as a "quiet courage."³

The efforts of the workers and of Local 50 had been in vain, as they would have been out of jobs within a few months regardless of the benefits that would have accrued from a new contract. The millinery industry within Milwaukee and throughout the country had been declining since the 1930s, and the skilled work required to make hats had begun to be replaced by machines in the 1920s. Further, the strategy of the HCMWU, as part of the AFL, tied the fortunes of workers to the fortunes of employers. The HCMWU did this within the context of a declining industry by warning Local 50's leaders against encouraging labor activism or asking

³ Correspondence from Sidney B. Slocum to Rose Maier, July 19, 1956, Folder 10, Box 4, Local 50 Records; "Slocum Hat Folds in Milwaukee When Workers Demand Rights," *The Hat Worker*, August 15, 1956; "Hat Firm Quitting Because of Strike," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 2, 1956; "Hatters Take Job Loss With Quiet Courage," *The Milwaukee Journal*, August 3, 1956.

too much in contract negotiations. This strategy, however, was not indicative of the needs of Slocum's workers. The International's strategy of repeated conciliation with employers, and the internal dynamics between the International and the Local, limited what could be accomplished by the union and by its workers just as much as Slocum Corporation's negotiating tactics, the inevitable march of capitalist technological innovation, and the omnipotent dictates of the American consumer marketplace. This is not to argue that the 1956 Slocum strike would have ended differently had the HCMWU operated in a more confrontational manner; in fact, to those involved, the closure of Slocum seemed to be a foreordained conclusion due to their perceptions, and the reality, that Slocum's products were marketed towards a contracted consumer base. It is, however, to suggest that the internal dynamics of the HCMWU operated in a detrimental manner for its workers, and the national-level union could have done more in the years leading up to the closure of Slocum to improve workers' livelihoods. Indeed, the HCMWU was nearly as much to blame for workers' problems as Slocum Hat Corporation.

The problem of union strategy, then, speaks to questions about Local 50; the United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers International Union; and the workers at the Slocum Hat factory. What was the relationship among Local 50, its workers, and the Slocum Hat Corporation? What were the strategies and internal dynamics of the HCMWU, especially in terms of the relationship between Local 50 and the International? Even if the closure of the plant was a foregone conclusion, were there other options that the union could have explored in prior years? These questions speak to broader issues that labor historians must address. Do unions express the interests of their workers, at what level, and where? Does the failure of direct action, in this case the closure of the Slocum Hat factory after workers struck, suggest that conciliation really is the best strategy and that workers are in fact tied to their employers and dependent upon

their success? How should historians think about a union that during the post-World War II period was not hampered by 1947's Taft-Hartley Law, which has often been considered a significant limitation on union activity, but by its own internal dynamics and by economic forces beyond the union's control? Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of Local 50 is, as will be discussed below, that it fits well neither labor historiography nor conventional thinking about the role of unions or union strategies.

In order to answer these questions, this paper implements as its main resource base the Records of the United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers International Union, Local 50. The Records of Local 50 are rich with detailed correspondence between the International and the Local, and also contain voluminous correspondence between Local 50 and the Slocum Hat Corporation. While these correspondence letters provide the historian with a detailed account of the internal workings and dynamics between the International and the Local, and between Slocum and Local 50, the voices of workers are scant. For example, the historian does not always know the exact interaction between a hat worker and a manager that led to a short work stoppage, just as the historian might not know exactly how, in their words, workers perceived the lack of a new contract. Perhaps most disappointingly, the temporal endpoint of the Records of Local 50 is essentially July 1956, the month that workers went on strike at Slocum. For example, the last entry in the local's minutes book is July 19, 1956, the day after the strike began.⁴ There are some correspondence letters that follow this date and there is evidence of the union as late as 1968, but for the most part, I have looked to newspaper sources to determine much of the strike's outcome. Despite these limitations, the source base provides the historian with documents that

⁴ Minutes of Local 50 of the United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers International Union, July 19, 1956, Volume 4, Box 6, Local 50 Records (hereafter Local 50's minutes will be cited as Minutes of Local 50). Please note that folder locations for Local 50's minutes are listed as volumes, whereas the rest of the collection is listed as folder.

shed light on the relationship between different levels of union management and the interactions between an employer and a union. From these, it is possible to derive a concept of the struggles workers faced on a daily basis, the desires workers held for workplace benefits, the promises a union might have offered, and the frustrations workers felt when their situations did not improve despite their and their union's efforts.

