

THE MANY NORMA RAES: WORKING-CLASS WOMEN IN THE 1970s  
CAMPAIGN TO ORGANIZE J.P. STEVENS

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## ABSTRACT

Joey Ann Fink: The Many Norma Raes: Working-Class Women in the 1970s Campaign to Organize J.P. Stevens  
(Under the direction of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall)

In the 1970s, labor, civil rights activists, feminists, religious leaders, and mill workers united in a multi-faceted campaign to unionize J. P. Stevens's textile mills in the Piedmont South. The campaign had support from celebrities, civic leaders, and professional athletes. In 1979, the Academy Award-winning movie, *Norma Rae*, dramatized the story of mill worker Crystal Lee Sutton, who was fired and arrested for her part in the organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. Sutton toured the country as the "real Norma Rae," ratcheting up the public pressure on Stevens, the nation's second largest textile manufacturer and "number one labor law violator." This dissertation presents the Stevens campaign as part of a broad movement for workers' rights in the 1970s that tapped into a groundswell of grassroots organizing in the South and nationwide around issues of economic injustice, occupational health and safety, civil rights, and feminism. The organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids in 1973-74 demonstrated that the mill workers could sustain interracial solidarity as they contended with Stevens's harassment and intimidation, as well as internal conflicts over issues of sexuality and respectability. Stevens's refusal to bargain in good faith in Roanoke Rapids prompted the recently-merged textile and clothing workers union, ACTWU, to implement a nationwide boycott and public shaming campaign to force the company to bargain in good faith. White and African American women emerged as local leaders and national spokeswomen. This dissertation contextualizes the mill women's experiences and illuminates the crucial role they played in capturing attention,

garnering support, and motivating action from allies. Their stories captured the public's attention and offered intimate glimpses into the physical contours and emotional dimensions of their lives and labor. There were many Norma Raes in the Stevens campaign, While the decline of the textile industry has overshadowed their accomplishments, the working-class women who put themselves front and center to win union representation blazed a trail that has outlasted the mills they organized.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A number of institutions and groups supported my research and provided opportunities to present my arguments and receive feedback. The History department and the American Studies department of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, funded my forays into the archives. The Center for the Study of the American South and the Southern Oral History Program consistently provided financial and moral support. The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the year of writing afforded to me by the Hugh McColl dissertation completion fellowship. I am also grateful for support from the Georgia State University History department and the Reed-Fink Labor History award. I appreciated the

opportunity to present my work in its early stages to a friendly and sage audience. My memory of that experience is all the more significant with the passing of Cliff Kuhn, who reassured me that “a fink can do southern labor history” and was a model of an engaged scholar and kind soul. Through the Southern Labor Studies Association, I have met many brilliant and kind scholars who have guided and inspired me. Participants in the D.C. Working Class History seminar evaluated a chapter of this dissertation and offered astute advice. While I owe a debt of gratitude to many archivists and librarians who assisted my research, I am especially grateful to the staff at Alamance Community College, where I made my first discoveries in the Crystal Lee Sutton archive, and to Traci Drummond at the Southern Labor Archives in Atlanta.

There are more scholars, colleagues, and friends than I have room to individually thank. Judy Smith gave me my first introduction to women’s history and Crystal Feimster directed my attention to the “real Norma Rae” and suggested I explore Sutton’s archive. Mary Frederickson, Lisa Levenstein, Sarah Deutsch, and Robyn Muncy have been especially helpful with their recommendations and encouragement. Fellow graduate students in Chapel Hill, Duke, and beyond provided a community of support. The friendship of Shannon Eaves, Jennifer Donnally, Sarah McNamara, and many others sustained me. I doubt I would have gotten through it without Jessie Wilkerson, a co-conspirator and dear friend to me through all the research trips, field work, conferences, long hours, and late nights. I am so grateful for the time my interviewees have spent with me, sharing their stories and offering their reflections. My thanks and love to my friends, peers, and mentors who stood by me through the various stages of this project to help me see it to fruition.

To my family, I owe more than I can ever repay. My sister, Jamie, has been my role model and protector for as long as I can remember; my brother, Jesse, and his family, who

offered shelter during research trips and rejuvenating time with my beautiful nieces. My father, Jim, and stepmother, Sharon, for unfailing encouragement and more than a few dinners that restored me, mind, body, and spirit. My mother, Deborah, and stepfather, Wayne, who gave me my first lessons in unions and patiently waited for the stubbornness of a rebellious teen to transform into the stubbornness of a determined scholar. To my mother, a ‘Norma Rae’ in her own right, I hope this dissertation is a credit to all you’ve done for me. To Marc Paradis, who has kept me nourished and grounded almost from the beginning of this project, can I ever adequately express my gratitude? You read my work with a keen editor’s eye and offered sound advice. When I doubted myself, you steered me back on course. And always, just when I really needed it, you made me laugh ‘halfways off my heel.’ For the countless ways you helped me to untangle my thoughts and put words on pages, thank you.

For those not mentioned but certainly deserving of appreciation, know that I am grateful for every act of kindness and support you have given along the way. To the past, present, and future Norma Raes, I offer this work with the hope that it does justice to your stories and inspires you in your struggles.

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## INTRODUCTION

Joyce Blackwell. Ai-jen Poo. Sarah Palin. Crystal Lee Sutton. Diane Wang. Sally Field. Francisca DeSousa. The women on this list are African American, white, and Asian American. Their dates of birth span from the 1940s to the 1980s. On the political spectrum, they range from right to left. What do these women share? Each one has been called “Norma Rae.” It is really more of a title than a name, bestowed on someone who ignores the rules and takes a stand, usually a woman and often (though not always) in the interest of workers. “Norma Rae” can be a compliment or an insult. In the case of Francisca DeSousa, whose supervisor told her, “I’m going to get you, Norma Rae,” it was a threat. As title, idea, and image, “Norma Rae” has traveled through the last twenty years of the twentieth century and into the new millennium. The name has a story, and it has power.<sup>1</sup>

There was a real “Norma Rae.” Crystal Lee Sutton was a mill worker and union activist from Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. On May 30, 1973, she was fired from the J.P. Stevens textile fabricating plant for copying an anti-union letter posted on the company bulletin board. To protest her firing, she climbed atop a table and raised a piece of cardboard with “UNION”

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<sup>1</sup>Joyce Blackwell was a black worker in the Patterson plant in Roanoke Rapids. One of the organizers from the 1973-1974 organizing drive called her “my Norma Rae.” Ai-jen Poo is the director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. Journalist Barbara Ehrenreich called her “the nannies’ Norma Rae.” NBC newscaster Chris Matthews called Sarah Palin a “conservative version” of Norma Rae, September 7, 2008. The character Norma Rae was based on Crystal Lee Sutton’s life. Diane Wang was called the “Norma Rae of Unpaid Interns” when she sued Harper’s Bazaar for labor law violations. Sally Field played Norma Rae and won an Academy Award in 1980 for her performance. Francisca DeSousa is a mill worker in Lowell, Massachusetts. DeSousa quoted in Susan Faludi, “Facebook Feminism, Like It or Not,” *The Baffler* 23 (2013), <http://thebaffler.com/salvos/facebook-feminism-like-it-or-not> (accessed November 23, 2013).

scrawled on it. She was hauled out of the mill, arrested, and spent the night in jail. Six years later, filmmakers made *Norma Rae*, an Academy Award-winning movie based on Sutton's story.<sup>2</sup> Sally Field won an Oscar in the title role. Sutton toured the country, giving speeches and interviews about the real story behind the film. "Norma Rae" entered the popular lexicon.

Crystal Lee Sutton and the movie *Norma Rae* were part of a bold, multi-faceted campaign to unionize J. P. Stevens's southern textile mills in the 1970s. The campaign had support from civil rights activists, feminists, religious groups, celebrities, and professional athletes. In southern mill towns, there were dozens of workers, mostly women and African American men, who risked their jobs to organize their workplaces. There were many Norma Raes in the Stevens campaign. The union claimed a major victory over Stevens in 1980, forcing the nation's second largest textile manufacturer and "number one labor law violator" to negotiate union contracts in four of its mills and to not hinder organizing drives in the others. It all happened between 1973 and 1980, a time when, according to many scholars and pundits, the working class was fractured by identity politics and disillusioned with organized labor.

Scholars have written about Sutton, the Stevens campaign, and the movie, but as yet, no one has written about the other working-class women who led organizing drives on the ground and testified in national forums. This dissertation builds on the scholarship on the Stevens campaign. It explores the experiences and stories of pro-union white and African American mill women to reveal the motivations for their union activism and the distinct forms their action took. It presents the Stevens campaign as part of a broad movement for workers' rights in the 1970s. The Stevens campaign tapped into a groundswell of grassroots organizing in the South and nationwide around issues of economic injustice, occupational health and safety, civil rights, and

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<sup>2</sup>*Norma Rae*, directed by Martin Ritt (Twentieth Century Fox, 1979), DVD (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001).

feminism. White and African American women were front and center in the Stevens campaign, as in-plant organizers, local leaders, and national spokespeople. Their stories captured the public's attention, elicited sympathy, and motivated supporters to action.

This project began with my curiosity about Crystal Lee Sutton. I saw *Norma Rae* for the first time with my grandmother, a retired cafeteria worker. I was too young to understand the plot, but I loved seeing my grandmother's excitement when Sally Field climbed on the table with the union sign. My questions about Sutton's life led me to focus on the union's effort to organize the J.P. Stevens textile mills in the South. The Stevens campaign began in 1963, when the Textile Workers Union of America renewed their postwar efforts to organize southern mills, focusing on J.P. Stevens (the second largest textile manufacturer in the country). The influx of pro-union black workers into textile mills in the wake of civil rights legislation encouraged the union, and they believed that if they could successfully organize workers at J.P. Stevens, this would have a domino effect in the South. Stevens employed approximately 36,000 people, with over 20,000 workers in its North Carolina and South Carolina plants. Less than five percent of its labor force was unionized. The TWUA hoped that by organizing Stevens, smaller mills would follow.<sup>3</sup>

The organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, where Crystal Lee Sutton stood on the shop floor and held her union sign, yielded an exciting victory when a majority of Stevens workers voted in 1974 to have the union represent them in collective bargaining. It was the first major turning point in the Stevens campaign. But Stevens stalled the negotiations on a contract with the union for the next six years. Across the country, activists and politicians, from Gloria Steinem and Coretta Scott King to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and civil rights

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<sup>3</sup>James A. Hodges, "The Real Norma Rae," in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940—1995*, Robert Zieger, ed. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 56-57.

organizations and women's groups rallied around the union and the workers. The TWUA merged with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union in 1976 to form ACTWU and initiated a nationwide boycott of Stevens's products and a corporate campaign that pressured Stevens through public shaming and through shareholders and the financial and insurance companies that supported the corporation. A group of researchers and activists created a citizens group, Southerners for Economic Justice, to support the union's campaign and use it as a springboard for a workers' rights movement in the South. At the same time, occupational health activists were organizing retired and disabled mill workers who suffered from brown lung disease. From 1976 to 1980, the J.P. Stevens campaign united a range of activists and organizations behind the workers in Stevens mills and factories. Roanoke Rapids became a symbol of hope for an organized southern working class.

White and African American women made up more than fifty percent of Stevens's labor force and were leaders in organizing drives and on the workers' contract negotiation teams in the mills where the union had bargaining rights. As local leaders and national spokespersons, these women told their life histories and shared personal (and sometimes very intimate) stories to critique J.P. Stevens specifically and economic injustice more broadly. Their stories of life as Stevens mill workers filled the campaign's organizing and promotional materials; they were interviewed in local and national newspapers; and they testified at hearings and shareholder meetings in New York City, Washington, DC, and Columbia, South Carolina.

Since the 1980s, several labor historians have written about the Stevens campaign. Timothy Minchin's monograph explores the boycott and corporate campaign from the union's perspective and argues that the J. P. Stevens campaign set a precedent for the aggressive anti-

union attacks of the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Minchin's exploration of the union's decisions, strategies, and actions is thorough, but this project seeks to answer questions that Minchin did not ask. The Roanoke Rapids vote was a turning point in 1974 and stood as a symbol of interracial working class solidarity against corporate intransigence for the next six years. Because of its centrality to the campaign, the town received much attention in the 1970s and a significant amount of evidence exists that offers rare glimpses into working-class culture and politics. One aim of this dissertation is to build on Minchin's work by revealing how gender, sexuality, and race shaped the organizing drive and contributed to the victory in 1974. The second aim of this project is to test Minchin's conclusion that support for the Stevens campaign from 1976 to 1980 came mainly from the northeast and west coast. Support from the South, he concludes, was insignificant. This dissertation shows that activists and workers on the ground in southern mill villages offered crucial support and expected to expand on the Stevens campaign to build a workers' rights movement in the South. These activists drew from a legacy of southern oppositional culture, and the workers – mostly women – built on a legacy of mill women's activism and leadership as working women and mothers.

Essays by James Hodges and Robert Zieger describe Crystal Lee Sutton's participation in the unionization effort, celebrate her as a working-class heroine, and critique *Norma Rae*'s poetic license.<sup>5</sup> In these historians' writings, however, the task of separating fact from fiction obscures

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<sup>4</sup>Timothy Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens! The J.P. Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South, 1963-1980* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>James A. Hodges, "The Real Norma Rae," in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940—1995*, ed. Robert H. Zieger (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 251–272 [this could be *ibid* if I don't remove the previous]. See also James A. Hodges, "J.P. Stevens and the Union: Struggle for the South," in *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History*, Gary M. Fink and Merl E. Reed, eds. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 53–64; Gay P. Zieger and Robert H. Zieger, "Unions on the Silver Screen: A Review Essay," *Labor History* 23, no. 1 (Winter 1982): 67–78; Robert Brent Toplin, *History By Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

the interplay between politics and fantasy, sex and race, and labor and feminism at work in the 1970s. The story upon which the movie was based – Sutton’s participation in the Roanoke Rapids organizing drive in 1973-1974 – was already laced with fiction, half-truths, and mysteries. The dramatization of the organizing drive and Sutton’s life highlighted themes of gender and sexuality that were already there. Part of this dissertation, therefore, seeks to explore how the filmmakers made decisions when they translated the “real” story to the silver screen, and how Crystal Lee Sutton negotiated with the various interpretations of her story to create her persona as “the real Norma Rae.”

In the last twenty years, historians and feminist scholars have challenged stereotypes and popular images of second-wave feminism, revealing the feminisms of women of color, the gender-conscious activism of working-class women, and the concerns for economic justice that infused many feminist agendas in the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> The mill women in the Stevens campaign did not call themselves feminist, but they did articulate gender-specific concerns in their appeals to other workers to support the union. Although gender issues and feminist concerns were not the union’s

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<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1933–1975* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), see especially Chapter 3, “Work, Family, and Black Women’s Oppression”; Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 2008); Dennis Deslippe, *Rights, Not Roses: Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945–1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Donald Mathews and Jane Sherron De Hart, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of ERA: A State and the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Stephanie Gilmore, ed., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, (University of Illinois Press, 2008); Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell: Grassroots Feminist Activism in Postwar America* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Lisa Levenstein, “‘Don’t Agonize, Organize!’: The Displaced Homemakers Campaign and the Contested Goals of Postwar Feminism,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 4 (March 2014): 1114–1138; Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Anna Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Melissa Estes Blair, *Revolutionizing Expectations: Women’s Organizations, Feminism, and the Transformation of Political Culture, 1965–1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

top priority, women's issues were at the heart of the campaign by virtue of their numbers and their prominence as local leaders.

This dissertation seeks to bring the stories and experiences of southern working-class women in the 1970s into the narrative of labor feminism in the twentieth-century United States, as well as contribute to the rich body of literature on women in the southern textile industry.<sup>7</sup> Thus far, scholarship on the textile industry since the 1960s has focused on race, civil rights, and black workers, with much success.<sup>8</sup> Yet women made up between forty and fifty percent of the textile labor force in the 1960s and 1970s, and like previous generations of mill women, they were leaders in organizing drives and unionization campaigns.<sup>9</sup> As this dissertation shows, women continued to be central to the industry and the union. White and black women shared

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<sup>7</sup>Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *The Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (1986): 354–382; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Public Eyes, Private Women: Images of Class and Sex in the Urban South, Atlanta, Georgia, 1913–1915," in *Work Engendered: Toward A New History of American Labor*, ed. Ava Baron (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 216–242; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Mary Frederickson, "Heroines and Girl Strikers: Gender Issues and Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century American South," in *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South*, ed. Robert H. Zieger (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press 1991), 84–112; Mary Frederickson, "I Know Which Side I'm On: Southern Women in the Labor Movement in the Twentieth Century," in *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of Women's Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 156–180; Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, (Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup>Timothy Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker: the Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960-1980* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999). There are many excellent books and articles that document how the civil rights movement transformed the American labor force. For this dissertation, I have relied on three in particular: Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker*; Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens!*; Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup>On the number of women in the US labor force in the 1970s, see: "U.S. Department of Labor Employment Standards Administration Women's Bureau 'Highlights of Women's Employment and Education,'" Box 2443, Folder 18, NC AFL-CIO State Records, Georgia State University (not sure about this previous source, double check). See also, Mary Frederickson, *Looking South: Race, Gender, and the Transformation of Labor from Reconstruction to Globalization* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 2011; Alice Kessler-Harris, "The Wages of Patriarchy: Some Thoughts about the Continuing Relevance of Class and Gender," in *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 3, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 7-22.

some, but not all, experiences on the shopfloor and stood shoulder-to-shoulder in their efforts to democratize their workplaces.

The Stevens campaign took place in a decade marked by dramatic economic shifts and political realignments. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a proliferation of working-class militancy and radical labor politics across the country. At the General Motors facility in Lordstown, Ohio, a biracial labor force with an average age of twenty-five initiated a series of wildcat strikes from 1967 to 1972. Black workers in Detroit's automobile industry formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in 1969 to advocate for better conditions in their factories and against police repression in their communities. In 1973 female clerical workers created "9to5" to call attention to the particular problems that women face in the "pink collar ghetto." Across the country, workers reformed existing union locals and created new workers' associations. The 1970s were not the "last days of the working class," as some scholars have claimed. They were the first days of a new working class made up of women, workers of color, and southerners eager to use or create institutions, including organized labor, to secure benefits, opportunities for advancement, better wages, and strong pensions.<sup>10</sup>

The new members of the 1970s working class had to contend with employers' resistance to unionization. From 1973 to 1983, union density in the private sector dropped from twenty-four percent of workers to eleven percent. Many scholars and pundits have taken these numbers to mean that in the 1970s the working class was fractured by identity politics, resentful of affirmative action and social welfare programs, and disillusioned with unions. But a different

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<sup>10</sup>Cowie, *Staying Alive*. One notable exception to this is Nancy MacLean, "Redesigning Dixie with Affirmative Action: Race, Gender, and the Desegregation of the Southern Textile Mill World," in *Gender and the Southern Body Politic*, ed., Nancy Bercaw (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 161–191.



statistic challenges the dominant interpretation. Approximately half a million workers voted in National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections each year throughout the seventies, an amount consistent with levels from 1949 to 1969. The proportion of elections that organized labor won, however, dropped from about eighty percent in the 1950s to less than half, while charges filed against employers for labor law violations rose by fifty percent.<sup>11</sup> The desire for union representation, particularly among white women and workers of color, remained consistent throughout the 1970s, while employers used new strategies and often illegal tactics to keep unions out.<sup>12</sup> The J.P. Stevens campaign demonstrates this vividly.

I began my investigation of Crystal Lee Sutton in her archive at Alamance Community College. Sutton donated her personal papers and ephemera: books, videos, newspaper clippings, union fliers, yearbooks, photographs, typed transcripts, and handwritten notes. The collection is unprocessed and at first, I discovered more mysteries than I solved. A pair of baby's shoes and a pink plastic comb and mirror in a cabinet standing under an array of photographs: Sutton with feminist Gloria Steinem; receiving an award for labor activism from the mayor of Detroit; a

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<sup>11</sup>I am grateful to Lane Windham for sharing her dissertation with me, "Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing and the Origins of the New Economic Divide (1968-1985)" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2015).

<sup>12</sup>Windham, "Knocking on Labor's Door," 20-22. See also Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens* and Stephen Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). On the rightward political shift, see Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1996); Steven Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989); Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press 2001); and Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001). For more on the decline in industrial manufacturing, organized labor, and the New Deal liberal coalition in national politics, see Grace I. Kunz and Myrna B. Garner, *Going Global: The Textile and Apparel Industry* (New York: Fairchild, 2007); Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*; Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Bruce Nissen, *Fighting for Jobs: Case Studies of Labor-Community Coalitions Confronting Plant Closings* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999).

photograph of her in Moscow's Red Square in 1984.<sup>13</sup> Oral histories with some of Sutton's family and friends helped to put some of the puzzle pieces together. Research in the textile unions' archives in Ithaca and Madison put my findings from oral history interviews and Sutton's archive in a larger context. Oral history interviews with former activists in the Carolina Brown Lung Association encouraged me to dig deeper into that organization and the role it played in the Stevens campaign. Unfortunately, many of the principal actors in the Stevens drama have since died. Still, the historical record contains a surprising amount of evidence from and about the mill women. There are at least three reasons for the availability of sources related to the Stevens campaign that preserve mill women's words and document their experiences. First, many of the activists and scholars in the Piedmont South in the 1970s consciously drew from the documentary tradition of the Progressive era and the New Deal. For instance, the journal for the Institute for Southern Studies, *Southern Exposure*, offered issue-driven reporting on poverty, civil and labor rights, and education that included intimate portraits of poor and working-class southerners. Two, investigative journalists such as Mimi Conway focused specifically on the workers' stories – their childhoods, families, experiences in private and public spheres –and produced articles and, in Conway's case, a book, rich with testimony, texture, and anecdote. Third, many of the people who joined the Stevens campaign as allies or organizers had roots in the civil rights movement and/or the New Left. In the 1970s, people like Si Kahn, Charlotte Brody, Chip Hughes, Len Stanley, and Beth Bailey went to work for unions or started new groups to mobilize the southern working class with a grassroots approach that encouraged story-telling as an organizing and consciousness-raising tool. As I explored these sources and started putting them together, I began to see Roanoke Rapids, Crystal Lee Sutton, and the

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<sup>13</sup>Sutton accompanied her friend and fellow organizer Richard Koritz to a symposium in Moscow on Soviet textile workers.

Stevens campaign as part of a bigger movement in the South for workers' rights and their health and safety rooted in the textile industry. By calling it a "movement," it is not my intention to overestimate either the number of people involved or the impact they had on southern politics and culture. The group of researchers and activists I interviewed were clear about the limitations of their efforts to democratize southern workplaces and mobilize a working-class movement in the 1970s. The southern textile industry did not experience a revolution during or after the Stevens campaign. But an interracial group of workers organized together in a union, with backing from a cadre of southern activists and supporters across the country, to defeat the nation's second-largest textile manufacturer and "number one labor law violator." This dissertation seeks to bring their efforts and achievements into the narratives of organized labor, social movements, and women's history since the 1960s.

The story begins in Roanoke Rapids. Chapter one offers a close study of the organizing drive in 1973-1974 and reveals how gender and sexuality shaped mill women's participation in the organizing drive and their relationships with one another and the union. The union had held an election in 1965. It lost, but the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that Stevens had violated labor laws to suppress workers' unionism. In April 1973, TWUA organizer Eli Zivkovich arrived in Roanoke Rapids and launched a new organizing drive. The drive was contentious and plagued with internal divisions over gossip and rumors. On August 28, 1974, the majority of the 3,500 workers in Stevens's seven mills in Roanoke Rapids voted for union representation. This election victory breathed new life into the TWUA's decade-long struggle to organize Stevens's workers and vindicated the many hours and resources the union spent on organizing drives and legal battles throughout the Piedmont South. Union leaders and civil rights

activists heralded it as a sign that “a new day in Dixie” was coming for the working class. Because of the unusual amount of attention paid to Roanoke Rapids and the symbolic power of the 1974 victory, the organizing drive deserves a close study. While Roanoke Rapids had some unique qualities that help to explain the election outcome, it was the workers – the white women and the black men and women – who led the organizing drive to victory.

The euphoria of the 1974 victory diminished in the months following the election. Stevens refused to bargain on a contract “in good faith” on a contract in Roanoke Rapids. Chapter Two begins with the second turning point in the Stevens campaign in 1976, when the textile union merged with the apparel workers union and launched a nationwide public shaming campaign and a boycott of Stevens’s products. Labor, civil, and women’s rights intersected in the struggle with Stevens and motivated support from individuals and associations. In the South, the Stevens campaign paralleled the work of two groups of activists, the Carolina Brown Lung Association and Southerners for Economic Justice, that sought to build a movement around workers’ rights in the 1970s. As women and minority workers in the southern textile industry made bold claims for social and workplace justice, their efforts generated broad public interest in the struggles of poor and unorganized workers. The support for the boycott and corporate campaign reveals the second half of the 1970s was a time of great possibility for mobilization around economic justice. The Stevens campaign tapped into a groundswell of grassroots organizing in the South around issues of economic justice, occupational health and safety, civil rights, and feminism.

The pro-union women who worked in Stevens’s mills contributed to the campaign as local leaders and national spokeswomen. They used their stories to capture attention, motivate supporters, and shame the company. In their public testimony, they made demands on the federal

and state governments to protect their rights as workers and women. Chapter three analyzes the stories, experiences, and testimony of the pro-union mill women. It includes those women in Roanoke Rapids and in Stevens's other localities, as well as elderly and disabled workers in the Carolina Brown Lung Association. The women's stories drew the public sympathetically into the workers' lives and complaints. The intimate details and evocative descriptions made visceral and vivid the abstractions of corporate intransigence and labor law violations. As evidence in the historical record, they also provide a window into the women's lives: how they interpreted their experiences, what motivated their activism, and what they hoped to achieve by organizing.

Chapter four returns to Crystal Lee Sutton. After the election victory, Sutton drops out of the narrative of the Stevens campaign. Following her divorce in 1974, she left Roanoke Rapids and struggled to find work as she built a new life with her third husband in Burlington, North Carolina. In 1979, she reentered the story of the Stevens campaign in a dramatic fashion. Hollywood filmmakers made a movie based on her life, *Norma Rae*. Although Sutton was frustrated that she did not have editorial authority over the screenplay and disliked many things about the movie, it was an undeniable boon to the union's campaign against Stevens. The film presented a fictionalized version of the organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids in 1974 and a sympathetic portrayal of the mill workers' struggle. The union seized on the popularity of the movie and sent Sutton on a nationwide speaking tour as the "real Norma Rae." Chapter four explains the creation of the movie, providing background information on the filmmakers and analyzing the choices they made as they turned Sutton's life story into an Academy Award-winning film. The chapter explores how Sutton became the "real Norma Rae," negotiating with the media, the union, and Hollywood for control of her story. While always insisting on her authenticity as the woman who lived the story, Sutton created her biography and public persona

on the “real Norma Rae” speaking tour. The positive publicity she garnered for the Stevens campaign helped the union achieve its victory in 1980, when Steven agreed to a settlement with the union.

In the Epilogue, I follow the many Norma Raes into the 1980s and 1990s. The epilogue illustrates how workers, union staff, and activists carried forward the lessons learned in the Stevens campaign to continue to fight for social and economic justice. In Roanoke Rapids, workers used their union to improve their communities and schools, as well as their workplaces. Facing import rates that doubled in the 1980s, Stevens, like many textile and apparel manufacturers in the United States, reduced production and shut down many operations. There were more than two million textile and apparel workers in the United States in 1973. By 2009, there were 400,000, nearly all in the Carolinas.<sup>14</sup>

A powerful legacy of worker militancy and grassroots mobilization in the South has been overshadowed by the nationwide decline in industrial manufacturing and organized labor’s strength. While it is important to appreciate how the decline has affected workers’ lives and their communities, it is equally important to acknowledge and understand the achievements of workers and their allies amid that decline. The totality of workers’ stories of struggle and survival in the previous forty years – the good and the bad, the victories and the losses – help to illustrate the magnitude of the problems that workers faced, especially women and people of color, and the ways they used their unions to grapple with these problems.

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<sup>14</sup>Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens*, 179.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “Everything Was Roanoke Rapids”: The 1973-1974 Organizing Drive

On August 28, 1974, more than three thousand mill workers cast ballots in makeshift polling stations set up in the seven J.P. Stevens plants in Roanoke Rapids. Agents from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) sat by the booths, monitoring the third election there in sixteen years to determine whether the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) would represent the Stevens workers in collective bargaining. When all 3,133 votes were cast, the agents carried the ballot boxes to the old meeting room in front of the Rosemary Mill, still called “the Potato Barn” by workers who remembered how the original mill owners allowed their parents and grandparents to store their root vegetables there in the winter. Maurine Hedgepeth, a middle-aged weaver who lost her job in the 1960s because of her support for the union, stood near the table to observe the ballot counting. The union won by 237 votes.

For the union organizers in the Potato Barn and their allies who soon learned of the victory, August 28 signaled a turning point. If black and white workers in Roanoke Rapids could unite against Stevens, a company with more than 400,000 employees and a notorious record of labor law violations, then victories in other southern mills were sure to follow. Organizer Michael Spzak, who had worked for the union in Greenville, South Carolina, recalled that among progressive activists in the 1970s, “everything was Roanoke Rapids.” Civil rights activist Reverend W.W. Finlator proclaimed from Raleigh, North Carolina, that “Roanoke Rapids is

everywhere.” North Carolina State AFL-CIO president Wilbur Hobby congratulated workers and noted that the local leaders were “the women... white and black.”<sup>15</sup>

The pro-union workers in Roanoke Rapids were jubilant. In the previous eighteen months, they had devoted hundreds of hours to leafleting, house-calling, and talking union in church and at market, on the front porch and at the mill gate. The campaign dragged out old grievances and created new rifts between co-workers and neighbors. Private lives became political arenas. Gossip and rumor served as powerful weapons in the campaign, and working-class women both wielded them and became their targets. Among even the pro-union workers, disagreements erupted into pitched battles. No wonder there were many Stevens workers like Sarah Bryant who chose to be “one of them that stays quiet.”<sup>16</sup> The white and African American mill women who put themselves front and center for the union had much to gain and to lose. Examining the local struggle in Roanoke Rapids from the spring of 1973 through the August 1974 election reveals what the women gave to the unionization campaign, what their participation in the organizing drive meant for them, and how the unprecedented election victory happened.

In 1973, the TWUA’s campaign to unionize the J.P. Stevens textile mills was in trouble. Stevens’s persistent and often illegal anti-union tactics had the TWUA mired in legal battles that siphoned away resources. Between 1963 and 1973, the union filed twenty-two charges with the NLRB against Stevens for violating labor laws by harassing and firing pro-union workers and

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<sup>15</sup>Statement of W. W. Finlator, August 26, 1977, Box 2363, Folder 1, North Carolina State AFL-CIO records, 1945–1981, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library. (Hereafter cited as “NC State AFL-CIO records, GSU Library.”) Michael Spzak, recorded interview with the author, March 23, 2011, in author’s possession. (Hereafter, cited as “Spzak interview.”)

<sup>16</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise, A Portrait of Southern Textile Workers* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1979), 23.



using influence and force to discourage workers from supporting the union's organizing drives. The NLRB ruled in the union's favor in all but one case. In 1973, just as the organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids started, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in New York delivered an unprecedented ruling. The court ordered Stevens to write a letter of apology to its employees for its use of illegal tactics to suppress unionism. The company had to post the apology on every bulletin board in its mills and mail a copy of the apology to the home of every employee. Managers were required to read the letter aloud to workers.<sup>17</sup>

Yet the rulings against Stevens did not seem to temper its resistance to unionization. For instance, the union began an organizing drive in Statesboro, Georgia, in 1968, and with signed cards from eighty percent of the workforce in 1970, it petitioned the NLRB for an election. In response, Stevens's managers instituted a new eighteen-minute break and outfitted the break rooms with new vending machines, tables, and chairs. They also changed work schedules to isolate in-plant organizers and fired several workers who were union supporters. Myrtle Cribbs, a pro-union worker in the Statesboro mill explained that before the election, "people went around and knocked on doors and said, 'If you vote the union in, they're going to close the plant,' [and] naturally it put fear in them because some of them couldn't read or write." The Statesboro workers voted 198-110 against the union. The NLRB subsequently cited Stevens for illegal tactics that influenced the election outcome and ordered the Statesboro management to recognize and bargain with the union. But negotiations between the union and the company went nowhere. Then Stevens began cutting back production. Between 1972 and the fall of 1974, the workforce declined by thirty-nine percent. The company cut production entirely in May 1975 and laid off the entire workforce. "It put fear in their soul," Cribbs concluded. That effect was not limited to

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<sup>17</sup>Sara Douglas, *Labor's New Voice: Unions and the Mass Media* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1986), 209-210.

Statesboro. The union was defeated in five organizing drives in the Carolinas between 1970 and 1973.<sup>18</sup>

TWUA southern director Scott Hoyman was thus understandably surprised when dozens of signed union cards from Roanoke Rapids arrived in his Charlotte office in the early spring of 1973. He had not assigned an organizer to Roanoke Rapids since the 1965 organizing drive. The union lost that election, but the NLRB ruled that Stevens engaged in illegal anti-union actions and threw out the election results. Because of this ruling, the TWUA could have requested another election without having to once again collect signed cards for the union, but Hoyman had not been confident that Roanoke Rapids was ready. Every election loss damaged the union's credibility, even if subsequent NLRB rulings condemned Stevens's practices. The batch of signed union cards on Hoyman's desk gave him a cautious hope.<sup>19</sup>

The signed cards were primarily the result of the efforts of black workers in the Roanoke Rapids mills. Joseph Williams, an African American who worked as a doffer in the Patterson plant, had requested union cards from the TWUA and enlisted several other black men who worked in the carding room to help him get signatures. Carding was the second step in the process of cleaning the cotton before it was shaped into yarn. Disentangling the cotton fibers was hard work, and the card room was one of the dustiest, dirtiest places in the mills. Because of this, carders were usually men. After the 1964 Civil Rights Act required the mills to integrate, the carding room was increasingly the province of African American men. James Boone was hired in May 1971 as a doffer. The doffers removed full spindles or bobbins from the spinning frames

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<sup>18</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep*, 55-56, 61.

<sup>19</sup>Scott Hoyman interview with Jim Cavanaugh, Chicago, Illinois, May 15, 1985, Tape 4, Side 2, Textile Workers Union of America Oral History Project, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison (hereafter cited as "Hoyman interview, TWUA").

and replaced them with empty ones. Doffing was considered unskilled work and therefore was one of the lowest paying jobs in the mill. Before the passage of child labor laws, it was usually performed by young boys. Boone recalled that African Americans “took the jobs that the whites didn’t want to do” and were offered few opportunities for promotion to better positions. Boone hated the work and moved to Washington, D.C., in search of other opportunities, but returned to the mills in 1973. He signed a union card and agreed to help collect more signatures, though he risked losing his job. “I guess it was being black,” he explained. “I was already treated bad.” The belief that organizing would improve working conditions and wages and help combat racial discrimination was common among African American mill workers, as was the sense that they had little to lose and much to gain in trying to bring in the union.<sup>20</sup> The signed cards that Williams and his co-workers had generated convinced Hoyman to send an organizer to Roanoke Rapids to assess the climate.<sup>21</sup>

Eli Zivkovich was an unlikely candidate for the organizer position in Roanoke Rapids. A fifty-five-year-old West Virginian and former organizer for the United Mine Workers (UMW), Zivkovich had never organized in a mill or factory. He had backed the wrong side in the Tony Boyle/Jock Yablonski fight for the UMW’s leadership during the 1969 election. Yablonski challenged Boyle’s presidency and accused him of corruption. On New Year’s Eve in 1969, three armed men shot Yablonski and his wife and daughter to death. Several years later, it was revealed that Boyle had ordered the murder of his rival.<sup>22</sup> Zivkovich was not connected to the

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<sup>20</sup>Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker*, 35, 123. Conway, *Rise, Gonna Rise*, 100, 123.

<sup>21</sup>Hoyman interview, TWUA.

<sup>22</sup>On the efforts to reform the United Mine Workers and the Boyle/Yablonski, see, for instance, Paul J. Nyden, “Rank-and-File Movements in the United Mine Workers of America, Early 1960s – Early 1980s,” in *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below during the Long 1970s*, eds. Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, and Cal Winslow (London: verso, 2010), 173-198 and Paul F. Clark, *The Miners’ Fight for Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1981).

executions, but he had been a Boyle supporter. The reformed UMW fired him in 1974.

