Workers of the Word Unite!: The Powell's Books Union Organizing Campaign, 1998-2001

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Date of Award
Fall 12-28-2017

Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
Master of Arts (M.A.) in History

Department
History

Physical Description
1 online resource (viii, 212 pages)

Subjects

DOI
10.15760/etd.6050

Abstract
The labor movement's groundswell in the 1990s accompanied a period of intense competition and conglomeration within the retail book sector. Unexpectedly, the intersection of these two trends produced two dozen union drives across the country between 1996 and 2004 at large retail bookstores, including Borders and Barnes & Noble. Historians have yet to fully examine these retail organizing contests or recount their contributions to the labor movement and its history, including booksellers' pioneering use of the internet as an organizing tool. This thesis focuses on the aspirations, tactics, and contributions of booksellers in their struggles to unionize their workplaces, while also exploring the economic context surrounding bookselling and the labor movement at the end of the twentieth century. While the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) auspiciously announced a national campaign in 1997 to organize thousands of bookstore clerks, the only successfully unionized bookstore from this era that remains today is the Powell's Books chain in Portland, Oregon with over 400 workers represented by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 5.

Local 5's successful union campaign at Powell's Books occurring between 1998 and 2000 is at the center of this study and stands out as a point of light against a dark backdrop of failed union attempts in the retail sector during the latter decades of the twentieth century. This inquiry utilizes Local 5's internal document archive and the collection of oral histories gathered by labor historians Edward Beechert and Harvey Schwartz in 2001 and 2002. My analysis of these previously unexamined records demonstrates how Powell's efforts to thwart the ILWU campaign proved a decisive failure and contributed to the polarization of a super majority of the workforce behind Local 5. Equally, my analysis illustrates how the self-organization, initiative, and unrelenting creativity of booksellers transformed a narrow union election victory to overwhelming support for the union's bargaining committee. Paramount to Local 5's contract success...
was the union's partnership with Portland's social justice community, which induced a social movement around Powell's Books at a time of increased political activity and unity among the nation's labor, environment, and anti-globalization activists. The bonds of solidarity and mutual aid between Local 5 and its community allies were forged during the World Trade Organization (WTO) demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 and Portland's revival of May Day in 2000. Following eleven work stoppages and fifty-three bargaining sessions, the union acquired a first contract that far exceeded any gains made by the UFCW at its unionized bookstores. The Powell's agreement included improvements to existing health and retirement benefits plus an 18 percent wage increase for employees over three years.

This analysis brings to light the formation of a distinct working-class culture and consciousness among Powell's booksellers, communicated through workers' essays, artwork, strikes, and solidarity actions with the social justice community. It provides a detailed account of Local 5's creative street theater tactics and work stoppages that captured the imagination of activists and the attention of the broader community. The conflict forced the news media and community leaders to publicly choose sides in a labor dispute reminiscent of struggles not seen in Portland since the 1950s. Observers of all political walks worried that the Portland cultural and commercial intuition would collapse under the weight of the two-year labor contest. My research illustrates the tension among the city's liberal and progressive populace created by the upstart union's presence at prominent liberal civic leader Michael Powell's iconic store and how the union organized prominent liberal leaders on the side of their cause. It concludes by recognizing that Local 5's complete history remains a work in progress, but that its formation represents an indispensable Portland contribution to the revitalized national labor movement of the late 1990s.

Persistent Identifier
http://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/24554

Recommended Citation
https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds/4162
10.15760/etd.6050

Workers of the world, unite! Search form. Search. The reformist trade union leadership was able to consolidate its control over the organised working class in this period, primarily due to the apparent success of their methods in securing real economic and political benefits; extension of the franchise, legalisation of trade unions, as well as real wage rises for at least the skilled workers. Many third world unions and grassroots organizations appreciate help from first world progressives in their campaigns for labor rights and standards. They would like us to help publicize abuses—particularly when our multinational corporations are the perpetrators. Moreover, precisely because third world workers are terribly exploited, their employers will pass on much of the cost of improvements in labor standards achieved through international trade treaties to their employees in the form of lower wages. Since the primary concern of the AFL-CIO is to arrest the race to the bottom effect of trade liberalization, they can more effectively protect their interests by supporting programs that improve the bargaining power of third world workers more than international labor standards do. Powell often wears the logo of the organization in the form of a red wagon pin on his lapel. In the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election Powell campaigned for Senator John McCain and later Texas Governor George W. Bush, after the latter secured the Republican nomination, serving as a key foreign policy advisor to the Bush campaign. Bush eventually won, and Colin Powell was appointed Secretary of State. Colin Powell holding a model vial of anthrax while giving a presentation to the United Nations Security Council. Colin Powell announced his resignation as Secretary of State on Monday, November 15, 2004. In 2008, Powell served as a spokesperson for National Mentoring Month, a campaign held each January to recruit volunteer mentors for at-risk youth.