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Local 50 of the United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers International Union formed as the HCMWU's Milwaukee, Wisconsin, affiliate in 1937, after it absorbed its predecessor, Local 51. Local 50 represented workers in a number of hat factories throughout the Milwaukee area, but by far the largest employer with which it had a contract was Slocum Straw Works, later Slocum Hat Corporation. The HCMWU was an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor, and characterized itself in terms of its strategies and ideologies, some of which derived from its affiliation with the AFL. As a craft union that represented skilled workers within a specific segment of an industry, the HCMWU believed, as did the AFL, that it was just as important to fight for the rights of its members as for those of its employers, and that workers had responsibilities to their employers just as much as employers had responsibilities to their workers. As a consequence, workers' power within the workplace derived just as much from their own demands and efforts, and those of the HCMWU, as they did from the power granted them by employers. This was a strategy based in expediency and one that recognized that the millinery industry had been regressing for a number of years due to declining consumer demand and technological innovation at the point of production, as then-HCMWU president Max Zaritsky stated in 1940, "the union is fully aware that the hat, cap and millinery industries have

been ‘sick’ industries for some time.”⁵ In fact, by 1940, the American hat industry had been on a steady economic decline, and workers experienced its impact most drastically. The hat industry mechanized in the 1920s, and this contained tremendous import for hat workers because many lines of work had required tremendous skill. Blockers, for example, had traditionally used their hands to shape and size hat bodies. After mechanization, the output that once required thirty journeyman hat blockers required only twelve. With reduced need for skilled workers, hat factories either sped up production or reduced the size of their labor force.⁶

While the strategy of the HCMWU, as a member International of the AFL and indicative of its craft union mentality, was certainly constrained by the context of the hat industry by the mid-twentieth century, it put the same burden of workers’ rights on local affiliates as employers at the same time that it tied worker success to that of employers. By the time Local 50 formed in Milwaukee in 1937, the nationwide millinery industry had been declining for some time, and because of this, its organizing body, the HCMWU, used a strategy that favored laborers only in contexts that were favorable to employers. From the beginning, the stage was set that would constrain Local 50 and deny basic improvements to its workers. For a short period of time, however, the Local would be able to win concessions for its workers through collective bargaining and would increase worker consciousness and solidarity through engaging them in broader educational and political actions. But as Slocum Hat Corporation’s financial situation became ever more dire and the company refused to accept minimal improvements for workers, the HCMWU fell back on its old strategy of conciliation and patience while also continuing to

⁵ While there is nothing in the Local 50 Records that might suggest why Local 51 was reformed as Local 50, and whether or not it is important, it is important to note that beginning in 1937 the union became Local 50; for the quote from Zaritsky, and a description of the HCMWU’s ideology and strategy, see Donald B. Robinson, *Spotlight On A Union: The Story of the United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers International Union* (New York: The Dial Press, 1948), 11-17.

⁶ Charles H. Green, *The Headwear Workers: A Century of Trade Unionism* (New York: United Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers Union, Marstin Press, 1944), 74-79.

focus its institutional efforts in other millinery cities. This limited what the International could accomplish for its workers at the same time that the Milwaukee chapter of the HCMWU fell to the wayside, a small union in a much larger organizational structure. The millinery industry was in a fight for survival, but by focusing on the larger picture of union success, the HCMWU ignored the micro-level picture.

Local 50, despite the fact that it was founded within a context that would later prove detrimental, did earn gains for its workers in its early years. Agreements between Slocum and Local 51, through 1936, recognized that workers had the right, but were not obliged, to join the union. When Local 50 formed in 1937, it shifted its focus to obtaining an agreement with Slocum that the company would operate as a single-union shop, which meant that the employer would agree to hire only members of Local 50. A contractual agreement such as this provided workers and unions with two benefits. First, it legitimized the sole right of the union to represent all workers in the factory. Whether or not workers actually were protected in practice, and as we will see, there was reason to question this in the case of Local 50 and the HCMWU, this still codified a legal concept of employee protection under the union. Second, because all workers to be hired needed to join a single union, Slocum could not develop an employer-run union or hire non-union workers. Employers used these strategies to weaken union solidarity. By developing an employer-run union, the company could pay workers in that union slightly more and thus weaken the independent union, or by bringing in non-union workers, the company could pay union members less and delegitimize the union. There were limitations to signing a union shop contract, however, as workers were required to join a single union, and if that union was unable or unwilling to win gains for workers, the workers were contractually obligated not to act beyond organizational guidelines. In fact, Local 50 refused to endorse spontaneous actions on the part of

its Slocum workers, as the Local needed to approve any stoppage. In turn, the Local needed to receive approval for a stoppage from the International. This limited from the start what could be accomplished within the workplace, as it shifted control and direction from workers, to their local unions, to their International. Still, by July 1938, Local 50 managed to secure a union shop agreement with Slocum Straw Works, which did at first provide the union with a degree of legitimacy.⁷

Local 50 had been able to achieve the union shop contract, which was something that Local 51 had not been able to accomplish. This break from Local 51 was critical, as it provided workers with a contractual basis for representation, but there were important continuities from Local 51 to Local 50. Local 51, in its short existence, engaged workers in actions that produced greater consciousness and solidarity. In August 1936, Local 51 sent pickets to support workers on strike at the Lindemann and Hoverson factory, which manufactured home appliances. That same month, the union sent delegates to the Women's Trade Union League convention in Waukegan, Illinois. In December 1936, Local 51 sent pickets to support strikers at National Straw Works, a small Milwaukee hat manufacturer. Local 50 initially continued this practice of involving its workers in broader issues with the hope of increasing solidarity and political awareness. In February 1942, it pushed its workers to purchase war bonds for the World War II effort, linking their efforts to broader patriotic endeavors. The next month, a representative from the National Federation of the Blind solicited funds at the union's membership meeting, and encouraged union members to write letters to Washington, D.C., in order to request higher pensions for blind persons. While this might seem somewhat simplistic and minimal, it is