Unemployed, with two children still in school, and rattled by the revelations of his former leader's crimes, Zivkovich searched for work in the labor movement. He was unfamiliar with textiles and knew little about the litigation and failed elections of the past decade. But a friend in the United Steelworkers recommended Zivkovich to Paul Swaity, the organizing director of the TWUA's Stevens campaign. He accepted an organizer position from Swaity. "My heart lies with the miners," he later explained, "but I didn't want to leave the labor movement."<sup>23</sup>

On April 9, 1973, Zivkovich reported to the union's Charlotte office. He met his immediate supervisor, Harold McIver, the Industrial Union Department's director of organizing activities for the TWUA's Stevens campaign, and Melvin Tate, a Georgian man with an uncanny resemblance to Burt Reynolds, whom the TWUA had just hired as an organizer. Zivkovich got a crash course in the history of the campaign and spent a few days leafletting at the Dunean plant in Greenville, South Carolina. Accustomed to organizing in the smaller, more intimate setting of mining camps, he was stunned by the size of the mill and the workforce. "Good God, it was like twenty-five thousand workers," he recalled. On April 15, McIver, Tate, and Zivkovich drove to a meeting at the paper mill's union hall in Roanoke Rapids. Approximately one hundred Stevens workers attended the meeting, nearly all African American. McIver was satisfied with the turnout and introduced Zivkovich to the crowd as their new TWUA organizer. "I didn't really know that I was going to be stationed there until we had the meeting," Zivkovich explained. Tate was assigned to Milledgeville, Georgia, to coordinate the Georgia organizing efforts. Everything had happened so fast over the previous seven days that it seemed to Zivkovich that the union was making decisions as it went along. Zivkovich felt like a fish out of water among the mill hands,

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<sup>23</sup>Henry Leifermann, *Crystal Lee, A Woman of Inheritance* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 116.

struggling to understand their Carolina accents and acclimate to his new surroundings. He remembered addressing the crowd and telling them “it’ll all start here in Roanoke Rapids.” He could not have known, of course, how prophetic his statement was, but from the start he was keenly aware of the enormity of the task before him and suspected that he was not fully prepared for it.<sup>24</sup>

After the meeting, McIver took Zivkovich down Roanoke Avenue to the Motel Dixie, a rundown brick building chosen for its cheap rates and proximity to the mills. Zivkovich secured a corner room that would function as the union office, with an adjoining room in which he could shower, dress, and sleep. In the movie *Norma Rae*, the union organizer, a wise-cracking New Yorker named Reuben Warshowsky, arrives in town and tries to find lodging with a mill family to counter his “outsider” status but is coldly rebuffed. He resigns himself to a room at the Golden Cherry Motel. He recognizes Norma Rae, who is waiting in the lobby for her lover, from a previous house visit. They banter a bit about roaches; the dialogue reveals Warshowsky’s familiarity with unfriendly mill towns and Norma Rae’s curiosity about the newcomer. The scene is entirely fabricated. McIver did not expect his organizers to stay anywhere but a motel, and it would be another month before Zivkovich met Crystal Lee, the “real Norma Rae” of Roanoke Rapids. But the movie did accurately depict Motel Dixie’s dilapidated condition and captured the loneliness and uncertainty that so many TWUA organizers must have felt when they settled into unfamiliar, shabby motel rooms in towns that were often hostile, if not downright

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<sup>24</sup>On Zivkovich’s background and initial impressions of the TWUA and Roanoke Rapids, see Liefermann, *Crystal Lee*, 115-119. On McIver and Tate, see Minchin, *Don’t Sleep*, 3-4, 156.

dangerous. Zivkovich was no stranger to the hardships of a labor organizer's life, but the Motel Dixie was something wholly new.<sup>25</sup>

Fortunately for Zivkovich, the black mill workers who attended the meeting were “rarin’ to go.” Shortly after he settled into the Motel Dixie, Joseph Williams arrived with approximately fifty signed cards. Two white men who had not been at the meeting delivered a handful of cards, although they said little and left quickly. Zivkovich recalled that they were nervous and “hanging real close,” but the visits were encouraging. “Good God,” he thought, “this thing’s going to happen overnight here.”<sup>26</sup>

The immediate response from these workers to Zivkovich’s arrival suggests the strong undercurrent of pro-union sentiment among the Stevens labor force in Roanoke Rapids. Although the union had lost the 1965 election, it had won over forty-one percent of the votes in an election stained with Stevens’s labor law violations. The TWUA won reinstatement for twenty-three workers who were fired for their union support. Zivkovich hoped to build on the existing union support and recruit veterans from previous drives to form the core of an in-plant organizing committee that would start leafleting and house-calling immediately. Maurine Hedgepeth was one of twenty-three workers in Roanoke Rapids reinstated in 1968. Though she received a settlement from Stevens of about \$14,000 after taxes, it was six months before her fellow workers would talk to her again. Some feared her association with the union, and others believed the rumor that the back pay Stevens awarded her had “come out of the workers’

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<sup>25</sup>On the Motel Dixie, see Leifermann, 119-120, Peter Gallaudet interview with author, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, March 13, 2015 (hereafter referred to as “Gallaudet interview”).

<sup>26</sup>The “rarin’ to go” quotation comes from James Boone, in Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 123. Zivkovich’s recollections of those first visits by mill workers to his room at the Motel Dixie are from Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 120.

pockets.”<sup>27</sup> Hedgepeth had spent nearly four years unemployed, struggling to support three children while her husband, who was fired by Stevens shortly after she testified, searched for work.<sup>28</sup> She still believed in the idea of collective bargaining, but she was weary from her last bout with the company. Having witnessed organizing drives rise and fall and union organizers come and go in Roanoke Rapids since she was a child, Hedgepeth chose to keep her distance from the new organizer until she was sure she could trust him. Boone and Williams informed Zivkovich that three other women in Roanoke Rapids who had received settlements would not support the renewed organizing drive because of the years they spent on the textile mill blacklist without support from the TWUA. Some women, like Shirley Hobbs, the “hell cat” of the 1965 organizing drive, had moved away in search of work. Zivkovich regretted the loss of these women’s support but admitted “it must have been a long time between meals for them, and I can’t blame them for being bitter at the union.”<sup>29</sup>

While some of the white women who had been involved in the organizing drives of the 1960s were loath to risk their jobs again for the union, the growing numbers of black workers swelled the amount of pro-union spirit in the mills. By 1973, nearly one-third of the Stevens labor force in Roanoke Rapids was African American, and the vast majority of them saw unionization as the best vehicle for improving their working conditions and prospects for

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<sup>27</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 193.

<sup>28</sup>“Justice Delayed is Justice Denied,” in *Mountain Life and Work*, Special Issue: History of J.P. Stevens (September 1978), 7.

<sup>29</sup>On Maurine Hedgepeth, see Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 194-195. On Shirley Hobbs and other women from the organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids in 1965, see “The Second Southern Revolution,” Vera Rony, undated, Box 10, Folder 137, Series 2, Textile Workers Union of America South Region Records, #5103, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as “TWUA SHC”). Zivkovich quoted in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 127.

promotions. Collective memory of mistreatment and discrimination by whites and the recent victories of the civil rights movement strengthened their solidarity and political consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

Otis Edwards, for instance, started working for Stevens in 1928, feeding coal into the furnaces. He was one of the few African American men in the mill. Simmons (the mill owner before Stevens) used to provide a Christmas dinner to the white workers in the cloth room, but the black workers had to take their food to the warehouse where there was no heat. “Then that law passed,” Edwards explained, “that civil rights law.” The next year, he and Arlene Hines, a black woman who worked as a sweeper on his shift, ate Christmas dinner with the white workers because “we’d heard about the law, read about it; it was on television.”<sup>31</sup> Some African American men had worked in more cosmopolitan areas, like James Boone in D.C., or in other industries, such as organized shipyards and construction work in Virginia. Black men and women who returned to Roanoke Rapids or to rural Halifax County carried their memories and experiences of urban life and unionized work. Rural Halifax County, moreover, was a hotbed of civil rights protests and political action in the 1960s and 70s. Black farmers, domestic workers, and their children protested against the Ku Klux Klan and joined the local NAACP chapter. The Halifax County Voters’ Movement and the Halifax County Coalition for Progress formed in the mid-1970s to mobilize black voters, combat persistently high poverty rates, and elect African Americans to local and county government seats. Many of the black activists in the Roanoke

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<sup>30</sup>Minchin, *Don’t Sleep*, 24. See also Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker* and MacLean, *Freedom is not Enough*. For oral histories with African Americans connecting the black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 60s with efforts to improve conditions in the mills in the 1970s, see, for instance, Lucy Sledge in Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 106-113. This theme recurs in interviews with black women in mills in other localities. See, for instance, Mary Robinson in *Moisture of the Earth: Mary Robinson, Civil Rights and Textile Union Activists*, Fran Leeper Buss, ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009) and Corine Lytle Cannon in Victoria Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls: Personal Histories of Womanhood and Poverty in the South* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1986), 143-160).

<sup>31</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 104.



Rapids mills came from families and communities that were involved in or at least supportive of economic and social justice activism, including collective bargaining and union solidarity.<sup>32</sup>

White pro-union men made up a small but important sector of Zivkovich's team. The few white men who signed union cards preferred to keep their support quiet or even anonymous, at least in the first few months of the organizing drive. In 1973, Lewis Edwards worked as an electrician in the River Mill. He started as a doffer in the 1960s, and voted for the union in 1965 because he saw that unionized workers in the Albemarle Paper Mill made twice as much an hour as he did. Edwards kept silent about his position on the union. "If you were for the union," he recalled, "you kept your mouth shut." Although Edwards worked in the mills, he grew up on a rural road in Halifax and his neighbors were poor black farmers. He continued to rent a sweet potato farm in the county and worked the land between his mill shifts. This tie to the land and rural life gave him a unique connection to African Americans in the mill, and he was one of a handful of white workers who would attend union gatherings in black rural churches.<sup>33</sup>

The majority of white men in the mills professed to be anti-union. Some were convinced that Stevens would close the mill before it would bargain with the union. Others believed that collective bargaining would take away their autonomy or ruin what they saw as a productive relationship between management and workers. There is never one single explanation for a worker's feelings about unionization, but some black workers believed that anti-union white male workers feared the loss of privilege. In the 1960s, whites held more than ninety-five percent of the skilled jobs in the mills. They enjoyed sole access to advancement to managerial positions,

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<sup>32</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 94, 123-128. Charlotte Brody interview with author, Howardsville, Virginia, September 5, 2011. William Goldsmith, "The Halifax County Black Caucus, 'A Group to Be Reckoned With'" (unpublished seminar paper, 2012). Gary Grant interview with Kieran Taylor, August 6, 2003, the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as SOHP).

<sup>33</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 120-122.

with the exception of a few white women who became “foreladies.” Well into the 1970s, a white man with a tenth-grade education could expect to make forty-nine cents an hour more than his black counterpart. “Resentment,” explained Jettie Purnell, who scrubbed floors in the mills in the 1950s but was blacklisted in the 1960s for his NAACP involvement. “The reason the whites resented the union [was] because they was told that union would elevate blacks above them, and they believed that, so that's why they didn't want it to happen.”<sup>34</sup>

In part because of the unusual make-up of union support in those first few months of the organizing drive – African American men and women but none of the white female veterans of the 1960s efforts and very few white men willing to be vocal and visible in their support – Crystal Lee Sutton assumed a prominent role. Some people who knew her described her as “larger than life” and “passionate” about the union. Others accused of her being domineering, driving supporters away, and absorbing all of Zivkovich’s attention.<sup>35</sup> Whatever truth there is to those claims, there is no doubt that she greatly influenced the Roanoke Rapids campaign. What explains the sudden emergence of her political consciousness in May 1973, and her equally sudden withdrawal from the campaign in March 1974?

Sutton was born Crystal Lee Pulley in Roanoke Rapids on December 31, 1940 to Albert and Odell Pulley.<sup>36</sup> The textile industry was the biggest manufacturing employer in North Carolina, and her parents both came from families of mill workers. About a quarter of the labor

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<sup>34</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens*, 71; Jettie Purnell interview with Timothy Minchin, Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, February 9, 1996. James Boone interview with Timothy Minchin, Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, February 9, 1996.

<sup>35</sup>Brody interview. Willie Jones interview with author, Greensboro, North Carolina, January 15, 2010. Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 172, 174.

<sup>36</sup>At the time of her arrest, her name was Crystal Lee Jordan. I have chosen to refer to her by her last name from her third marriage. I use “Sutton” and “Crystal” or “Crystal Lee” interchangeably.

force worked in textiles in 1940; by the mid-1970s, the number had grown to nearly forty percent. The mills were the primary source of work for poor and working-class whites in the Carolina Piedmont.<sup>37</sup> Crystal recalled that in her early childhood, her mother came home crying with the news that she finally got a job as a weaver in the #2 mill, where Albert worked as a loom fixer. “She cried because she was happy,” Crystal explained. “She needed the job, we needed the money.”<sup>38</sup> Few employment options were available for women in mill towns in the 1940s and 50s, and mill jobs were coveted because they fell under the federal Fair Labor Standards Act and therefore guaranteed a minimum wage. But the mills offered more than work. In Roanoke Rapids, the mill still provided many social services under the old paternalistic managerial style. The Pulleys, like all their friends and neighbors, rented their home from the mill, went to softball games sponsored by the mill, received medical care at a hospital that was partially subsidized by the mill owners’ donations, and had their modest trip to the beach every summer when the mills closed for the Fourth of July holiday. Every member of the Pulley family lived a life marked by the rhythm of the mill’s shifts and paydays.<sup>39</sup>

As a teenager, Crystal witnessed the cycle she would critique later in life as a mother and labor activist. When she was fifteen, Albert moved the family to Burlington, just before J.P. Stevens purchased the mills from the Simmons Company and dismantled the last vestiges of corporate paternalism. Five days a week, “Lee” (as she was known then to family and friends) left school at noon to work at a local florist shop, receiving course credit for her fifty-cents-an-hour job. Lee was permitted to keep her wages, but she often made a gift of her earnings to her

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<sup>37</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 10.

<sup>38</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 9.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 7, 11-12.

father.<sup>40</sup> In the eleventh grade she went to work at the mill with her parents, where she made almost twice as much. Children of mill workers were not expected to do well in school, and many failed or dropped out, turning to low-wage jobs in the mills as their best option. Working as a battery filler on the second shift, she struggled to keep up with her schoolwork. “It was very hard to do your homework in the mill, studying Macbeth and all that crap,” she recalled. It seemed to Crystal that “mill kids just couldn’t [learn] as fast as the others ... because we had to work, and we didn’t have the help at home.” In 1959 she was the first in her family to graduate from high school.<sup>41</sup>

Sutton was not ashamed of being a mill worker, but she understood at an early age that a hierarchy existed in her small town and textile workers were near its bottom. In Roanoke Rapids, her older brother briefly dated the daughter of one of the mill supervisors. The girl’s father came to the Pulley’s home one night and told Albert to keep his son away from her. Crystal interpreted that incident as one more piece of evidence that she and her siblings were looked down on as ‘mill trash.’ Although she was a very pretty young woman, with plenty of

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<sup>40</sup>Data from federal agents in the South in the first decade of the twentieth century reveals that sixty percent of girls in textile mills did not control their wages. Girls in families where all or the majority of able-bodied relatives worked in the mill were most likely to keep some or all of their wages. Douglas Flamming concluded that parents who were entrenched in the paternalistic mill village system with multiple children at work could afford to allow their daughters to keep some of their earnings in the early twentieth century. See Flamming, “Female Independence in the New South,” 50-52. Anecdotal evidence in Victoria Byerly’s interviews with female mill workers suggests this pattern persisted into the mid-century. See Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*. Timothy Minchin argued that many mill workers’ standard of living rose in the years following World War II, as employers abandoned home ownership and elevated wages to match those at organized workplaces to discourage unionization. See Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For? The TWUA in the South, 1945-1955* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997). It would seem, therefore, that Sutton was not unusual among her peers to retain most or all of her wages.

<sup>41</sup>Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 202-203. In her high school senior portrait, Sutton wears her cap and gown. The portrait and her high school diploma are displayed prominently in her archive at Alamance Community College. As well, her archive includes her junior high yearbook from 1954. While Sutton was critical of class inequalities in educational experiences in Roanoke Rapids and Burlington, she did seem to enjoy a fair amount of popularity, judging by the inscriptions and notes in her yearbook. She was even nominated as a class officer in seventh grade.

boyfriends and admirers, Crystal Lee disliked high school, where the “higher class kids [...] dominated the school.”<sup>42</sup>

Throughout Crystal’s young adult life, economic realities and gendered assumptions limited her options. In high school she hoped to become a beautician or secretary, but both occupations required training her family could not afford. She considered military service as a way to escape the mills, but her mother forbade it, admonishing her that “only whores went into the army.”<sup>43</sup> She could not imagine living on her own or moving away. Like so many women of her generation and class who were “at once dependent daughters and independent wage-earners,” going from her father’s house to a new home with a husband seemed to be the only choice.<sup>44</sup>

Sutton married Omar Carlos Wood (known as Junior) on 8 August 1959 and had her first child fifteen months later. Junior died in a car accident just four months later. Grieving and lonely, she had a brief affair with a young man she had dated in high school and got pregnant.<sup>45</sup> She did not have access to birth control, and because it had seemed to her that it took so long to get pregnant the first time, she was not concerned that she would. Only twenty years old, Sutton was alone, unwed, and pregnant. The young man wanted to drop out of college and marry her but she refused. She felt he was not responsible enough to be a father and would resent her for causing him to leave college. She considered terminating the pregnancy, but she “didn’t know what in the world to take.” Fending off questions about her figure to keep her pregnancy a secret from her family, she went alone to the Alamance County welfare office. The woman there gave

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 203. Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 7.

<sup>43</sup>Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 203. Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 19.

<sup>44</sup>Douglas Flaming, “Female Independence in the New South,” in *Labor in the Modern South*, ed. Glenn T. Eskew (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 56.

<sup>45</sup>In interviews and oral histories, Sutton referred to the young man by pseudonym, never revealing his identity.

her some vitamins, the address of a nearby obstetrician's office, and a piece of advice: have the baby at a home for unwed mothers in Durham and give it up for adoption. But Sutton could not live her life wondering what had happened to the child. She would keep the baby, whatever social stigma she would have to endure.<sup>46</sup>

After the baby was born in 1962, Sutton moved with her two sons back to Roanoke Rapids, where her sister's family lived, to make a fresh start. Several months later, she married Larry Jordan, a recently divorced friend of her brother-in-law. Cookie, as everyone called him, was a faithful husband and good provider, but Sutton felt isolated in her new life as a housewife. Three years after their marriage, she had an affair with Ira, a wealthy married man.<sup>47</sup> When she tried to end the affair, he slapped her across the face, knocking her to the floor. Ira, she explained, "was always used to putting the woman down, where I actually put him down." She told Cookie about the affair and together they went to Chief of Police Drewery Beale, hoping he would order Ira to leave her alone. "I guess [Beale] thought that I was a two-bit whore," Sutton recalled. "But a two-bit whore needs help, and she should get justice from a police department. They're supposed to treat a two-bit whore just the way they do a doctor's wife."<sup>48</sup> Sutton's frustration with the sexual double standard and the better treatment that a "doctor's wife" could expect reveals how gender and class inequality blended together, virtually inseparable in her personal experiences and her class consciousness.

Drewery Beale was her first cousin's husband, but Sutton could not assume that Beale would be sympathetic to her because of their kinship. Beale knew that her second son was born

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<sup>46</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 36-37.

<sup>47</sup>Pseudonym.

<sup>48</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 83-84, 86.

out of wedlock, and this made it even harder for her to go to him for help. In Roanoke Rapids, the premium placed on reputation and respectability could outweigh the ties of family or friendship. If a woman ignored notions of sexual propriety, one union activist in Roanoke Rapids explained, “[that] meant that all forms of misogyny were deserved.”<sup>49</sup> By going to Beale and demanding police protection from Ira, Sutton demonstrated the exceptional courage and belief in equality that motivated and sustained her involvement in the union struggle. It is not clear what action Beale took on Sutton’s complaint, but Ira ceased to bother her. It is likely that Beale convinced Ira to leave Sutton alone and kept the matter out of the public record.

After the birth of her third child, Sutton returned to the work force, waiting tables, and then working in an apparel plant. Beyond contributing income to her growing household, working outside the home gave her a sense of accomplishment and engagement with the world. In 1972 she quit her job at the apparel factory, after a near-accident on the way home from second shift convinced her to find work closer to home. She was hired to fold towels in the Stevens Fabricating Plant.<sup>50</sup> While Sutton was in some ways exceptional for her determination to control what parts of her destiny that she could, her life in most ways was typical of women of her class, race, and generation. Her movement in and out of the paid labor force mirrored that of many southern working-class and low-income women, who were pushed and pulled by family responsibilities and limited in opportunity by class and geography.<sup>51</sup> Her fondness for the sociability of working outside the home, even in taxing, low-wage jobs, reflected a common

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<sup>49</sup>Brody interview.

<sup>50</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 89.

<sup>51</sup>On the rise of two-income households, see Nancy MacLean, “Postwar Women’s History: The ‘Second Wave’ or the End of the Family Wage,” in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, eds. Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 235-259.

desire for relationships with peers and relief from household monotony. Ernestine Brooks, an African American woman in the Rosemary spinning room, called being a spinner a “stinking job,” but it was an improvement over her life as a mother on a rural farm outside of Roanoke Rapids. “I had a baby every year, and I didn’t like that time in my life at all,” Brooks explained. “I went into the woodwork back then. I weren’t doing no work outside the home.”<sup>52</sup> Like Crystal Lee, a mill job meant more than just a paycheck for Brooks.

Unlike most mill families, however, the Jordans could have survived without Crystal’s wages. Cookie worked in the unionized Albemarle Paper Mill, where workers enjoyed better wages, in some cases twice as much per hour as Stevens workers, as well as benefits such as paid vacation time. This was the first time Crystal directly benefited from collective bargaining, but still she did not immediately make the connection between a better quality of life and union representation. Her father had witnessed the reprisals against pro-union workers in the 1934 General Textile Strike and had always said that unions caused nothing but trouble. While she occasionally reflected that her husband and his co-workers at the paper mill seemed better off than Stevens’s workers, it did not occur to her that a union could or should be brought into the mills until spring of 1973, when the TWUA renewed its organizing efforts in Roanoke Rapids.<sup>53</sup>

Sutton returned to work after recovering from an injury in mid-April. Zivkovich had just made his first tour inside the Stevens plants. In previous organizing drives, Stevens managers used the mill bulletin boards to intimidate workers or disseminate false information about labor laws. Because of this violation of labor laws, a federal court order granted the union an important privilege. Union representatives had the right to inspect the bulletin boards in Stevens’s mills on

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<sup>52</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 94.

<sup>53</sup>Sutton, transcript of speech given at Graham High School, October 11, 2000, Graham, North Carolina, Sutton Collection, Alamance Community College, Acc. #986.87 (hereafter referred to as “CLS #986.87”).



a regular basis. Individual managers could be held in contempt for anti-union messages on the board and for obscuring workers' view of the federally-mandated postings on workers' rights to organize. McIver had been sure to emphasize this point at the first union meeting and Zivkovich made weekly tours of the plants, hoping that his vigilance would assure pro-union workers that federal laws protected them from harassment and reprisals. Sutton had not been there to witness it, but dozens of other workers saw it when Zivkovich commanded a supervisor to move boxes that were obstructing the view of the bulletin board. It had taken the union six years of litigation, but with that federal court order, the TWUA got Zivkovich inside the mill where the workers could see him order their supervisors to comply with the law. This spectacle helped to bolster the pro-union workers' confidence in the union, even as rumors spread that Joseph Williams was being harassed by his supervisor in retaliation for leafletting.<sup>54</sup>

In early May, Sutton's friend and co-worker Liz Johnson whispered to her that there was going to be a union meeting on May 13 in the Chockoyotte Baptist church. Although curious, Liz was sure her husband would not let her go to the black church where the meeting would be held. Sutton was intrigued and convinced Liz to accompany her to the meeting. At the church, Reverend Tom Herndon opened the meeting with a prayer and introduced Zivkovich. Zivkovich noted the two white women seated in the front row of the church. Because black workers constituted about one-third of the labor force in the Roanoke Rapids plants, the organizing drive needed white votes as well to win an election. By the end of Zivkovich's speech, Sutton had decided to support the organizing drive. The next day she went to work wearing "the biggest TWUA button Eli had," a five-inch-wide white button with "I'm for the TWUA" emblazoned in red. She passed out union leaflets after her shift and talked to workers on break around the

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<sup>54</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 122-125.

canteen about what the union could do for mill families – all actions for which many workers had lost their jobs in the past. When foreman Eugene Taylor asked her why she wore the union button, Sutton replied with satisfaction, “None of [your] damn business.”<sup>55</sup>

Sutton’s sudden turn to unionism was rooted in her lived experiences. She had long harbored resentment towards J.P. Stevens for the power the company held over the mill families in Roanoke Rapids. Mill workers’ children, Sutton feared, learned from their parents an attitude of resignation. “All their life, all the children ever hear is JP. The parents come home and say, ‘Lord a mercy, they worked me down today,’” she explained. “So naturally they’re going to pick it up, learn about it. And they are going to work for JP.” The union’s language of fair treatment and equal opportunity rang true with her personal experiences and frustrations.<sup>56</sup> Sutton’s sudden embrace of unionization was not so unusual. Willie Jones worked with Sutton as a union organizer and recalled a similar experience when she first recognized that organizing could address the injustices she saw and experienced. “When you look around you and see people being mistreated there’s a little something in you that wants to say something until it builds up more and more and more,” Jones explained. “All of the sudden you explode and you start taking on the fight of other people.”<sup>57</sup>

Wearing the button and leafletting at the mill gate was quite a contribution to the campaign. Many pro-union white mill workers were not willing to publicize their stance so visibly. Sutton also held interracial union meetings in her home on Carolina Street. She hoped to

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<sup>55</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 113-114, 127-130. On previous instances of pro-union workers being harassed and fired for visible support of the union, see *National Labor Relations Board, Petitioner, v. J.P. Stevens & Co., Inc., et al., Respondents*. Nos 654-657, Dockets 30914, 30391, 31164, and 31245. United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit. Argued April 19, 1972. Decided July 13, 1972.

<sup>56</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 109.

<sup>57</sup> Jones interview.

bring whites who would not attend meetings in black churches together with black workers. At these interracial meetings, Cookie noted, there would be “twelve or fifteen cars parked at our house [and] black people standing in the front yard and all, sitting around talking.” He worried about what people might say in a town that resolved the problem of desegregation by redrawing the school district lines around the white neighborhoods and bussing the majority of black children out into the Halifax County schools.<sup>58</sup> But Sutton, who maintained that she was glad she had been born “colorblind,” was unconcerned about the talk the union meetings stirred up in town.<sup>59</sup>

Bringing the union into her home may have served an additional function for Sutton. During the month of May, she was at the union headquarters at the Motel Dixie before and after every shift and often brought her children with her. Hosting meetings at home may have helped Sutton balance her labor as a mother with her union activism, as many working-class women were compelled to do. Literally bringing the union home with her, Crystal also hoped to teach her children that they should stand up for themselves. Beverly Riggs, an employee at Stevens’s fabricating plant in Roanoke Rapids, told a similar story. When she and her husband first got involved with the organizing drive, Beverly stayed at home with the children while her husband Rylan attended union meetings. Dissatisfied with receiving information secondhand, Beverly explained, “I started going to union meetings too, and we just carried the children with us. After that, I got more involved with the union than Rylan.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 132. On desegregation and redistricting, see Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 114-115.

<sup>59</sup>Sutton, speech given at Graham High School, CLS #986.87.

<sup>60</sup>Tom Herriman, “At the Heart of the Stevens Campaign Are Families Trying to Make Ends Meet,” *Labor Unity* 62, No. 13 (December 1976): 10, at CLS #986.87.

Near the end of May, workers informed Zivkovich that management had posted a new notice addressed to the mill workers on the company bulletin board in the Fabricating plant. The letter insinuated that the union was a front for a black power movement that would take over the mills and the town.<sup>61</sup> The floor bosses at Stevens were aware of the effect the letter might have on white workers, many of whom were already wary of black participation in the campaign. They also knew that the union could bring charges against them before the NLRB for posting a racially inflammatory message on company property. Supervisors kept a careful watch over employees who seemed to linger in front of the bulletin board for too long. They ordered away several employees who were known union supporters. When workers told Zivkovich about the letter during their organizing meeting, he stressed the importance of getting him a copy that he could send to the union office in Charlotte. He felt sure that the company would pull the letter down before they admitted him into the plant for his bulletin board inspections, if this four-page letter was as bad as the workers said it was.<sup>62</sup> Sutton tried to copy the letter on Monday, May 28, but assistant overseer Dave Moody stopped her. She was dismayed; she had hoped to please Zivkovich by being the one who got him the copy. She told her friend Liz that night, “If they try to stop me next time, I’m going to start swiping the clipboard. I’ll blow this place sky high.”<sup>63</sup>

On May 30, during Sutton’s usual meeting with Zivkovich before her shift, he again impressed upon her the importance of getting a copy of the letter. He charged her with this task because she struck him as someone “who if she said she was going to do something she’d do it.”

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<sup>61</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 145. Minchin, *Don’t Sleep With Stevens*, 72.

<sup>62</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 136.

<sup>63</sup>*National Labor Relations Board, Petitioner, v. J.P. Stevens & Co., Inc., et al., Respondents*. No. 671, Dockets 30914, 30391, 31164, and 31245. United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit. Argued January 12, 1977. Last brief submitted March 2, 1977. Decided August 31, 1977.

He was impressed by her boldness in displaying her unionism and had come to rely on her for information about the levels of pro- and anti-unionism among the white workers. The two had developed a bond. Zivkovich's confidence in her had grown during the previous four weeks, but he suspected that her enthusiasm for the campaign stemmed from her dissatisfaction with her marriage and boredom with her job. He saw the letter as a way to test her commitment to the campaign.<sup>64</sup>

Sutton's restlessness at work and dissatisfaction at home did indeed motivate her political activism, though not in the shallow way that Zivkovich suspected. She wove indictments of class and gender inequality together, taking equal delight in standing up for the union and challenging the men in her life. She was thrilled by her own willingness to defy her supervisors. "All my life it seems like I've been told what to do. I had Daddy as a boss. And I had Cookie as a boss," she reflected. "All my life I've always had to get permission from a man, and I'm tired of it." Every day Cookie drove her to work and warned her that she was going to get fired for her unionism. He professed that he did not object to her being pro-union, he just did not want her to be "a front-runner" in the struggle and turn their home into a union hall.<sup>65</sup> As Sutton stood folding towels in the first hours of her shift, her thoughts wavered between the persistent helplessness she felt, trapped in the mills and by her responsibilities as wife and mother, and her growing bitterness towards the structural inequalities that kept Stevens's workers economically and psychologically dependent on the mill. Her admiration of Zivkovich and desire to impress him blended with her zeal for the union campaign and her determination to do something about that letter before it weakened the white support they had managed to secure.

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<sup>64</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 132, 143.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 137, 141. Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 206-208.

In the movie, the script writers and director used the letter as a way to stir the sexual tension between Norma Rae and Reuben. When Reuben presses her to copy the letter, she retorts that it will get her fired. He yells back, “Sweetheart, you go into the mill, you stand there, you copy down the letter. You bring it back to me.” The two characters pace the small motel room, and Norma cries out in exasperation, “Reuben, I’m gonna tell you something. You been away from home a long time. Reuben, you need a woman!” Reuben snatches his coat and heads for the door, firing back at her, “Funny you should say so, because tonight’s the night.” He charges out, calling out over his shoulder to Norma, who remains standing somewhat bewilderedly in the center of the room, that he will “wear a rubber.”<sup>66</sup> Given that rumors circulated in the Roanoke Rapids organizing drive that Sutton and Zivkovich’s relationship went far beyond the platonic and that both were married, it is unsurprising that scenes such as this irritated Crystal and she felt pressed to downplay their bond in her speaking tour as “the real Norma Rae.” The real-life organizer, she stressed, was a good husband who worked himself to exhaustion for the campaign and taught her “to fear no one but the Lord, Jesus Christ.”<sup>67</sup>

The contention around the rumors and the sexual tension has made analyzing the bond that Sutton and Zivkovich shared a delicate exercise. To overstress it is to play into the same preoccupation with the “did they or didn’t they” question that nearly split apart the organizing drive. To ignore it is to do an injustice to the strength and importance of the bonds that organizers often developed during campaigns with another and with the workers they organized. Sutton’s willingness to risk so much for Zivkovich cannot be fully understood without taking

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<sup>66</sup> *Norma Rae*, directed by Martin Ritt (Twentieth Century Fox, 1979), DVD (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001).

<sup>67</sup>“Crystal Lee’s Norma Rae,” *The Real Inquirer*, February 9, 1980, at CLS #986.87.

into account her feelings for him, yet it does not prove that their connection went beyond the intellectual and emotional. In one interview, Sutton included a detail that did not make it into other published iterations of her story and suggest how intimate their relationship had become in just a few weeks. Early in her shift, she realized how difficult it would be to copy the letter and decided to abandon the effort. She called Zivkovich during her break to tell him that she was hungry, she wanted to eat her supper, and she would try another day. Zivkovich replied, “Look, Crystal, you can afford to lose a few pounds and I need that letter.”<sup>68</sup> Sutton was a voluptuous woman who took pleasure in her attractive appearance. By all accounts, she was a striking woman. “She was beautiful,” recalled one Roanoke Rapids organizer. “You would notice her on any street.”<sup>69</sup> Zivkovich knew that his comment would make Crystal mad, and he hoped that her anger would embolden her. But he also risked insulting or embarrassing her by suggesting that she was overweight; his remark could have the opposite effect. Zivkovich must have felt confident in their relationship and in how well he knew Crystal to gamble on that comment. It worked. Crystal snapped back, “I’ll get the damn letter.”<sup>70</sup>

Sutton’s first impulse was to avoid direct confrontation with her supervisors by discretely copying the letter. She enlisted her friend and co-worker Liz Johnson. In the bathroom of the Fabricating plant, they plotted how they would copy the letter and conceal the subversive act from their supervisors. The ladies rooms in the mills were places for secretive behavior, by definition a feminine, private space. Women used the bathrooms for a variety of punishable offenses – from stealing a quick smoke to talking about the union. Myrtle Cribbs in the J.P.

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<sup>68</sup>Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 208.

<sup>69</sup>Brody interview.

<sup>70</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 143. Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 208.

Stevens plant in Statesboro, Georgia, for instance, used bathroom trips to talk union with her co-workers. “I went to the restroom and I was talking and I asked these three ladies in there how they felt about the union trying to come in,” Cribbs recalled.<sup>71</sup> Since the bathrooms were also spaces where mill women policed and spied on each other, Sutton and Johnson first checked the stalls of the ladies room and then strategized. They decided to take turns strolling by the bulletin board and memorizing as much of a paragraph as possible. They would proceed to the bathroom and scribble the fragments on scraps of paper hidden in their bras.<sup>72</sup>

The prospect of carrying out such clandestine activity thrilled the women, and their nervousness became giddy excitement. Sutton wondered if the bathroom was wired with listening devices so that Stevens could spy on them. She performed an elaborate routine of inspecting every corner of the ladies room and peering into the trash can. Her friend caught the spirit, lighting up a cigarette and asking, “You suppose they can hear me doing this?” Sutton whispered into the towel dispenser, “Can you hear me?” Both women erupted into giggles.<sup>73</sup> Poking fun at mill authority occurred often in the ladies rooms of mills. The comedic relief broke up the monotony of factory work, and for women like Sutton and Johnson who faced dire consequences for their actions, the mockery alleviated tension and fear. No doubt the camaraderie helped sustain the union activism of women like Sutton.

Sutton and Johnson launched into their plan but soon realized that their strategy for copying the letter was ineffective because they forgot so many of the words by the time they reached the bathroom. Their frequent trips to the ladies room, moreover, drew the attention of the

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<sup>71</sup>“I think a day of reckoning is coming,” in *Mountain Life and Work*, Special Issue: History of J.P. Stevens (September 1978), 14.

<sup>72</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 142.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.



assistant overseer Dave Moody and his supervisor, Ray Mabry. Johnson noticed the men watching her in disapproval when she lingered in front of the bulletin board. She did not want to risk copying any more of the letter. Four hours into the shift and nearing the dinner break, Sutton had less than two paragraphs tucked away under her blouse.<sup>74</sup>

At the other end of the shop floor, Sutton could see the catered dinner that Stevens was providing that night to celebrate a milestone in hours worked without an accident that caused a loss in man-hours. Across the table laden with barbeque chicken and Brunswick stew from Ralph's Barbeque, a local favorite, a banner read: "CONGRATULATIONS! On A Record Of 2,000,000 *Safe Man-Hours Without A Lost Time Accident!*"<sup>75</sup> Stevens had hosted a "safety supper" before to mark the first million hours, but Sutton suspected that the organizing drive motivated this show of appreciation. Her co-workers filed towards the opposite end of the room for their supper. She was alone. Armed with a clipboard and pencil, she walked directly to the bulletin board. The first two pages of the letter, as Sutton recalled, contained the familiar company message: the union will make workers go on strike and will cause job loss, strife, and violence. The third page, however, contained a message that made Sutton understand why Zivkovich wanted a copy so badly. It implied that African American men ran the union and intended to unionize the mills in order to dominate whites in Roanoke Rapids.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>The local newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, featured a photograph of the safety dinner the next day, but notably absent was any reporting on the conflict between Sutton and management on May 30. *Daily Herald*, Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, May 31, 1973, 11.

<sup>76</sup>Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 208. Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 144-145. See also *National Labor Relations Board, Petitioner, v. J.P. Stevens & Co., Inc., et al., Respondents*. No. 671, Dockets 30914, 30391, 31164, and 31245. United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit. Argued January 12, 1977. Last brief submitted March 2, 1977. Decided August 31, 1977.

As Sutton scribbled on scraps of paper, Moody approached her and ordered her to stop. Moody's direct supervisor, the general overseer James Alston, joined him at the bulletin board. Sutton insisted that she had the right to copy the letter during her break. When Mason Lee, the general supervisor of Delta #4, ordered her to stop, she replied, "Well, Mr. Lee, I didn't know you knew my name," and continued to copy. When he threatened to call the police, she laughed and said, smiling at him, "Mr. Lee, I am going to finish copying this letter. And then, I am going to eat the supper." Crystal Lee copied the letter in front of them. When she finished, she tucked the paper down under her bra, certain that "nobody will get it down there."<sup>77</sup> Sutton's determination to copy the letter was remarkable, but her resistance reveals more than individual assertiveness or loyalty to the campaign. Sutton relied on a performance of her gender and her male supervisors' assumptions of appropriate contact between men and women to copy the letter and stand up to her supervisors. She used language and actions that suggested that a playful, even flirtatious attitude rather than outright rebellion. Like the "disorderly women" historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall identified in the 1929 Elizabethton, Tennessee, strike, Sutton used smiles, disarming laughter, and a parody of friendly banter to evade and resist her supervisors' authority.<sup>78</sup>

When Sutton warned the men, "You better not touch me," they drew away from her, apparently stunned by her audacity. Surprise alone does not explain why her supervisors did not physically stop her from copying the letter. They could have simply ripped the pen and paper

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<sup>77</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 146. Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 276.