⁷ 1934 Contract between Slocum Straw Works and Local 51; 1938 Contract between Slocum Straw Works and Local 50. Both sources located in Folder 4, Box 6, Local 50 Records. Slocum Straw Works became Slocum Hat Corporation in 1946. The change in name does not seem significant, as the sources indicate the Slocum family, along with a board of directors, continued to run the company in a similar fashion.

important to note that in these early years, Local 50 engaged its workers to broaden their consciousness within a larger context of integrating the union's members into national and political debates. Labor historians have recognized that it is critical for local unions to encourage their workers to expand their horizons by emphasizing contexts outside the workplace. These contexts, such as the effort to fund military efforts in a time of patriotic fervor, or the suggestion that engaging the political sphere can be beneficial, ask workers to consider themselves in relation to the world around them, which raises their awareness of themselves with the ultimate goal of making them perceive class struggle.⁸ In other words, Local 50's early efforts to broaden worker horizons were typical examples of union strategies to increase solidarity and cause an awareness that unions often function within larger spheres outside the workplace.

While Local 50 involved itself in political spheres outside the workplace, it is important to note that neither Local 50 nor the HCMWU were radical institutions, and in fact favored the use of government agencies and legal channels to earn gains for workers. In 1942, the same year that Local 50 encouraged its workers to consider military and political efforts, it took Slocum to arbitration through the Wisconsin Industrial Commission to force a wartime wage increase. The period leading up to the March 1942 arbitration meetings was indicative of later relations between Slocum and the Local. The Local brought the company to arbitration because Slocum disputed whether or not the yearly contract required the company to pay workers a five percent increase because it had operated at a loss for each year from 1931 through 1941, and despite the slight profit in 1941, losses were forecasted again for 1942. Granted, much of this period of

⁸ Minutes of Local 51 of the United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers International Union, August 13 and 27, 1936, and November 12, 1936, Folder 3, Box 1, Local 50 Records; Minutes of Local 50, February 12, 1942, and March 6, 1942, Volume 3, Box 6, Local 50 Records; Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?: The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1988), 3-9, 166.

financial difficulty was during the Great Depression, but Slocum did not experience financial recovery at the end of the 1930s as many businesses did. The company argued that the contract signed in 1941, which guaranteed a five percent wage increase for the plant's workers, was only applicable when the company operated at a profit. If it was forced to concede higher wages, in its economic condition, it might be forced under. Further, Slocum accurately pointed out that the company could not produce hats nearly as quickly as other factories, as the majority of its workers were over age forty-five and no longer as dexterous as hat makers in other plants. However, the aspect of Slocum's argument that suggested economic difficulty was relevant, as the company had not operated with substantial profits in over a decade, and its distributor, Gage Brothers, also operated at a loss, which further complicated Slocum's financial situation.⁹

The union countered with the argument that if wage increases were valid only when Slocum operated at a profit, workers would quickly find themselves in dire economic straits. The Local recognized that the company had been losing money for some time, and that if the arbitrator decided to uphold Slocum's claim, there would be no reasonable expectation for future improvement. The union argued two points. First, that hat workers in Milwaukee, especially at Slocum, were severely underpaid compared to other cities. Trimmers, who cut material that would later be used in the construction of hats, in Milwaukee earned 52.5 cents per hour, whereas their counterparts in Chicago earned sixty-four cents per hour. Similarly, blockers in Milwaukee earned 90.3 cents per hour, but their counterparts in Chicago earned \$1.24 per hour, and in Philadelphia earned \$1.32 per hour. The cost of living in Milwaukee was lower than in Philadelphia or Chicago, but at the same time, Local 50's second point of argument was that wages at Slocum Straw Works were not increasing nearly as dramatically as the city's cost of living. Workers required the minimal five percent wage increase because Milwaukee's 1942 cost

⁹ Arbitration between Slocum Straw Works and Local 50, Folder 8, Box 4, Local 50 Records.

of living had increased 7.3 percent since 1941. Further exasperating the situation, the arbitrator also discovered that while Slocum's evidence, provided by the United States Department of Labor, which demonstrated that workers had received a wage increase from 1940 to 1941 was accurate, it was also misleading. Taken in relation to wages paid in 1939, many categories of hat workers in fact earned lower or similar wages in 1941. Eventually, the arguments of the union, and Slocum's misrepresentation of wage increases, convinced the arbitrator that the hat workers within Slocum Straw Works deserved the five percent wage increase to begin to approximate the city's cost of living.¹⁰

The early years of Local 50 were thus fairly successful, and despite the fact that the union had formed within a context of decline that would later become quite detrimental, it seemed in the early 1940s as if the union was gaining steam. It had negotiated a union shop contract with Slocum, it involved its workers in issues beyond the union so as to raise the political consciousness of its workers, and it also had used legal and governmental mechanisms to force concessions from the company even during a period of industrial and consumer contraction for Slocum's products. But after the victory in 1942, the local union's situation changed. Slocum continued to refuse increases and new contracts, arguing that the company's dire financial situation necessitated patience on workers' part. Similarly, the International cautioned the Local against demands that were beyond what Slocum would allow because it conceptualized the union's and the employer's success in the same terms and because other, larger, locals were more important to organizational strategy. By October 1946 Local 50 and Slocum were locked in contract negotiations over grievance procedures for workplace discipline. Slocum wanted its managers to obtain sole discretion for directing the workplace, at the same time that it wanted to shift responsibility for worker discipline to the union. Under this procedure, the union would be

¹⁰ Ibid.

responsible for reforming and training hat workers. On the one hand this might have placed some power in the hands of the Local as it provided some form of workplace discipline outside the control of the company. On the other hand, however, in practice it absolved Slocum's responsibility for terminating workers, as it would be the union's fault if it failed to properly address worker competency and behavior.¹¹

Local 50 was very concerned about this, and sought the direction of the International. The Local was advised by the International to accept the terms of Slocum's contract, which it did, not only because Slocum continued to bemoan the company's financial predicament, but also because there were similar contracts that had been proposed throughout the hat industry in efforts to weaken local unions. Therefore, Milwaukee might be a test case for other millinery cities. Local 50's Business Secretary, Rose Maier, was concerned that the Milwaukee local was being made the "guinea pig" of the hat industry, especially because it seemed absurd to sign a regressive contract when the industry, and Slocum especially, did not seem to be improving. The International, it seemed to Maier, was concerned about Milwaukee's hat workers only insofar as they could provide a test case for union strategy within the declining industry, and the International, as part of its craft union ideology, tied the fortunes of Slocum to those of its workers, and suggested patience and cooperation until the company could recover.¹²

Local 50 was indeed aware that the International considered it a smaller, less important local within its organization. Perhaps nothing reflected this more than the July 1953 millinery strike in Norwalk, Connecticut. A strike for an AFL-affiliated union was a severe occasion, especially when the union's governing organization imbued itself with an ideology that equated

¹¹ Correspondence from Rose Maier to Mr. Max Zaritsky, "Clause Submitted by Slocum Straw Works for 1946 Contract," October 4, 1946, Untitled Document Containing Proposals Submitted by the Union, October 4, 1946, Folder 6, Box 4, Local 50 Records.

¹² Correspondence from Rose Maier to Max Zaritsky, "Clause Submitted by Slocum Straw Works for 1946 Contract," Folder 6, Box 4, Local 50 Records.

workers and employers. The Norwalk local was one of the HCMWU's oldest affiliates, and the Norwalk plant employed 1500 union members. Once the Norwalk workers went out on strike, the International wrote to its locals, stating that it expected each member to contribute to a strike fund. It asked for one dollar per member per week, which seems a small sum. However, by 1953, workers at Slocum were in fairly dire financial straits. Since 1947, their wages had increased between only fifteen to twenty cents per hour. For a trimmer earning only ninety-five cents per hour, the fee in support of the Norwalk strike could become a fairly significant amount as the strike progressed. Still, the International demanded that its workers contribute to the strike fund because Norwalk was a location at which the organization could not afford to lose because the plant employed so many union members. Just as Milwaukee in 1946, Norwalk was a test case for the HCMWU, only this time the situation did not allow for failure because of the city's significance for the millinery industry.¹³

The strategy of the HCMWU might have been wise, as there should be no doubt that a union ten times as populous as the Milwaukee local was an important strategic point, especially considering the trajectory of the industry's shrinking consumer base. In May 1954 the Norwalk workers won the strike and in August 1954 went back to work, having forced concessions from the Norwalk factory. This was a tremendous source of pride for the International, as its leaders had put much emphasis on the strike, with the assertion that the outcome of Norwalk would dictate the course of the organization.¹⁴ Indeed the outcome did dictate the course of the organization, but not in the way that was perhaps assumed by other locals. The International

¹³ "Norwalk Hatters Mark End of Strike at Picnic," *The Hat Worker*, August 15, 1954; Correspondence from Alex Rose and Marx Lewis to United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers International Union Locals, July 28, 1953, Folder 7, Box 4, Local 50 Records; 1947 Contract between Slocum Hat Corporation and Local 50, and 1952 Contract between Slocum Hat Corporation and Local 50, Folder 1, Box 1, Local 50 Records.

¹⁴ Ibid.

neither developed in militancy nor did it shift away from the assumption that worker success was linked to employer success, but it did continue to focus on its larger rather than its smaller locals. It continued its old strategy and ideology, concepts with which Local 50 was well aware by 1953.