<sup>78</sup> Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in her analysis of the 1929 Elizabethton textile strike, noted that women strikers used gender identity to subvert authority, and defended their rebellion with "[m]ock gentility [and] transgressive laughter." See "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (1986): 354-382. For gender as performance, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

from her hands. Sutton's visibility on the shop floor and the potential for an uncontrollable reaction from the workers help explain why the men hesitated. Mason Lee was one of six Stevens supervisors who had been individually cited for contempt for anti-union intimidation and harassment in the recent federal case. Perhaps the men weighed their desire to stop Sutton and retrieve the copies of the letter against the legal reprisals the union would surely undertake.<sup>79</sup>

After hiding the copied letter under her bra, Sutton went on her dinner break, finished supper, and went to the ladies room. There she redid her makeup as though donning battle armor and returned to her workstation. She began folding towels when Moody directed her to Mason Lee's office. In Sutton's account, Lee never mentioned the letter. He berated her for using the pay phone on company time. Sutton refused to respond to his accusations. She put her hands over her ears and told the five men and the forelady in the room, "All of you people in here are against me. And I'm telling you, I'm not going to say anything until I have all of your names." Lee shouted at her to leave the plant. Uncertain what to do next, Sutton insisted that she return to her workstation to retrieve her purse. The men offered no objections and she stormed back to the shop floor. Her supervisors followed her, joined by a security guard and a police officer, Lieutenant Harry Vaughn.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>While the NLRB rulings against Stevens had little effect on the company, it may have made some managers in the Roanoke Rapids mills who were specifically cited in cases more cautious. When Zikovich toured the mills in April, he reminded manager Tommy Gardner of the possibility of contempt charges when Gardner tried to hurry him through the plant inspection. See Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 123-124. The United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit found Mason Lee to be in civil contempt in 1972. See *National Labor Relations Board, Petitioner, v. J.P. Stevens & Co., Inc., et al., Respondents*. Nos 654-657, Dockets 30914, 30391, 31164, and 31245. United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit. Argued April 19, 1972. Decided July 13, 1972. Sara Douglas offers an excellent summary of the NLRB cases against J.P. Stevens and an analysis of the media coverage of the rulings in *Labor's New Voice: Unions and the Mass Media* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 207-215.

<sup>80</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 148-149. See also *National Labor Relations Board, Petitioner, v. J.P. Stevens & Co., Inc., et al., Respondents*. No. 671, Dockets 30914, 30391, 31164, and 31245. United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit. Argued January 12, 1977. Last brief submitted March 2, 1977. Decided August 31, 1977.

At the table where she folded hand towels, Sutton grabbed a marker and piece of cardboard and scrawled one word, UNION, on it. She climbed up on to her workstation and held the sign above her head. She turned slowly in a circle. Mabry ordered her to come down, but no one laid a hand on her.<sup>81</sup> In the movie, Norma Rae's co-workers famously shut down their machines in solidarity with her. But the Fabricating Plant bore little resemblance to the weave room of the film, with broad tables rather than rattling looms. Some of her co-workers were still eating supper. Sutton remembered several workers quietly raising their hands in the "victory" sign to her with "no shouts, no cheers." Sutton had intended to demonstrate to her co-workers that she was being fired for her unionism. When she felt certain that her co-workers had received the message, she climbed down from the table when. Then she saw Chief of Police Drewery Beale, her neighbor and her first cousin's husband, across the shop floor, headed towards her. Beale knew from his wife that Sutton's second son was born out of wedlock. He had learned of her extramarital affair when she asked for police protection against her former lover. Beale's knowledge of her sexual past gave him power over her, and she consented to leave the plant with him. If before Crystal Lee had played coy and then defiant with her supervisors, she now felt compelled to assert her respectability. "I said to Drewery Beale," she recalled, "'I'll tell you one thing: You're going to open that door for me to go out of here. I am a lady.' Because see, Drewery knows things. He knows me." She also demanded that he sign a piece of paper promising to take her straight home. Beale began writing, but when he noticed the other men staring at him, he stopped and threw the paper aside. As he led her out of the plant, Sutton recalled that he stopped and said, "I'm not going to get in that car with you by myself." It is possible that Beale was concerned that Sutton was so unpredictable and volatile that she would

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<sup>81</sup>Janet Simpson, "Little Did 'Norma Rae' Realize Her Deed Would Result in Fame," *Eden Daily News*, January 13, 1983, at CLS #986.87. Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 150-151. Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 208-209.

attack him or attempt to run away. Perhaps the response was intended to put Crystal Lee in her place by insinuating he would not be caught alone with a promiscuous and disreputable woman. With the eyes of her coworkers fixed on her, Sutton gave a casual, almost flippant response. Laughing, she replied, “Drewery, I’m not going to do anything to you.” Sutton carried her purse and the little rug that she brought to work to stand on during her long shifts, exiting the plant flanked by the Chief of Police, the lieutenant, and the mill guard.<sup>82</sup>

Once outside the plant, Sutton considered for the first time that Chief Beale and Lieutenant Vaughn would in fact take her to jail. She tried to appeal to Beale as kin, reminding him, “I know you. You are going to take me home.” When they directed her to the backseat of the police car, Sutton struggled with the two officers. She dropped her purse and gripped the chain-link gate at the entrance of the mill. Vaughn pried at her fingers while Beale pulled her back from the fence. Whether the men felt free to use force on Sutton once she initiated the struggle or were emboldened in their treatment of her once away from the audience of millworkers, the two men wrenched her from the gate and shoved her into the back of the police cruiser. She was taken to the station and charged with disorderly conduct.<sup>83</sup> The charges against her were eventually dropped, but the event would have far-reaching implications for the campaign, the town, and, most of all, for Sutton and her family.

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<sup>82</sup> Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 151-152.

<sup>83</sup> Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 152-154. On the arrest sheet, Drewery Beale wrote that Sutton “caused a public disturbance at [unclear] and Henry Street by using abusive language in the presence of D. N. Beale and W.E. Vaughan which language was intended likely to provoke violent retaliation by persons present and thereby cause a breach of the peace. The abusive language used by the defendant consisted of saying as soon as that dam [sic] gate is open I am going inside and then pulled at Lt. Vaughan and Chief Beale.” Copy of Sutton’s arrest sheet, May 30, 1973, Box 5, Folder “JPS Roanoke Rapids,” Textile Workers Union of America Records, 1915-1994, Mss. 396, Accessions M86-403, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison (hereafter cited as “TWUA, SHSW”).

Like most small towns, Roanoke Rapids had an active rumor mill. Union field notes from the 1960s and 70s are rife with examples of organizers combatting “hosts of rumors” and complaints about “too many different rumors and factions.”<sup>84</sup> Sutton knew that her dramatic confrontation with the mill bosses and arrest would make her the talk of the town. She resolved to tell her children about her checkered past before they could hear it elsewhere. One week after her arrest, Crystal sat her three children, ages ten, eight and five, down in the kitchen and explained to them that they each had different fathers. She admitted that Jay, her second son, was born out of wedlock. She told them about the affair she had several years ago, and how she had to ask Police Chief Beale to protect her from assault and harassment from her former lover. “I figured someone would be cruel enough to get that stuff going with the children in school,” she explained. Revealing secrets she had long safeguarded, she felt liberated from shame.<sup>85</sup>

Sutton took her liberation a step further when journalist Henry Leifermann interviewed her two months later for his article on the organizing drive. When the article was published in the *New York Times Magazine* on August 5, 1973, a nationwide audience learned about Crystal’s journey. She laid out every detail of her personal life, turning rumor into fact and gossip into headlines. Historians have shown how women engaged in public activism and social reforms were vulnerable to attacks on their respectability and accusations of sexual deviance. Sutton knew she could not control what people said, but she refused to be a passive object of the town

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<sup>84</sup>See, for example, Harold McIver to Roanoke Rapids workers, June 19, 1974, Box 5, Folder “JPS Roanoke Rapids,” and Lawrence Guyot Field Notes, November 2, 1960, Box 681, Folder “J.D. (Joel) Goad,” Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>85</sup>Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 212. See also Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 162-163.

talk. She reclaimed some power when she chose to reveal her secrets rather than have them exposed by others.<sup>86</sup>

Sutton also hoped that her public revelations and refusal to be shamed would deflect the damage that the gossip might have on her children. Her fear that the town talk would filter down to her children was not unfounded. Gendered rules for behavior and standards for respectability were first learned and enacted in schools and on playgrounds where children were socially marked: pretty, rowdy, tough, sissy, from “good people” or from “trash.”<sup>87</sup> The news and gossip about Sutton did indeed spread among her children’s peers. Her eldest son, Mark, fought daily in defense of his mother. “When all this union stuff started, I had to man up,” he recalled matter-of-factly. “She thought it would help [to show her children she was not ashamed],” her husband explained. “I thought it would help. I mean, you think about this thing, telling that story and living in this town, some people knew it, some thought it. We talked it over, and we just decided, well, it’ll hurt us, it’ll hurt. But it’ll help too.”<sup>88</sup>

Crystal was well aware that her public airing of the dirty laundry would have an impact on her family and the organizing drive. Because race was the most powerful marker of status in southern culture, the scaffolding within the worlds of white southern workers is often overlooked. Social distinctions between white mill workers were significant, and they were

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<sup>86</sup>See Hall, “Disorderly Women,” Enke, *Finding the Movement*. See also Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Leacock, eds., *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

<sup>87</sup>Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls*, 212. Mark Jordan interview with author, Hillsborough, North Carolina, November 14, 2011. On early childhood experiences of class and exclusion, see Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: a Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997). For an excellent analysis of how southern children learned racial difference in the Jim Crow era, see Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>88</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 188.

coded by gender and sexuality: what a woman wore; how men talked to her and about her; how a man's family measured up to middle-class norms mattered.<sup>89</sup> "Rumor has got back to me," Sutton said, "that people are saying that it's a bunch of whores, standing out, getting people to join the union." Crystal was confronted by a female co-worker while leafleting with her son Mark at the factory gate before her shift. "I been wanting to meet you," said the white middle-aged woman. "I sure do feel sorry for you, because of any woman that has little enough respect for herself to do what you did." Understanding that the woman was referring to her public revelations of her sexual past, Crystal defended not only her actions but also her motherhood. "Please don't feel sorry for me," she replied, and pointed to her son. "That's my son and I love him."<sup>90</sup>

It was not only anti-union women, however, who leveled accusations of sexual impropriety against Sutton. Some pro-union workers, especially Maurine Hedgepeth, had never liked Sutton, and her revelations about her past confirmed her disreputability in their eyes. There was no love lost between Maurine and Crystal, but Hedgepeth was equally unsympathetic to other women who danced too close to the line between good and bad girls. One union activist recalled that Hedgepeth resented how attractive female co-workers flirted with the foremen to reduce their workload, unable or unwilling to imagine that the foremen's advances were unwanted.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>On white working-class respectability, see for instance Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*; Mary E. Frederickson, "Heroines and Girl Strikers: Gender Issues and Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century American South," in *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), edited by Robert Zieger, 84-112. On African American women and respectability, see for instance, Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women," in *Unequal Sisters*, eds. DuBois and Ruiz; Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in the Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>90</sup>Sutton quoted in *Woman Alive!* produced and directed by Joan Shigekawa, PBS television, June 19, 1974.

<sup>91</sup> Brody interview.



Hedgepeth may have felt that Crystal's dubious past threatened not only the respectability of the union campaign, but also the reputation of the other women involved in it. She and other white working-class women like her had reason to be invested in the strictures of respectable womanhood. Their reputations afforded them status and respect in their communities. If one stood for the union, moreover, a good reputation was protection from shunning and mistreatment. Interracial organizing heightened anxieties over sexual misconduct. An irreproachable reputation shielded women from accusations of sexual deviance and miscegenation. Perhaps most importantly, women's wages in the non-union cotton mills were low and their employment options scant. The most reliable way to achieve and maintain economic security was through a stable marriage to a good provider.<sup>92</sup>

Not all white working-class women, however, shunned Sutton or felt she threatened the success of the organizing drive. Beverly Riggs, Elizabeth Johnson, Cheryl Wasmund, and Jeanne Bailey attended meetings in the union office with Crystal. Crystal's vocal critique of the sexual double standard was unusual, but many women in Roanoke Rapids in the early 1970s were living very different lives from their mothers and grandmothers. Younger people delayed marriage longer. There were more options for young single women to live independently. Thirty-three-year-old Crystal recalled that when she turned eighteen, it didn't occur to her to move out on her own. Without access to higher education or a skilled occupation, her choices were simple: live with her parents, older sisters, or a husband. Just fifteen years later, new options were

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<sup>92</sup>Lillian Breslow Rubin, in her exploration of the intimate relationships of white working-class men and women in the 1970s, reported that even in the era of sexual liberation, working-class women "know all about who are the 'bad girls' [and] who are the 'good girls.'" Rubin concluded that "as long as men distinguish between the girls they marry and the girls they use, many women will remain [...] wary about engaging in sexual behaviors that seem to threaten their 'good girl' status." Hedgepeth died years before I could interview her, and in the one existing interview with her that I have been able to access, the topic of Crystal Lee Sutton was not raised. Charlotte Brody, who knew Hedgepeth well, posited in her interview that the animosity between Hedgepeth and Sutton may have stemmed from Hedgepeth's disdain for (or perhaps jealousy of) Sutton's seemingly unrepentant sexual attractiveness. Brody interview.

available for young women. Cheryl Wasmund and Jeanne Bailey (known as Blondie and Jeanie), for examples, rented a trailer together.<sup>93</sup>

Still, all of this should not diminish the enormous risk working-class women took when they deviated from the well-trod paths of respectable womanhood. Many women choose neutrality or silence in the organizing drive. “It’s just that I’m one of them that keeps quiet,” Sarah Bryant explained when her father Louis Harrell warned her that everyone had to pick a side in the organizing drive.<sup>94</sup> Labor historians and organizers have long assumed that the risk was primarily economic – the fear of losing one’s job. But from the perspective of working-class women, this fear had multiple layers. Being labeled a troublemaker or loose, and having one’s sexual past gossiped about could damage a woman’s ability to find a good husband or lead to divorce. For women earning less than men in any given job market and usually burdened with all the child care in single-parent situations, this personal risk had significant implications for themselves and their families.<sup>95</sup>

At the same time, rumor and gossip could be useful tools. Until the 1960s, black women’s access to jobs in the mills was severely limited. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, with its federal ban on discriminatory employment practices, changed things for African Americans, especially women. The number of black women working in textile mills increased fourfold

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<sup>93</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 132.

<sup>94</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 23.

<sup>95</sup>On fear of losing one’s job inhibiting unionism, see, for instance, Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For*, Hall et al, *Like a Family*, Robert Zieger, “From Primordial Folk to Redundant Workers: Southern Textile Workers and Social Observers, 1920-1990,” in *Southern Labor in Transition*, 273-294, and Linda Frankel, “‘Jesus Leads Us, Cooper Needs Us, the Union Feeds Us’: The 1958 Harriet-Henderson Textile Strike,” in *Hanging by a Thread*, 101-121. Douglas Flamming’s work suggests that workers’ sense of reciprocity in relationships of corporate paternalism also undermined unionization efforts. See Flamming, *Creating the Modern South*. On women’s economic vulnerability in the work force, see Nancy MacLean, “Postwar Women’s History: The ‘Second Wave’ or the End of the Family Wage,” in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 235-259.

between 1966 and 1987. For many, it was through rumor and gossip that they first learned that the mills were being forced to integrate. They shared information and speculations on where their best chances lay: where white coworkers were the friendliest and where the foremen were the least threatening. Once employed in the mills, black women cautiously navigated the new space, a space occupied for so long by whites. Some of their white co-coworkers had hired them or a woman they knew to perform domestic labor. The reputations of those women as employers served as gauges for how much distance to keep on the shop floor. In the weave room, where the rattle and hum of the machines was deafening, bathrooms were crucial spaces for making small talk and building connections with white women who might become allies.<sup>96</sup> Friendly gossip shared while stealing a minute's reprieve in the ladies' room could help to build interracial bonds between women.

By late fall in Roanoke Rapids, internal divisions, gossip, and rumors troubled the organizing drive. Some people in town swore that Crystal had made a pornographic movie with two Roanoke Rapids police officers. Sutton's revelations about her past and much-gossiped about reputation were not the only things troubling some of the white workers. Some of the workers were jealous or suspicious of the bond she shared with Zivkovich and the extent to which he trusted and relied on her. They resented the dominant role that Crystal assumed in the organizing drive. Margaret Banks, the second organizer that the TWUA sent to Roanoke Rapids to assist Zivkovich, left the organizing drive in September, feeling that Zivkovich ignored her and Sutton's dominance in the campaign made it impossible for her to do her job. Some of the white pro-union workers were loyal to or at least tolerant of Sutton. The white workers who were against Sutton coalesced into a faction around Maurine Hedgepeth, Alice Tanner, Dorothy

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<sup>96</sup>Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker*, 163-164, 181.

Balmer, and Raymond Moseley, a white loom fixer in the Roanoke No. 1 mill who was as fiercely against Sutton as he was for the union.<sup>97</sup>

The TWUA organizer Peter Gallaudet arrived in Roanoke Rapids in late September, amid the swirling rumors and as the schism between the two factions deepened. Gallaudet was a recent graduate of Cornell University's Industrial Labor Relations School and was recruited by the TWUA with the understanding that he would be assigned to the IUD's organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids. One of his Cornell professors asked him before he left if he was sure he wanted to go, reminding him that anti-union southern workers had been known to assault and shoot union organizers from the North. Gallaudet laughed off that warning, and drove from New York to North Carolina. When he arrived at the Motel Dixie, the desk clerk directed him to the union office and Zivkovich's adjoining room. Gallaudet recalls that he knocked on the door a few times before Zivkovich answered, wearing long underwear and wiping the sleep from his eyes. He apprised Gallaudet of the growing division within the organizing campaign and the rumors about an affair.<sup>98</sup>

In early November 1973, a dozen workers, all white supporters of the union, sent a batch of letters to Margaret Banks, who had returned to her home to Buffalo, New York, after leaving the organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids. On November 7, Banks forwarded the letters to TWUA president Sol Stetin, with a note saying, "These were sent to me, so I am sending them on to you. I am not sure if they will help or not but it was the request of the people from Roanoke Rapids." The letters outlined a list of complaints about Sutton and asked McIver to force Zivkovich to

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<sup>97</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 174. Peter Gallaudet interview with author, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, March 14, 2015. Letters of complaint from Roanoke Rapids workers, Box 5, Folder "JPS - RR, NC General info & correspondence," m81-406, Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>98</sup>Gallaudet interview.

remove her from the campaign. These workers alleged that Crystal had taken control of the organizing drive and treated other pro-union workers “as poorly as Stevens does.” They claimed that if anyone criticized her, Eli delivered a reprimand or turned against the criticizer. For instance,

Raymond [Mosley] and Eli had an argument on Monday. Eli called Raymond a company man and told him that his organizer card wasn't worth the paper it was written on. Raymond told him that if that was all it was worth he could have it. [...] So Raymond went home, took the sign off his car which advertised the meeting on Monday and carried it to the office.<sup>99</sup>

Lewis Edwards and his wife Shelby penned a letter that suggested how deep the divide among the white workers had grown and the toll it was taking on Zivkovich. When the Edwardses arrived at the union office at eleven o'clock at night on October 30, they were pleasantly surprised to see twenty-five or thirty people working there, a good turnout for a Tuesday evening. But Zivkovich, they stated, “started giving us this speech” about how he had told Sutton to stay out of the office because of the conflict between her and other workers, and that the organizing drive was hurt by her absence. Lewis and Shelby Edwards walked out of the office with two other workers, telling Zivkovich they had heard enough about Crystal Lee Sutton. As they stood outside the office door, they could hear Zivkovich yelling, and then Mary Katherine Tanner, the teenage daughter of mill worker Alice Tanner, ran out of the room crying. In another letter, Alice Tanner alleged that Zivkovich had yelled at her daughter, who did not work at the mill and was there to help her mother, upsetting her so much that she fainted. Tanner concluded her letter by suggesting that “if Eli would quit drinking so much, he might do better.

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<sup>99</sup>Letters of complaint from Roanoke Rapids workers, Box 5, Folder “JPS - RR, NC General info & correspondence,” m81-406, Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW.

Liquor courage is no good for anyone.”<sup>100</sup> Either Zivkovich had reached such a level of frustration and exhaustion that he lost his temper with a young woman who did not even work in the mills, or the anti-Sutton faction had so much contempt for Zivkovich that in their memory or retelling of the conflict that night, Zivkovich was reduced to a tyrant who drank too much and terrorized teenage girls.

Accusations about the nature of Zivkovich’s and Sutton’s relationship were common in the letters. James Vicks promised that “as long as Crystal [Sutton] stays at that office, you have lost an organizer because I don’t like the things she and Eli are doing. P.S. Please send Margaret Banks back.” Raymond Moseley’s letter insisted that the problem would cause even African American supporters to defect. “James Boone and B[ennett] Taylor said for me to call [Harold] McIver and tell him what was going on [with Zivkovich and Sutton],” Moseley wrote. “They are Black People. He said the people would stick behind me because they didn’t like what was going on either.” Moseley was apparently unable to convince Boone and Taylor to sign their names to the letter, but he must have counted on the threat of losing their support to catch the union’s attention. Lewis and Shelby Edwards wrote

[Crystal] has got a key to the office. She has got a key to Eli’s motel room. She drives his car. She and Eli ride around together all the time. They go out of town claiming that they are going on business and stay all day. She had her sewing machine in Eli’s room until just recently. She stayed up there until two, three o’clock in the morning, claiming to be making [union sweatshirts]. So why shouldn’t people be talking? A woman does not leave her husband and three children and go stay in an office with a man night and day for no reason at all.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>Letters of complaint from Roanoke Rapids workers, Box 5, Folder “JPS - RR, NC General info & correspondence,” m81-406, Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid.

Shelby Edwards was probably the one who penned the letter. After the sentence, “A woman does not leave her husband and three children and go stay in an office with a man night and day for no reason at all,” the author added, “I know I wouldn’t.”<sup>102</sup> Mrs. Edwards’ accusations indicate the thin line between the appropriate and inappropriate support a working woman might lend to an organizing drive. A room full of organizers, male and female, at eleven o’clock at night was a sign of success. A woman with a checkered past alone with the organizer after midnight was surely guilty of a transgression. There is no evidence that confirms the rumors that Zivkovich and Sutton were having an affair, but for Shelby Edwards and her co-signers, what more proof was required?

Zivkovich was ill-prepared for his role in Roanoke Rapids. He received scant training before being installed as an organizer in an industry he knew little about, in a town he did not know at all. But to the Edwardses, the problem was his relationship with Sutton. “We feel that Eli is for Crystal and nobody else. We want somebody that we can rely on to be for all of us working people and for getting the union,” the letter concluded, “because we need it and want it so much that we can taste it.” Next to their signatures, the word HELP was written in large letters and circled.<sup>103</sup> Their desire for a union heightened their fear of anything that might threaten the organizing drive’s success. Maurine Hedgepeth apparently refused to enter the union office as long as Sutton was there. Organizer Charlotte Brody, who developed a friendship with Hedgepeth while working in Roanoke Rapids in the late 1970s, remembered talking to her about the 1973 organizing drive, suggesting that perhaps Hedgepeth had been too hard on Sutton and Zivkovich. “You don’t understand, Charlotte,” Brody recalled Hedgepeth saying. “When Crystal

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<sup>102</sup>Letters of complaint from Roanoke Rapids workers, Box 5, Folder “JPS - RR, NC General info & correspondence,” m81-406, Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid.

was in the room, Eli couldn't *see* anybody else."<sup>104</sup> To feel so excluded from something one felt such responsibility and hope for must have been painful, whether the exclusion was intentional or imagined.

While the tensions and divisions that surfaced over emotional bonds were not uncommon in labor organizing, the timing of this particular conflict between the pro-union white workers was not incidental. Gallaudet recalled that Sutton was, in many ways, "a woman ahead of her time."<sup>105</sup> Her independence and rejection of the sexual double standard kept pace with the rise of feminism and gender-conscious activism in the early 1970s in cities and towns across the country. The fact that Sutton was featured so prominently in Leifermann's *New York Times Magazine* cover story about the union's organizing drive suggests how timely her immersion in the campaign was. Leifermann saw a crowd-pleaser in her story: a struggling working-class wife and mother who risked her job, her reputation, and her relationships to break free from unfulfilling personal relationships, from stereotypes of southern ladies she neither fit nor had any use for, and from unsatisfying wages and working conditions. Some pro-union workers were particularly galled by all of the attention that she received after the *New York Times* piece. Raymond Moseley included in his complaint letter the assertion that "the People said they don't like the publicity [Sutton] is getting when there are three or four other people who were fired that we feel are just as important, if not more so."<sup>106</sup> Moseley's point is valid, but unfortunately visiting journalists rarely are attuned to the dynamics and power structures at work in the local stories they cover.

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<sup>104</sup> Brody interview.

<sup>105</sup> Gallaudet interview.

<sup>106</sup> Letters of complaint from Roanoke Rapids workers, Box 5, Folder "JPS - RR, NC General info & correspondence," m81-406, Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW.



Moseley and like-minded mill workers had difficulty accepting Sutton's ascent into leadership in a culture where mill women's roles as wage-earners still did not grant them the freedoms of their male counterparts. George Strawn, an organizer assigned to the Roanoke No. 1 mill who arrived in Roanoke Rapids shortly after Gallaudet, sent a memo on December 23 to Harold McIver, in which he recounted a conversation he had with Moseley. After noting that a man named John Collier had been a witness to the entire discussion, Strawn wrote that Moseley "went into a long spiel about how he had started rumors about Eli and Crystal and how he had made an effort to try to get people not to come to the Union Meetings." Moseley admitted to looking into the phone records of the union office because he was concerned that Sutton had called McIver to complain about him and Margaret Banks. "His justifications for these actions," Strawn concluded, "were that he was jealous and he really wanted to play an important role in the Union, but did not have the courage to do so."<sup>107</sup> Sutton's refusal to be ashamed of her past or to be afraid of the town rumor mill presented a challenge to the gender power structure and the normative behaviors in the town at just the moment when women across the country were critiquing patriarchy through fashion, music, politics, and personal relationships. "Things were in flux [in the 1970s], including women's roles. And that maybe made it harder for Crystal [in Roanoke Rapids]," Brody reflected, "because when there are no rules, people sort of get harder on the rules."<sup>108</sup>

While tensions, rumor, and gossip over Sutton's private life and her relationship with Zivkovich simmered in the fall of 1973 and into the winter, gender entered the organizing drive in another way. The pro-union women created a TWUA cheerleading squad for their daughters.

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<sup>107</sup>George Strawn to Harold McIver, December 23, 1971, Box 5, Folder "JPS - RR, NC General info & correspondence," m81-406, Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>108</sup>Brody interview.

As Sutton put it, the cheerleading squad was a way “to show everyone in town that the union is here to stay.” For decades, TWUA organizers came into southern mill towns and labored under the suspicion of being ‘outsiders.’ The organizers came from another town, often from the North, and they stayed in a motel or rented a room. They were not there to live, raise a family, or join the community. They were there to bring in the union. Anti-union workers and mill owners painted the organizers as foreigners and the local workers who sided with them as troublemakers. Cheerleading was local, familiar, and, at first glance, anything but radical. Organizing the daughters of pro-union workers into the union’s cheerleading squad, then, demonstrated that the desire for a union was homegrown. The mothers sewed “TWUA” to the fronts of their daughters’ sweatshirts and bought plastic pom-poms for the girls. They changed the words of popular chants to direct the cheers at J.P. Stevens, personalizing the message to address the fictional Mr. Stevens: “You can rock us, you sock us, but you can’t knock us flat! Tell me Mr. Stevens, can you top that?”<sup>109</sup> This habit of personalizing the company was common among Roanoke Rapids workers, stemming from the time, just twenty years earlier, when the mills were owned by an identifiable individual, not a corporation with an executive board and CEO. Some older workers often caught themselves calling the company “Mr. Stephenson,” a common surname in their part of North Carolina.<sup>110</sup> The little girls poked at the company’s anti-unionism as they would an opposing team’s mascot. The critiques underlying the cheers were potent, but the delivery was benign because youth sports were a major part of life in Roanoke Rapids. By creating a union cheerleading squad, the mothers grafted their class politics on the town’s existing social structures, the region’s popular past times, and an appropriately feminine activity.

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<sup>109</sup>The cheerleading squad was featured in *Woman Alive!* and discussed in Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 173. In Sutton’s archives, a notebook contains chants that Sutton rehearsed with the cheerleaders, CLS #986.87.

<sup>110</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 27.

The TWUA cheerleaders practiced and performed in front of the union office on busy Roanoke Avenue, their highly visible performances taking the union's message, literally, to the streets. The parents of the squad members were determined to have a union float in the town's Christmas parade, with the union name across the front and the TWUA cheerleaders marching along beside it. Even as the squad represented a familiar, safely feminine activity, it had one characteristic that made it symbol of so much more. It included both white and black children. The 1955 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision rendered racially segregated education and school activities illegal, but eighteen years later, integration was incomplete.<sup>111</sup> A consequence of this was that African American and white workers at Stevens clocked in and out together, but their children continued to live largely in different worlds.<sup>112</sup> The TWUA cheerleading squad and the Christmas float offered a remedy to that. Gallaudet recalled that the mothers and daughters in the Christmas parade "really got a chance to show how proud they were as textile workers to have a nice float and these young girls were going to be cheerleaders. And that meant a lot. It wasn't that evident to me at the time how important that was."<sup>113</sup> Like feminists across the country in the 1970s, the Stevens women made their politics personal, articulating gender-conscious labor politics that built on a lifetime of experiences as white working-class women and low-income women of color.

In November of 1974, the women's movement came to town, as feminist Gloria Steinem arrived in Roanoke Rapids with a film crew. Steinem and producer Joan Shigekawa were creating a new PBS series called *Woman Alive!* that highlighted the diversity of women

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<sup>111</sup>See for instance Pamela Grundy, *Learning to Win: Sports, Education, and Social Change in Twentieth-Century North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>112</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 115.

<sup>113</sup>Gallaudet interview.

interested in gender equality.<sup>114</sup> Steinem had read about the Stevens campaign and Sutton's dramatic confrontation in Leiferman's *New York Times* article and wanted to feature her in the pilot episode. In the beginning of the twenty-minute segment on Sutton, which featured shots of her children passing out union leaflets with her, Crystal explained how her involvement with the union gave her "an opportunity to be the woman I always wanted to be." She said that since she was young, it seemed to her that "the man could do what he wanted to and the woman, she couldn't do nothing, especially with your local gossip."<sup>115</sup> Sutton, it seemed, had found the right group of filmmakers to showcase her cause and her critiques. In the segment, other white and African American women sing and leaflet with her at the mill gate; their proud stances and shining expressions suggest that they, too, are enjoying the attention.

The segment then records a union meeting in which Crystal, her husband Cookie, two union staffers, and nine workers discuss their day of leafleting. Six of the nine workers are women; four are black women. The participants could have been deliberately chosen by the producers to showcase the women. Given that Steinem and her film crew arrived just when tensions between Crystal and some pro-union workers had escalated, it is possible that some white workers declined to participate in the filmed meeting. The episode does capture, however, Sutton's feminist ideas. "It makes me really mad," she told the camera. "The men say, 'Oh my wife doesn't want to join the union,' and I feel like, sincerely, it is him holding her back."<sup>116</sup> After participating in *Woman Alive!* Sutton reflected that she had "fallen right in together" with

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<sup>114</sup>Jerry Kenion, "'Woman Alive!' Ms. Steinem will tell you," *Greensboro Daily News*, June 16, 1974, at CLS #986.87.

<sup>115</sup>*Woman Alive!*

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*

the women who worked on the episode and was “one hundred percent in favor of women’s liberation.”<sup>117</sup>

While feminists celebrated Sutton, some union leaders worried about how Sutton’s notoriety and checkered past reflected on the union’s credibility. Zivkovich recalled that he met an NLRB prosecutor who asked him about “that stripper that got up on the table and hootchy-kootchied and all.”<sup>118</sup> Zivkovich wanted the union to fight Sutton’s firing before the NLRB and also hire her as full-time organizer, but his supervisors were reluctant to put her on the payroll.<sup>119</sup> It would have set a problematic precedent – the union could not be expected to put on the payroll every worker who was fired or laid off during an organizing drive. Moreover, Harold McIver was not as convinced of Sutton’s talents as Zivkovich was. McIver described Sutton as “having stars in her eyes once that journalist showed up,” implying that her union activism was either driven by the desire to be in the spotlight or swayed by romantic longings.<sup>120</sup> Sutton, for her part, felt that her relationship with the union was always problematic. It seemed to her that some union leaders wished she would “crawl in a hole somewhere and hide.”<sup>121</sup> Zivkovich’s supervisors advised him to move the union headquarters out of the Motel Dixie and into an

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<sup>117</sup>Mary Day Mordecai, “‘My Head Runs 90 Miles an Hour,’ Says Woman Labor Union Organizer,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 19, 1974, at CLS #986.87.

<sup>118</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 163-164.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*, 164-165.

<sup>120</sup>Harold McIver interview with Chris Lutz, Meansville, Georgia, September 26, 1995. Transcript (L1995-12), Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections and Archives Department, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, GA (hereafter cited as “McIver interview”).

<sup>121</sup>Sutton, quoted in Lelia Carson Albrecht, “The Real ‘Norma Rae’ is Anguished by the Hollywood Replay of Her Life and Battles,” *People* 11, no. 17 (April 30, 1979): 43-44, at CLS #986.87.

established office – probably as much to temper gossip as to prove their commitment to maintaining the union’s presence in the town.<sup>122</sup>

In December, the union secured the necessary permit to have a float in the town’s Christmas parade bearing the message, “Good Tidings and Merry Christmas from the Textile Workers Union of America.” The mill workers’ daughters on the TWUA cheerleading squad would march along, performing their union cheers and singing carols, while the adults rode atop or walked alongside the float. Sutton recalled that the workers were excited about participating in the parade, especially the “mothers [who had never been] cheerleaders or been on a float.”<sup>123</sup>

But the Christmas parade became another source of tension between Sutton and some of the other workers. Alice Tanner wanted her daughter to take charge of the cheerleading squad and manage the practices and performances. Sutton objected that the squad needed an older woman to lead it; Tanner countered that Sutton had to be in control of everything, leaving no room for others to participate and lead. On the day of the parade, Cookie and Raymond Moseley argued over whose vehicle would tow the float. Moseley had criticized Sutton once before for not letting the Tanner women handle the cheerleading squad and taking credit for other people’s ideas and work; perhaps words from Moseley to that effect started the argument.<sup>124</sup> Or Cookie may have instigated the altercation, as he grew increasingly sensitive to real or perceived slights on his wife’s reputation and his manhood. In any case, the argument escalated and the men began throwing punches when Zivkovich stepped in and broke up the fight, warning the men that they would ruin the parade before it began. Two days later, Sutton argued with one of the union

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<sup>122</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 171.

<sup>123</sup>Byerly, *Hard Times*, 214. Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 175-176.

<sup>124</sup>Letters of complaint from Roanoke Rapids workers, Box 5, Folder “JPS - RR, NC General info & correspondence,” m81-406, Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW.

organizers in the office. Zivkovich intervened in the argument, telling Sutton to leave the office to “keep the ship together.” She avoided the union office after that, but continued to meet with Zivkovich to discuss the campaign. She seized any opportunity to talk about the need for a union with friends and neighbors.<sup>125</sup>

Sutton had been politicized by her participation in the organizing drive, but it took a toll on her marriage. In mid-March 1974, Cookie and Crystal began to quarrel late one Friday night. Cookie had been willing to do some of the cooking and laundry when his wife was too busy or too tired. He had even learned to sew a bit and mended the children’s clothing when Sutton had been in the union office every night of the week.<sup>126</sup> Not many men in Cookie’s shoes would have supported their wives’ activism to such an extent; some men would not have even permitted it. He had grown tired of feeling like their family played second fiddle to the union, and he told her so. Her banishment from the union office seemed like a clear message that the union did not need her as much as she thought. It was time for her to resume her duties as wife and mother. Crystal Lee suggested they should not fight about this in front of the children. “The children,” Cookie fired back. “How the hell can you talk about the children when you never see them?” In the film, this scene culminates with Norma Rae’s husband Sonny shouting at her in their kitchen, “The kids are going without dinner, without clean clothes. And I’m...going without. Entirely.” Norma Rae responds by standing before the ironing board, and challenges her husband to lift her nightie while she irons, thereby completing all of her wifely duties at once. She is furious, but Sonny looks at her and melts. Later that night in bed, when Sonny asks Norma if she is in love with Reuben, she replies, “No, but he’s in my head.” Sonny assures her that he loves her, will always

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<sup>125</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 174-176.

<sup>126</sup>*Woman Alive!*

stand by her, and “no one else is in my head.”<sup>127</sup> The real-life Norma and Sonny did not have such a sanguine conclusion to their fight.

Cookie rankled Crystal with his comment that she had no right to talk about the children when she hardly saw them. To her, all of her union work was for her children, so that they might have a better life if they went into the mills. She suggested to him that the next she might go down to the paper mill. The men who worked there were unionized. They offered their union hall for textile meetings, but she thought the paper mill unionists should help the textile mill workers more by leafletting and attending meetings. The men at the unionized paper mill might have some influence with the white male textile workers who were afraid to support the union. Perhaps Crystal could not predict the effect this statement would have on Cookie; maybe she knew exactly how it would strike him. “The hell you say, the hell you say,” she recalled Cookie shouting at her. “I dare you to go down there in front of those men. I don’t want no wife of mine doing that. You do that and you can get the hell out of this house.” Although paper and textile mill workers were part of the southern working class, subtle but important distinctions separated them. Textile mill workers typically earned lower wages, but paper mill labor was heavy, dirty, and very masculine. The pulp mill had a pungent, rotten smell, and it was understood that it was no place for a woman. Not only had Crystal threatened to invade Cookie’s turf in response to his complaints about her neglecting her domestic duties, but she had also nonchalantly proposed hanging around outside of the paper mill, soliciting help from the men for her union cause. Later that month, Cookie and Crystal separated, and she moved the children back to Burlington, North Carolina.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup>*Norma Rae*, DVD, directed by Martin Ritt, 1979. Hollywood, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001.

<sup>128</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 179-181.



Sutton's departure appeased those pro-union workers who resented her presence. The organizing team continued leafletting and house-calling. If any of Sutton's allies among the pro-union workers felt that she had been unfairly exiled, they did not show it by boycotting the union office. The organizing drive gained momentum, and Zivkovich began to pressure his supervisors to call for an election. He was convinced they had enough votes to carry a victory. Perhaps, too, he was ready to conclude the organizing drive. He was as eager to return to his home and family as anyone would be after twelve months in a strange town. No doubt the internal conflicts had wearied him.<sup>129</sup>

In May he invited TWUA president Sol Stetin and organizing director Paul Swaity to Roanoke Rapids. He arranged a rally at the paper mill's union hall to convince them that it was time for a vote. Only a few dozen workers attended the afternoon rally. At midnight, a new group of pro-union workers arrived at the union hall after second shift; again, only twenty or so workers showed. "They undercut me," Zivkovich averred. "I felt like I'd been knifed." If the intention behind the low attendance had been to show displeasure with Zivkovich and remove him from the organizing drive, it worked. After the dismal turnout at the meetings, he tendered his resignation with McIver and went home to West Virginia.<sup>130</sup> McIver wrote to the Roanoke Rapids office that a search for a permanent replacement for Zivkovich was underway but said nothing about the abrupt departure.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 181.

<sup>130</sup>Leifermann, *Crystal Lee*, 181-182. Gallaudet interview. Jordan interview. Zivkovich's resignation was not in either the TWUA files in WHS or the ACTWU files in Ithaca. The files from the 1973-74 organizing drive simply show that Zivkovich dropped from the records after April 1974.

<sup>131</sup>Harold McIver to Roanoke Rapids staff, May 22, 1974, Box 5, Folder "JPS - RR, NC General info & correspondence," m81-406, Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW.

The summer heat set in. The TWUA staff carried on in Zivkovich's absence, under the temporary leadership of Al Motley. A crucial turning point occurred in June. Since 1965, Stevens had offered employees a share in the company's profits in lieu of a pension plan. In the early 1970s, the American economy was in crisis: inflation rose to over ten percent in 1974 and the oil crisis raised consumers' energy rates. Between 1973 and 1974, the stock market suffered one of its worst years in the history of the market index. Consequently, Stevens workers received dismal news about their returns in the profit-sharing program. The union organizers saw an opportunity to pull more white workers off the fence and on to the union side, especially older workers whose futures were more immediately affected by the decline in the company's profit-sharing program.<sup>132</sup>

Gallaudet recalled the sense of urgency in the moment. "We had this critical leaflet to get out and I made calls," he said. "There was a series of young white guys my age who signed [union] cards. I could talk to them and they were helpful, but they didn't want to stand up at the union meeting and talk, or wear a button, or get out on the gate and leaflet." Four young black men from the Patterson mill agreed to leaflet with Gallaudet. The in-plant organizing committee flooded the mill with fliers that explained the decline and promised that a union contract meant a stable retirement plan.<sup>133</sup>

The union staff in Roanoke Rapids advised McIver that an election should be held by the end of the summer, before the union lost the edge provided by the profit-sharing decline. The staff claimed to have seventy to eighty percent of the mill workers.<sup>134</sup> It is possible that more

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<sup>132</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep*, 73-74. Gallaudet interview.

<sup>133</sup>Gallaudet interview. Bennett Taylor interview with Timothy Minchin, Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, February 9, 1996.

<sup>134</sup>Appraisal of the Roanoke Rapids mills, June 29, 1974, Box 5, Folder "JPS - RR, NC General info & correspondence," m81-406, Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW.

workers signed on to the union *because* Sutton and Zivkovich were gone. In Sutton's absence, women stepped forward as strong in-plant organizers. They may have felt obligated to contribute more with the loss of Sutton's participation. Then, too, Sutton had been a powerful force in the union office; shyer women who were eclipsed by her presence may have shined in her absence. It also could have simply been a matter of timing. After a year of organizing, the drive had momentum.

Everyone expected the election to be close. The TWUA and the IUD put everything they could into the election. The pre-election rally featured local and regional guest speakers, including Reverend W.W. Finlator, a Raleigh civil rights activist, and Georgia Congressman Andrew Young. The union rented the auditorium and field at the Roanoke Rapids High School and arranged for barbeque and Brunswick stew from the local favorite, Ralph's Barbecue. Nearly one thousand people came to the rally. Workers from the unionized paper mill and A&P grocery store attended, and union officials flew in from New York City and Washington, D.C.<sup>135</sup>

On August 23, 1974, the TWUA claimed its first election victory since beginning the campaign in 1963. Roanoke Rapids workers voted 1,685 to 1,448 in favor of union representation. Sutton and Zivkovich returned to town for the election. In the photograph of the victory party, Sutton stands in the front row, beaming from behind a huge banner that read, "ALL THE WAY WITH TWUA." The workers have their arms raised above their heads in triumph. North Carolina State AFL-CIO president Wilbur Hobby declared it "a new day in Dixie – first J.P. Stevens, then the textile industry, then the South."<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup>Receipts for Ralph's Barbeque, Box 5, Folder "JPS - RR, NC General info & correspondence," m81-406, Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW. Gallaudet interview.

<sup>136</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep*, 73-74. "A New Day in Dixie," *Charlotte Observer*, August 20, 1974.

Within one week of the election, Stevens requested a meeting with the union. With J.P. Stevens's history of union resistance, union leaders were expecting a decertification battle. The Stevens representatives did not talk about contesting the results, however, and the union grew optimistic. Stetin celebrated the election victory in the AFL-CIO offices in Washington, D.C., where everyone "talked about this being the most significant organizing victory in the South in decades." McIver exulted that the election would "open the door to a new, progressive South."<sup>137</sup>

Back in Roanoke Rapids, the end of the organizing drive meant change in union office. Organizers were reassigned to other towns and two new staffers, Cecil Jones and Clyde Bush, were brought in. Jones and Bush recruited workers to serve on the contract negotiating committee. Maurine Hedgepeth, James Boone, Bennett Taylor, Joyce Blackwell, Danny Blackwell, Linwood Ivey, Carolyn Brown, and Raymond Hollowell stepped forward. The committee met with Stevens representatives in the old Potato Barn. But after six months of meetings, the euphoria of the election victory that occurred in that building ebbed.<sup>138</sup>

Company officials were determined to prevent the union from gaining a strong contract. They refused to accept automatic dues check-off and any form of arbitration, the two most important factors to the union. "Without arbitration, no agreement is worth the paper it's written on," said Stetin. "They say to us, 'Well, you can strike.' Sure, they would like us to strike, while all the other plants are operating." Without an automatic check-off of dues, the union had to rely on workers to voluntarily pay union dues. Contract negotiations dragged on fruitlessly throughout 1974 and 1975.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup>McIver to Stetin, August 30, 1974, Box 5, Folder "JPS - RR, NC General info & correspondence," m81-406, Mss. 396, TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>138</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 211-212. Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens*, 75.

<sup>139</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep*, 80-81.

Although Roanoke Rapids workers did not have a contract, they did have a union. TWUA officers agreed that until a contract was won, it would not collect dues from workers but would remain invested in the town. Clyde Bush developed an informal grievance process in which he met regularly with mill supervisors to discuss the workers' complaints. This at least gave workers a sense that they were indeed being represented. "It took eleven years and two elections to win at Roanoke Rapids," Hoyman said. "We're not going to abandon these people." In the union office on Roanoke Avenue, the workers put up a hand-written poster: "United we stand up to J.P. Stevens 'til they fall on their knees with a contract!"<sup>140</sup>

The election was not won by a landslide, and even with bargaining rights in Roanoke Rapids, the union still represented only about ten percent of the entire Stevens workforce. But the symbolism of the victory was more powerful than the numbers might suggest. In 1973, union leaders were considering abandoning the Stevens campaign. The win renewed their commitment to the campaign. Swaity contended that it "saved the Stevens drive."<sup>141</sup> What accounts for the union's success in Roanoke Rapids?

The particularities of time and place deserve some of the credit. There were elements of Roanoke Rapids that helped the union effort. The unionized workplaces in town exposed mill workers to the benefits of organized labor through friends and family. The town was situated on a major interstate and within a two-hour drive of Newport News, Richmond, and Norfolk, three

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<sup>140</sup>Scott Hoyman interview with Timothy Minchin, Summerville, South Carolina, November 6, 1995 (hereafter cited as "Hoyman interview").

<sup>141</sup>Paul Swaity interview with Jim Cavanaugh, November 15, 1978, TWUA, SHSW (hereafter cited as "Swaity interview").

major cities where organized labor had a presence. “If we were able to win in Roanoke Rapids,” Paul Swaity said, “it was because the potential was good.”<sup>142</sup>

The difficult economic climate of the early 1970s was a factor. High inflation and unemployment levels could have hurt the union’s effort; workers in times of economic crisis are less likely to risk losing their jobs. With the closing of the Statesboro mill after the NLRB granted the union bargaining rights, the threat of Stevens shutting down if the union won must have seemed very real. Yet the decline in the profit-sharing program made the promise of a union contract that would ensure pensions very attractive, particularly to older workers. “I remember after [the election victory],” Gallaudet recalled, “I was at a union meeting in Charlotte and – I was just a little bit cynical – I said I want to thank J.P. Stevens for the profit-sharing program.”<sup>143</sup>

Ultimately, though, it was black workers’ leadership and interracial solidarity that carried the union to victory. Desegregation in the mills brought in pro-union black workers. Roanoke Rapids was in Halifax County, which had a strong NAACP chapter that championed voter registration drives and desegregation activism in the 1960s. When African American men and women entered the mills in the sixties and seventies, there was a good chance that they or someone they knew had political experience and education.<sup>144</sup> Within the mills, black workers desegregated bathrooms and break rooms, creating shared spaces where white and African American workers could talk. Linwood Ivey was one of the few African American men in the mills in the 1950s and 1960s. “In the earlier campaigns, you had separate bathrooms, you had

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<sup>142</sup>Brody interview. Swaity interview.

<sup>143</sup>Gallaudet interview.

<sup>144</sup>Goldsmith, “The Halifax County Black Caucus, “A Group to be Reckoned With.”

separate washrooms, and you couldn't discuss unionism on the job," he said. "During [the 1973-74 organizing drive] everybody was eating at the same cafeteria. That's one of the main reasons we came out victorious in 1974."<sup>145</sup> Black workers instigated the organizing drive by getting union cards signed and provided one-third of the pro-union votes. They encouraged pro-union white workers who suffered after previous organizing drives, like Maurine Hedgepeth, to believe this time could be different. "Without the black support," Hoyman concluded, "there would have been no possibility of us getting close."<sup>146</sup>

Women were a critical factor in getting the necessary support from white workers. "It's one thing for a white worker to show up at a meeting and sign a card," Gallaudet explained. "But unless you got a white worker on the gate, picketing and wearing the buttons, and trying to break down that fear, you weren't going to go anywhere. And that's where the women were just invaluable."<sup>147</sup> Sutton was important part of this, although she is certainly not the only woman who deserves credit. The women on the in-plant organizing committee were fearless in making their union support visible inside and beyond the mills. "You can't win with secret committees," Swaity said. "You gotta come out."<sup>148</sup> The women put their daughters in TWUA cheerleading uniforms and marched them in town parades alongside black workers and union organizers. They were unapologetic and assertive, especially Sutton. "Looking back," Gallaudet said, "it really was a working-class women's campaign."<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup>*Labor Unity*, January 1979.

<sup>146</sup>Hoyman interview.

<sup>147</sup>Gallaudet interview.

<sup>148</sup>Swaity interview.

<sup>149</sup>Gallaudet interview.

## CHAPTER TWO

### In Good Faith: Building a Workers' Rights Movement

On October 24, 1977, journalist Martha Shirk of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* posed the following question to her readers: “Who is J.P. Stevens and why are clergymen, professional football players, feminists and all organized labor urging everybody not to sleep with him?”<sup>150</sup> After 1976, the struggle to secure a contract in Roanoke Rapids and organize other southern mills grew into a nationwide boycott, corporate campaign, and public relations battle. The union leveraged pressure from consumers, citizens’ groups, and high-profile individuals to force Stevens to bargain in good faith. Roanoke Rapids continued to be “ground zero” for activists and organizers, in imagination if not in reality. “I don’t remember if I ever did go to Roanoke Rapids in the 1970s,” union organizer Joe Uehlein admitted, as he tried to recall, “but I sure heard a lot about it.”<sup>151</sup>

Labor, civil, and women’s rights intersected in the struggle with Stevens and motivated support from individuals and associations. By 1977, nearly one hundred national and local religious groups endorsed the boycott. Clergy and laity called for Stevens to bargain in good faith in Roanoke Rapids and “rearrange its priorities [to make] the needs of the worker a primary concern.” Civil rights and anti-poverty advocates within the South and across the country

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<sup>150</sup> ““Don’t Sleep With Stevens!”” Martha Shirk, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, October 24, 1977.

<sup>151</sup> Joe Uehlein interview with author, Takoma Park, Maryland, March 24, 2012 (hereafter cited as “Uehlein interview”).



supported the Stevens campaign, viewing it as the next step in keeping alive the 1960s vision of a more equitable and just society. Coretta Scott King, widow of Dr. Martin Luther King, announced that the outcome of the Stevens campaign “will determine whether millions of Southern workers, black and white, win their right [to] a fair and equitable share of the wealth that production creates.”<sup>152</sup> Women’s rights advocates and feminist groups threw their support behind the union’s campaign, pointing out that nearly half of Stevens employees were women. “The Stevens boycott so ties in with everything that the women’s movement is doing,” said NOW President Eleanor Smeal, “that it is part and parcel of it.”<sup>153</sup>

In the South, the Stevens campaign paralleled the work of two groups of activists: the Carolina Brown Lung Association and Southerners for Economic Justice. It is no accident that the South, a region with a notorious history of political exclusion, was the site of some of the most remarkable struggles for justice in U.S. history. The activists in these two groups drew from a rich legacy of oppositional movements against racial, gender, and economic injustice as they sought to build a movement for workers’ rights in the South in the 1970s.

As women and minority workers in the southern textile industry made bold claims for justice, their efforts generated broad public interest in the struggles of poor and unorganized workers. The support for the boycott and corporate campaign reveals the second half of the 1970s was a time of great possibility for political mobilization around economic justice. The Stevens campaign tapped into a groundswell of grassroots organizing in the South and

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<sup>152</sup>King quoted in Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 135. *Social Justice*, No. 7, May 1977. NC State AFL-CIO records, L1981-20, Box 2363, Folder1, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University (hereafter cited as “NC AFL-CIO, GSU”).

<sup>153</sup>*Social Justice*, No. 17, May 1978, Box 2363, Folder 1, NC AFL-CIO, GSU.

nationwide around issues of labor law reform, occupational health and safety, civil rights, and feminism.

In 1976, the TWUA and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA, or “the Amalgamated”) merged to create the Amalgamated Textile and Clothing Workers Union of America (ACTWU, pronounced “Act Two”). The merger was the culmination of several years of discussion between the two unions and made sense for many reasons. The two unions overlapped in their institutional histories, the workers they organized, and the companies they targeted. Both faced dwindling numbers as manufacturing jobs moved south or overseas throughout the twentieth century. Its pilot year, ACTWU counted about 500,000 members. The merger more than tripled the size of the textile union.<sup>154</sup> Marrying resources and staff helped each union strengthen its position in the increasingly globalized and consolidated manufacturing economy of the 1970s. Urging the consolidation of unions in 1974, TWUA president Sol Stetin told delegates at the union’s national convention, “The last two decades have been marked by the birth and growth of conglomerates [formed] when giant corporations merge and acquire companies in a variety of industries.” A plan must be devised, Stetin argued, to coordinate and combine the resources and efforts of international unions to meet this challenge.”<sup>155</sup>

Created in 1914 in Chicago when workers in plants that manufactured men’s and boy’s apparel broke away from the United Garment Workers, the Amalgamated was the older and larger of the two unions. It had 350,000 members in 1976, to the textile union’s 160,000. The Amalgamated brought to the merger experience with public relations and consumer-oriented

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<sup>154</sup>Minchin, *Don’t Sleep*, 88.

<sup>155</sup>Sara Douglas, *Labor’s New Voice: Unions and the Mass Media* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 200.

organizing tactics: it was one of the first trade unions to use a union label campaign in the postwar era to address the general public. At the 1948 convention, delegates agreed to appropriate a half-million dollars to encourage consumers to buy only union-made men's apparel. The Amalgamated leadership – with a female vice president in the early 1950s but otherwise dominated by men, like most trade unions at the time – showed an uncommon interest in the untapped power of women as consumers. Despite the fact that women made up eighty percent of the apparel industry work force, the union label advertisements portrayed women in domestic roles or sexualized situations. In one cartoon, for instance, two men read Alfred Kinsey's report on sexuality over a caption that says, "Ninety-nine point ten percent of women prefer men with Amalgamated Union Labels in their suits." Another advertisement pictured a woman scrutinizing her husband's suit, while the man proclaims that the only time he did not mind his wife's hands in his pocket was when she was checking for a union label. ACWA's sexism was hardly unusual in the mid-century labor movement, but its focus on consumer recognition as a way to combat the problem of runaway shops to the South was an important postwar organizing method that other unions subsequently copied.<sup>156</sup>

By the 1970s, the ACWA began to recognize the power of its female members and the stronger role they could play in consumer-oriented organizing. In March 1972, when twenty-six Latina workers in the Farah manufacturing plant in El Paso, Texas, walked off their jobs, igniting a string of walkouts by the mostly Latina workforce in southern Texas, the Amalgamated sent organizers to support the workers and within a month, launched a national boycott of Farah's pants. The public images of the strikers the union disseminated featured defiant women workers in militant postures. ACWA reached out to allies outside of the labor movement to endorse the

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<sup>156</sup>Haberland, *Striking Beauties*, 115-126, 126.

boycott and support the picketing women. The Catholic Church was a particularly strong supporter, and the union heavily promoted its religious backing. The strike and boycott ended in 1974, when Farah agreed to sign a union contract. Although some of the Farah strikers were less than satisfied with the terms, most celebrated the end of the boycott as a victory for the women garment workers who were the local leaders and public face of the Farah campaign.<sup>157</sup>

The Amalgamated's greater experience with campaigns that focused on product recognition and appeals to consumers reflects the difference in the industries that it and the Textile Union targeted. The textile industry was more the diverse of the two. It included fiber and yarn production, the creation and finishing of fabric, and the use of natural and synthetic fibers that were processed in different ways and blended at various stages of production. Textile production also included dyeing, laundering, and fabricating. Although some textile companies produced home furnishings, about eighty percent of textile plants did not make finished products that directly met consumers' hands. These factors made it difficult for the TWUA to target retailers and appeal to consumers to the extent that the ACWA had.<sup>158</sup>

ACTWU leaders set goals for the new organization that reflected the new concerns of organized labor in the 1970s. The new union sought to increase membership levels by organizing non-union mills and plants in the southeast and southwest, where "runaway" shops from the unionized northeast and Midwest had been relocating since the early twentieth century. The union also considered strategies for combatting high unemployment and the problem of

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<sup>157</sup>Haberland, *Striking Beauties*, 134-138. For information on the Farah Strike, see Emily Honig, "Women at Farah Revisited: Political Mobilization and Its Aftermath among Chicana Workers in El Paso, Texas, 1972-1992," *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 425-452.

<sup>158</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens*, 111. Douglas, *Labor's New Voice*, 216.

automation, which analysts warned could put as much as one-third of the textile and apparel labor force out of work in the 1980s.<sup>159</sup>

The most significant question facing the new union in 1976 was J.P. Stevens. Should the merged unions continue the struggle against the textile giant; if so, what could bring about victory? After thirteen years, the Textile Union leaders were loath to back down on Stevens, especially after finally achieving a notable victory and favorable publicity with Roanoke Rapids. TWUA president Sol Stetin negotiated during the merger talks to ensure the survival of the Stevens campaign. He agreed that the Amalgamated's president, Murray Finley, should assume ACTWU's presidency, which allowed Finley to keep his seat on the AFL-CIO executive board, in exchange for the promise that the new union would sustain the efforts against J.P. Stevens. Given that the Amalgamated had twice the membership of the Textile Union, it was likely that Finley would have won the presidency regardless of Stetin's capitulation. In other words, ACWA did not have to pledge to continue the Stevens campaign in order to ensure that its president would lead ACTWU. Finley could have decided to bury the struggling Stevens campaign with the old textile union and move forward as a new institution with fresh initiatives. Yet ACWTU made the struggle against Stevens its top priority and immediately sought to reorganize and revitalize the campaign. Finley authorized the hiring of thirty-one new staffers in the first six months, and nearly one-third of them worked solely on the Stevens campaign.<sup>160</sup>

ACTWU pledged more resources and funds to Stevens because the union's leadership believed they could not afford to lose the campaign. The stakes were too high. ACTWU's deputy general counsel Joel Ax argued that if the union abandoned the Stevens campaign, the message

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<sup>159</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep*, 87. Chip Hughes, "New Twist for Textiles," in *Working Lives*, Marc S. Miller, ed. (New York: Random House, 1980), 341.

<sup>160</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep*, 87-88.

that illegal anti-union tactics paid off would be clear to textile and apparel employers alike. Ax's concerns were echoed by NLRB judge Joel A. Harmatz, who predicted that if the union relented, "the exploits of J.P. Stevens would serve as an historic touchstone for those who would defy the law by subjecting employee organization to the type of endurance struggle experienced [by Stevens workers.]"<sup>161</sup>

Roanoke Rapids continued to stand as a powerful symbol of what was at stake in the Stevens campaign and as a reason for persistence. If the workers never won a contract, the town would symbolize defeat even more powerfully than it had inspired hope. Allies of the labor movement were equally concerned that a retreat would have ripple effects. Congressman Ted Weiss of New York told Stevens workers that "the fight that you are waging here in North Carolina and the rest of the South is not just your fight."<sup>162</sup> An article in the progressive magazine *Mother Jones* warned that "a showdown is going on [...]. What happens in Roanoke Rapids this year is likely to affect the entire Southern textile industry, and thus the very economy of the New South."<sup>163</sup>

Union officials in the New York City headquarters and on the ground in Roanoke Rapids agreed that winning a contract in Roanoke Rapids was critical to ACTWU's efforts to organize in the South. As long as operations continued there without a contract, the union's claims regarding the benefits of collective bargaining would ring hollow to mill workers. ACTWU's legal department continued litigation against Stevens's bad faith bargaining but worried that

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<sup>161</sup>Douglas, *Labor's Voice*, 209.

<sup>162</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 11.

<sup>163</sup>Robert Friedman, "The Cotton Mills Back Home," *Mother Jones*, April 1977, 3, in the National Alliance Against Racism & Political Repression Collection, the Schomburg Library, New York City, New York (hereafter cited as "Schomburg").

court rulings would not sway the textile giant. The charge of bad faith bargaining was the twenty-sixth case the union filed against Stevens since 1963. The company had been cited in several contempt cases for violating previous court decrees, leading the court to call Stevens the “most notorious recidivist” in the United States. Yet legal condemnations had not seemed to faze the company. One NLRB judge noted that J. P. Stevens “approached [contract] negotiations [in Roanoke Rapids] with all the tractability and open-mindedness of Sherman at the outskirts of Atlanta.” Tax codes even allowed Stevens to deduct the costs of legal fees and fines from NLRB cases as a business expense. By the end of 1976, the company had paid out nearly \$1.3 million in back pay and fines, but it would have cost more than \$8 million to raise its 40,000 employees’ wages by a modest ten cents an hour.<sup>164</sup>

Union leaders agreed that striking in Roanoke Rapids would be ineffective and potentially disastrous. J.P. Stevens was an enormous, diversified corporation. In 1976, it employed approximately 45,800 people in eighty-five manufacturing facilities in the United States, with additional factories in Mexico, Canada, Great Britain, France, and New Zealand. Stevens recorded net sales of \$1,421,386,000 in 1976, a twenty-seven percent increase over the previous year.<sup>165</sup> In short, J.P. Stevens was an international behemoth. Its assets, profitability, and far-flung production centers made it impervious to a strike of less than three thousand workers in Roanoke Rapids, and the union had no illusions that it could or should encourage strikes in other towns. Even if the union could marshal the militancy of hundreds of workers

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<sup>164</sup>Douglas, *Labor’s Voice*, 209. Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 11. The quotation from the NLRB judge also appears in Hodges, “J. P. Stevens and the Union,” 59. Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens*, 183.

<sup>165</sup>J.P. Stevens Annual Report, 1976, Box 31, Folder 2, 5619/007, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library (hereafter cited as “Kheel”).

beyond Roanoke Rapids, the images of picketing out-of-work women and men would confirm the anxieties of southern workers that standing for the union was a sure path to unemployment.

Bolstering Roanoke Rapids workers' commitment to and faith in the union was crucial, so ACTWU took measures to ensure that the rank and file continued to feel invested in their union. Southern regional director Paul Swaity cautioned that setting up traditional union structures – shop stewards and elected officers – might “destroy” the workers' involvement by making them feel that their leadership and direct action was no longer necessary. Instead, union officials in Roanoke Rapids shared leadership responsibilities with the members of the in-plant bargaining committee and continued to sign up more union members. ACTWU did not collect dues, but it did grant Roanoke Rapids a charter despite the lack of a contract “to give the workers a greater sense that they are union and should act as a union.”<sup>166</sup>

At the same time, the union had to make Stevens feel enough pressure to bargain in good faith, without calling for strikes. An internal report concluded that “a multi-phased broad campaign will be necessary [and] J.P. Stevens must be overwhelmed by the constantly growing forces marshalled against it and the multiple fronts on which it is being attacked.”<sup>167</sup> To achieve this goal, ACTWU developed a two-tiered strategy: a modified southern organizing strategy that shifted the focus away from holding elections to getting the union certified through the NLRB after collecting a majority of signed cards; and a corporate campaign and boycott that would direct public pressure against the company from within the business world and from consumers across the country. George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, immediately issued a statement pledging “complete, total, all-out support of the AFL-CIO” for the campaign and boycott and

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<sup>166</sup>Swaity to Stetin, September 1976, Box 39, Folder 8, 5619/017, Kheel.

<sup>167</sup>“Upgrading the Program to Organize J.P. Stevens,” Box 39, Folder 8, 5619/017, Kheel.



urged affiliated unions to form support committees.<sup>168</sup> The union titled the boycott “Don’t Sleep with Stevens,” a catchy slogan that played on Stevens’s advertisements of its linens and blankets, often featuring models lounging in bed. The company’s name, merely the plural form of a common male name, lent itself to sexual innuendo. “Don’t Sleep with Burlington” could never have delivered the titillating punch of “Don’t Sleep with Stevens.”

ACTWU hired Ray Rogers, a Massachusetts native in his early thirties, to lead the corporate campaign, which consisted of targeting the stockholders and the financial and insurance companies that supported the company’s operations. “These institutions had to be drawn heavily into the Stevens controversy,” he explained, “so that their own image, reputation, credibility and prosperity would be seriously jeopardized.” Rogers had spent the previous decade working in impoverished Appalachian communities as a VISTA volunteer. In 1974, he organized consumer boycotts on behalf of strikers at the Eastover Mining Company’s Brookside mine in Harlan County, Kentucky.<sup>169</sup> Eastover was a subsidiary of Duke Power, which was headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina. The United Mine Workers publicity director Bernie Aronson developed the plan to target Duke Power in North Carolina, organizing pickets in front of the headquarters, demonstrations in Durham, and encouraging boycotts of Duke’s stock. The direct action against Duke and negative publicity influenced Duke Power directors to push Eastover towards a settlement with the strikers. The consumer action and demonstrations in Charlotte also helped boost the strikers’ morale by publicizing the outside support for the miners. Rogers applied the same strategy to the Stevens campaign: extending the fight to Wall Street to pressure Stevens to bargain in good faith and abandon its relentless anti-union tactics, while

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<sup>168</sup>Meany to AFL-CIO executive counsel, June 16, 1976, Box 39, Folder 8, 5619/017, Kheel.

<sup>169</sup>Minchin, *Don’t Sleep With Stevens*, 111–112, 122–124. Hodges, “J. P. Stevens and the Union,” 59–61.

generating national publicity to turn public opinion against the company and bolster the morale in Roanoke Rapids.<sup>170</sup>

In tandem with the corporate campaign, ACTWU undertook a nationwide boycott of Stevens's products. The successful twenty-two month strike and boycott against the Farah Manufacturing Company inspired the new union's boycott plan, but ACTWU could not simply replicate the Farah strategy. One ACTWU staff member remarked that comparing Farah to Stevens was like comparing a firecracker to a stick of dynamite.<sup>171</sup> Farah was much smaller, with only five plants in Texas and New Mexico, and an easier target because it sold one brand of pants that consumers could easily remember. The Amalgamated's boycott directly impacted Farah's profits; the company suffered significant losses in the 1972 fiscal year.<sup>172</sup>

Stevens was an altogether different beast. There was the problem of product identification. Stevens sold about two-thirds of its products to other plants and factories as raw materials for finished goods. The products that Stevens sold directly to consumers were marketed under dozens of different brand names and distributed beyond the United States, in Europe and Asia. Stevens also generated profits through contracts with the Department of Defense that were unaffected by consumers' decisions at the cash register.<sup>173</sup> On one hand, the size and reach of the textile giant made it virtually impossible for the union to economically cripple the company, reducing the leverage the union could generate with the boycott. On the other hand, union leaders hoped that this liability meant that a boycott would not diminish Stevens's sales so as to allow the corporation to blame massive layoffs on the union, as Farah had done.

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<sup>170</sup>Tom Bethel and Bob Hall, "Contract at Brookside, 1974" in *Working Lives*, 264-265.

<sup>171</sup>Douglas, *Labor's Voice*, 215.

<sup>172</sup>Haberland, *Striking Beauties*, 137.

<sup>173</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep*, 45, 48, 98.

Despite the differences between the Farah and Stevens campaigns, Farah had taught the Amalgamated lessons that were valuable in the Stevens campaign. Howard Samuel, president of the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department, called most boycotts “time-wasters.” Reaching massive numbers of consumers was difficult and expensive. Even the purchasing decisions of sympathetic consumers were often influenced by factors not parallel with their politics, including quality, price, or simply forgetting about the boycott in the moment of the purchase. Samuel noted, however, that the Amalgamated was “one of the few unions who get it.” ACWA had volunteer individuals act as representatives of their community or constituency to retailers and urge the merchant not to sell Stevens products. These individuals’ requests carried more weight if they were politically significant, especially vocal and persistent, or had a connection to the store management or owners, such as religious affiliation.<sup>174</sup>

ACTWU boycott coordinator Del Mileski had learned much about consumer-oriented union organizing working on the Farah boycott under Emileo Molleda, a member of the United Auto Workers who served as the Farah boycott coordinator and head of the Justice for Farah Strikers Committee in the Dallas area. Copying Molleda’s approach, Mileski selected boycott staffers, called “liaisons,” based on their ability to reach specific constituencies. There were liaisons for women, Catholics, Protestants, college students, and for more than twenty cities throughout the United States. The women’s liaison, Jeannine Maynard, played an especially important role, as women typically purchased the home furnishings that Stevens produced and sold directly to consumer markets. Mileski recognized the liaisons’ particular abilities to connect with their constituencies and allowed them a great deal of autonomy. “These specialists would come in and tell me what they thought should be done and I relied on their judgments,” Mileski

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<sup>174</sup>Douglas, *Labor’s Voice*, 222.

explained. “My role was like that of traffic policeman - directing and coordinating. And it was amazing the way it worked.”<sup>175</sup>

The boycott strategy carried significant risks for the union. There were legal consequences if the NLRB considered the boycott a violation of labor laws, which prohibit unions from engaging in secondary boycotts. Pressure on retailers and merchants not to sell Stevens’s merchandise had to come from citizens and non-union groups.<sup>176</sup> The architects of the new Stevens campaign also feared that the company would try to turn workers and the public against the union by painting the boycott as an underhanded way to force unionization on all mill workers. For all these reasons, the union needed a comprehensive media strategy to maintain control of the boycott’s message and combat negative publicity. ACTWU director of public relations Burt Beck circulated a memo to union leadership in June 1976 warning that it was “VERY, VERY IMPORTANT that we warn all those who might have any dealings with the media” to be cooperative, but refrain from any “chatter” that deviated from the union’s stated purpose of the boycott: “to convince the company to deal with its workers in a fair manner [and] stop poisoning the atmosphere so that workers could make their own decisions free of company pressure.” Mileski and Beck hoped that as nationwide support for the Stevens workers pressured the company to yield, it would show southern workers that people across the country were on the union side. This would have the double impact, they hoped, of bolstering the confidence of pro-union workers and influencing workers who were not *anti*-union but were afraid to publicly support unionism.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup>Douglas, *Labor’s Voice*, 217.

<sup>176</sup>Haberland, *Striking Beauties*, 59.

<sup>177</sup> Beck memo, June 14, 1976, Box 39, Folder 8, 5619/017, Kheel.

In the South, ACTWU shifted its organizing strategy. Rather than call for NLRB elections after collecting a majority of signed union cards, ACTWU sought to strengthen its informal presence in southern mill towns. The union reasoned that because of Stevens's labor law violations, fair and free elections were impossible and likely to result in the union leveling more NLRB charges at the company, siphoning more energy and resources from the union's legal department. Paul Swaity advocated for a comprehensive Community Services Program, with full-time, paid staffers installed in localities throughout the Piedmont. These staffers would connect the union with local community groups, sponsor recreational activities, and help workers navigate government services. Swaity insisted that the effort would combat negative images of the union and cement pro-union workers' loyalties by providing "tangible evidence of how a union can serve the needs of workers and the community even prior to achieving bargaining rights."<sup>178</sup>

To engage in the kind of community-based organizing that Swaity advocated, ACTWU needed allies in southern localities to help the union mobilize workers on the grassroots level and develop useful connections with local institutions. And to achieve success with the nationwide boycott and corporate campaign, it had to convince the public that what was at stake was not simply an argument between a union and a company over labor laws. Supporters must feel that the Stevens campaign was their fight, too. The union needed endorsements from high-profile individuals and organizations with influence over diverse constituencies, as well as sympathetic media coverage. Its two-tiered approach required networks of support for the consumer boycott across the country, a regional coalition of pro-labor groups and individuals in the South, and

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<sup>178</sup>Swaity proposal to General Officers, May 9, 1977, Box 28, Folder 1, 5619/007.

local leaders and spokespeople from the mills it sought to organize. In sum, the union needed to build a movement.

In the 1970s, the Carolina Brown Lung Association was determined to build a workers' rights movement around uncompensated occupational disease and employee vulnerability in the southern textile industry. "Brown lung" is the common name for the respiratory illness byssinosis. It is caused by exposure to dusts from processing cotton, hemp, and flax. Workers inhale the fine particulates and the tiny airways of the lung become blocked, making it difficult for oxygen to get into the blood stream. Symptoms include tightness in the chest, coughing, wheezing, and shortness of breath. Workers sometimes referred to their breathing problems as "Monday morning sickness" because the asthma-like symptoms usually went away after a long stretch of consistent workdays, but returned on the first day back after an absence. After working in cotton dust for years, a worker's symptoms cease to abate after periods of non-exposure. In the final stages of byssinosis, the weakness, pain, and diminished lung capacity from the irreversible lung damage resemble the effects of emphysema, and can cause cardiovascular and circulatory complications resulting in amputations, heart attack, and stroke.<sup>179</sup> "The best way I can describe is," Eva Bradshaw said, after forty-one years in Burlington Mills, "I feel like an accordion that has been played for about forty-one years and I am closed and locked completely."<sup>180</sup>

Dust levels were highest in the early stages of processing cotton; workers in carding, spinning, and weaving were most likely to be afflicted and suffer the worst symptoms. Women

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<sup>179</sup>On byssinosis, see Robert Botsch, *Organizing the Breathless: Cotton Dust, Southern Politics, and the Brown Lung Association* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), Charles Levenstein, Gregory F. DeLauier, and Mary Lee Dunn, *The Cotton Dust Papers: Science, Politics, and Power in the "Discovery" of Byssinosis in the U.S.* (Amityville, New York: Baywood Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), Bennett M. Judkins, *We Offer Ourselves as Evidence: Toward Workers' Control of Occupational Health* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

<sup>180</sup>*Song of the Canary*, VHS, produced by the Carolina Brown Lung Association, 1979, accessed in the Carolina Brown Lung Association's records, 04463, Subseries 4.3, Southern Historical Collection (hereafter cited as "CBLA").

traditionally tended the machines during spinning and weaving, where cotton dust levels were high. Even as breathing troubles worsened for a woman worker, she was more inclined to stay on the job than a male worker because women had fewer opportunities than men to advance in the mills or obtain decent-waged blue collar work outside the mills. African American workers prior to the 1960s rarely held jobs in the mills beyond janitorial work, but if they did, they were closest to “the raw,” often consigned to the heaviest, dirtiest work of feeding cotton bales into hoppers or moving materials through the parts of the mill where cotton was carded, spun, and wove. Although the vast majority of brown lung diagnoses were of retired white workers, a disproportionately large number of retired black workers also suffered. Vulnerability to byssinosis was something that elderly white women and black men had in common.<sup>181</sup>

Nineteenth-century mill records suggest that workers commonly suffered from respiratory problems that may have been byssinosis, but cases of brown lung in New England factories were masked by diseases like tuberculosis and whooping cough. With the shift in textile manufacturing from the northeast to the Piedmont South in the early twentieth century, mill workers with respiratory afflictions became a southern problem. As early as 1940, industry publications and public health reports warned of the hazardous conditions inside the dust-clogged mills. In North Carolina in 1940, M.F. Trice, an industrial hygienist with the Department of Health, reviewed the literature on cotton mill illnesses and argued in an article in the trade journal *Textile World* that “dust control measures are essential.”<sup>182</sup> In 1941, Great Britain began paying workers’ compensation to textile workers diagnosed with byssinosis. Yet well into the 1970s, textile industrialists in the United States rejected the idea that mill owners were

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<sup>181</sup>Botsch, *Organizing the Breathless*, 27.