The final time Local 50 was able to complete contract negotiations with Slocum was 1952, which carried over into the 1953 fiscal year. If the two parties could not reach an agreement, the terms would carry over into the next year. In the period between the final contract signing with Slocum and the 1956 strike at the plant, the Local repeatedly attempted in vain to negotiate a new contract with the company. Several times, including in March 1956, the Local notified the Wisconsin Employment Relations Board that it sought mediation in negotiating a new contract with Slocum, as it was supposed to do under the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act. Local 50 proposed contract amendments that would guarantee workers not only higher wages, but also some form of retirement compensation. Retirement compensation was critical for Slocum Hat Corporation's aging millinery laborers, and for Local 50 to secure it would have been a critical victory for its workers. Wage increases were also a critical issue, because of the contractual carryover from 1953. By 1956 the workers at Slocum had not received wage increases in three years, and in the past decade their wages had increased only between fifteen and twenty cents per hour, depending upon department. These were pressing demands, and the Local realized it and was willing to use governmental bargaining apparatuses in the postwar years to help their workers.¹⁵

¹⁵ Correspondence from the State of Wisconsin Employment Relations Board to Slocum Hat Corporation, May 20, 1954, and April 13, 1956, Folder 4, Box 5, Local 50 Records; 1947 Contract between Slocum Hat Corporation and Local 50, and 1952 Contract between Slocum Hat Corporation and Local 50, Folder 1, Box 1, Local 50 Records; Correspondence from Marx Lewis to Rose Maier, October 9, 1953, Folder 7, Box 4, Local 50 Records; Christopher L. Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law, and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 282-316.

Despite Local 50's willingness to use legal channels to mediate a new contract, the International warned them against this strategy. When contract negotiations between Local 50 and Slocum broke down, the Local appealed to the International for help. But the General Secretary-Treasurer of the International, Marx Lewis, who reported to local unions the strategies International officials decided upon, had been too involved in the Norwalk strike to pay attention to other locals. In his first letter to Rose Maier after the Norwalk strike began, in October 1953, he outlined the International's strategy for Milwaukee. The International suggested that Local 50 reorient its goals; instead of seeking a retirement fund or increased wages, it should look for other, unspecified gains. Lewis ended the letter by reminding Maier that Local 50 was \$4,000 behind in its contributions to the Norwalk strike fund.¹⁶ The International, echoing 1946, once again considered the needs of its Milwaukee affiliate and its workers less important than larger locals, and it developed a strategy that did not speak to the needs of workers at the ground level.

The International, in asking Local 50 to reorient its goal, also circumvented the Local's use of governmental assistance to collectively bargain with Slocum. Local 50 filed briefs with the Wisconsin Employment Relations Board to request assistance in negotiations with Slocum, but the Local never pursued this avenue of mediation. The record is unclear as to specifically why Local 50 never fully pursued arbitration, but what is clear is that the International sent its representatives to Milwaukee to bargain with Slocum. While Local 50 officials were present at meetings, the International took the lead in negotiations. When International officers were not present or the union was between negotiating periods, the HCMWU recommended to the Local that due to Slocum's financial situation, it was unlikely that hat workers in Milwaukee would earn the specific gains they needed. Marx Lewis reminded Rose Maier in a January 1955 letter

¹⁶ Correspondence from Marx Lewis to Rose Maier, October 9, 1953, Folder 7, Box 4, Local 50 Records.

that the HCMWU's intention was to make sure that any gains earned were not detrimental to Slocum due to the company's financial predicament. In other words, the International suggested patience and slow gains, mutually agreed upon by the national-level HCMWU and the company, as opposed to a ruling from the state that might have put Slocum in an even more difficult economic situation.¹⁷ The International essentially adopted Slocum's argument that the company was financially unable to grant retirement benefits or meaningful wage increases, and implicitly sided with Slocum rather than its workers because during periods of industrial contraction the equation of capital with labor as organizational strategy effectively prioritizes the economic health of the company above that of its members.

If the millinery union was unwilling or unable to side with its workers, and in fact sided with an employer that refused to accede to demands, there was little point to being in a union. While the International was willing by October 1954 to "reconcile" itself with the possibility that there might never be significant gains made in Milwaukee due to Slocum's financial situation, it also recognized that union members understood that the HCMWU did not properly represent them. Marx Lewis believed that hat workers in Milwaukee were different from those in other cities, in that workers in other cities were not demoralized by failures to earn yearly contractual improvements. Lewis feared that Milwaukee workers thought Local 50 and the HCMWU were not in a position to earn them anything. In order to overcome this impression, he suggested to Local 50 that rather than actually earn the improvements workers needed, the local union should do more to convince its workers that the HCMWU acted as an organized body in the best interests of its members. The International considered, however, worker and employer interests

¹⁷ Correspondence from Marx Lewis to Rose Maier, January 22, 1955, Folder 7, Box 4, Local 50 Records.

to be predicated upon one another, which ultimately meant that considerations of slow gains and Slocum's survival overtook the pressing needs of the hat workers.¹⁸