<sup>182</sup>Levenstein et al, *Cotton Dust Papers*, 42.

responsible for workers' breathing problems. One editorial in the industry magazine *Textile Reporter* suggested that doctors manipulated or misinterpreted breathing ailments as evidence of byssinosis. "We are particularly intrigued by the term 'Byssinosis,'" the editorialist wrote in 1969, "a thing thought up by venal doctors who attended [...] meetings in Africa where inferior races are bound to be afflicted by new diseases [that] more superior people defeated years ago." Many mill owners refused to allow medical researchers into their plants.<sup>183</sup>

However, 1970 marked a turning point for workers in America. Under pressure from organized labor and with on-the-job injury rates escalating, Congress passed the Williams-Steiger Occupational Safety and Health Act, which created a new administration within the U.S. Department of Labor (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA) responsible for inspecting workplaces and imposing fines on companies for breaches in worker safety policies. In December 1970, President Nixon signed the act, declaring that it was "probably one of the most important pieces of legislation, from the standpoint of the fifty-five million people who will be covered by it."<sup>184</sup> The act not only created a new federal agency with authority to intervene in business operations, but also gave workers the right to request unannounced inspections and demand investigations of potentially harmful substances. OSHA established the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) as the research arm of the new administration. Southern workers' rights activists heralded OSHA as "dynamite for workers." Many companies had avoided safety and health issues when bargaining with unions, claiming those were areas of "management prerogative only," or established safety committees through

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<sup>183</sup>Quotation from "Stevens' Briefing," *Fair Measure* 1, no. 2 (September 1978), 3. See also, Ralph Nader, "Brown Lung: The Cotton-Mill Killer," *The Nation*, March 15, 1971, 335-336.

<sup>184</sup>Nixon quoted in Cowie, *Staying Alive*, 139.



which unions could only make suggestions. OSHA gave workers specific rights to inquire, complain, request federal intervention, and demand that employers take responsibility for work-related injuries and illnesses.<sup>185</sup>

Textile industrialists carried great influence with the Nixon Administration, however, and the OSHA's potential for cotton mills was defused when the new workers' rights agency refused to pass cotton dust standards. George Guenther, Assistant Secretary of Labor and a former textile executive, circulated an internal memo stating that "no highly controversial standards (i.e., cotton dust, etc.) will be proposed by OSHA or by NIOSH," and he followed through on his promise. It took seven years of grassroots organizing and citizens' lobbying for OSHA to implement cotton dust standards. In those years, many mill workers died from byssinosis, or as Bea Norton, a retired mill worker in Spartanburg put it, they "died of injustice."<sup>186</sup>

The problem of byssinosis was brought to national public attention by a 1971 article in the *Nation* by consumer and environmental protection advocate Ralph Nader. The article revealed the findings of the previous decade of research on brown lung in the United States. Dr. Arend Bouhuys, professor of epidemiology at Yale University Medical School, reported that his research since 1964 revealed that at least seventeen thousand workers suffered from various stages of byssinosis. Research by the North Carolina Board of Health found that twelve percent of workers had brown lung; the number jumped to nearly thirty percent of workers in the cardroom. Nader pointed out that because these were studies of active, not retired workers, the statistics only hinted at the number of those afflicted. Employees were reluctant to admit to symptoms of brown lung, moreover, for fear of being discharged. Since byssinosis was not

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<sup>185</sup>Chip Hughes and Len Stanley, "OSHA: Dynamite for Workers," in *Working Lives*, 326.

<sup>186</sup>"Stevens's Briefing," *Fair Measure*, Volume 1, no. 2 (September 1978), 3. *Song of the Canary*.

classified as a work-related disease under any state's worker compensation laws, mill workers had no hope of receiving workers' compensation for their affliction. The article also brought to light the efforts of both the Nixon administration and textile industrialists to stymie brown lung research and keep cotton dust unregulated. Nader's public appearances helped to educate workers on byssinosis and popularize the term 'brown lung.' In Roanoke Rapids, retired mill worker Lucy Taylor (who became the president of the Roanoke Rapids chapter of the Brown Lung Association in 1976), saw Ralph Nader on television describing the symptoms of byssinosis. "That's what I have," Taylor thought to herself. It was the first time she heard someone name the breathing problems she experienced. The silence around byssinosis was something occupational health activists wanted to change.<sup>187</sup>

Textile unionists were not surprised that Lucy Taylor had never heard of byssinosis. The TWUA had published an article about byssinosis in the January 1946 issue of *Textile Labor*, and made several attempts in the late 1940s to influence state health boards to mandate safer and cleaner conditions in the mills. But this bore little fruit and the low levels of unionization in the Piedmont inhibited efforts to educate workers on byssinosis. After the passage of OSHA, the TWUA showed renewed interest in the problem of brown lung and reached out to Si Kahn, a community organizer and folksinger/songwriter, to investigate the potential of the issue as an organizing tool. Si Kahn was a VISTA volunteer in Appalachia in the 1960s who was a well-known figure in activist circles. He published *How People Get Power* in 1970, a primer that advocated for grassroots community organizing. With his wife Kathy, he operated the Cut Cane Association, named after the creek that cut through the front yard of their home in northern Georgia. In 1971, the TWUA offered the Cut Cane Association \$500 to conduct interviews on

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<sup>187</sup>Nader, "Brown Lung: The Cotton-Mill Killer." Taylor quoted in Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 78.

brown lung with textile workers. Si Kahn interviewed workers in four mill towns in the Piedmont in 1972, but then put byssinosis “on the back burner” to focus on Black Lung organizing in the mining towns of Appalachia.<sup>188</sup>

As it turned out, it was in the coalfields and towns of eastern Kentucky and Tennessee that idea for an organization focused on mobilizing textile workers around brown lung was conceived. In Appalachia, Kahn joined a group of young people working with the Brookside miners’ strike in Harlan County and the Black Lung Movement: Charlotte Brody, a registered nurse who had worked with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee; Frank Blechman, a VISTA volunteer; Thad Moore, an organizer with the North Carolina Public Interest Research Group (PIRG, a student group inspired by Nader’s consumer and environmental protection activism); and Michael Szpak who led efforts to pressure Duke Power, the owner of the Brookside mine, through consumers and stockholders. This group of activists connected with staffers from the Institute for Southern Studies (ISS), a center for research and publications on issues of economic and social justice in the South, and writers for ISS’s journal *Southern Exposure*: Bob Hall, Bill Finger, Eleanor “Len” Stanley, and Joseph “Chip” Hughes.<sup>189</sup>

In the summer of 1974, three major events pushed the group of black lung and miners’ rights activists to turn their attention to the southern textile industry and brown lung. The Highlander Center, a longstanding training school and activist hub for social and economic justice activists, sponsored a conference in July on occupational health for members of the Black Lung Association, public health activists, workers’ rights advocates, and attorneys. Blechman, Brody, Kahn, Moore, Stanley, and Hughes attended and would become founders of Carolina

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<sup>188</sup>Botsch, *Organizing the Breathless*, 55-56. Szpak interview.

<sup>189</sup>Brody interview. Szpak interview. Chip Hughes interview with author, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, December 20, 2011 (hereafter cited as “Hughes interview”). Botsch, *Organizing the Breathless*, 56-59.

Brown Lung Association chapters throughout the Piedmont in the 1970s. Bruce Raynor, a young staffer with the TWUA, was also present at the Highlander meeting. Raynor came of age at the height of the social movements of the 1960s. He believed that organized labor had the capacity to effect social change on and beyond the shop floor, especially for minority workers. He began working for the textile union in 1973 on the organizing drive in the Oneita Knitting Mills in Andrews, South Carolina. The leadership of black women workers was critical to the contract victory in July 1973, and Raynor never forgot the lessons he learned in Andrews. He spent most of his early career organizing for ACTWU in the South.<sup>190</sup> After the Highlander meeting, Raynor wrote to TWUA president Sol Stetin, encouraging him to consider ways that the union might “harness the efforts of many of these [brown lung] people to our efforts in the South in the future,” adding that union organizers in the South “certainly need any help we can get from sympathetic Southerners if we are to organize the South.”<sup>191</sup> Then, on August 24 in Harlan County, a mine supervisor shot and killed a young striker, and five days later, the company offered a contract to the workers, ending the strike. As the Harlan County conflict reached an end, news spread about the TWUA’s election victory on August 23 in Roanoke Rapids. With the Harlan County strike over and Roanoke Rapids signaling new possibilities for organizing textile workers, the textile industry seemed the logical place for these organizers to focus their efforts.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup>Botsch, *Organizing the Breathless*, 59-60. Carolyn Ashbaugh and Dan McCurry, “On the Line at Oneita,” in *Working Lives*, 205-207. Bruce Raynor interview with Timothy Minchin, Greensboro, North Carolina, July 28, 1995 (hereafter cited as “Raynor interview”).

<sup>191</sup>Botsch, *Organizing the Breathless*, 60.

<sup>192</sup>Judkins, “The Brown Lung Association and Grassroots Organizing,” in *Hanging by a Thread*, 127-128. Botsch, *Organizing the Breathless*, 59.

The Black Lung Association served as a model for organizing around brown lung, but there were significant differences that made it impossible to replicate the black lung success in the textile industry. First, miners in Appalachia were organized, with a long history of collective action, local leadership developed through the union struggles, and union structures for institutional support. Second, working miners not afflicted with black lung were active in the black lung movement. To some degree, their union membership protected them from reprisals for their activism to improve conditions in the mines. Active textile workers concerned about byssinosis did not have that kind of protection if they advocated for changes in the mills to protect them from cotton dust. Third, the black lung movement had many doctors willing to “stump the coal fields” and help publicize the effects of coal dust. The few physicians and public health officials who researched and reported on brown lung were outliers in their fields, and there were “virtually no doctors [in southern mill towns] who would openly speak about the dangers of cotton dust or diagnose byssinosis.”<sup>193</sup>

Still, the time that brown lung activists spent in Appalachia greatly influenced their organizing style and political philosophy. One such way was the use of music in movement building and as an organizing tool. Appalachian folk music formed the basis for songs about miners’ struggles that encouraged solidarity and militancy; Florence Reese’s “Which Side Are You On?” is perhaps the most famous example of Appalachian oppositional folk music. Music was a focus for many Highlander Center civil and labor rights organizers, such as Guy Carawan, the famed activist and musician credited with popularizing “We Shall Overcome” as a civil rights anthem. In 1975, Si Kahn and Charlotte Brody recruited a half dozen musicians and activists (including Carawan) to work with them on an album, *Brown Lung Cotton Mill Blues*.

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<sup>193</sup>Spzak interview. “Carolina Brown Lung Association, Proposal,” Box 1, Folder 3. CBLA.

The album blended traditional cotton mill songs that “reflect[ed] a growing anger that exploded in the massive strikes of the 20s and 30s” with new songs written by Kahn and Brody. They recorded at the June Appal studio in Whitesburg, Kentucky (now, Appalshop). The album sold for five dollars, with the proceeds benefiting the new brown lung association movement.<sup>194</sup>

In September 1974, Michael Szpak received a seed grant from the Youth Project, Inc., a funding organization for liberal and progressive causes, and began investigating areas in South Carolina to start organizing around brown lung. Scott Hoyman, then southern regional director for TWUA, let Szpak use his Charlotte office to print materials and make phone calls. Szpak spoke with George Perkel, the TWUA research director at the time, who advised him to investigate Greenville, “the textile capital of the world,” as a possible headquarters for a new brown lung organization. For two months, Szpak met with workers, doctors, lawyers, clergy, and union organizers in Greenville, but encountered “a good deal of resistance” and these initial efforts petered out.<sup>195</sup>

Szpak turned his attention to Columbia, where the TWUA had two active locals and Dr. Arendt Bouhouys, the leading brown lung advocate in the medical field, had already conducted brown lung screenings on retired and active members of TWUA Local 254 at the Pacific Mills. In December, Szpak secured \$10,000 from the United Church of Christ’s Board for Homeland Ministries and \$10,000 from the AFL-CIO’s Industrial Union Department. He had more success in reaching workers and identifying byssinosis victims in Columbia because of the union locals. In 1975, Szpak and Frank Blechman were running screening clinics in Columbia and Spartanburg, South Carolina. Other activists from the Appalachian network were recruited to

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<sup>194</sup>Sally Maggard, “Music for the Mill Hand,” *Mountain Life and Work*, April 1975, 9.

<sup>195</sup>Szpak interview. “1976 Youth Report,” Box 1, Folder 3, CBLA.

make forays in North Carolina: Thad Moore in Greensboro; Chip Hughes and Len Stanley in Erwin; and Charlotte Brody in Roanoke Rapids. Brody and Si Kahn were in a relationship, and Kahn was already in Roanoke Rapids, working for the union. In 1976, the group received funding from the Southern Institute for Occupational Health and established the Carolina Brown Lung Association (BLA).<sup>196</sup>

The Brown Lung Association had three goals: help disabled workers file and receive workers' compensation, pressure mill owners to invest in new technology to improve the conditions in the mills, and lobby at the state and federal level for stronger protections for workers, especially raising the standard for cotton dust in the mills. Underlying these three goals was the broader objective to force employers to accept responsibility for their workers' health and safety and to counter the political power of textile manufacturers. BLA organizers targeted retired and disabled workers. This was a logical approach since workers' compensation was the immediate goal. Brown lung activists also felt that retired and disabled workers would be more willing to engage in public activism, as they were not vulnerable to pressure from employers or the threat of losing their jobs.<sup>197</sup>

BLA activists adopted a community-based organizing style. They utilized the networks and resources within the community and encouraged the members' leadership in the association. Chapter officers had to be members; the BLA activists were there to support, not direct. They tried to close the distance between themselves and the people they were mobilizing. They rented houses (rather than living in a motel), went to the town's social events, and spent time getting to

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid. Brody interview. Hughes interview. The Southern Institute for Occupational Health was a new organization formed by Szpak and Blechman in 1975 as a sponsoring agency for activism in the South around occupational health and safety, with a great deal of its focus on brown lung.

<sup>197</sup>Judkins, *We Offer Ourselves as Evidence*, 5. Szpak interview. Brody interview. Conway, "Cotton Dust Kills, and it's killing me," in *Working Lives*, 311.

know BLA members and their families. Brody held movie nights for Roanoke Rapids members, showing labor documentaries like *Union Maids*. Chip Hughes and Len Stanley married while organizing in Erwin, and BLA members attended the wedding. Szpak joined a Pentecostal church and was re-baptized. In Spartanburg, South Carolina, he was able to convince a Free Will Baptist church to lend its bus to Stevens workers protesting in Columbia. Organizing meetings were held in churches, if possible. In Roanoke Rapids, Lucy Taylor asked her minister if the church would loan her folding chairs for the brown lung meetings. He declined, but Taylor's friend, Maggie Myrick, offered the studios at her dance school.<sup>198</sup>

The union was interested in capitalizing on the Brown Lung Association's efforts to organize retired and disabled mill workers. Harold McIver wrote to the Greensboro chapter of the Brown Lung Association, requesting that a representative from the organization attend meetings in the spring of 1976 with union leaders and staffers from the Institute for Southern Studies. "We are attempting to develop an organizing program in which we can call on various interested groups for assistance in organizing J.P. Stevens."<sup>199</sup>

The activists of the Carolina Brown Lung Association saw themselves as part of a broad movement to make southern workplaces, societies, and governments more democratic. Their organizing efforts ran parallel to and often intersected with the union's campaign against Stevens. Many of the BLA members considered unionization a legitimate and effective tool for active workers to pressure employers to improve conditions in the mills. In Spartanburg, Bea Norton wanted active workers to organize the Mayfair mill to "make [the owners] put in some kind of machinery that would suck that cotton dust out." In Roanoke Rapids, Lucy Taylor, Louis

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<sup>198</sup>Hughes interview. Brody interview. Szpak interview. Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 78.

<sup>199</sup>Harold McIver to Dee Steele, May 1976, Box 12, Folder 4, 5619/038, Kheel.



Harrell, and Otis Edwards were vocal supporters of the Stevens campaign. Harrell admonished his daughter Sarah, who worked in the Patterson mill, for not supporting the union. “The onliest way we can argue with Stevens is through the union,” he said. The connection between the Stevens campaign and the Brown Lung Association was especially strong in Roanoke Rapids because of the union’s presence in the town and Brody and Kahn’s relationship. The couple literally and figuratively bridged the two organizations. Movement-building happened at their kitchen table, where Brody created both ACTWU and BLA newsletters.<sup>200</sup>

In the spring of 1976, BLA activist Chip Hughes met with Bob Arnold, Susan Angell, Bill Finger, and Bob Hall of the Institute for Southern Studies proposed forming a new group, called the Carolina Citizens Committee for Economic Justice, to support the new union’s efforts to win a contract in Roanoke Rapids and organize workers in other towns. The ISS staffers argued that without a broad, mobilized base of support in the Carolinas, the union’s two-tiered approach to the Stevens campaign would fail. The union’s southern organizing efforts would be strengthened by a regional “network of ministers, women’s groups, civil liberty advocates, [and] political spokespersons” who could offer “support mechanisms [to] neutralize intimidation.”<sup>201</sup>

The ISS proposal for a new citizens’ committee presented a set of principles that reflected the authors’ organizing philosophy and goals for the South. “We cannot overemphasize the point that organized Stevens workers at Roanoke Rapids, Statesboro, [and] plants where elections have not yet been won,” the authors stated, “have to be the heart of a massive campaign against

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<sup>200</sup>*Song of the Canary*. Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 23-24.

<sup>201</sup>“Carolina Citizens for Economic Justice,” May 10, 1976, and “Carolina Committee Proposal,” Box 39, Folder 8, 5619/017, Kheel.

Stevens.” The southern working class, they believed, was capable of remarkable resistance and militancy. The union and its allies had to mobilize that power.<sup>202</sup>

The proposal also urged the union to bring supporters into the Stevens campaign as equal participants in the planning and execution stages. Bill Finger, as the first executive director of the new citizens group, used this approach in his work with religious groups, hosting workshops in which supporters were educated on the Stevens campaign and invited to imagine ways that their constituencies could best be mobilized in the boycott, corporate campaign, and organizing drives. Finger was raised in Jackson, Mississippi, with “family roots deep in southern religion.” In his early thirties at the time of the Stevens campaign, he had studied ethics at Boston University’s School of Theology, joined the Peace Corps, worked for the North Carolina State AFL-CIO, and served as the labor editor for the liberal magazine, *Southern Exposure*.<sup>203</sup>

The citizens group that emerged from these talks in 1976 was named Southerners for Economic Justice (SEJ). The structure and goals of the new organization were similar to those proposed by ISS, although the name change suggests that the SEJ founders were already imagining an organization that would reach beyond the Carolinas. The new group would focus on the Stevens campaign while working toward the larger goal of building a lasting coalition to address economic inequality and political disenfranchisement in the South. High-profile figures from the 1960s black freedom struggle served on the first board of directors, including Georgia senator Julian Bond (who also served on the ISS board), freedom rider John Lewis, Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson (who had visited Roanoke Rapids in 1974 to support the organizing drive), and Rev. W. W. Finlator of the Pullen Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. The

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<sup>202</sup>Ibid.

<sup>203</sup>“Staff biographies, SEJ,” July 1977, Box 2422, Folder 4, NC AFL-CIO, GSU.

board also included leaders whose activism reached back into the 1940s and 1950s: Alabama civil rights activist Virginia Durr and NAACP southern director Ruby Hurley. While naming Stevens as its top priority, SEJ sought to promote grassroots mobilization among a variety of constituencies in the South, with the understanding that legal gains in racial and gender equality would be meaningless without significant advancements in economic equality. To maximize its reach and influence in the South, SEJ emphasized its background in the civil rights movement, regional roots, and autonomy as an organization outside the formal labor movement.<sup>204</sup>

In 1977, Atlanta mayor and SEJ board member Maynard H. Jackson sent a message to Stevens about the power behind the Stevens campaign. He issued an executive order that the city would not contract with Stevens until it complied with labor laws, and called for a city-wide boycott of Stevens products and also of businesses with contracts with Stevens. It was not “in the best economic business and social interests of the City of Atlanta and its citizens,” Jackson announced, “to support financially organizations which deny fundamental human and employment rights to employees and applicants for employment, nor to contract with organizations which support such illegal, discriminatory activities.” Stevens reacted swiftly. Three days after Jackson issued the order the company petitioned for a temporary restraining order and then filed a lawsuit against Jackson, alleging that the mayor violated Stevens’s constitutional rights under the Civil Rights Act.<sup>205</sup> Given that Stevens was a defendant in two major class-action lawsuits for violations of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the company’s use of the law was ironic, even audacious. Jackson responded by first suspending implementation of

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<sup>204</sup> “ACTWU Press Release,” December 1978, Box 25, Folder “IUD information,” TWUA records, WHS, 396; Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens*, 94; “Hearings Before the Committee on Education and Labor (Sub-committee on Labor-Management Relations), H.R. 8410, Labor Reform Act of 1977,” August 9, 1977, Box 16, Folder “Misc. Legal Cases,” TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>205</sup> *J.P. Stevens & Co. V. Jackson*, 99 L.R.R.M 2827 (N.D. Ga. 1978).

the order and two days later, withdrawing it completely. Stevens's attorneys then amended its suit. First, the plaintiff requested punitive damages from the mayor. Stevens alleged that Jackson was politically motivated knowingly to spread false statements about the company which damaged its business reputation. Second, the company brought ACTWU into the lawsuit under conspiracy charges, arguing that the union financially supported Southerners for Economic Justice's boycott efforts and had counseled Jackson in writing the executive order. These factors, Stevens maintained, proved that ACTWU conspired to deprive the company of its constitutional rights.<sup>206</sup>

In 1978, Judge Richard J. Freeman of the United States District Court for the Northern District of Georgia issued his rulings. He dismissed the suit, declaring that Jackson had the right to deny contracts on the basis that the mayor had "reasonable justifications" for issuing the order, such as a company's record of discrimination and law-breaking. Freeman rejected Stevens's equal protection argument, stating that the order's specialized treatment of Stevens did not constitute a violation of rights because it was "rationally based and economically justified." He further noted that the plaintiff had no "entitlement" to city contracts and unlike employment, public contracting was not protected under due process. The judge also rejected the conspiracy charges, ruling that the union was protected by the First Amendment and existing labor laws in its appeals to government officials to endorse the boycott. Southerners for Economic Justice publicized the ruling widely, noting that it confirmed the legality of the consumer boycott."<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup>Boston College Law Review, Vol 21 Issue 1 no 1 Article 2; 162:174 *1978-1979 Annual Survey of Labor Relations and Employment Discrimination Law*, 21 B.C.L. Rev. 85 (1979), <http://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/bclr/vol21/iss1/2>.

<sup>207</sup>"Stevens's Briefing," *Fair Measure* 1, no. 2, September 1978, 3.

The leaders of Southerners for Economic Justice identified six purposes that the organization could serve in the J.P. Stevens campaign, which can be grouped under two general goals. First, SEJ wanted to influence public perception of the Stevens campaign in the South and nationwide: what was a stake, who would be affected, and who supported it. To this end, activists would work to “minimize the potential for the Stevens campaign to be viewed as a contest between ‘big labor’ and ‘big business,’” and promote an image of J.P. Stevens as an irresponsible company run by unethical men whose business practices threatened the American economy. SEJ hoped to “raise serious questions to company insiders and to the larger public about the company’s credibility” and to “isolate Stevens (as a company and as individual personnel) from the rest of ‘normal’ society.” Second, SEJ aimed to personalize the boycott and the corporate campaign. It would create structures for “people-to-people communication” between Stevens’s workers, stockholders, and boycott supporters, and act as “the vehicle through which influential citizens can participate in supportive actions [and] persuade their peer group to see/accept the justice of their demands.”<sup>208</sup>

SEJ publicized the Stevens campaign and boycott endorsements through organizing literature, demonstrations and rallies, and television and magazine advertisements. In January 1978, for instance, the organization paid for a television commercial featuring football stars Tom Banks and Ken Reeves of the St. Louis Cardinals which aired six times a day for three days before the Super Bowl on stations in Greenville, Laurinburg, Laurens, Rockingham, Hickory, and Lincolnton. The commercial linked the union to the popular American pastime and reminded watchers that the athletes they admired were members of players associations that bargained

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<sup>208</sup>Southerners for Economic Justice, “Working paper on the J.P. Stevens Campaign,” December 1976, Box 1799, Folder 130, AFL-CIO Civil Rights Department, Southeast Office, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University (hereafter cited as “AFL-CIO Civil Rights, GSU”).

collectively on behalf of professional athletes. SEJ also secured an endorsement from Charlie Scott of the Boston Celtics. Scott was the first black scholarship athlete at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and led the Tar Heels to two consecutive NCAA Final Four appearances in 1968 and 1969.<sup>209</sup>

Southerners for Economic Justice helped the union secure boycott endorsements against Stevens's products and the stores that sold them from faith-based organizations in the South. Religious leaders and church groups were particularly important to southern organizing efforts. In mill towns, churches provided space for gatherings, were often the center of community life, and lent moral credibility to the activities on their grounds.<sup>210</sup> Aware that organized religion in the South was often a strong force working against unionization, SEJ sought to organize through sympathetic churches to "demonstrate with maximum visibility the broad range of citizens and southern leaders that support the J.P. Stevens workers."<sup>211</sup>

The organization reported that in 1977 it held more than sixty workshops with ministers, local leaders, and teachers in almost thirty towns and cities and five universities in Tennessee, Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. In November 1978, SEJ sponsored a conference, "The Church's Responsibility in the Changing Southern Economy; Case Study: The Church and J. P. Stevens," at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. Seventy clergy and laity from Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, DC, and the Carolinas participated, representing seven different Christian denominations. In the Piedmont and Mountain South, the North Carolina

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<sup>209</sup>"Letter to Harold McIver from Bill Finger, with ad script enclosed," December 22, 1977, Box 12, Folder "Southerners For Economic Justice," TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>210</sup>Len Stanley from field notes of interview with Betty Bailey, Len Stanley and Thad Moore by Alicia J. Rouverol January 6, 1995, G-0222, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, #4007.

<sup>211</sup>"Southerners for Economic Justice, Working Paper on J. P. Stevens Campaign," December 1976, Box 1799, Folder 130, AFL-CIO Civil Rights, GSU.

Council of Churches and the Commission on Religion in Appalachia worked with SEJ activists to educate southerners through their churches about the Stevens campaign. In the summer of 1979, SEJ secured a \$5,000 donation for the Stevens campaign from the World Council of Churches and organized an economic justice ministry with Sister Mary Priniski in Rock Hill, South Carolina.<sup>212</sup> The mill workers struggle with Stevens took on a moral dimension. James Orange, an ACTWU organizer, civil rights activist, and minister, called on people of faith to show their support. “We [preachers] can’t just talk about how David picked up a rock and killed Goliath,” he said, “if we won’t pick up a picket sign.”<sup>213</sup>

In Roanoke Rapids in February and November of 1977, Reverend Jim Sessions, then an organizer with the Southern Appalachian Ministry and soon-to-be director of SEJ, and Collins Kilburn of the North Carolina Council of Churches met with ministers of the Rosemary United Methodist, First United Methodist, and First Presbyterian churches. “All three are generally supportive of the workers’ right to organize,” Finger summarized in a report to ACTWU, “[but] had some reservations about the boycott.” First Union Methodist’s pastor had many “high level management people in his church [and] does not believe in the tactic of a boycott,” but admitted the NLRB process was an inefficient way to resolve the impasse over a contract. The minister of First Presbyterian, “a patriarch in town [with] some 35 years at the same church,” agreed to publicly state that he supported the workers’ right to form a union, but felt the boycott “might

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<sup>212</sup>“Proposal for SEJ’s Third Year,” August 8, 1978. “Conference pamphlet, ‘The Church’s Responsibility in the Changing Southern Economy; Case Study: The Church and J. P. Stevens,’” November 4 and 5, 1978. “Report from Bill Finger, SEJ Staffer, to Harold McIver,” January 19, 1978. “Memo to SEJ Board of Directors, two-month report July 15-Sept. 15, 1979 from Jim Sessions, Director,” September 1979. All items from Box 12, Folder “Southerners for Economic Justice,” TWUA records, WHS, 396.

<sup>213</sup>James Orange interview with Robert Woodrum, Atlanta, Georgia, July 15, 2003, Voices of Labor Oral History Project, GSU (hereafter cited at “Orange interview”).

hurt the town.”<sup>214</sup> While many African American and northern Baptist and Methodist churches and Catholic leaders endorsed the boycott, the support of white southern Protestant churches was more difficult to secure. Getting white southern church leaders to agree to any public acknowledgement of workers’ rights—or even just to maintain neutrality regarding unionization—was a step forward. Union organizer Joe Uehlein recounts meetings in which he helped Szpak and Sessions talk with anti-union Baptist preachers, explaining that, “Our hope was (and it worked) to neutralize them so they wouldn’t preach *against* the union.”<sup>215</sup>

Outside of the South, support from religious institutions and faith-based groups swelled from 1976 to 1979. An array of religious groups endorsed the boycott: the National Council of Churches, the Women’s Division of the United Methodist Church (with nearly one million members), the Synagogue Council of America, the National Council of Catholic Women (representing about fourteen women nationwide), the American Jewish Congress, and the National Council of Catholic Charities. At a Roman Catholic “Call to Action” conference in Detroit, Michigan, in October 1976, the participating bishops issued a statement that advocated the repeal of right-to-work laws and urged the Catholic Church to “commit itself with monies and human resources to aid the struggle of non-union workers to organize in the South, especially the textile industry.” The National Coalition of American Nuns announced that “multinational corporations [like] J.P. Stevens ... must be challenged by Christians in the name

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<sup>214</sup>“Staff Report by Jim Sessions, Southern Appalachian Ministry,” November 3, 1977, and “Report to Concerned Parties by Bill Finger,” Box 12, Folder “Southerners for Economic Justice,” TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>215</sup>Uehlein interview. On religion and labor organizing in the South since World War II, see Elizabeth Fones-Wolf and Ken Fones-Wolf, *Struggle for the Soul of the South: White Evangelical Protestants and Operation Dixie* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).



of the Lord.”<sup>216</sup> In 1979, after nearly a year of research and debate, the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church endorsed the boycott. It issued a resolution that identified three Biblical concepts that supported workers’ right to organize and that urged its two-and-a-half million members to make a “public witness” through the boycott and “cast their economic ballots in favor of collective bargaining.”<sup>217</sup>

The National Board of Managers of Church Women United (CWU), representing more than two thousand local groups of Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox women across the country, sent members to investigate the conditions in JPS plants. CWU staffer Virginia Bacon reported that just a few minutes in the Dunegan acrylic plant in Greenville, South Carolina, was “time enough for me to develop a high esteem for anyone who endures [this] labor.” When Bacon requested a copy of Stevens’s personnel policy, her guide told her that the policies “were being reviewed” and hence unavailable. For Bacon, this confirmed the workers’ assertions that there was no recourse for employees who had complaints or problems. “Without a mechanism for collective bargaining,” Bacon concluded, “where can workers look for the power to achieve changes in one’s work life?” During the investigative visits to Stevens’s plants, CWU interviewed workers and former employees and reported that the people they spoke with “were grateful that women in Church Women United wanted to hear their stories.” Lucille Sampson, an African American woman in Stevens’s Estes Plant in Greenville, South Carolina, explained that mill workers who stood for the union were “blackballed” and couldn’t find work if they quit or were fired from Stevens. Sampson left Stevens after an accident in which she nearly lost a finger,

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<sup>216</sup>“Catholic Leaders Urge Church to Aid the Organizing Struggle of Textile Workers in the South,” *Labor Unity* 62, no. 13 (December 1976): 11, at CLS #986.87. ACTWU Press Release, December 1978, Box 25, Folder “IUD information,” TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>217</sup>“Final report and recommendations on the J. P. Stevens situation, United Presbyterian General Assembly,” May 29, 1979, Box 1799, Folder 144, AFL-CIO Civil Rights, GSU.

and SEJ hired her as a full-time staffer, a turn of events she called providential. “God says, ‘Fear not for I am with thee,’” she told the CWU interviewer, “so I’m not afraid.” Church Women United concluded that working conditions in Stevens were “hazardous and inhumane” and unionization was the only way to ameliorate the conditions.<sup>218</sup>

Support from the women’s movement for the Stevens campaign demonstrates the saliency of economic rights for feminist activists. Dozens of women’s rights groups endorsed the Stevens boycott, including: the National Organization of Women (NOW), the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), Women’s Equity Action League, the National Women’s Party, the National Women’s Political Caucus, and the National Consumer League. New York Congresswoman Bella Abzug, feminist writer Gloria Steinem, and Hollywood star Jane Fonda spoke in support of the union’s campaign. Feminists and women’s groups saw the unionization of Stevens’s mills as an issue of women’s rights, and connected the campaign against the textile giant with the struggle to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. “The guts of the feminist movement,” announced NOW president Eleanor Smeal, “is the economic issue. It is about equality and the economic survival of women.” The New York chapter of NOW burned Stevens bedsheets in front of Madison Square Garden. “Labor issues and feminist issues are the same issues,” insisted Dixie White, a member of the Allenton, Pennsylvania, NOW chapter.<sup>219</sup>

In Washington, D.C., in March 1978, representatives from more than thirty women’s organizations established the National Women’s Committee to Support J. P. Stevens Workers. The Committee organized letter-writing campaigns aimed at major department store chains, urging them not to sell Stevens products. The committee members had the constituencies of their

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<sup>218</sup>“Church Women Investigate J. P. Stevens & Company,” undated clipping from the newsletter of Church Women United, *The Church Woman*, Box 12, Folder “Southerners for Economic Justice,” TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>219</sup>“News from the AFL-CIO: ERA,” July 7, 1976, Box 2349, Folder 2, NC AFL-CIO, GSU.

various groups write to local merchants. “I am not a ‘special interest group,’” one New York resident wrote to Lazarus department store. “I am a citizen who believes in fair labor practices, and I feel strongly that the Stevens Company has consistently violated these.” Women reminded retailers that losing them as a customer meant losing an entire family’s business. “As the major purchasers of domestic products,” one letter to Woolworth’s stated, “we are using our consumer power to help bring justice to the workplace at J. P. Stevens.”<sup>220</sup>

On September 15, 1979, the NOW chapter in Charlotte, North Carolina, celebrated “Ella May Wiggins Day.” NOW activists distributed a pamphlet urging members to support textile and apparel workers, citing the J.P. Stevens struggle in Roanoke Rapids specifically, as they push for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. “The struggle to organize the South is especially important to women because it directly affects the wages and working conditions of one out of four working women,” the pamphlet states. “However, *all* women in the U.S. have a stake in the South because here is where the fight for legal equality, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), has met its most vicious enemy.” Of the fifteen states that have not ratified the ERA, NOW pointed out, twelve are in “right-to-work” states. The pamphlet explained the story of textile mill worker and union martyr Ella Mae Wiggins, who was murdered in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929 while leading a strike. Louise Bailey, a Stevens worker in the West Boylston plant in Montgomery, Alabama, is quoted in the pamphlet, describing how the women in her family have all worked for low wages in the cotton mills. Applauding the “militancy of women like Louise

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<sup>220</sup>Letters from Harriet Hopkins (coordinator of the NOW Durham chapter) to NC AFL-CIO president Wilbur Hobby, September 10 and 22, 1978, Box 2376, Folder 15, TWUA, SHSW. “ACTWU Press Release,” December 1978, Box 25, Folder “IUD information,” TWUA, SHSW. *Social Justice* 17, May 1978, at CLS #986.87; quotation in Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens*, 98.

Bailey,” the feminists of North Carolina NOW directly linked fight for equal rights in the 1970s with the historic and ongoing struggles of mill women.<sup>221</sup>

On November 30, 1978, thousands of people in seventy-four cities across the country participated in “Justice for J.P. Stevens’s Workers Day.” In New York City, more than three thousand marched in front of the company’s headquarters. The demonstrations were well publicized in local and national media. Photographs of marchers and the signs they carried suggest the issues with the most resonance. Signs that noted J.P. Stevens’s status as “number one labor law violator” or “billion dollar criminal” were common. Many placards featured photographs of Louis Harrell, a recently deceased member of the Roanoke Rapids BLA chapter, with the caption, “Cotton dust kills, and it’s killing me.” And of course, there was the ever popular, slightly naughty, “Don’t Sleep with Stevens!”<sup>222</sup>

Although a *Business Week* survey revealed advertisements and distribution of Stevens products had decreased in several major American cities in the first two years of the boycott, Stevens reported increased sales those years.<sup>223</sup> The Stevens boycott was more about educating the public, eliciting sympathy, and shaming the corporation than it was about generating bargaining power through economic pressure. The many endorsements it received, especially the support from religious groups, gave the union the moral high ground. “One of the big differences

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<sup>221</sup>“Let’s Stand Together: The Story of Ella Mae Wiggins,” September 14, 1979, Metrolina Chapter of NOW, Charlotte, NC, CLS #986.87.

<sup>222</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 130-132.

<sup>223</sup>“A Gathering Momentum Against J.P. Stevens,” *Business Week*, March 20, 1978.

in the Stevens drive, I really appreciated was,” Hoyman recalled, “there were moral issues that sprung out of it. It was very, very helpful.”<sup>224</sup>

The corporate campaign achieved some success in 1978. Supporters flooded the New York-based Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company with letters, demanding that the board remove two Stevens officials, CEO James Finley and Stevens board member David Mitchell. Several unions had large pension funds invested in Hanover and threatened to pull their accounts if the company continued to lend financial or moral support to J.P. Stevens. In March 1978, Mitchell resigned but asserted that it was his decision. It seemed Finley, however, was asked to resign. When asked about his plans for reelection to the board, he simply answered, “You don’t go where you are not wanted.”<sup>225</sup> Two weeks later, Mitchell stepped down from the Stevens board, a sign that people in the business were starting to distance themselves from Stevens. Ray Rogers’s corporate campaign claimed the resignations as a victory.<sup>226</sup>

The boycott, corporate campaign, and demonstrations kept the union’s campaign against Stevens in the spotlight through national and local media. “The more high profile this gets,” Si Kahn and Charlotte Brody wrote to the union from Roanoke Rapids, “the more the public will want to see and hear from the workers themselves; the press will increasingly want to hear from them directly.”<sup>227</sup> The next chapter looks at the testimony and stories of the pro-union women in the Stevens mills who offered themselves as evidence of injustice

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<sup>224</sup>Hoyman interview.

<sup>225</sup>Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens*, 168-169.

<sup>226</sup>Douglas, *Labor’s New Voice*, 242-243.

<sup>227</sup>Si Kahn and Charlotte Brody to Paul Swaity, December 18, 1976, Box 6, Folder 32, 5610/007, Kheel.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Testimony: Working Women Speak to Power

In 1976, Bea Norton, an elderly white woman from Spartanburg, South Carolina, spoke at a public hearing in Greenville, South Carolina. She was there to testify to the dangerous cotton dust levels in textile mills. Senators Strom Thurmond and Ernest Hollings, both Republicans representing South Carolina, sat at a table on an elevated dais in the front of the room. Norton stepped up to the podium before them. She held a piece of paper containing her prepared speech. Her hand shook, but her voice was clear and sharp:

I come from what I call a brown lung family. We didn't know nothing about brown lung until about 1975 but my mother, my stepfather, my husband, my sister, myself all had to quit the mill because of the breathing problem. As long as the textile companies are able to scare politicians and buy them off with liquor and campaign contributions, they ain't going to do much to help the poor working people of this state. Last year the workers' compensation study finally reported out what they call a compromise bill on brown lung. And it passed. But the compromise was between the crooked politicians and the textile manufacturers. And it was the poor workers that got compromised. We've waited a long time and many of us have died waiting. I don't want to die of injustice.<sup>228</sup>

Bea Norton stood alone at the podium, but she had many people behind her. The members and activists of the Carolina Brown Lung Association were there, and figuratively speaking, the pro-union mill women of the Stevens campaign were by her side. In the late 1970s, southern mill women united behind a broad banner of justice for textile workers. They testified at hearings and in public forums to shame the company and demand the state's intervention to

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<sup>228</sup>Quotation from video-recorded testimony of Bea Norton, in *Song of the Canary*, DVD accessed in the Carolina Brown Lung Association's records in the Southern Historical Collection, 04463, Subseries 4.3.

protect their rights. They told their stories – sometimes personal, even deeply intimate stories – to interviewers and writers. Their testimony filled the campaign’s organizing and promotional materials; they were interviewed in local and national newspapers; and they testified at hearings and shareholder meetings in New York City, Washington, DC, and Columbia, South Carolina.

ACTWU put forth the workers’ stories and images to capture the public’s attention and garner support for the corporate campaign and boycott. Because women were the primary consumers of household goods, working-class women’s stories of workplace injustice were therefore particularly valuable as organizing tools. Moreover, with the women’s movement at its height and more and more women entering the paid labor force in the mid-1970s, a growing audience was receptive to the mill women’s speeches and testimonies.<sup>229</sup>

ACTWU used the women’s stories as organizing tools in the South. Linda Blythe was fired from her job in Stevens’s Patterson mill after she missed several days of work because her son was sick. Clyde Bush, the union representative in Roanoke Rapids, insisted on seeing the attendance records of other women who worked with Blythe. Only three out of twenty-six people in Blythe’s department were women; the other two women's attendance records were worse than hers. Bush argued that the company was treating Blythe differently than other workers because she joined the union. Blythe got her job back after a month of negotiation between union representatives and the managers. "I used to be scared. The bossman would take me in to the office to talk to me and I'd start crying," said Blythe in an article for the union’s newsletter.

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<sup>229</sup>On the number of women in the US labor force in the 1970s, see: “U.S. Department of Labor Employment Standards Administration Women’s Bureau ‘Highlights of Women’s Employment and Education,’” Box 2443, Folder 18, NC AFL-CIO, GSU. See also, Stephanie Gilmore, ed., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, (University of Illinois Press, 2008) and MacLean, “Postwar Women’s History.”

“Now I don't cry no more because I know [...] my rights.”<sup>230</sup> ACTWU staffers may not have intended to highlight the problems of working mothers, but Blythe's story did.

The union's allies in the South, the Carolina Brown Lung Association and Southerners for Economic Justice, were strategic in their use of women's testimony. In a 1976 working paper, SEJ admitted that “the participants in the J. P. Stevens campaign ... are relatively unknown to most people,” making it difficult to “define the merits” of unionization. The participants were “vast numbers of *working* women who call on the average consumers of Stevens products—another working woman [sic] — to help them earn a living for their families.”<sup>231</sup> The membership of the Carolina Brown Lung Association was at least sixty percent women in all of the Carolina chapters in the 1970s. Activists with the Brown Lung Association used storytelling as a consciousness-raising and organizing tool.<sup>232</sup>

Rank-and-file women articulated gender-specific concerns in their appeals to other workers to support the union. Although gender issues were not the union's priority, they were at the heart of the campaign by virtue of the women's numbers and their prominence as local leaders. Because the union and its allies provided opportunities for these women to testify and lead, some of the women emerged from the ensemble to become leading actors in the political drama of the Stevens campaign. They made brief but significant entrances in to the center of the political arena and then dropped out of the spotlight. Yet whatever the length of their time on the stage, these stories are a window into the women's lives and their worlds. They take us back to

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<sup>230</sup>“Roanoke Union Gets Results,” ACTWU Newsletter, Vol 2, no 1, March 1979.

<sup>231</sup>“Southerners for Economic Justice, Working Paper on J. P. Stevens Campaign,” December 1976, Box 1799, Folder 130, AFL-CIO Civil Rights, GSU.

<sup>232</sup>Hughes interview.



the 1970s and reveal it to be a time when the possibility of making the mills cleaner, safe, and more just seemed achievable and yet very contested.

This chapter explores the testimony and experiences of pro-union textile mill women during the campaign against J.P. Stevens. Their stories reveal the physical contours and emotional dimensions of their lives as working women in ways both subtle and bold. They show that the women resisted the dehumanizing effects of industrial labor and insisted upon control of their bodies and labor. They looked to the union and made claims on the state for protection from economic insecurity and for amelioration of the conditions in the mills.<sup>233</sup>

Textile mills were gendered spaces. From the inception of the industry, jobs were segregated by sex. Women were spinners and weavers; men were doffers and carders. While men could move into higher paying mechanical or supervisory jobs, women's opportunities for advancement were few. In the 1970s, this was still largely the case. A few women might aspire to "floorlady," but never to the highest skilled work (loom fixers) or positions as supervisors. Women viewed unionization as a way to combat sex discrimination in the mills. "We're supposed to get jobs according to seniority," said Nadine Buckner. "But it's just a joke. There's no way I'll get ahead unless we get organized."<sup>234</sup> In Montgomery, Alabama, in J.P. Stevens's

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<sup>233</sup> I have relied on the following scholarship as I've analyzed the women's testimony: Ava Baron and Eileen Boris, "'The Body' as a Useful Category for Working-Class History," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 4, Issue 2 (Summer 2007): 22-43. John Kasson, "Follow the Bodies: Commentary on 'The Body' as a Useful Category for Working-Class History," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 4, Issue 2 (Summer 2007): 45-48. While my dissertation project builds on the work of many working-class historians and women's/gender historians, I have especially depended on the following scholarship in thinking about mill women's lived experiences of capitalism: Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago, 1986); Elizabeth Faue, "Retooling the Class Factory: United States Labour History after Marx, Montgomery, and Postmodernism," *Labour History* Number 82 (May 2002): 109-118; Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Massachusetts, 1860-1912* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>234</sup> Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens*, 23

West Boylston plant, Mildred McEwen wanted to apply for an open position as a loomfixer. She had seniority over many of the men in her department who wanted the job, but her supervisors laughed when she suggested that she would apply. “File you one of those discrimination suits so that the company will think twice before they give it to a man next time,” her friend and co-worker Mary Robinson told her. Robinson had participated in the civil rights demonstrations and marches in Montgomery in the 1960s. She had an understanding of the legal mechanisms women could use to combat discrimination. “You see, they want to keep a woman down to where she cannot be independent and cannot have any power,” she told her interviewer. “There’s no women in supervision, in management, no way. And it’s not reason at all that a woman can’t do it. Who can’t drink coffee, and that’s basically what the supervisors do.”<sup>235</sup>

Black women like Mary Robinson experienced discrimination in the mills on the basis of their race and gender, often feeling that they had more common ground with black men than with white women. While they shared with black men the experience of racial discrimination in the mills, black women’s grievances differed. Black men, while mostly barred from operative jobs, could work in the lowest-paid, unskilled jobs: manual labor such as feeding cotton bales into hoppers, moving tubs and carts, loading and unloading shipments, and low-level jobs in the dye rooms. Therefore, when black men charged the company with discrimination, it was usually because of issues around seniority and promotion. When black women complained of discrimination, it was often that they could not get in the door at all. Hiring rates at J.P. Stevens’s mills in the South between 1969 and 1972 show that black men were twice as likely to be hired

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<sup>235</sup>Mary Robinson quoted in *Dignity: Lower Income Women Tell of Their Lives and Struggles*, ed. Fran Leeper Buss (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 221.

as black women. In 1975, J.P. Stevens hired thirty percent of the white women who applied, but only fifteen percent of black female applicants.<sup>236</sup>

Black women actively sought out textile mill jobs in the 1960s. In South Carolina, some would drive around the countryside and collect friends and neighbors to apply at the Stevens and Bloomsburg mills in the Spartanburg area. Rejection infuriated them. Sallie Pearl Lewis explained, “We went to all the plants [and] every time, we wonder why they’d let the white folks set back and the black folk had to leave with a hanged head down.” Well into the 1970s, black women faced rejection in the mill’s hiring offices. Denise Johnson went to the Stevens hiring office in Roanoke Rapids every Tuesday and Thursday for nearly four months in 1979. The response was always “the same bull,” and she stopped trying. She finally found employment in the Virginia shipyards, but insisted in a letter to the EEOC that “someone [needs to] get some justice done.”<sup>237</sup> Ernestine Brooks was one of the few black women hired in the spinning rooms in Roanoke Rapids in 1971. “To tell you the truth,” she said, “when I first went in there, I thought I had stepped into hell. I thought I knew what hard work was, but until I went in there, I didn’t.” Brooks worked at Stevens for about six months, then quit and worked at a fast food restaurant.<sup>238</sup>

Black women faced another barrier in the mills that white women and black men did not. In the first decade of integration, mill owners often made decisions about which black women to hire based on the women’s looks. When Lucy Sledge graduated high school in 1967, she applied at Stevens. “They weren’t hiring any ‘ugly blacks.’ I hate to say that, but I don’t know another

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<sup>236</sup>Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker*, 161-162.

<sup>237</sup>Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker*, 169, 173.

<sup>238</sup>Brody interview. Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 91-92. Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker*, 169.

way to put it,” she said. “You had to be light and nice-looking. Now, I can’t call myself beautiful, but I am light-skinned.” Some black women were told that they were too overweight to work in the mills; others were told they were too small to handle the job. The sheer number of black women, eager for work beyond domestic service or agricultural labor, gave hirers the privilege to select based on any number of assumptions, desires, or prejudices.<sup>239</sup> “It was pretty bad to overcome that hurdle,” Jettie Purnell recalled.<sup>240</sup>

One step toward overcoming that hurdle occurred in 1970, when Lucy Sledge filed a charge against Stevens with the EEOC for racial discrimination. She was laid off from her job as a terry inspector in the Fabricating department in July 1968; her termination form noted her conduct and attendance with no complaints. Over the next seven months, however, Stevens hired four white women for terry inspector jobs – one woman was rehired after she quit or was discharged fourteen times. Sledge’s description of her seven months of waiting evokes the frustration black workers felt as they watched the promise of economic inclusion slip away with each white worker who entered the personnel office unemployed and exited with a job:

Always when you went into the Stevens personnel office, it was mostly blacks waiting, on the porch, inside, everywhere. We’d sit there. Every time a white comes out of that office, they’d have an envelope. Now I know what that means because I already worked there; it means you have the job. It’s the papers to carry you to the doctor for the physical examination. But when we’d ask the whites when they came out of the office, ‘Did you get a job?’ they’d say they didn’t. Sometimes you’d sit there all day.

When Sledge filed her EEOC complaint, she did not intend to become the lead plaintiff in a class action lawsuit, which would eventually grow to include more than one hundred plaintiffs, against the second largest textile manufacturer in the country. “I just wanted to do *something*,”

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<sup>239</sup>Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker*, 171.

<sup>240</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 109. Purnell interview.

she said.<sup>241</sup> The class action suit took years to work through the court system, but even before the ruling, the *Sledge* case seemed to make Stevens more cautious in its hiring and assignment practices. In 1969, only six of the one hundred and twenty spinners at Stevens were black women. Over the next three years, twenty-two of the forty-five of the women hired as spinners were black, and forty black women were hired as weavers out of one hundred and twelve assignments. Textile union organizer Clyde Bush credits the *Sledge* case with helping to integrate the shifts in the Roanoke Rapids mills. In the 1960s, it was common for the first and second shifts to be predominantly white, and the third shift to be nearly all black workers. The integration of shifts in the 1970s was a significant step towards uniting pro-union workers across racial lines.<sup>242</sup>

In December of 1975, Judge Dupree ruled that Stevens had “*purposefully* [emphasis in original] discriminated against blacks on the basis of their race in hiring, job assignments, layoffs and recalls, and reserving certain jobs for white workers.” The *Sledge* ruling mandated that if a position was vacant for twenty days or more, it had to be posted publicly. This helped diminish the need to “know somebody” to learn about job openings.<sup>243</sup> Even though Lucy *Sledge* was not on Stevens’s payroll in the mid-to-late 1970s, her actions had a significant impact on the labor force of J.P. Stevens in Roanoke Rapids. “I did do right, I know I did,” *Sledge* reflected. “I’d go down for this, if I had to, for my black brothers and sisters.”<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>241</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 107-108.

<sup>242</sup>Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker*, 174. Clyde Bush interview with Timothy Minchin, Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, February 9, 1996.

<sup>243</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 113. Taylor interview.

<sup>244</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 113.

Just getting through the mill gate was a hurdle for black women, but once hired, they faced new challenges. As white women fought the company to move out of designated women's jobs and into higher skilled or managerial positions, black women were often slated into traditionally male assignments. Some owners may have hoped to scare off black women by giving them the dirtiest, most strenuous jobs; others seized an opportunity to pay black women less to do the work black men had done. Across the Piedmont South, black women wrote letters to the EEOC and to lawyers complaining that they were placed into "male jobs." Mary Robinson spoke up about the problem at an organizing meeting in Stevens's West Boylston plant. "They are really hard on black women. I see women out there right now doing jobs that women never did before," she said. "I've noticed that they're [...] doing those heavy jobs back behind the carding department where raw materials start and come forward."<sup>245</sup>

When forty-year-old Lucille Sampson applied for a job at the Estes Plant in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1973, the interviewer said to her, "You look like one of those 'women libs.' How would you like to work in the card room?" Sampson accepted, although the work in the card room was some of the heaviest and dirtiest in the mill, and she was the only woman. "I thought it would be a good place to move up from," she explained. "I made up my mind I could do the job, so I did it. The men in the card room didn't like it at first, but after they saw how hard I worked, they accepted me." But when Sampson started showing her support for unionization, the "anti's" turned on her. The men who had accepted her in the card room began harassing her. "They say filthy things about women in general," she said. After she made visible her union support, they made a point of walking near her machine, talking loudly and crudely about her. "They put you through mental torture," she concluded. She worried that anti-union workers

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<sup>245</sup>Robinson, *Dignity*, 221-222.

would try to sabotage her machines if she were not vigilant. She “finally broke under the pressure,” and had an accident that required thirty-seven stitches on her hand. Sampson returned to work after her hand healed, but when Southerners for Economic Justice offered her a job as an organizer, she was eager to escape the hostile work environment and be paid for her activism.<sup>246</sup>

Mill women’s complaints about unfair treatment in the mills were not always specifically about race or gender. They spoke generally about “favoritism,” that supervisors favored some workers over others, and this often motivated their unionism. Hildegard Hale was a spinner in the Roanoke No. 1 plant in Roanoke Rapids. She had been against the union during the 1973-74 organizing drive. The fifty-one-year-old spinner grew increasingly resentful about the unfair allocation of work in her department. “You can’t talk to your bosses about it, they have their favorites,” she said. She joined the union and by 1979 was fully immersed in the contract battle and served on the contract negotiating committee.<sup>247</sup> Janie Hawkins, a terry inspector in the Rosemary Cloth Room in Roanoke Rapids, also became an ardent union supporter after Stevens fired a co-worker for something Hawkins knew he did not do. If the plant was unionized, she concluded, there would be “a way to decide who’s right and who’s wrong [and] be fair about it.”<sup>248</sup>

Mill women’s complaints about “favoritism” may have been veiled references to flirtations and sexual relationships between female workers and supervisors. Beverly Riggs was a terry inspector in the Fabricating plant in Roanoke Rapids and a member of the contract negotiating committee. Frustrated with the decisions of supervisors about whom to reward and

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<sup>246</sup>“Church Women Investigate J. P. Stevens & Company,” undated clipping from the newsletter of Church Women United, *The Church Woman*, page 24, Box 12, Folder “Southerners for Economic Justice,” TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>247</sup>Janet Guyon, “Union’s foe becomes ally after pay cut,” *The News and Observer*, December 7, 1977.

<sup>248</sup>“Building for the Future on the Struggles of the Past,” *Labor Unity*, November 1980, 6.

whom to punish, Riggs hoped that unionization would mean equal treatment. “They have their pets you know,” she said, “the people that can come in late all the time and get away with it and the people who get the favoritism from the supervisors and the boss man.”<sup>249</sup> Preferential treatment could occur because of family relationships and friendships between bosses and workers, but also when male supervisors were attracted to a female worker. Mary Robinson recalled, “Black womens, including myself, and older white womens would work real hard, learn our job, and be making production real good, so we’d finally be making money, and suddenly the boss would [put someone else on the job]. You’d look around to see who [took your place] and nine times out of ten, it was some nice-looking white girl.”<sup>250</sup> Some women in the mills traded sexual favors with supervisors to curry favor or out of fear of reprisals. Robinson was frustrated at times by her female co-workers’ unwillingness to resist their supervisors. “When men think they’ve got the advantage over women [...] they’ll come up and tell you a joke or something. If they think they can use it in order to make a play at you, they’re going to use it,” she said. “When the supervisor come at them sexually, a lot of women, rather than saying anything about it, just keep quiet and take it.” Robinson blamed the unequal power distribution inside the mills, where women harassed by one male supervisor would have to go to another to report it. “Makes you want to just slap the taste out of their mouth,” she said. “I just really don’t feel a man has any business being over a whole bunch of women like that.”<sup>251</sup>

Mildred McEwen hoped that the union would be a way to combat sexual harassment in the mills. She did not have the phrase “sexual harassment” ready on hand when she described the

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<sup>249</sup>“At the Heart of the Stevens Campaign are Families Trying to Make Ends Meet,” *Labor Unity*, December 1976, 10.

<sup>250</sup>Robinson, *Moisture of the Earth*, ed. Fran Leeper Buss (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 147-148.

<sup>251</sup>Robinson, *Dignity*, 221.



conditions for women in the mills, but her explanation of the emotional and psychological effects on women articulate a feminist critique of the power imbalance inside the mills:

I don't know exactly what you'd call it, but if you're a fairly good-looking woman in a place like that, and you go along with them, you flirt around [with the supervisors], talk to them, it's much easier. And if you don't or if you have and stop, it's bad. It's terrible. That should be brought out somehow [by the union]. It's true, it's definitely true. Nobody's just had enough guts to say it. But I've had some experiences like that [...] That should definitely be stopped, definitely. [It] makes you feel so small.<sup>252</sup>

Pro-union women complained that supervisors used “nasty” language and were verbally abusive to punish union supporters or to provoke them into a confrontation. Louise Bailey testified at the Labor Law Reform Act hearings in Roanoke Rapids on August 9, 1977. “One woman — Ruth Gregory — was pushed and harassed for her union activities so much — taken into the office by herself with four supervisors pointing their fingers at her and laughing at her,” Bailey recounted. “She was made so nervous that she went all to pieces.” Bailey told the men, “I wish I could take you all into the plant and have you hear how the supervisors talk to the women workers,” she said. “There's just no way to explain it.”<sup>253</sup>

Beverly Riggs said that pro-union women were targeted by supervisors, watched more closely, and publicly criticized for mistakes. “Sometimes at work they just try to embarrass you. They make you walk over and get the bad work that [you did] then you're standing up there in front of everybody and they show you what you've done wrong.”<sup>254</sup> Riggs claimed that she was not upset by this herself, but hated to see how much it upset some of the other women. Ollie

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<sup>252</sup>Mildred McEwen interviewed with Fran Leeper Buss, “Oral Histories of Low Income and Minority Women, 1970s-1992,” Southern Historical Collection 04608, March 25, 1981 (hereafter cited as “McEwen interview”).

<sup>253</sup>Let's Stand Together: The Story of Ella Mae Wiggins,” September 14, 1979, Metrolina Chapter of NOW, Charlotte, NC, CLS #986.87.

<sup>254</sup>“At the Heart of the Stevens Campaign are Families Trying to Make Ends Meet,” *Labor Unity*, December 1976, 10.

Varnadore started working at Stevens in Roanoke Rapids in 1943, when it was still the Simmons Company. She found that her supervisors' compliments on her work quickly turned to complaints when they discovered she supported unionization. "It got on my nerves so bad that I had to go to the doctor," she said in testimony for an NLRB case. Some mill women took "nerve pills" or were prescribed anti-anxiety medications. Their emotional and mental health issues may not have been solely because of their work, but the hectic pace, deafening noise, and long shifts were trying on even the hardiest of women.<sup>255</sup> Ernestine Brooks chafed under daily indignities that dehumanized workers. "My boss man told me, 'If you don't get your machines right, then you don't eat,'" Brooks said. "You'll just have to swallow fast."<sup>256</sup> Addie Jackson, an African American woman at the Stevens mill in Statesboro, Georgia, linked the daily indignities to African American history. "At J.P. Stevens, before we started organizing, it wasn't much different than slavery. No lunch hour. Just eat your sandwich while running your machines."<sup>257</sup>

Myrtle Cribbs began working in the textile mill in Statesboro, Georgia, in 1962. When she started as a spinner, the A&M Karagheusian Company owned the mill. J.P. Stevens bought the company in the early 1960s. Cribbs, a white woman with short, stylish hair who dressed in smart-looking jackets when she appeared at public debates and hearings, recalled low wages and poor working conditions under both managements. Workers began organizing in 1968 and requested a union election. Then "about three weeks before we were supposed to have our election," Cribbs recalled, "Stevens instituted an eighteen-minute lunch break, installed benches in the smoking areas; sandwich machines were filled with ham sandwiches layered with ten or

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<sup>255</sup>Varnadore quoted in Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens*, 31. References to emotional and mental health problems and medication can be found in McEwen interview. Gallaudet interview.

<sup>256</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 92.

<sup>257</sup>Jackson quoted in *Labor Unity*, Vol 26, No. 13, December 1976.

twelve slices instead of two or three.”<sup>258</sup> These changes did not pacify Cribbs. She became one of the most outspoken pro-union workers in the Statesboro mill.

Complaints about not having time to eat lunch were common, but stories about the bathrooms in mills were ubiquitous. In interviews, public testimony, and oral histories, it is rare *not* to hear a woman voice a complaint or tell a story about working in the mills without a reference to bathrooms. Many argued that they did not get enough bathroom breaks during their shifts because of the pace of the work. Marie Eury, a knitter in the Stevens mill in Wallace, North Carolina, said, “I’m a knitter and I have sixteen machines to operate at one time, and I don’t have nobody to relieve me even to go to the bathroom.”<sup>259</sup> Ernestine Brooks had the same experience as white spinners. “They wouldn’t even let you go to the bathroom when I was there. When I asked my boss man if I could go, he said I couldn’t leave my machines. I asked him what I was supposed to do, and he said he didn’t know. He said he couldn’t help it, that I couldn’t leave. ‘Unless you’re smart enough to keep all those machines going, you can’t go to the bathroom.’”<sup>260</sup> Supervisors singled out pro-union women for taking too many breaks or taking too long. Louise Bailey told congressmen at the labor law reform hearings in Roanoke Rapids in 1977, “The boss will come and beat on the door of the bathroom just as soon as you go in there.”<sup>261</sup>

Mill women relied on bathrooms as a place of rest and recovery. Monitored or restricted bathroom breaks infuriated them. Many women ate their lunches in the ladies room either

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<sup>258</sup>“I think a day of reckoning is coming,” in *Mountain Life and Work*, Special Issue: History of J.P. Stevens (September 1978), 14.

<sup>259</sup>Ed McConville, “Still, the union makes them strong,” *The Progressive*, August 1975.

<sup>260</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 92.

<sup>261</sup>*Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor*, H.R. 8410, Labor Relations Act of 1977, August 9, 1977, 635-643.

because they did not have enough time on their breaks or because it was the only place free of the dust and lint that coated everything. Bathrooms promised a modicum of privacy. A bathroom stall was the only space in the mill where a woman was guaranteed at least a few minutes of privacy, while the common space in the ladies room was a place to share information with a select audience. Women were mindful that frequent trips to the ladies room drew attention and might suggest illness, pregnancy, or some kind of clandestine activity.<sup>262</sup>

Wages were a common complaint for men and women, but the women were more likely to work on the piecework system, in which the company sets a production rate that workers must meet to earn a specific hourly wage. Many women complained that the company changed production rates to make workers produce more for the same wages. Mary Robinson pointed out that the quality of the equipment, the humidity levels in the mill, and the quality of the material affected women's ability to meet production rates. "Sometimes we just get a shipment of bad cotton," she said, "I think the boll weevils done got in and ate it all."<sup>263</sup> The women pointed out in interviews and testimonies that the low wages throughout the mills forced women to work for the family's survival. "I work because I have to," Dorothy Varnadore explained. "You can't make it at Stevens on one person's pay."<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>262</sup>Researchers found that Mexican-American women at the Farah pants company in El Paso, Texas, were prone to kidney and bladder infections from too few bathroom breaks during shifts. The Farah women discussed the restricted bathroom breaks as particularly onerous to women workers. "If you have to go when it is not break, the supervisor sees you and he waits for you outside and when you come out he asks you why you went it. Perhaps it is your period, you have to mess with the machine and you are tired and you must change clothes. But it is embarrassing to say this to the supervisor, so you just say you don't know and look dumb." See Laurie Coyle, Gail Hershatter, and Emily Honig, *Women at Farah: An Unfinished Story* (copyright by the authors, El Paso, 1979), 8; Gayle Galiano, "Women Won't Wear the Pants," *Distaff* (New Orleans) 1, no. 9 (October 1973): 4.

<sup>263</sup>Mary Thornton, "The Union Versus the Mill," *The Boston Globe*, March 19, 1978.

<sup>264</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens*, 23.

Complaints about wages were as much about respect and fairness as they were about amounts. “If all I have to sell is my labor,” said Maurine Hedgepeth, a weaver in Roanoke Rapids, “why can’t I bargain for what I think it’s worth?”<sup>265</sup> In the White Horse mill in Greenville, South Carolina, Pat Burgess pointed out that southern workers made less than any other industrial worker in the United States. “Why is my labor - my hands - so much cheaper than the same hands in New York? I love to weave and I’m good at it,” Burgess said. “I want J.P. Stevens to make money, because then my job runs. I just want to get some of the harvest.”<sup>266</sup>

Control over one’s labor and pride in the work done could be more important than the wages. Often a raise was not enough to take away the sting workers felt when Stevens changed the expectations for their job or increased the workload. Fifty-three-year-old Virginia Davis was a warper creeler at the Stevens plant in Roanoke Rapids. In 1977, the company got rid of the floor sweepers in her department and expected the creelers to sweep the floors three times a day, in addition to their usual duties. “They want to give me a raise for this,” Davis fumed. “I got a job. My job is creeling warpers. My job ain’t sweeping. I weren’t for no union, but this is too much. I done signed me a union card.”<sup>267</sup>

Women’s concerns about their health and safety in the mills were also linked to their demands for respect and dignity. They resisted the dehumanizing effects of mill work and insisted on their basic rights to bodily integrity and safety. “I got almost crazy on that job,” Ernestine Brooks recalled of six months in the mills in Roanoke Rapids. “You can’t do that to your body. That’s one machine you can’t overhaul.”<sup>268</sup> Lucille Sampson caught her hand in a

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<sup>265</sup>Robert Friedman, “The Cotton Mills Back Home,” *Mother Jones*, April 1977, 5.

<sup>266</sup>“Harvest,” *Southern Changes* 1, no 7, 1979.

<sup>267</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 165.

<sup>268</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 95.

brush in the carding room. The ring on her middle finger kept the machine from chewing up her entire hand. “I imagine the only time they gonna correct anything is when they see blood on the frames,” said Sampson. “That’s why I have to tell these people the sheets they’re lying on, there’s blood in them [fibers], old blood, young blood.”<sup>269</sup> Sampson used her story when she spoke to supporters to promote the union’s boycott.

ACTWU published the stories of injured workers in print and through video. Lucy Taylor, a retired worker in Roanoke Rapids and president of the Brown Lung Association chapter there, was featured in one pamphlet. In the photograph, Taylor sits in a rocking chair, looking steadily into the camera at a sideways angle. The pattern of her shirt is reminiscent of a crocheted afghan a grandmother might wrap around herself as she rocks on her front porch on a cool evening. Her lengthy quotation is next to the photograph, blocked to look almost like a poem. She tells the story of working in the weave room one day when a loom caught on fire. Choking from the smoke, she went outside. Her foreman berated her, “Get back on your job. Those looms cost money. They have to run. We have to buy them. But I can go to the door and whistle and get all the help I want.” Taylor’s concludes with a line that was often quoted in union and brown lung literature: “They care nothing about the human side of the picture. The looms are all that count.”<sup>270</sup>

In the same pamphlet, Mildred Whitely told her story. After twenty-six years in the West Boylston plant, Stevens denied her request for a lighter workload after she had a radical mastectomy. Her supervisors told her she could take a sick leave or quit if she could not keep up.

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<sup>269</sup>Dara Thorpe, “Human Rights Issues and J.P. Stevens,” *The Church Woman*, September 1978.

<sup>270</sup>“Don’t Sleep with Steven” pamphlet, undated, in in the National Alliance Against Racism & Political Repression Collection, the Schomburg Library, New York City, New York (hereafter cited as “Schomburg”).

She was fired for arriving to work a few hours late because she was filing a request for an extension of her sick leave. She received a lump-sum retirement benefit of \$1,360.<sup>271</sup>

ACTWU featured Whitley and workers with similar stories in their film *Testimony*. In one segment, the film narrator introduced John Bolt Culbertson, a lawyer and a trustee of the Presbyterian church. Culbertson interviewed Richard Gregory, a seventeen-year-old young man who caught his hand in machinery during his first week in a Stevens plant. His supervisors did not warn him about the danger; after his injury, they let him go. Culbertson then turned to Kathy Peace, an eighteen-year-old young woman. After her first two hours of her first shift at Stevens's Riverine plant in Taylor, South Carolina, she caught her hand in the gears of the tufting machine. Like the young man, she explained that she did not receive adequate training on the dangerous machines. She held up to the camera her right hand with its two missing fingers. "Since that time, what has been the status of your life?" Culbertson asked. "Well," she falteringly answered. "I mean, I have this fear of people seeing my hand because, well I'm a woman and I just thought, you know, they'd look at my hand when they see me, you know, and it upsets me when I see people." Culbertson then stated, "She's not able to work. Nobody does anything for her. No rehabilitation. Nothing done to salvage her. People mean absolutely nothing to J.P. Stevens."<sup>272</sup>

*Testimony* publicized the message that workers consistently delivered in interviews and at public hearings: "at Stevens, the machines mean more than the people." Culbertson made sure to drive home the point that while Stevens invested in their machinery, they did nothing to "salvage" workers who lost in that machinery pieces of themselves. But Culbertson overlooked something in Kathy Peace's story that female audiences surely would have recognized. When

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<sup>271</sup>Ibid. Marth Shirk, "'Don't Sleep With Stevens!'" *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, October 24, 1977.

<sup>272</sup>*Testimony* transcript, Box 34, Folder 23, 5619/017, Kheel.

asked about “the status” of her life since the accident, she said that she was afraid of what people would think of a woman with a disfigured hand.<sup>273</sup> Her status as a worker was not on her mind so much as her status as a woman. Given that she was eighteen – just the age when young women sought relationships that would lead to marriage – she no doubt wondered if the accident narrowed her chances of being loved by a good man.

Mill women testified to the daily drain on their bodies from the work. “Sometimes I get so nervous and tensed up that when I get out of there, I’m just not worth a cuss to live with when I get home,” Mary Robinson said. “I spin in my dreams all the time that I sleep.” Marie Eury was a knitter at Stevens’s mill in Wallace, North Carolina. “When I get off at midnight, I could just drop where I’m at,” she said. “If we unionize, I think we’ll have better working conditions and a little bit of rest where we can eat and give proper attention to ourselves as well as to the machines.” Mill women’s personal lives were affected by the stress at work. “I think that if you took a survey of people who work at the plant, most drink a lot or take nerve pills or smoke dope in order to go to sleep,” Robinson said. “You get tensed up working there, and most people can’t then just relax.”<sup>274</sup>

Many women were infuriated by the treatment of aging workers. In the union’s film, *Testimony*, Hedgepeth recounted a story of watching “the boss man” criticize an elderly weaver, Hazel, who was crying. Hedgepeth tried to intervene, telling the foreman to leave Hazel alone, but was told to mind her own business. “I’m really afraid of getting old [and] working at Stevens,” she admitted. “They try to get rid of you, after you give your life to them.”<sup>275</sup> Seeing

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<sup>273</sup>*Testimony* transcript, Box 34, Folder 23, 5619/017, Kheel.

<sup>274</sup>Robinson, *Dignity*, 225.

<sup>275</sup>*Testimony* transcript, Box 34, Folder 23, 5619/017, Kheel.



elderly parents mistreated was particularly painful. Helen Acree, a weaver in the Patterson Plant in Roanoke Rapids, was horrified by how supervisors treated her aging mother. “I joined the union because of the way [mill managers] were treating Mama. I joined, then I got her to join.”<sup>276</sup> Because so few black women were hired before 1964, black women did not have the same experiences of watching parents age in the mills. Still, Mary Robinson related her union activism to her mother. “I think about the union in terms of my mother. She would have been proud of me for doing it,” Mary said. “Because her life had been devastating, too, and she’d been oppressed all of her life. She’d want a change for us all.”<sup>277</sup>

Whether or not mill women saw their mothers in the mill, motherhood was a common, powerful theme in the women’s testimony, interviews, and stories. Louise Bailey took in as much overtime as she could at fifty-two years old. She wanted to help her children afford a college education so they would never have to work in a cotton mill.<sup>278</sup> “I’ve thought about what if the kids would have to go to work in the textile mills,” said Mary Robinson. “The main thing that has made me fight against Stevens is that I don’t want my kids to have to work under the same conditions that I had to.”<sup>279</sup>

Black and white women viewed their union activism through the lens of motherhood. For black women, the legacy of racial oppression added another layer. “My son Donald came home and asked me, ‘Are we slaves?’ At first I didn’t know what to answer,” Addie Jackson said. “[Working at Stevens] wasn’t too much different than slavery.”<sup>280</sup> Many times between 1976 and

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<sup>276</sup>“Company-Union Struggle in Textiles Continues,” *Labor Unity*, November 1980, 6.

<sup>277</sup>Robinson, *Dignity*, 227-228.

<sup>278</sup>Mary Thornton, “The Union Versus the Mill,” *The Boston Globe*, March 19, 1978.

<sup>279</sup>Robinson, *Dignity*, 227.

<sup>280</sup>“Special: Textiles,” *Mountain Life and Work* 53, no. 3, April 1977, 30.

1980, Mary Robinson thought about giving up her union work. She wasn't getting enough sleep, between her night shifts and her daytime union work. But she wanted to set an example for her children, so she kept organizing for the union. Robinson's message got across to her daughter, who led efforts to desegregate the cheerleading squad at her high school.<sup>281</sup>

Some men discussed their unionism in terms of their concerns for their children. In a newsletter for ACTWU members, for instance, Beverly Riggs's husband discussed the working conditions in the mill, his struggle to keep up at work since his injury, and the ongoing contract negotiations. At the end of the article, Rylan added, "They have a Christmas party every year down at the mill, and they ask us to bring the children. But I don't want to bring my children in there, the way they treat people. Don't want them to get used to going there."<sup>282</sup> But while men occasionally talked about themselves as fathers, women often spoke from their perspective as working mothers. Hedgepeth was one of twenty-three workers in Roanoke Rapids that the NLRB ordered Stevens to reinstate in 1968. She spent nearly four years unemployed, struggling to support three children as her husband searched for work. "During supper the kids used to ask me, 'Aren't you going to eat?' I always said, 'I ate while I was cooking.' The truth was," Hedgepeth admitted, "I went without food many nights. We just didn't have enough."<sup>283</sup> The Stevens women fit in long history of mill mothers. The high number of married women and mothers in the cotton mills was unusual in the early and mid-twentieth century. In the 1970s, as more married women entered the work force across the country, southern mill women's experiences looked more like the norm. The union used the stories of working mothers at Stevens to promote

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<sup>281</sup>Robinson, *Moisture of the Earth*, ed. Buss, 144.

<sup>282</sup>"At the Heart of the Stevens Campaign," *Labor Unity*, December 1976, 10.

<sup>283</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 193.

the boycott, knowing that women were the primary consumers of household goods. In one union flier, Maurine Hedgepeth's photograph appears next to her quote about Stevens. Her brow is furrowed; deep lines form stern parentheses around her mouth. She looks tired as she gazes slightly downward from behind steel-rimmed glasses. But her mouth is set in a firm line, and her broad face, though wrinkled, is unyielding. "I'd never let my children work here," she says. "The way they treat me, I can take that. But I'd kill a man if he treated a child of mine the way I been treated."<sup>284</sup> Hedgepeth's message and image evoke maternal sacrifice, and the photograph accompanying reinforces it. Her anger is righteous. It is a mother's anger.

In the same flier, Charlotte Moseley, a weaver in Roanoke Rapids, is featured. The curlers in her hair are almost concealed by the diamond-patterned scarf that covers her head. One gets a glimpse of her clothing: a clean, white turtleneck under a rugged-looking work shirt. She has dark circles under eyes. This is a woman with little time for her family, let alone for herself. Her beauty regime, if it happens at all, happens around and during her work. The slightly exposed curlers add a hint of vulnerability to the picture, as if she were caught on camera before quite finishing her toiletries. They also suggest her determination to indulge in at least this beauty ritual, refusing to allow her exploitation in the mills to rob her of all feminine trappings. "When I went to apply for the job they told me that my family or my children could not come before my job," she says, echoing a chief complaint of women workers and feminists of all classes and skin colors. "I have three girls and I don't want them to go into the mill to work, as it is now. But you really don't have much choice where to work around here."<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup>ACTWU flier, Box 34, Folder 23, 5619/017, Kheel.