As the situation at Slocum Hat Corporation became more critical, and Local 50 was unable to convince its workers that the HCMWU truly represented them, the International went to Milwaukee more frequently, and began to address workers at membership meetings. On July 26, 1955, Alex Rose, then the president of the HCMWU, visited Milwaukee to attend the Local's monthly meeting to discuss the issue of contracts. Rose took complaints and suggestions from workers, and stated that he would consider their concerns, as he believed he knew what workers wanted. While the record is unclear about the demands workers directed at Rose, in the months following this meeting and leading up to the July 1956 strike, the International continued to seek a policy of cooperation with Slocum. In early 1956, Sidney Slocum visited the International headquarters to speak to the union's officers. At this meeting, the company's representative reiterated the need for the union to have patience, and that he could not grant wage increases due to the company's financial situation. The HCMWU's leadership again deferred to Slocum's suggestion.¹⁹ Despite its concern that workers did not believe that the union truly represented them, the International repeatedly submitted to Slocum's argument that improvements could not be given to workers.

Workers at Slocum became disillusioned with the inefficacy and strategy of their union, and the organization found itself with less influence among its workers. Throughout the 1950s, Local 50 planned fewer activities outside the union, and by the end of 1955 it reduced its emphasis on broader worker political engagement to selling candy for Thanksgiving and cards

¹⁸ Correspondence from Marx Lewis to Rose Maier, October 21, 1954, and January 22, 1955, Folder 7, Box 4, Local 50 Records.

¹⁹ Minutes of Local 50, July 26, 1955, Volume 4, Box 6, Local 50 Records; Correspondence from Marx Lewis to Sidney B. Slocum, September 5, 1956, Folder 10, Box 4, Local 50 Records.

for Christmas. Workers decreasingly identified with the union, and on Wednesday, July 19, 1956, the problems reached a breaking point. The workers finally staged a semi-spontaneous sit-down strike at Slocum, after which they simply walked off the job. Local 50 had been informed of the strike, and did support the workers. However, in yet another perceptive disconnect between local- and national-level needs for workers, the local could not provide much protection, as it remained beholden to the International's strategy and Slocum's finances. The International attempted to negotiate with Slocum and with the workers, but one week after the beginning of the strike, the factory permanently shut down. Slocum's management would later justify the decision to quit, stating that the company planned to stop operations in December 1956 due to financial problems stemming from severe revenue loss. For Slocum, the strike justified the decision immediately to close the shop, but for the workers, the inability of the union to win their demands justified the decision to strike and thus attempt to empower themselves. All sides were caught in a no-win situation due to the logic of urban and industrial deterioration, and in the end, the 155 Slocum Hat Corporation workers suffered most, as they were older Milwaukeeans left without jobs.²⁰

In the aftermath of the strike and Slocum's closing, the International distributed one-time payments of \$39 to male workers, and \$29 to female workers. The International leadership recognized the right of Slocum to close, as it was clear that the firm had typically operated at a loss since the 1930s. As such, the HCMWU did not propose a strike fund for the millinery workers in Milwaukee, since there could be no strike if the employer did not exist. Some employees agreed to return to the job to finish the orders Slocum Hat Corporation needed to fill, but it was clear they would be unemployed once this task was complete. On Thursday, August 2,

²⁰ Minutes of Local 50, October 3, 1955, and July 19, 1956, Volume 4, Box 6, Local 50 Records; Correspondence from Sidney B. Slocum to Rose Maier, July 19, 1956, Folder 10, Box 4, Local 50 Records.

officers from the International and from Local 50 summarized what the Slocum workers could expect in the coming months. The Local would attempt to find jobs for its members in Milwaukee's other millinery shops, but union officials warned against optimism, as many of the former Slocum workers were fairly advanced in age and could be associated with the labor activism that occurred at their former place of employment, which was an ominous relationship within the context of an industry in broad decline. Missing from the International's approach to Local 50 and its workers in the aftermath of the 1956 Slocum strike was the determination and vigor of the Norwalk strike. The HCMWU simply conceded its members' jobs and also declined to provide sustained economic support either to sustain Local 50 to organize at other, smaller shops, or to help workers face what appeared to be a period of prolonged unemployment.²¹

There was not a massive appeal for funds from smaller locals, no reminders to them that they were thousands of dollars in arrears to the Milwaukee strike fund; nor was there a recognition that Milwaukee's millinery workers deserved a job and that the workers might matter to the union. In other words, the International absolved itself of the former Slocum workers. It was left to workers and historians to ponder the advantages of being in a union as local economies transitioned away from production, especially when that national-level union prioritized its members while also implementing a bargaining model that equated the interests of workers and employers, which in the end always normalizes the extraction and increased technological abstraction of the means of production from workers and takes power away from workers and local representatives when the consumer side of production goes bad.

²¹ "Hatters Take Job Loss With Quiet Courage," *The Milwaukee Journal*, August 3, 1956; "Hat Firm Quitting Because of Strike," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 2, 1956; "Union Works to Save \$55,000 Slocum Job," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 3, 1956.



Slocum Hat Corporation workers on strike, advertising the hat company with which Slocum contracted, likely with the hope of starting a consumer boycott of Gage Hats.²²

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The story of Local 50 and the closure of the Slocum Hat Corporation suggest conflicting aspects of labor historiography, and this affects how the union and its strategies will be remembered. This is a story that does not fit neatly within labor historiography, as it speaks clearly to one school of thought while at the same time ignoring important components of that school. In some cases, the union's history speaks not at all to an established historiographical field. One aspect of labor historiography to which Local 50 ostensibly relates is the work published by and for the hat makers in the 1940s. This historiography developed as a consequence of post-World War II consensus history, which was a way of thinking that tended to

²² "Slocum Hat Folds in Milwaukee When Workers Demand Rights," *The Hat Worker*, August 15, 1956.

consider and look for unities in the face of opposition; in other words, labor historians of the consensus school assumed that the underlying unity of a union, between its organizing body and its locals, was an undeniable fact. The objective of the union subsumed internal differences of opinion or strategy. While this school of historiography is important for understanding the long-term trajectory of a union's development, it does much less to explain the internal dynamics between national- and local-level unions and how these internal dynamics affected what could be accomplished by and for the union's workers. Further, this historiography assumes that unions best represent workers, so less attention is paid to significant differences between worker demands and union strategy, which presents problems for historians attempting to make sense of the austerity imposed by the consumer marketplace on entire productive industries. For example, one can read stories about the HCMWU's president winning benefits for hat workers by bargaining directly with an employer, but one cannot read about the interactions between the HCMWU and its locals when there was a fundamental disconnect between the International's strategy and worker needs on the ground regarding local economic situations.²³

There is another, much newer, labor historiography that continues to argue that unions most legitimately represent working people as a class. This school of thought, often dubbed by labor historians as "institutional history," focuses on the roles unions play in encouraging organizational civic activity. Robert Zieger, perhaps the most prominent historian of this school, believes that unions have been most successful when they have engaged, and spoken for their workers, in state- and national-level political debates. Zieger suggests that a broad political agenda is important for unions when he discusses the ebb and flow of their success in relation to

²³ Green, *The Headwear Workers*; Robinson, *Spotlight On A Union*.

changes in political climates.²⁴ The focus on political contexts and on the efforts of unions to represent their workers is important, as these foci shed light on the broader roles unions play in gaining advantages for their workers. Despite this strength, institutional history critically omits the worker, and to a certain extent, the local union, because overwhelming focus is placed upon the national, organizing body of the union and the ebb and flow of its influence on federal and state policy makers. Grand narratives of national-level institutions and their interactions with political and legal structures silence the efforts of workers at the local level, and readers are left to wonder about workplace struggles and the interactions between local and national levels of institutional leadership.

These historiographical schools fail to shed much light on Local 50 and its efforts within the Slocum plant. The fact that the International continued to urge Local 50 to exercise caution in the face of overwhelming worker disempowerment, the fact that the HCMWU considered Local 50 less important than its other locals and indeed provided far more economic and bargaining support to larger locals, and the fact that workers suffered from the International's focus on Slocum's, not workers', financial needs, suggest that labor historians must go beyond the assumption that unions best represent workers during periods of industrial decline or that unions have an underlying institutional unity. In the case of the Slocum workers, the HCMWU's representation did not, in the end, do anything to help workers' economic conditions even if Local 50 was fairly attuned to the needs of its members.

While labor historians such as Robert Zieger have focused on union strategies within broader political contexts, other historians have focused on the role the law played in

²⁴ Robert H. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), see especially pages ix-xi, but the importance of the institution is a concept that runs throughout Zieger's work; Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

constraining union actions. Much of the debate temporally relevant to Local 50 surrounds the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act. Labor and legal historians are torn about Taft-Hartley. Some historians argue that Taft-Hartley, a product of developing post-World War II political conservatism and economic growth, reduced worker power by outlawing strikes, by refusing governmental recognition to radical or communist-backed unions, and therefore by requiring unions and employers to bargain collectively through government agencies.²⁵ Still other historians take a more nuanced view, recognizing that while Taft-Hartley did in fact reduce the power of workers and radical, often industrial, unions, it also empowered many traditional craft unions by providing the right to collectively bargain and by guaranteeing this right in relation to the postwar national legal structure. Still, Taft-Hartley limited union activities and bargaining to spheres that were healthy for postwar economic development.²⁶ Local 50 seems to speak little to this aspect of labor history, since it and the International did not implement radical labor strategies, nor did they take advantage of collective bargaining during the postwar period, as the International urged conciliation with the intent of Slocum's success.

Still other historians have gone beyond integrationist frameworks, and have examined union development from the ground up. From this point of view, which is helpful but incomplete for understanding Local 50, historians insist that the identities workers bring into the workplace impact what can be accomplished by way of labor movements and solidarity. Labor historians have recently begun to link gender and labor, and suggest that a gendered system of wages and preexisting notions of gender limit workplace activism because a lack of internal worker and

²⁵ James B. Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State: Labor Relations and Law During World War II* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 214-215; Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Thomas W. Gavett, *Development of the Labor Movement in Milwaukee* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 198-201.