<sup>285</sup>Ibid.

Mill women went to the union to address problems they had when working while pregnant or on leave. Syretha Medlin and Betty Stallings filed complaints with the TWUA in Roanoke Rapids in 1973 that Stevens had a policy that women must go on sick leave after the sixth month of pregnancy. The sick leave policy provided workers with \$36 a week, up to twenty-six weeks. Medlin and Stallings signed statements that they received no benefits or sick leave pay while forced out of work in their third trimesters.<sup>286</sup>

Many black women faced an even bigger problem than white women when it came to pregnancy and mill work, due to having heavier workloads and harder jobs. At one Stevens plant, two black women went into labor early; one lost her baby. In 1981, Lena Harris Dowtin described in a grievance for the *Sledge v. Stevens* case that she tried to appeal to her supervisor at Stevens to give her a light workload during her pregnancy. “I went to the doctor and the doctor said I was having a threatened miscarriage. After I told him what type of work I was doing he said it was too heavy a job,” she wrote. Her doctor advised her to stop working for a month or get a lighter workload. “I went [to] my employer and they wouldn’t give me a lighter job.” Marion Brown Mason worked at J.P. Stevens in Roanoke Rapids in 1973. She joined the class action *Sledge v. Stevens* suit, and recounted a tragic story on her grievance form. “I got pregnant and I told them that I [had a] problem and I couldn’t work until I had the baby. But they told me I was fired, and I lost the baby in July and went back to try and get my job back, but they wouldn’t hire me back.”<sup>287</sup>

Divorce could tip a mill woman from economic insecurity to destitution. After getting divorced, Mary Robinson had struggled to keep her house. She felt like she was “fixing to crack

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<sup>286</sup>Signed statements of Syretha Medlin and Betty Stallings, Box 5, Folder “JPS – RR, NC general info & correspondence,” TWUA, SHSW.

<sup>287</sup>Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker*, 191.

up.” She was determined to unionize the West Boylston plant to protect her children from the stress and trauma of poverty. The union provided a way for her to take action, to combat her sense of powerlessness and her fear for her children’s future. “My kids are really the only [thing] I’ve got,” Robinson said. “But I do care about something else; I care about bringing a union to Stevens. I’m thirty-six years old and I say, ‘Well, I’ve did the best part of my years here anyway, so I’ll take what remains and try to do something constructive with my life.’ And trying to bring a union to Stevens is constructive.”<sup>288</sup>

For many mill women, working for the union gave them a sense of direction and control, as it offered hope for something better for their families. For some of them, it was the first time they spoke up for themselves. For others, their union work built on their leadership in churches and communities. For all, the Stevens campaign was a personal and political battle for justice. Charlotte Brody traveled with Stevens workers to hearings and rallies up and down the eastern seaboard. On the long bus rides, Brody recalled, white and African American working-class women talked about their lives and families. “They were basically saying,” Brody recounts, “this is who I always had to be, this is how I always had to fight.”<sup>289</sup>

The examples of mill women articulating the particular pains they felt as women workers and holding up their private lives and personal stories to garner support for their cause fit into a long history of women in the apparel and textile industry, from the Lowell Mill girls and the Female Labor Reform Association of the nineteenth century, to the garment workers organizing in the wake of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, to the women and girls of Lawrence, Massachusetts,

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<sup>288</sup>Robinson, *Dignity*, 220.

<sup>289</sup>Brody interview.

demanding “bread and roses,” to the flying squadrons of southern women in the 1934 General Textile Strike. The architects of the Lowell mill “experiment” in the 1820s hired unmarried, native-born women and built housing, churches, and schools for them, to show that industrialization in the United States could proceed responsibly and without upsetting patriarchal authority. Industrial capitalism started in America with a promise to the public that it would not breed radicalism, and the fulfillment of that promise was based on the assumption that any women’s sexuality and labor could and should be controlled.<sup>290</sup> White southern mill women who rallied workers for unionization were labeled radical, “disorderly,” or worse, and were vulnerable to accusations of sexual deviancy and race betrayal because their labor activism threatened the southern system of racialized capitalism and corporate paternalism.<sup>291</sup> In the history of industrial capitalism in the United States, mill women have been there every step of the way.

But even as the Stevens women of the 1970s boycott and corporate campaign fit into a long history, they also represent a turning point. The Stevens campaign coincided with the 1970s women’s movement, at the height of the so-called “second wave” of feminism.<sup>292</sup> Dozens of

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<sup>290</sup>See for instance Thomas Dublin, *Farm to Factory: Women’s Letters, 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Stephen A. Mrozowski, *The Archaeology of Class in Urban America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Mary H. Blewett, *We Will Rise in Our Might: Workingwomen’s Voices from Nineteenth-Century New England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>291</sup>See for instance Hall et al, *Like a Family*; numerous articles by Mary Frederickson, especially “Heroines and Girl Strikers: Gender Issues and Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century American South,” in *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South*, ed. Robert H. Zieger (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 84-112; and Linda Frankel, “Southern Textile Women: Generations of Survival and Struggle,” in *My Troubles Are Going to Have Trouble with Me: Everyday Trials and Triumphs of Women Workers*, eds. Karen Brodtkin Sacks and Dorothy Remy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 39-60.

<sup>292</sup>In the last twenty years, historians and feminist scholars have challenged stereotypes and popular images of American feminism, revealing the feminisms of women of color, the gender-conscious activism of working-class women, and the concerns for economic justice that infused many feminist agendas in the 1970s. More recently, historians have shown that the women’s movement did not bypass the South and that southern women presented their own particular feminist politics and gender-conscious activism. See for instance: Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-wave Feminism and Black Liberation in*

women's rights groups endorsed the Stevens boycott.<sup>293</sup> The women's movement and feminism of the 1970s gave the mill women's stories a deeper resonance, as the idea that the "personal is political" infused legal struggles and social activism. For working-class women in the 1970s, the decade was not just the beginning of deregulation, the flight of manufacturing, and the decline of organized labor. It also offered a new way to talk about the particular ways women experienced social and economic injustice in the workplace, the home, their personal relationships, and communities, and new structures of opportunity for them to speak out for themselves and others. By placing the activism and leadership of women in the J.P. Stevens campaign in a long history of textile manufacturing and labor organizing, and in the context of heightened awareness of and attention to gender issues in the 1970s, we can see the Stevens campaign as an arena for multiple, overlapping struggles for justice – economic, emotional, racial, and gender justice. Working women's lives were terrains for political arguments about corporate capitalism that included and went beyond workplace problems and wage injustice, and for critiques of the gender and racial hierarchies that have supported industrial capitalism.

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Washington, D.C. (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 2008); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Dennis Deslippe, *Rights, Not Roses: Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945–1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Donald Mathews and Jane Sherron De Hart, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of ERA: A State and the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Stephanie Gilmore, ed., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, Urbana: (University of Illinois Press, 2008); Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell: Grassroots Feminist Activism in Postwar America* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Lisa Levenstein, "'Don't Agonize, Organize!': The Displaced Homemakers Campaign and the Contested Goals of Postwar Feminism," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 4 (March 2014): 1114–1138; Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Anna Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Melissa Estes Blair, *Revolutionizing Expectations: Women's Organizations, Feminism, and the Transformation of Political Culture, 1965–1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

<sup>293</sup>“Letters from Harriet Hopkins (coordinator of the NOW Durham chapter) to NC AFL-CIO president Wilbur Hobby,” September 10 and 22, 1978, Box 2376, Folder 15; “News from the AFL-CIO: ERA,” July 7, 1976, Cox 2349, Folder 2, both items in NC AFL-CIO, GSU; “Let’s Stand Together: The Story of Ella Mae Wiggins,” September 14, 1979, Metrolina Chapter of NOW, Charlotte, NC, CLS # 986.87. See also Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens*, 96–98.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Norma Rae vs. J.P. Stevens

On April 14, 1980, Sally Field delivered her acceptance speech for the Academy Award for Best Actress. “They said this couldn’t be done,” she began breathlessly. “This role was given to me as a gift,” Field continued. The role was the title character in the 1979 movie *Norma Rae*. The filmmakers avowed that Norma Rae was a composite character based on many women in the southern textile industry but they based it on Henry Leifermann’s biography *Crystal Lee, a Woman of Inheritance*. The movie’s plot mirrored the 1973-1974 organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids and Crystal Lee Sutton’s life story. “Mostly it was given to me,” said Field, after thanking the producers and studio, “because of [director] Marty Ritt. Marty Ritt is Norma Rae.” Field descended the stage to thunderous applause without having thanked the one person who really *was* Norma Rae.

After the election victory in Roanoke Rapids in 1974, Sutton separated from her husband, Cookie, and moved to Burlington. She returned to Roanoke Rapids and for two years tried to make their marriage work. But in 1976, the separation culminated in divorce. Her daughter, Elizabeth, chose to stay with Cookie in Roanoke Rapids. Crystal moved into an apartment in Burlington with her sons, Mark and Jay. When she visited Roanoke Rapids to see Elizabeth, she would often stay with Preston Sutton and his then-wife, who both worked at the Stevens plant and updated her on the ongoing struggle for a contract. Crystal’s son Mark jokingly referred to Preston as “Elvis,” suggesting something of Preston’s charm and good looks. For Crystal,



Preston seemed to be the first man who appreciated and respected her fierceness. “That lady really has brains,” Preston was wont to say about her. When Crystal and Preston’s friendship turned into romance, he quit his job at Stevens and moved to Burlington with her.<sup>294</sup>

Preston found work at a textile finishing plant in Burlington, but Sutton felt as though she were on an “invisible blacklist.” Her case against Stevens for firing her worked its way slowly through the NLRB process. Between 1974 and 1978, she held jobs at several sewing factories and textile mills in the area, but believed she was always let go or fired for some “lame reason” when the employer discovered she was “that Union Woman.” Her worst job was processing frozen chickens at Church’s Fried Chicken. “I’d rather shovel shit,” she concluded. “I think that would be easier.”<sup>295</sup>

Sutton’s last contact with the union was on April 3, 1978, when her NLRB case against J.P. Stevens finally reached a conclusion. She was reinstated by court order with \$13,436 in back wages. The commute from Burlington was hardly worth the hourly salary she received, but she worked for two days “to prove to workers that you can fight and win.” She was disappointed with the cold reception in Roanoke Rapids. The workers had thrown a party for Joseph Williams, who was fired a few weeks before Sutton and reinstated through the same court order, but Sutton’s return was largely ignored. Some workers still felt a bit raw over the 1973-1974 organizing drive. “I must have heard twenty or thirty different versions of what went on,” said Charlotte Brody, who came to Roanoke Rapids in 1975 as an activist with the Brown Lung Association.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>294</sup>Lelia Carson Albrecht, “The Real ‘Norma Rae’ is Anguished,” *People* 11, No. 17, April 30, 1979, 43-44. Jordan interview.

<sup>295</sup>Megan Rosenfeld, “Through the mill with Crystal Lee,” *Washington Post*, June 11 1980.

<sup>296</sup>Brody interview.

In 1979, Sutton reentered the Stevens campaign in a dramatic fashion. Hollywood filmmakers made a movie based on her life, *Norma Rae*. Although Sutton was frustrated that she did not have editorial authority over the screenplay and disliked many things about the movie, it was an undeniable boon to the union's campaign against Stevens. The film presented a fictionalized version of the organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids in 1974 and a sympathetic portrayal of the mill workers' struggle. The union seized on the popularity of the movie and sent Sutton on a nationwide speaking tour as the "real Norma Rae." This chapter examines the creation of the movie, providing background information on the filmmakers and analyzing the choices they made as they turned Sutton's life story into an Academy Award-winning film. On the speaking tour, Sutton became the "real Norma Rae," negotiating with the media, the union, and Hollywood for control of her story. She generated significant publicity for the union's campaign against Stevens, using her life story to draw attention to the struggles of southern textile workers.

The idea for a Hollywood movie based on Crystal Lee Sutton's story came from producers Tamara Asseyev and Alexandra (Alex) Rose in the mid-seventies. The two women were a rare duo in the male-dominated movie industry and had extensive experience with major Hollywood studios, big budget films, and popular actors. Asseyev was born in 1943 and had a bachelor of arts from Marymount College (Los Angeles) and masters in theater arts from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her first work was a television movie, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, starring Vincent Price. She co-produced several films in 1967, including *The Saint Valentine's Day Massacre*, with a budget of \$2,175,000 in 1967, and *The Trip*, starring Peter Fonda, Bruce Dern, and Dennis Hopper. Rose was born in 1946 and had a bachelor of arts in

political science and French literature from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and a diploma from L'institut D'Etudes Politiques in France. Her major film credit prior to teaming up with Asseyev was as a writer for *Black Belt Jones*, a 1974 Blaxploitation film about a streetwise Kung Fu master in Harlem. The first film that Asseyev and Rose produced together, *Drive In* (Columbia, 1976), was a profitable comedy about teenagers in a small Texas town. This was followed by *Big Wednesday* (Warner Bros., 1978), a heavier coming-of-age film set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War draft, and a fictionalized account of the day the Beatles first appeared on the Ed Sullivan show, *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* (Universal, 1978). The last film did poorly in the box office, but provided an opportunity for the two young women to work with executive producer Steven Spielberg and Robert Zemeckis in his directorial debut.<sup>297</sup>

Asseyev and Rose first heard about Sutton in Henry Leifermann's *New York Times* article and then read her full story in his 1975 book, *Crystal Lee, a Woman of Inheritance*. Both women were attracted to the story of a feisty woman's personal growth and dramatic resistance to authority. "Here was a woman who was trying to make life better for her children," Asseyev said. "She took all her inner means and courage [and] put everything at risk." Unionizing a textile mill did seem an unglamorous plot, but in a decade of highly publicized feminist struggles, they believed Sutton's personal story would have an appeal. They planned to pitch *Crystal Lee* as the story of an underdog, a "female Rocky." Asseyev later reflected, "We didn't expect [the movie] to be a success at all because it was a political film. We just knew that it was a film that had an emotional core that we could identify with. It was a true story, and a story that needed to be told." In 1976, the producers secured the rights to Leifermann's book and then

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<sup>297</sup>Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, 204-209.

approached Martin Ritt, a director with a reputation for turning stories about social issues into character-driven dramas.<sup>298</sup>

Martin Ritt was born on the Lower East Side of New York City on March 2, 1914 to Jewish immigrant parents. Ritt attended public school and went to Hebrew school in the afternoons, but his family was not very religious. He grew into a “tough kid” who defended himself and his friends on their way home from Hebrew lessons from the attacks of neighborhood teens. Ritt won a football scholarship to Elon College in Greensboro, North Carolina. In North Carolina he developed an idealized, romantic view of the rural landscape along with an awareness of racial injustice and southern poverty. He also got his first taste of theater life, attending plays at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and acting in a few productions at Elon. He returned to New York to study law at St. John’s University but quit to pursue a career in theater. In 1937, Ritt started working with the Group Theatre of New York City and was mentored by famed directors Elia Kazan and Harold Clurman. The Group Theatre shaped his views about how art and performance intersected with politics and social conflict. While the Group Theatre had roots in the liberal and radical theater projects of the 1930s, Ritt aimed to use the stage to illuminate societal and philosophical problems but not advocate solutions.<sup>299</sup>

After serving in the U.S. Army Air Force during World War II, Ritt began directing teleplays during the “golden age” of television. His promising career was interrupted in 1952 when CBS did not renew his contract. Donald Davis, the head of television, would not admit it, but Ritt was being blacklisted as a communist or “fellow traveler.” Five years earlier, the right-

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<sup>298</sup>*Norma Rae*, DVD, directed by Martin Ritt, 1979. Hollywood, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001.

<sup>299</sup>Gabriel Miller, *The Films of Martin Ritt* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 3-8.

wing American Business Consultants had alleged in its newsletter *Counterattack* that Ritt had assisted and donated money to union locals associated with the Communist Party. Ritt was never subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). He never publicly denied the accusations, however, and refused to assist in any anti-communist investigations. As he walked down the hallway of CBS headquarters in 1952 to his meeting with Donald Davis, he spotted a friend and colleague down the hallway who saw him and abruptly disappeared. Ritt knew then that he was blacklisted. That memory of being ostracized and betrayed surfaced in several of his movies. In *The Front*, a small-time bookie in 1950s New York City agreed to submit the work of a blacklisted television writer as his own. Three of the actors in the film – Zero Mostel, Walter Bernstein, and Lloyd Gough – had been blacklisted; the years of their time of the blacklist appeared next to their names in the credits. “I care very deeply about which is the right way for people to go,” Ritt said in the production notes.<sup>300</sup>

By the late 1950s, the anti-communistic hysteria that had stalled his career ebbed, and Ritt began working in Hollywood. He directed his first film, *Edge of the City*, in 1957, a gritty drama about longshoremen on the Manhattan waterfront, starring Sidney Poitier and John Cassavetes. The film grappled with themes that Ritt would return to throughout his career: relationships between whites and African Americans, working-class life and culture, and the struggles of ordinary people who were both heroic and flawed. *Edge of the City* was commended by the NAACP, the Urban League, and the American Jewish Committee. Some scholars have critiqued the perpetuation of black stereotypes in the film, but Ritt did push at 1950s conventions in both Hollywood and the American South. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer delayed the film’s release,

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<sup>300</sup>Miller, *The Films of Martin Ritt*, 4-6. Lyn Goldfarb and Anatoli Ilyashov, “Working Class Hero: An Interview with Martin Ritt,” in *Martin Ritt: Interviews*, ed. Gabriel Miller (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 87.

apprehensive about the interracial friendship upon which the plot centered and the racialized violence of its denouement. Many theater managers in the South refused to show the movie at all. The Motion Picture Production Code Administration, created in 1930 to set moral rules and principles for Hollywood films, cautioned Ritt that Cassavetes's performance suggested his character was a homosexual. The television version rewrote the script entirely to erase any hints of homosexuality.<sup>301</sup>

Ritt's choices of the films he made and his approach to directing were grounded in his personal experiences and principles. "*The Molly Maguires*, that I'd wanted to make all my life," he said. "I remember reading that story as a young history student and being very taken with it." The film was based on the nineteenth-century story of a group of Irish-American miners in northeastern Pennsylvania. A Pinkerton detective, James McParlan, went undercover to expose the secret organization and its leader, Jack Kehoe. The two men develop a mutual respect, but the detective betrays the radical leader and testifies against the miners, sending them to the gallows. In the final scene, McParlan visited Kehoe in jail. Kehoe refused to forgive the detective, saying, "There's no punishment this side of hell can free you from what you did." For Ritt, the denial of absolution was a statement about his own time on the blacklist. "That's very important to me," he said of the ending, "for a highly personal reason which is not a secret to anyone in this country."<sup>302</sup>

Ritt had read the *New York Times* article about Sutton in 1973. To him, the conditions in the southern textile industry in the seventies echoed the struggles of early twentieth century

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<sup>301</sup>Miller, *The Films of Martin Ritt*, 4-6. Lyn Goldfarb and Anatoli Ilyashov, "Working Class Hero: An Interview with Martin Ritt," in *Martin Ritt: Interviews*, ed. Gabriel Miller (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 87.

<sup>302</sup>Goldfarb and Ilyashov, "Working Class Hero: An Interview with Martin Ritt." On the blacklist, see Reynold Humphries *Hollywood's Blacklist: A Political and Social History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

industrial workers while reflecting contemporary social issues. “When I first heard about the situation in this industry,” he recalled, “I could not believe that I was not reading a period piece, and was further excited to find how many women were in the forefront of the struggle for civil and economic rights.”<sup>303</sup> Ritt was particularly moved by the story of Sutton telling her children about her sexual past after her arrest. “I’ve known a lot of women in my life, most of them much more educated and sophisticated [than Sutton], who would not have had the balls that she had.”<sup>304</sup> Perhaps Sutton’s story reminded him of his own family history. When he was in high school, his father divorced his mother and insisted that Martin testify in court to his mother’s infidelity. Shortly after the divorce proceedings, his father died and his estranged wife and children were left with nothing. His mother weathered the Great Depression as a single mother of two by working as an agent for chorus girls.<sup>305</sup> Little wonder that Ritt “fell in love” with Sutton and the story of the organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids in 1973. It contained nearly all of the major elements of his personal life, politics, and professional interests: an underdog determined to overcome personal obstacles, a struggle for workers’ rights, a woman ostracized for defying sexual propriety and social conventions, and all against the backdrop of a small southern town.

Ritt agreed to work with Asseyez and Rose on the project and insisted that Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank, Jr. were brought on as script writers. Ravetch and Frank were a husband and wife screenwriter team who had worked with Ritt on five film projects: *The Long, Hot Summer*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Hud*, *Hombre*, and *Conrack*. Irving Ravetch, born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1920, was the son of a rabbi. He grew up writing bar mitzvah

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<sup>303</sup>Miller, *Martin Ritt, Interviews*, 170.

<sup>304</sup>Goldfarb and Ilyashov, “Working Class Hero: An Interview with Martin Ritt,” 87.

<sup>305</sup>Miller, *The Films of Martin Ritt*, 5.

confirmation speeches for young men in his synagogue and wanted to be a Broadway playwright. His family sent him to Los Angeles when he was a teenager in the hopes the dry heat would resolve his asthma. After he graduated from the University of California in Los Angeles, he enrolled in the Junior Writers Program at the studios of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. It was there he met and fell in love with a fellow enrollee, Harriet Frank. Frank was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1917. Her mother, Harriet, had a radio program on a local station and her father ran a shoe store. The family moved to Los Angeles during the Great Depression and her mother became a well-known story editor for Hollywood studios. (Frank adopted “Jr.” to differentiate her work from her mother’s.) Ravetch and Frank married in 1946. Ravetch wrote scripts for Westerns and melodramas; Frank worked as a script polisher for several studios and wrote short stories for *Colliers* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.<sup>306</sup>

Ravetch and Frank began collaborating on screenplays in the 1950s and shifted their focus to material that illuminated social problems. Ritt’s approach to story-telling and adapting material to film influenced them. “Marty became like a big brother to us,” Ravetch said. “We were a gang of three.”<sup>307</sup> An interview with Ravetch and Frank shows how their work developed under Ritt’s influence and their engagement with southern literature:

*Frank:* All my life, I’ve seen myself writing comedy. When I wrote by myself, I wrote comedy. Somehow or other, maybe related to Marty in some way, I did go into drama.

*Ravetch:* The various pieces by Faulkner led us to the South, and the South is the landscape where the greatest evil committed by Americans occurred. It’s also where there was a terrible, bloody war. So it’s full of memories, an indelible, brooding, phantom of a place.

*Frank:* The issues that interested Marty also interested us—

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<sup>306</sup>Pat McGilligan, *Backstory 3: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1960s* (University of California Press), 1997, 274.

<sup>307</sup>“Irving Ravetch, 89, Screenwriter of ‘Hud’” Bruce Weber, *The New York Times*, September 21, 2010.



*Ravetch*: And vice versa. We have our own social concerns. After all, *Hud* dealt with the greed and materialism that was beginning to take over America, and which has fully done so today. *Conrack* and *Hombre* dealt with racism; *Norma Rae* with the exploitation of the working man, of a great industry that so long resisted being unionized.

*Frank*: Those stories are just strong stories, and they also make a social comment, which we are not ashamed to make.<sup>308</sup>

When Ritt asked Ravetch and Frank in 1977 to write the screenplay for *Crystal Lee*, they eagerly accepted. In their opinion, Ritt was a “dream director.” He left them alone to produce the screenplay and was forthright and specific about revisions. But mostly he left their work intact. He defended their decisions when studio executives, film crews, or actors criticized or demanded changes to the script. “He always protected us,” Frank recalled.<sup>309</sup>

Once Ritt had his screenwriters, he and the producers sought out a Hollywood studio to make the film. Asseyez and Rose framed their pitch around the themes of gender and sexuality, arguing that the story of a sexually expressive, independent heroine would attract female moviegoers in 1977. Focusing on a southern working-class woman, moreover, would set the film apart from the recent dramas and romantic comedies about urban, middle-class, and professional women. They downplayed the unionism in their pitches. In Hollywood, where studio executives had to face strong unions, pro-labor stories were rarely well-received. Columbia Pictures, Warner Bros. Studios, and United Artists turned down the film as too depressing and with little potential for big profits. Asseyez and Rose then pitched it to the president of Twentieth Century Fox, Alan Ladd, Jr. Ladd was not entirely confident about the movie’s potential popularity but was willing to gamble on the film with the profits from the studio’s 1976 megahit *Star Wars*. Ritt further swayed Ladd by offering to take a fifty percent salary cut. Ladd committed Twentieth

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<sup>308</sup>McGilligan, *Backstory* 3, 274-276.

<sup>309</sup>Ibid.

Century Fox studios to the project and told the producers to secure the rights to the story from Crystal Lee Sutton.<sup>310</sup>

When Sutton received the letter from Fox studios requesting her signature on the consent form, she refused. She thought this would prevent them from using her story until she approved the screenplay. But she had no legal ownership over her story as it was presented in Leifermann's book. The publisher, Macmillan, insisted that the book's principal subjects sign releases that stated they relinquished all commercial rights to the author. Leifermann's contract gave him full copyright over the personal stories he wrote about and the right to the full profits from any play, movie, or television series based on *Crystal Lee, A Woman of Inheritance*.<sup>311</sup>

The producers had already optioned the book with \$500 to Leifermann and an agreement that he would be paid \$20,000 if the movie was made. The studio still wanted a signed release from Sutton. Individuals were rarely successful in lawsuits against movie studios that purchased the rights to their story from a third party, but signed releases eliminated the time and money spent on post-production legal battles. Twentieth Century Fox sent Sutton another letter. This time, Sutton retained a lawyer. Her attorney, Syd Alexander, arranged a meeting with Ritt and the studio's attorneys in April of 1978 in Durham, North Carolina. After the meeting, Alexander informed Sutton that Ritt was offering her \$25,000 to sign the release. But she insisted that she would not sign the form unless she had editorial authority over the script. Ritt refused to allow that. Sutton's lawyers threatened to sue under a North Carolina law that required the explicit

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<sup>310</sup>Miller, *Martin Ritt*, 60-61.

<sup>311</sup>Henry Leifermann, "Selling Out to Hollywood," *Atlanta Magazine*, 1980.

consent of the principal subjects of the story before filmmakers could use their names and likenesses.<sup>312</sup> The two parties were at an impasse.

Sutton had two objections to Ritt's plan to base his movie on her life story. First, she feared the focus on her sexual past would make the film "tawdry" and distract viewers from the issue of workers' rights. If a movie were made about her life, she wanted it to be one would "help people understand that companies cannot continue to treat people the way they do and get away with it." She also worried that a spicy Hollywood movie about her would have consequences for her children, who were now teenagers and young adults. "I don't want anybody to make a film about me and my family and make it something dirty, sexy, un-Christian," she told the *Charlotte Observer* when they interviewed her in 1978 about the "brouhaha" surrounding the making of the film. Second, she feared that the focus on her personal story would erase the work and sacrifices of other pro-union people in Roanoke Rapids, especially the black workers, and that the film would not educate the public about the continuing struggle for a contract.<sup>313</sup>

Sutton had been in conversations with Barbara Kopple, director of the 1976 Oscar-winning documentary *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, about producing a movie based on the organizing drive in Roanoke Rapids in 1973-1974. The struggle was compelling, but Kopple felt that the events of the organizing drive were not current enough to produce the kind of spontaneous interactions and scenes she had captured in Kentucky. She wanted to make the story her first fictional movie. Kopple visited Crystal and stayed with the Suttons in their Burlington home. During that time, she convinced Crystal that she was motivated by the social and political issues

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<sup>312</sup>"Life on Film?" *Greensboro Daily Times*, April 18, 1979, CLS #986.87.

<sup>313</sup>Mary Bishop, "The Diary of a Union Organizer," *Charlotte Observer*, May 7, 1978.

behind the story, not the sensational aspects of Crystal's life. Kopple took the project quite seriously. *Variety* reported on March 15, 1978 that Kopple was employed under an assumed name as a towel folder in an unidentified southern mill, "working ten-hour days at \$2.25 per hour." Nancy Dowd was slated to write the script based on taped interviews with textile workers. Dowd had scripted the 1977 comedy *Slapshot* and wrote the story for the weightier 1978 *Coming Home*, a drama about a wounded Vietnam War veteran. Kopple hoped to cast Rip Torn in Eli Zivkovich's role and Lily Tomlin as Crystal Lee. She anticipated her film would be released by spring of 1979. Kopple's plans, however, would be delayed and complicated by copyright conflicts with Leifermann and the 1979 release of Twentieth Century Fox's version of Sutton's story. In 1981, Kopple would finally complete her fictional account of the Roanoke Rapids organizing drive. *Keeping On* premiered on PBS's American Playhouse on February 8, 1983. The lead character, a black worker/minister who struggles to maintain his hope and faith after being fired for his union support, was probably based on Joseph Williams.<sup>314</sup>

When it became clear to Ritt that Sutton would never sign a release without editorial authority, he instructed Ravetch and Frank to rewrite the script to remove the specific references to living people, Roanoke Rapids, and J.P. Stevens. Producers Rose and Asseyev called ACTWU senior executive vice president Sol Stetin, asking for information on other women who played prominent roles in the Stevens campaign. They hoped the union could provide names and "a one-sentence sketch" of other female leaders of the rank-and-file.<sup>315</sup> It is not clear what information the union shared with the filmmakers, but when the producers asked for permission to use the union's name in April 1978, Stetin refused. ACTWU counsellor Alan Derickson warned Stetin,

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<sup>314</sup>"Kopple Eyes J.P. Stevens," *Variety*, March 15, 1978.

<sup>315</sup>Mary Howe to Paul Swaity, Memo re: film of Crystal Lee Jordan, November 14, 1977, Box 13, Folder 24, 5619/038, Kheel.

“It would be a mistake to allow these people to use our name for what is likely to be a sensational film, over [which] we have no control. They might try to portray Roanoke Rapids as Peyton Place.” Derickson also informed him that no one from the production staff had made any attempt to contact the president of Opelika’s union local.<sup>316</sup>

The film moved into production as *Norma Rae* in the late spring of 1978, without Sutton’s consent and without her having received a cent. Sutton eventually did receive a settlement from the studio in 1985.<sup>317</sup> Leifermann swore he never received more than \$500 from the producers.<sup>318</sup> In 1978, however, Sutton’s main concern was finding a way to prevent the movie from being made. Her attorney threatened to sue Twentieth Century Fox for invasion of privacy.<sup>319</sup> Ritt lamented that Sutton was “no longer [a] free spirit” and had “turned into a middle-class bourgeois woman who doesn’t want anyone to know about her life.”<sup>320</sup>

Sutton may have objected to Ritt’s vision for telling her story, but she did not resent that her private life was made public. She had already done that much in countless interviews and for Leifermann’s book. She was willing to forsake privacy and reputation if the movie would tell her story “as it really is, as it was lived at that time.”<sup>321</sup> She wanted to control the meaning and telling of her experiences. In 1973, Sutton had felt powerless in her life, confined by her role as wife and mother, condemned to mill work, and dogged by her past. She saw unionization as a

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<sup>316</sup>Alan Derickson to Sol Stetin, May 19, 1978, Box 13, Folder 26,b5619/038, Kheel.

<sup>317</sup>Jordan interview.

<sup>318</sup>Henry Leifermann, “Selling Out to Hollywood,” *Atlanta Magazine*, 1980.

<sup>319</sup>William C. Lhotka, “Real-life Norma Rae Recalls Stevens Fight During St. Louis Visit,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 14, 1980.

<sup>320</sup>Lelia Carson Albrecht, “The Real ‘Norma Rae’ is Anguished,” *People* 11, No. 17, April 30, 1979, 43-44.

<sup>321</sup>C.S. Crawford, “Life on Film? One-time organizer, Crystal Lee says movie is based on her life,” *Greensboro Daily Times*, April 18, 1979, at CLS #986.87

way to break some of the chains that bound her, limited her children's future, and kept textile workers trapped in economic insecurity and divided by race. Now in 1978, she felt powerless to control her own liberation story. If given the opportunity, Sutton believed, she could use her story to benefit the union's campaign against Stevens and "show the people that they can stand up for their rights."<sup>322</sup> As Ritt moved forward with his telling of her story, under the new title *Norma Rae*, it must have seemed to her that once again, people with more resources, education, and access to power were pulling the strings in her life.

With the consent dilemma resolved by changing the names and places, the filmmakers moved into action. Casting the title role was the first priority. Twentieth Century Fox president Ladd wanted a popular star for the female lead, a strong actress who could carry the story. At least three women were under consideration for the part, including Jane Fonda. Well known for her 1960s anti-war activism, Fonda continued to engage political and social justice issues throughout the 1970s, including welfare rights and economic justice. Fonda endorsed the Stevens boycott at its inception and visited Roanoke Rapids in 1978 to see the conditions under which workers lived and labored. She stayed with Si Kahn, an ACTWU staffer, and Charlotte Brody, an organizer with the Carolina Brown Lung Association. "She was great. She met with some of the workers, went to meetings. Our sons loved her," Brody recalled. "But she took long showers and used up all the hot water."<sup>323</sup> Fonda was "smuggled" into one of the weave rooms and could not believe the "medieval conditions." After her visit, she wrote an account for ACTWU's news service of what she witnessed: the noise levels, the dust clogging the air, the dangerous machinery. Her conversations with workers, especially the women, revealed to her "the appalling

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<sup>322</sup>Mary Bishop, "The Diary of a Union Organizer," *Charlotte Observer*, May 7, 1978.

<sup>323</sup>Brody interview.

economic deprivation as well as the emotional strain [of keeping] a marriage and a family together when the women have to work long hours and their husbands are on another shift.”<sup>324</sup>

Fonda’s eyewitness account was published in the newsletter for the Stevens Campaign News Service in 1978, and the story was picked up by several wire services.<sup>325</sup>

Fonda was considering the Norma Rae role while she was in Roanoke Rapids, but weaver Maurine Hedgepeth, urged her to decline the role because the movie would “throw us in a bad light” and the Norma Rae character was based on “a loose woman.”<sup>326</sup> Hedgepeth and Sutton had not gotten along during the 1973-74 organizing drive. Hedgepeth had been convinced that Sutton and Eli Zivkovich, the union organizer, were in love and that Sutton’s involvement in the organizing drive damaged the union cause. Brody arrived in Roanoke Rapids after the election victory, but knew about the conflicts that had divided the pro-union workers during the organizing drive. “I’d try to talk to Maurine about Crystal, but she would say, ‘You don’t understand, Charlotte. When she was in the room, Eli wouldn’t see anyone else,’” Brody recounted. “I’d say, well, maybe that wasn’t Crystal’s fault, but she didn’t want to hear it. Crystal wasn’t a ‘good girl.’”<sup>327</sup>

Fonda declined Ritt’s offer, instead taking the role of an investigative journalist who exposes a cover-up at a nuclear power plant in *The China Syndrome*. Perhaps Hedgepeth influenced Fonda’s decision, or the anti-nuclear message in *The China Syndrome* appealed more

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<sup>324</sup>Statement prepared for the Stevens Campaign News Service by Jane Fonda, , Box 8, Folder 13, 5619/007, Kheel.

<sup>325</sup>Victor Riesel, “Control of billions involved in J.P. Stevens,” *Rome News-Tribune*, October 12, 1978.

<sup>326</sup>Moe Foner, interviewed by Robert Master, Columbia University Oral History Research Office, Notable New Yorkers collection, Session 15, page 359, [http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/nny/fonerm/transcripts/fonerm\\_1\\_15\\_356.html](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/nny/fonerm/transcripts/fonerm_1_15_356.html), January 23, 1986. (Hereafter cited as “Foner interview.”)

<sup>327</sup>Brody interview.

to her political sensibilities. Ritt was not perturbed; he had been skeptical that Fonda could pull off a convincing southern accent. He also wanted an actress who could convince audiences of her vulnerability, “a girl who could underplay” and “who starts out as a simple woman with very little education, a woman who has no hope in her life.” Fonda’s high-profile activism might have made it difficult for audiences to imagine her as someone who initially resists her political transformation and doubts her own capacity for leadership.<sup>328</sup>

Ritt needed a strong actress to carry the title role. As one actress after another turned him down, he began to look beyond the Hollywood “A-list” of leading ladies. A friend showed Ritt the 1976 television movie, *Sybil*, in which Sally Field delivered an Emmy-award winning performance as a woman struggling with schizophrenia. Ritt immediately sent Field the script and an offer to play the title role. Field was traveling at the time, but her mother, with whom she and her two sons from her first marriage lived, read the script and called her daughter, urging her to take the offer. “I had been playing what I call ‘the girl,’” Field explained. “I realized I had a desperate, very personal need to establish myself as a serious actress.” She took her mother’s advice and accepted the role before reading the screenplay.<sup>329</sup>

Sally Field has become so well-known for her performance as Norma Rae, it is hard to imagine that she was ever an unlikely candidate for the role. Born in Pasadena, California, in 1946, Field was best known in the 1970s for television roles as Gidget, the stereotypical California beach gal, and the sweet and silly title character of *The Flying Nun*. “I was a continual put-down, a national joke, a running gag,” she said. Her performance in *Sybil* was well-received, but in 1977, she played the love interest of Burt Reynolds in *Smokey and the Bandit*, and was

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<sup>328</sup>Albrecht, “The Real ‘Norma Rae’ is Anguished.”