²⁶ Tomlins, *The State and the Unions*, 314-316.

union solidarity often reflect cultural and economic discrepancies.²⁷ Other historians have made similar arguments in regard to race, suggesting that black labor is the historical bogeyman of white workers.²⁸ Still other historians argue that worker identity develops along more than gendered or racial lines, and suggest that communities have been important contexts in which unions have increased worker consciousness. Community-based actions and social experiences informed worker identity at the same time that these strategies developed within laborers a sense of solidarity and shared purpose at the ground level. Many of these community-based strategies developed from communist or other radical agendas as part of a larger project intended to increase worker consciousness and opposition to capitalist development.²⁹ The HCMWU and Local 50, however, were not radical nor did they oppose capitalism; in fact, the union, to its detriment, tied its success in Milwaukee to the success of Slocum, which essentially doomed the local-level union to failure because the company so frequently operated in the red. It also decreasingly involved its workers in political issues or other ways of helping them recognize broader class-consciousness. Even if these efforts might seem trivial, they nonetheless testify to problems of solidarity and awareness. Further, while many workers at Slocum were female and earned lower wages than their male counterparts, an unequal, if unsurprising for the 1930s

²⁷ Ileen A. DeVault, *United Apart: Gender and the Rise of Craft Unionism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Kathleen Banks Nutter, *The Necessity of Organization: Mary Kenney O'Sullivan and Trade Unionism for Women, 1892-1912* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000); Mary Margaret Fonow, *Union Women: Forging Feminism in the United Steelworkers of America* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

²⁸ David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).

²⁹ Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront*; Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest*; Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets*; Leigh David Benin, *The New Labor Radicalism and New York City's Garment Industry: Progressive Labor Insurgents in the 1960s* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000).

through the 1950s, gendered economic hierarchy did not hinder the union's success nearly as much as Slocum's efforts to avoid paying higher wages across the board.³⁰

In other words, while some aspects of Local 50's history relate to broad issues and questions within labor historiography, and it is to an extent possible to understand Local 50 and its problems in relation to the type of organization it was not, there is much about this union that is perplexing to labor historians. It fits nicely within the craft union structure of the AFL, and its national-level union was the large, powerful institution that consensus and institutional historians suggest lead the way for workers. At the same time, the International was more concerned about Slocum's economic health than that of its workers, and it advised its Milwaukee local into a detrimental situation. True, there was not much that could be done to stop Slocum from closing, but the union certainly could have forced a modicum of concessions by bringing the company to government-legitimated arbitration or it could have treated its workers in Milwaukee with a degree of validity that at least approached that of workers in Norwalk, Connecticut. Local 50 did initially encourage its workers to become involved in activities outside the workplace, but these activities tapered off as workers considered themselves increasingly isolated from the International. That the union at the national, and as a consequence, local levels failed its Milwaukee workers has by this point been established, which leads to the final and most problematic conclusion about workers and unionism at Slocum Hat Corporation. The facts that neither the International nor the Local could win gains for workers, and that the International in many ways ignored the desires of workers in favor of a conciliatory strategy, suggest the wisdom of worker action and decentralized political mobilization. Under this strategy, workers would forego the use of unions in order to win gains through direct action. In the case of the Slocum

³⁰ For a depiction of female in relation to male wage rate, see the payroll lists in Arbitration between Slocum Straw Works and Local 50, Folder 8, Box 4, Local 50 Records.

strike in 1956, however, it was worker action that caused the closure of the factory and left 155 men and women out of work. Within a period of time they would have been without jobs anyway, but prior to this had they or their local union acted outside a constraining International organizational structure it is possible, due to the existence of governmental mediating bodies, that they could have at least secured economic recompense for the time worked before the planned closure. It was the direct action of workers, in rejecting the ideology that employers and employees have mutual interests, that suggests that perhaps they do, but this is also the ideology that caused so many of the problems for workers at Slocum and validates the logic of consumer capitalism's effect on productive industries.

How should historians remember Local 50 and its workers? It would be fruitful to suggest that Local 50 was a union operating within a context that was unwinnable. Its governing body recommended a strategy that hampered the Local and hurt its workers, at the same time that Slocum's failing economic vitality severely limited both what could be gained from the company and what the International believed should be done. Its workers became increasingly disillusioned with a national-level union structure that implicitly considered their everyday livelihoods unimportant, in relation both to the International and to Slocum. Workers were left without much choice. They could continue to march toward the light of Slocum Hat Corporation's inevitable failure, or they could strike. Both options proved to be fatalistic, as either choice would have resulted in Slocum's closure. The best way for historians to remember Local 50 and its workers is as a small organization and group of human beings stuck in consumer capitalism's unfortunately teleological process of productive dependence upon the market, which was made worse by their affiliation with a larger organizational structure which placed the right

for employers to profit alongside, which in the end means above, the right for workers to earn wages and maintain economic security.

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