<sup>329</sup>*Norma Rae*, Special Commentary, DVD, directed by Martin Ritt, 1979. Hollywood, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001.



having a hard time breaking out of her “sweetheart” image. Twentieth Century Fox president Alan Ladd was skeptical about the casting choice, but Ritt convinced him that Field had the mix of strength and insecurity that he wanted audiences to see in the character.<sup>330</sup>

Ritt’s next concern was finding a location in which to film. Constructing the interior of a textile manufacturing plant would have been costly and difficult. Moreover, Ritt valued authenticity in his films; he never would have been satisfied with a studio set. He wanted scenes filmed inside a working cotton mill and his actors immersed in the world of a southern mill town. Ritt sent scouts into northern Georgia, where he had filmed parts of *Conrack*. “The Georgia film commission tried its best,” recalled Ritt, “but eventually realized it was bucking one of the most powerful outfits in the state – the textile industry.” A group of textile manufacturers in Georgia objected to having the movie filmed in their state. It is possible that J.P. Stevens used its influence in the South to close doors to Ritt’s film crew, although it is just as likely that Ritt’s reputation or the film’s subject matter (or both) fostered mill owners’ opposition.<sup>331</sup>

Ritt turned his attention west of Georgia’s state line. Alabama Governor George Wallace was promoting the state to the film industry, and Ritt was able to arrange meetings with at least two mill owners. One backed out of talks, but the owners in Opelika were interested in Ritt’s offer of \$25,000 to film inside their mill. Like Roanoke Rapids, Opelika was a small town, with a population of about 16,000, situated along a major interstate that connected it to urban centers. Opelika straddled Interstate Eighty-Five in east central Alabama, about sixty miles east of Montgomery. Auburn University was nine miles from the town center. Opelika’s economy was

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<sup>330</sup>*Norma Rae*, Special Commentary, DVD, directed by Martin Ritt, 1979. Hollywood, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001.

<sup>331</sup>Ray Herbeck, “Shoot ‘Norma Rae’ In Dixie?” *On Location: the Film and Videotape Production Magazine*, Nov/Dec, 1978, Box 13, Folder 24, 5619/038, Kheel.

more diversified than that of Roanoke Rapids. By the late 1970s, there was a large Uniroyal tire plant, an exercise equipment manufacturer, a sheet metal and iron fabricating facility, and a bottling company. The mill was organized and under contract with ACTWU.<sup>332</sup>

Ritt wanted Opelika. It suited the film's needs, and Stillwaters Resort on Lake Martin was a half hour drive north of the mill, providing comfortable accommodations for the cast and crew. When negotiations with the mill owner seemed to stall, Ritt raised the offer to \$100,000 and the owners accepted. The director had a mill for his movie. After two weeks of rehearsals, the cast and crew of *Norma Rae* descended upon Opelika, Alabama, on May 1, 1978. The town was named Henleyville in the script and the mill became "O.P. Henley" a thinly veiled nod to "J.P. Stevens." Ritt filmed scenes in the town's diners, churches, and bars. The domestic scenes were filmed in mill houses that the studios purchased.<sup>333</sup>

The Opelika mill was more a character in the film than a set. The windows were bricked over, giving the exterior an imposing air. Cinematographer John Alonzo adapted to the challenges of filming inside the weave room. The noise was deafening. Sound engineers embedded microphones in earplugs for the actors. "Sally would scream," Alonzo recalled, "and [we would] record it." The space between looms was so narrow, he had to use a handheld camera for the interior scenes. Ritt liked the effect so much he insisted that Alonzo film ninety percent of the scenes that way. The running machines shook the floors and made focusing the camera difficult, but Alonzo agreed that it was worth the trouble. "It gave the picture a tension, an anxiety," he said. "It has a grittiness." Alonzo was shocked by the conditions inside the mills.

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<sup>332</sup>Walter G. Davis, Director, Department of Education, to Trade Unionist, April 9, 1979; Box 13, Folder 26, 5619/038, Kheel.

<sup>333</sup>Herbeck, "Shoot 'Norma Rae' in Dixie?"

“The break rooms are five-foot by six-foot cubby holes,” he remarked. But before the union, the workers told him, they had to eat their lunches inside the washrooms.<sup>334</sup>

The people of Opelika were cast as extras. A city judge played the part of the justice of peace when Norma Rae and Sonny were married. Carolyn Danforth, a retired schoolteacher, was hired to play an elderly woman in the mill. The cast and crew were so taken with her that Ritt had a few lines written for her and gave her a screen credit. Active workers operated the looms and created a “brilliant background” that ensured the film’s authenticity. The union meeting in Norma Rae’s house is one of the few scenes where the workers emerge from the film’s backdrop. Norma Rae hosts an interracial union meeting at her house, just as Sutton had. The scene is taken from Leifermann's brief account of Sutton's husband's chagrin that she invited black men. The book does not describe what went on in the meeting, so Ravetch and Frank created dialogue. The meeting begins with Ruben encouraging the workers to share with him the troubles they have in the mill. “They make us bring in a doctor’s note if we miss work,” says an elderly white woman. “We wouldn’t say we were sick if we wasn’t.” A young white woman sits on Norma Rae's couch, hands folded demurely in her lap, and hesitantly speaks after the elderly worker. "Excuse me for saying this with menfolk present," she practically whispers. "But sometimes I get my menstrual cramps real bad and need to sit down, but we get in trouble if we take a break." The invented dialogue dramatized the concerns that mill women articulated in interviews and testimony.<sup>335</sup>

Most of the dozen men and women in this scene were professional actors, but a few were real mill workers. Alonzo remembered tiptoeing around the room with his handheld camera,

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<sup>334</sup>Herbeck, “Shoot ‘Norma Rae’ In Dixie?” *On Location: the Film and Videotape Production Magazine*. Nov/Dec, 1978, Box 13, Folder 24, 5619/03, Kheel.

<sup>335</sup>*Ibid.*

prepared to swivel and pivot along with the script to capture each face as the lines are delivered. Lucius, an African American worker (played by a professional actor), says, “There used to be a window where I worked, but they closed it up. Now I look at a brick wall all day. A man’s work should be his work, not a prison sentence.” Suddenly the young black man on the other side of the room speaks. “The blacks have been pushed and pushed for too long. If a union is what everyone believes in, I’m for it all the way.” The words seem to tumble out of him with both force and uncertainty. The young man was a real mill worker, cast as an extra with no lines. “[He] got caught up in what everyone else was saying,” Alonzo recalled. “He delivered the most eloquent speech of all as to why they should be unionized. Marty and I got chills listening to it. We had to leave it in.”<sup>336</sup> The line between fact and fiction in the film was indeed blurry.

The textile workers remained, for the most, as the “brilliant backdrop” in the movie. The passionate yet platonic relationship between Norma Rae and Ruben dominates the movie. This was a deliberate move on the part of Ritt and the scriptwriters. “Because there was no violence in the story, we were looking for tension,” Ritt explained. They created the tension by pulling the two characters emotionally closer, but never to the point of romantic love or sexual intimacy. Ritt explained that this protected “the whole moral fiber of the film.” If Ruben and Norma consummated their relationship, it would seem to audiences, Ritt feared, that the organizer “was going from one town to another, screwing every dame he made a connection with.”<sup>337</sup>

When Ritt coached Field and Liebman, he would sometimes give them opposite directions in a scene to create a harmonic discord that emphasized the tension he wanted audiences to see between the characters. For instance, when Norma Rae took Ruben out to talk

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<sup>336</sup>Herbeck, “Shoot ‘Norma Rae’ In Dixie?” *On Location: the Film and Videotape Production Magazine*. Nov/Dec, 1978, Box 13, Folder 24, 5619/03, Kheel.

<sup>337</sup>Goldfarb and Ilyashov, “Working Class Hero: An Interview with Martin Ritt,” 87.

with workers on the rural back roads, Ruben slips and falls into a patch of cow manure. The camera cuts to a bucolic swimming hole. Ruben is naked in the water, lazily paddling in circles, while Norma Rae, clothed, washes his shirt on the banks of the river. She decides to join him in the water. Ritt told Liebman that when Field strips and jumps in the water with him, he should avert his gaze, swim away from her, and generally keep his distance throughout the scene. Then Ritt told Field, privately, to “be very flirtatious” in the water and try to swim close to Liebman as they talk. Liebman recalled, “As we were shooting, she [kept] skittering around me and throwing her hair back. She’d never done this in rehearsal.”<sup>338</sup> Ritt’s direction produced his desired effect. In the movie, the naked figures seem to dance around each other in the water; every time Norma Rae attempts to close the distance, Reuben reconfigures the space between them. Authenticity was important to Ritt, and Liebman’s movements and expressions blend genuine confusion with a slight level of discomfort. The actors are both a little breathless as they swim and deliver their lines, heightening the sense of restrained passion between the two swimmers.

The climax of the movie is Field’s dramatization of Sutton’s moment of defiance. Norma Rae stands on a table in the weave room with the UNION sign over her head. “In that moment,” Field later reflected, “I don’t know if I became Norma Rae or she became me.” Field’s performance in the scene after her defiance on the shop floor attests to her immersion in the character. After Norma Rae climbs down from the table and consents to leave the mill, she struggles with the police outside of the mill gate. “How angry can I be?” Field had asked Ritt. “How angry *can* you be?” he replied. The scene is taken directly from Leifermann’s pages, but the one-hundred-and-five-pound Field may have outdone Sutton in her fierceness. In the scene, five police officers try to force Norma Rae into the backseat of the police car but she resists.

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<sup>338</sup>*Norma Rae*, Special Commentary, DVD, directed by Martin Ritt, 1979. Hollywood, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001.

“The car meant this *tremendous* defeat,” Field recalled. “One of the fellas [playing a police officer], I broke his rib. And I broke some guy’s fifty-year retirement watch, and another guy sprained his wrist. I just didn’t want to get in that car.” The story came alive for Field and the *Norma Rae* cast through the weeks of filming in the summer heat in 1978.<sup>339</sup>

*Norma Rae* premiered on Friday, March 2, 1979 in Los Angeles and New York City. The movie grossed \$262,778 in its opening weekend. The initial reviews were positive, with many predicting that the film would garner multiple Academy Awards. The movie’s popularity increased after the Thirty-Second Annual Cannes Film Festival in May 1979 in France. *Norma Rae* was nominated for the Palme D’Or, the highest award at Cannes. It lost to *Apocalypse Now*, but Martin Ritt took home the Technical Grand Prize and Sally Field won Best Actress. Field recalled that the applause at Cannes for *Norma Rae* seemed to go on for a half an hour. “They wouldn’t stop,” she recalled with exultation and a hint of disbelief.<sup>340</sup>

Reviews of *Norma Rae* in national media praised both the subject matter and the work of the filmmakers and cast. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* applauded the director and cast for capturing the essence of the textile workers: “their grit, their emotional reserves and their complex feelings for one another.” Canby concluded, “When the issues dividing labor and management can be clearly drawn, there is nothing quite as satisfying as collective effort to fight oppression.”<sup>341</sup>

Textile manufacturers were concerned about precisely that message. A labor consultant arranged for a screening of *Norma Rae* for a group of mill executives in Atlanta. The executives

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<sup>339</sup>*Norma Rae*, Special Commentary, DVD, directed by Martin Ritt, 1979. Hollywood, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001.

<sup>340</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>341</sup>Vincent Canby, “‘Norma Rae,’ Mill-Town Story,” *New York Times*, March 2, 1979, Box13, Folder 24, 5619/038, Kheel.

complained that the organizer was a “Christ” figure, while management was “cast in [a] satanic light.” Some of the audience members worried about the film’s potential influence on workers. One attendee suggested that managers should distribute free movie tickets to show workers “that we recognize that things weren’t always as good as they are now.” The labor consultant concluded that the film “could make a difference in areas where the union has been defeated by relatively small margins.”<sup>342</sup>

Organized labor hoped to capitalize on the power of a good movie as an educational and organizing tool. Walter G. Davis, director of the AFL-CIO’s Department of Education, recommended that affiliates urge members to see the film and provided a discussion guide.<sup>343</sup> ACTWU officials were surprised that *Norma Rae* was so well received, but moved quickly to take advantage of the sympathetic portrayal of the Roanoke Rapids story. David Dyson, the Field Director for ACTWU’s Union Labor Department, recalled, “I was stunned at the number of issues that we were trying to project through the campaign that were touched upon in the film.”<sup>344</sup> Boycott organizers leafleted at movie theaters and tried to connect the drama on the screen with the ongoing struggle. In Baltimore, allies in the IBEW attended a special screening and distributed fliers with the title “NORMA RAE IS STILL WAITING.” They reported that the leaflets were “anxiously received.” One audience member admitted to the organizer, “That’s the first time in my life I have felt pro-union. I really enjoyed the film.” In Atlanta, ACTWU organizer Joel Gray marveled that *Norma Rae* drew long lines at five theaters for several weeks

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<sup>342</sup>“Norma Rae, a name that the industry will not soon forget,” *America’s Textiles*, April 1979, 36-38, Box 13, Folder 26, 5619/038, Kheel.

<sup>343</sup> Walter G. Davis, Director, Department of Education, to Trade Unionist, April 9, 1979, Box 13, Folder 26, 5619/038, Kheel.

<sup>344</sup>Douglas, *Labor’s New Voice*, 238.

and that he had never had so much success leafleting. “In summary,” he wrote, “I feel ‘Norma Rae’ is helping us.”<sup>345</sup>

Union organizers and their allies contacted local media to report on the true story behind the film’s plot, with some success. The *Charlotte Observer* ran two stories on the movie in the Sunday March 11 edition. Catherine Chapin concluded that *Norma Rae* “weaves art with mills’ reality” to create “a beautiful, touching story.” J.P. Stevens executives and managers must have cringed when they read Chapin’s explanation of the real story upon which the movie was based, which discussed the “repressive background” that motivated the real-life Norma Rae and noted that Sutton was fired “illegally.” Bob Dennis’s article featured interviews with three active textile workers and ACTWU members. One worker, who wished to be identified only as Linda, insisted the ending was a distortion. Voting in the union was just the beginning of the struggle. “In places where there’s right to work (laws),” she explained, “you gotta keep fighting.” Fifty-year-old Ruth Benfield confirmed the movie’s depiction of the working conditions in mills. “The more you do, the more they expect,” she said of her managers at the American Thread Company’s mill in Clover, South Carolina. “Oh, you could just take your fist and ram [the company’s engineers] right in the nose.”<sup>346</sup>

Even in Greenville, South Carolina, a town that one labor activist described as “a graveyard of union organizing,” an article in the local paper on March 25 presented the reactions to the movie from two weavers in Stevens’s White Horse No. 2 plant. Mildred Ramsey refuted the movie’s portrayal of the harsh working conditions and condemned the union for “vandalism, violence [and] ugliness.” Ramsey was especially disturbed by the portrayal of the mill town and

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<sup>345</sup>Marlene Wade to Del Mileski, August 26, 1979, Box 13, Folder 26, 5619/007, Kheel.

<sup>346</sup>Catherine Chapin, “‘Norma Rae’ Film Weaves Art With Mills’ Reality” and Bob Dennis, “Films Have Endings, But Workers Feel Struggles Go On,” the *Charlotte Observer*, March 11, 1979.



workers in the film. "The image of textile workers [...] as filthy, illiterate is not only unflattering, it's untrue," she said. "We do bathe other than our armpits. Look at my hands: they are clean, neatly manicured; not like those of Norma Rae in the film where grease was embedded in her skin, and hers looked like mechanic's fingers." Pat Burgess, though, adored the movie. "I even got so excited," she said, "I had to holler two or three times." She admitted that not all textile workers live under conditions as hopeless and deprived as the film suggested, but avowed that *Norma Rae* was "fact, not fiction." An active participant in the union's organizing drive in the White Horse plant, Burgess was thrilled that movie showed the pressure from managers and the conflict with anti-union co-workers. "It's like you're working in a pit of snakes," she said. "Those ladies, I love them, but they're afraid, they define their opinions with what their husbands think."<sup>347</sup>

*Norma Rae* met with resistance in some southern towns. One movie theater in Atlanta shut down the movie after one weekend. ACTWU mobilized allies in the city to demand the theater show the film. In May 1979 in Laurens, South Carolina, the Oaks Cinema cancelled screenings of *Norma Rae* after the manager received harassing phone calls. A group of unknown individuals attempted to tear down the cinema's marquee. Southerners for Economic Justice organized a petitioning campaign to the stars of the film from moviegoers in Laurens. One handwritten letter stated, "We beg you Mr. Liebman [Ron Leibman] please don't let us miss *Norma Rae*. We have heard so much about it and want to see it in our home town where it should be shown." The authors added, "P.S. There is a J. P. Stevens supervisor who works part time at the Oaks Theater." Workers at a unionized glass bottling facility joined with pro-union Stevens workers in Laurens in pressuring the cinema's management to persuade the theater to show

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<sup>347</sup>Sharon Todd, "Two Reviews of *Norma Rae*," March 25, 1979, *Greenville News and Piedmont*, Box 26, Folder "Norma Rae Articles.," TWUA, SHSW.

*Norma Rae*, but the manager insisted that the booking company wanted him to show *The Champ* instead.<sup>348</sup>

The *News and Observer* in Raleigh reported that the film generated little interest in Roanoke Rapids when it opened on June 15. Tommy Clifton, manager of the Cinema Theater, declined to reveal ticket sales, but said it was “less than fifty percent” of what he expected. Given J.P. Stevens’s influence on the local merchants in the town, Clifton’s dismissal of the film was predictable. The company had been under fire from organized labor, civil rights activists, ministers, and feminists for three years, and had Hollywood celebrities infiltrating its operations. Stevens’s local allies had no interest in helping the movie fan the flames. Yet, if nothing else, curiosity drove residents to the movie theater. “I’m here because I’m nosy,” Diane Arp declared. “I heard the movie and the book were a bunch of lies.” Eula Cutler thought that *Norma Rae* was “a slap in the face.” Echoing Mildred Ramsey’s criticism, Cutler complained that the movie made her hometown “look like a hick town” with “shabby houses.” But her husband countered her, contending that it “may be a slap in the face,” but the depiction of the working conditions in mills rang true to him.<sup>349</sup>

The ACTWU organizer in Roanoke Rapids, Clyde Bush, admitted that the first night’s attendance was low, but blamed it on a lack of advertising. The movie was not listed on the marquis until just hours before the show time. Bush assured Stetin that the movie drew “large crowds” after the opening night and that the response from mill workers had been positive. However, two months later when ACTWU planned the celebration of the fifth anniversary of the election victory, rank-and-file members of the contract negotiation committee expressed no

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<sup>348</sup>Report on *Norma Rae* viewings and controversy at the Oaks Cinema, April 30–May 18, 1979, Box 25, Folder “Norma Rae (cancellation),” TWUA SHSW.

<sup>349</sup>Ginny Carroll, “Union film falters in Roanoke Rapids,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 15, 1979.

interest in screening *Norma Rae*. The film's focus on the relationship between the organizer and Norma Rae was too vivid a reminder of the internal conflicts in 1973.<sup>350</sup>

For some feminists and female activists, in contrast, the film's representation of the interpersonal relationships that develop during organizing campaigns was the strongest and most authentic element. In Arkansas, organizer Elena Hanggi reviewed *Norma Rae* of the newsletter for the Association for Reform Now (ACORN), describing it as a film about "'isms' – feminism, unionism – and also about strong feelings of boredom, frustration, anger, oppression, fear, bravery, and hope." She saw her own experiences reflected in Ruben's character. Organizers tried to find common ground with people sometimes vastly different from themselves. The sting in this kind of work, she explained, was that when that connection was achieved, just when the organizer could see the fruits of her labor in the people's mobilization, she must leave the community to "grapple with the issues themselves" and move on to the next assignment.<sup>351</sup>

In Cleveland, a reviewer in the feminist newspaper *What She Wants* praised the filmmakers for presenting the relationship between Norma Rae and the organizer as an "equal friendship in action." In *Norma Rae*, the author contended, "'women's issues' and 'workers' issues' are intertwined and explored so that we see the close, vital relationship between the two: Norma Rae can't be a free woman until she can get some control over the company that rules Henleyville; the mill workers won't win if the potential of women like Norma Rae is submerged."<sup>352</sup> Ruben empowered Norma Rae, who, in turn, empowered her community.

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<sup>350</sup>Bush to Stetin, June 18, 1979, Box 13, Folder 26, 5619/038, Kheel. ACWTU internal memo on the fifth anniversary celebrations in Roanoke Rapids, August 26, 1979, Box 14, Folder 6, 5619/038, Kheel.

<sup>351</sup>Elena Hanggi, "Norma Rae: A Movie Review," Arkansas ACORN Newsletter 2, no. 2, March/April 1979, Box 18, Folder 23, 5619/007, Kheel.

<sup>352</sup>"A Surprise from Hollywood," *What She Wants* 6, no. 12, May 1979, Box 18, Folder 23, 5619/007, Kheel.

Writing for *Ms. Magazine*, Elizabeth Stone saw a very different power dynamic at work in the relationship between Norma Rae and Ruben. The unrequited romance between the two, Stone argued, reduced Norma Rae's motivation for joining the union campaign to her sexual attraction to Ruben. The male organizer was noble in his resistance to the sexual charge between the two, while the female worker's motive was "trivialized." Stone noted that the story was based on "the real 'Norma Rae' Crystal Lee," and lamented that Ritt did not provide more of the context of the organizing drive to explore better the social and economic constraints that push women into public activism.<sup>353</sup> Feminist moviegoers contested the meaning of the relationship between Norma Rae and Ruben, suggesting the emotive power of the film's blending of the political and the intimate dimensions of organizing.

No one was more invested in controlling the meaning of the film than Crystal Lee Sutton. With the movie's release in the spring of 1979, Sutton was once again thrust into the spotlight. Dozens of journalists contacted or visited Sutton to hear what the "real 'Norma Rae'" thought about Hollywood's version of her story. Newspaper articles between May and November covered Sutton's threats to sue Twentieth Century Fox for making the movie without her permission. Interviewers questioned her about the "thin discrepancies" between her story and the filmmakers' fictionalized account. While the coverage often publicized the union's campaign against Stevens, journalists focused more on Sutton's critiques of the film and her determination to gain control over her life story. The articles were entirely sympathetic to Sutton, noting that she was "blacklisted" in North Carolina and struggled with unemployment and poverty. The

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<sup>353</sup>Elizabeth Stone, "'Norma Rae: The Story They Could Have Told,'" *Ms. Magazine*, May 1979.

*Detroit Free Press* lamented that there was “no happy ending for the real-life Norma Rae.” The *Philadelphia Inquirer* called her a “media darling.”<sup>354</sup>

Sutton was prepared to use the “Norma Rae” publicity any way she could. When the movie was released, Sutton was employed as a housekeeper at the Hilton Inn in Burlington, North Carolina. She was happier at the motel than she had been in her previous, intermittent jobs since Stevens fired her. Her son Mark joined her at the Hilton Inn, working as part of the maintenance staff. The staff and management were friendly, and, if her reputation preceded her, she did not experience any repercussions from it. In the summer of 1979, however, she had to stop working when a foot injury sustained five years ago when a cart ran over her foot in the Stevens plant began to cause her problems. Shortly thereafter, Mark informed her that Best Western had purchased the motel and reduced or eliminated employees’ benefits. Along with her son and some former coworkers, Sutton initiated an organizing drive, calling in representatives from the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders Union. When she spoke on the phone with the union representative about starting an organizing drive at the Burlington Best Western, she felt her case was not being taken seriously. “Wait a minute,” she said, interrupting the union representative, “have you ever heard of the movie *Norma Rae*?” When he answered affirmatively, Sutton said, “Well, this is the real Norma Rae.”<sup>355</sup>

In August of 1979, Sutton wrote to ACTWU senior executive vice president Sol Stetin, expressing concerns that the media attention from the movie could hurt the union. Her lack of understanding about the intricacies of labor law made her unprepared to field questions from the

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<sup>354</sup>Rick Nichols, “In a mill town, ‘Norma Rae’ means Crystal Lee,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 5, 1979. Chip Visci, “No happy ending for the real-life Norma Rae,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 25, 1979. Dorothy Lewis, “Norma Rae comments on movie, unionism,” *St. Louis Dispatch*, May 22, 1979. C.S. Crawford, “Life on Film?” *Daily Times*, April 18, 1979. All in Box 18, Folder 23, 5619/007, Kheel.

<sup>355</sup>Jim Jenkins, “Real ‘Norma Rae’ Is Organizing Again,” *Greensboro Daily News*, December 5, 1979, CLS #986.87.

media about the union's campaign. She was bitter about Stevens's firing her and being blacklisted, and at the filmmakers for using her story without her permission. But she feared that anti-union interests would twist her words and make it seem as though she resented the union. "I don't want J.P. [Stevens] to use me to destroy what we all worked so hard for [in] Roanoke Rapids," she wrote.<sup>356</sup>

The union had been considering how to manage the publicity the movie had generated to their best advantage. Stetin hired Gail Jeffords, a public relations agent, to develop a strategy for using *Norma Rae* as an organizing tool. Del Mileski, the director of the Union Label department, and Pam Woywod, assistant director of the Public Relations department, agreed that the movie could be useful, but there must be a way to connect the Norma Rae story to the boycott and corporate campaign. It could not all be about Sutton's personal experiences and individual actions. Woywod and Jeffords became the architects of a cohesive plan for managing the Norma Rae publicity and using Sutton's popularity.

Woywod outlined the union's plan for the speaking tour in a letter and contract to Sutton on October 26, 1979. Sutton must be available to speak at special viewings of the movie, as well as give television, radio, and newspaper interviews. Her job was to publicize the union's campaign against J.P. Stevens and talk about "the *true* events surrounding [the] union's organizing of the J.P. Stevens Roanoke Rapids plant[s]" (emphasis in original). She would receive a retainer of \$100 a week, whether or not she had any speaking arrangements during the week. Additionally, the union would pay her \$100 for each appearance, not to exceed \$200 a week regardless of the number of engagements. ACTWU would pay her travel and accommodation costs and provide a \$25 daily allowance when she traveled. This was new

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<sup>356</sup>Crystal Lee Sutton to Sol Stetin, August 30, 1979, Box 10, Folder 3, 5619/038, Kheel. Del Mileski to Sol Stetin, "Crystal Lee Sutton," September 7, 1979, Box 23, Folder 37, 5619/007, Kheel.

ground for ACTWU, and perhaps the controversy around Sutton's participation in the Roanoke Rapids organizing drive made them apprehensive. The letter mandated that either party could break the contract with a fifteen-day notice. Sutton signed the contract but added her own condition; she would make no more than one trip a week.<sup>357</sup>

Toronto, Ontario, was the test ground for the Norma Rae speaking tour. Between November 23 and 28, Sutton met with the mayor and gave speeches at the New Democratic Party's convention, to one thousand delegates of the Ontario Federation of Labor, and to a women's forum of three hundred activists and organizers. She received standing ovations at each event, and her audience members "attacked the hotel" for using Stevens's linens. She taped segments for Canadian ABC and CBS affiliates, spoke on a morning radio show, and was featured on the front page of the *Toronto Star* Family section, in an article that referred to her as a "missionary" and devoted two columns to Sutton's litany of abuses that Stevens regularly committed. Woywod estimated that five million people heard or saw Sutton in five days, and that the tour garnered more press for the Stevens campaign than any single action since the 1977 Stockholders' meeting. "People are searching for heroes, especially women," Woywod concluded. "She has filled the gap in those she meets."<sup>358</sup>

After the Toronto engagement, Woywod and Mileski were exultant, but Sutton returned to Burlington with strep throat and an upper respiratory infection. Her husband, Preston, threatened to leave her because her new position took her away from home and returned her too tired and sick "to pay attention to his needs." Woywod wrote to Mileski with serious concerns.

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<sup>357</sup>Woywod to Sutton, October 26, 1979, Box 23, Folder 34, 5619/007, Kheel.

<sup>358</sup>Woywod to Mileski, "Crystal Lee Sutton – Toronto Media Tour, November 23 to 28," Box 23, Folder 34, 5619/007, Kheel. Louis Brown, "Toronto Welcomes Real 'Norma Rae,'" *Toronto Star*, November 26, 1979, CLS #986.87.

“There is a very great danger we might lose Crystal,” she reported, “not to her [lack of] desire to help but to real problems that her poverty creates.” Sutton had medical difficulties and no health insurance. Her teeth were “deteriorating,” the traveling aggravated her old foot injury, and her blood pressure was elevated. Woywod reminded Mileski that Sutton had trouble finding work before the speaking tour; her notoriety as the “real Norma Rae” was sure to increase her difficulties, and perhaps her children’s, too. Woywod recommended that the union hire her full time, with benefits, to alleviate the economic pressure and ensure that if she were injured while traveling for the union, she would have health insurance. Woywod added that Sutton was educating herself about organizing. “Her goal is to be an organizer with the union which will accept her,” she warned. “The Canadians almost did last week.”<sup>359</sup>

With the Toronto success, ACTWU realized the potential power of the speaking tour and moved to guarantee Sutton’s commitment. Woywod offered Sutton a contract with the union for the duration of the tour; when it ended, she could discuss further employment options with union officials. All of her travel and lodging accommodations would be paid by the union, and she would receive a \$15 a day allowance when she traveled. She was salaried at \$225 a week, with medical benefits and an option to enroll in the pension plan.<sup>360</sup> Sutton accepted and December 10, 1979, she was officially on ACTWU’s staff as a “special representative in the Public Affairs department.”

Sutton toured the country as the real Norma Rae from January through June 1980. Jeffords wrote to Mileski that Sutton was “a proven media ‘draw’ [and] ACTWU’s position in the Stevens conflict can only be enhanced by taking advantage of her inherent usefulness in

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<sup>359</sup>“Crystal Lee Sutton,” Woywod memo to Del Mileski, Box 23, Folder 34, 5619/007, Kheel.

<sup>360</sup>ACTWU contract with Crystal Lee Sutton, December 3, 1979, Box 3, Folder 15, 5619/007, Kheel.



public relations.” Just in the first six months, Sutton reached a potential audience of seventy-five million people through fifty-seven newspaper feature stories, sixty-three local television appearances, and thirty-nine radio appearances. Jeffords reported triumphantly to the union that there had not been “a single negative story!”<sup>361</sup> In her new role as the “real Norma Rae,” Sutton took advantage of every opportunity to emphasize that the fight to unionize Stevens was not over and the textile workers’ struggle encompassed much more than the movie revealed, such as Stevens’s discrimination against African-American and female workers.

In her speeches and interviews, Sutton connected the movie’s theme of a woman’s liberation from her dependency on men with the fight for economic justice in the textile industry. She reminded audiences that in the mills, “*women* stay on those same jobs year after year with no promotions and few raises [and] it’s women who have to smile and flirt to be sure they keep their jobs or don’t get impossible jobs.” She described letting housework take a backseat to the organizing drive in 1973, and the strain on her marriage. “When I got involved with the union there was just no way that I could do [all the housework],” Sutton explained. “And that started causing trouble [at home].”<sup>362</sup> Sutton’s stories and *Norma Rae* rang true to many women in the 1970s who discovered a new vocabulary through the women’s movement for discussing the challenges they faced as daughters, wives, mothers, and workers.

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<sup>361</sup>“Gail Jeffords to Del Mileski,” October 16, 1979,” and “Gail Jeffords to Murray Finley et al, Final Media Report on Media Coverage for Crystal Lee Sutton,” June 30, 1980, both in Box 23, Folder 25, 5619/007. (Hereafter cited as Kheel Center. On Sutton’s “Norma Rae” tour, see also Hodges, “The Real Norma Rae,” 267.

<sup>362</sup>Sutton quoted in “Transcript, International Women’s Day Speech,” March 8, 1980, CLS #986.87. For more quotations from Sutton that connected economic justice and women’s liberation, see: Elizabeth Stone, “Norma Rae: The Story They Could Have Told,” *Ms. Magazine*, May 1979, 30–32; Mary Bishop, “The Diary of a Union Organizer,” *The Charlotte Observer*, May 7, 1978, Section D, 1, 3; Anicia Lane, “Fact and Fiction: Crystal Lee Sutton Insists She Is Not ‘Norma Rae,’” *Signal*, April 8, 1980, 10–12. For scholarly analyses of the themes of unionism and feminism in the movie, see Edward Benson and Sharon Hartman Strom, “Crystal Lee, Norma Rae, and All Their Sisters: Working Women on Film,” *Film Library Quarterly* 12, no. 2/3 (1979): 18–23, and Gay P. Zieger and Robert H. Zieger, “Unions on the Silver Screen: A Review-Essay of F.I.S.T., Blue Collar, and Norma Rae,” *Labor History* 23, no. 1 (Winter 1982): 67–78. Sutton quoted in Megan Rosenfeld “Through the Mill With Crystal Lee and ‘Norma Rae,’” *Washington Post*, June 11, 1980.

When interviewers raised questions about her sexual past, Sutton deflected the inquiries and steered the conversation back to the union. “I’m not worried about [audiences] knowing about the sex and all back then,” she explained in an interview for *People* magazine in April 1979. “I’ve told my children you can be sorry for some of the things you’ve done, but not ashamed. I’m never ashamed.”<sup>363</sup> After the release of the movie, with its focus on the sexual tension between Norma Rae and Warshowsky, Sutton also emphasized the platonic nature of her relationship with Zivkovich. She said that she loved Zivkovich “like a father” and learned from him to “show respect, never fight, and fear nobody but your Lord Jesus Christ.” She reminded audiences that the scene with Norma Rae and the organizer swimming naked in a local pond was fictional. “Wouldn’t it have been nice,” she added drily, “if we had time to have fun.”<sup>364</sup>

Sutton critiqued the filmmakers for failing “to get the message across... to show people in the South how much they needed a union.” One interviewer asked if she was a feminist. “I support the women’s movement,” she said. Had she joined any feminist groups? “I live it instead,” she said. She positioned herself in relationship to the women’s movement, occupying a corporeal space outside of political and ideological categorizations. Sutton insisted on her distinct authority as a working-class woman and her ownership of not just the storyline, but the lead character. “Well, she’s a good actress,” Sutton admitted when asked about Sally Field’s performance. “But that was my story. I lived it. There’s no way she could know what I went through.” Sutton even appropriated Field’s appearance. “She looks lean and hungry, like I’d like to look,” she said.<sup>365</sup> During one speech, an audience member commented, “There’s a delightful

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<sup>363</sup>Lelia Carson Albrecht, “The Real ‘Norma Rae’ is Anguished,” *People* 11, No. 17, April 30, 1979, 43-44.

<sup>364</sup>“Crystal Lee’s Norma Rae,” *The Real Inquirer*, February 9, 1980, CLS #986.87.

<sup>365</sup>Susan Harrison, “Real ‘Norma Rae’ lives unionism, feminism,” *Muskegon Chronicle*, September 14, 1980, CLS #986.87.

quote attributed to you about how you compare yourself with Sally Fields. You said you're tougher and sexier. Is that right?" Sutton, "standing tall and throwing back her shoulders," fired back, "Well, you *see* me!"<sup>366</sup> During those months in 1980, Sutton crafted a public persona that blended her lived experiences and personality with the character that Ravetch, Frank, and Ritt developed and Field brought to life. It was a way to, at last, own her story.

On March 4, 1980, the CEO of J.P. Stevens announced at the annual stockholders meeting that the company wished to settle the dispute with ACTWU. The timing of this announcement, coming as it did right in the middle of Sutton's tour as the real Norma Rae, could serve as evidence that Sutton's performance as the real Norma Rae had tipped the balance of power in the Stevens campaign towards the union. But Stevens executives had begun meeting privately with ACTWU president Murray Finley in the spring of 1978. Although nothing had come of those meetings, their existence does indicate that the company had begun to consider settling with the union before the movie. The company had been under pressure from the union, consumers, feminists, civil rights activists, and religious institutions since 1976. "We became the lesser of the two evils, an ongoing campaign or some kind of settlement," one ACTWU staffer concluded.<sup>367</sup>

It is impossible to measure precisely how much the movie and tour benefited the Stevens campaign. The timing of the film could not have been better if it had been planned by the union. ACTWU was well-poised to take advantage of the publicity, having created an effective communications network and publicity strategy for its boycott and corporate campaign. When a

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<sup>366</sup>Anicia Lane, "Fact and Fiction: Crystal Lee Sutton insists she is not 'Norma Rae,'" *Signal* 10, April 8, 1980, CLS #986.87.

<sup>367</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens*, 168.

settlement was finally reached between the union and Stevens, the company insisted the union publicize that it had ended its campaign and advise supporters to cease all boycott activity. The company's reputation had suffered from four years of negative publicity generated by the union and its allies. Sutton's tour as Norma Rae may have been the final straw. She delighted and intrigued audiences, using her personal story to connect the film to the Stevens campaign and promote the boycott. While always insisting on her authenticity as the woman who lived the story, Sutton created a public persona that blended fact and fiction, feminism and unionism, and politics and fantasy.

## EPILOGUE

### Winning a Contract, Creating a Legacy

“I was a nice, little old black girl from the country when I started,  
but Stevens made me a woman.”

Mary Robinson, Montgomery, Alabama

In the 1970s, pro-union workers and their allies in churches, civil rights organizations, and the labor and women’s movements worked within and beyond union campaigns to make southern workplaces more democratic, safe, and just. Women and workers of color fought against gender and racial discrimination and pay inequity on the job and to make their unions more inclusive and responsive to their concerns. The victories of the 1970s suggest a powerful legacy of worker militancy that has been overshadowed by the nationwide decline in industrial manufacturing and organized labor’s strength.<sup>368</sup> While it is important to appreciate how the decline has affected workers’ lives and their communities, it is equally important to acknowledge and understand the achievements of workers and their allies amidst that decline.

In 1980, ACTWU and J. P. Stevens agreed to a settlement. Stevens would not block negotiations over contracts in Roanoke Rapids plants and the three other sites where the union had bargaining rights: West Boylston, Alabama; Aberdeen, North Carolina; and Allendale, South

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<sup>368</sup>For more on the decline in industrial manufacturing, organized labor, and the New Deal liberal coalition in national politics, see: Grace I. Kunz and Myrna B. Garner, *Going Global: The Textile and Apparel Industry* (New York: Fairchild, 2007); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010); Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Bruce Nissen, *Fighting for Jobs: Case Studies of Labor-Community Coalitions Confronting Plant Closings* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999).

Carolina. Stevens agreed to bargain in good faith at plants that ACTWU was able to organize within the next year and a half. The company agreed to automatic check-off of dues, binding arbitration of grievances, and compensation for the wage increases the workers lost during the years spent trying to secure a contract. In return, ACTWU called off the boycott and the corporate campaign. In the wake of the settlement, dozens of Roanoke Rapids workers joined the union for the first time.<sup>369</sup>

Success came at a price. In debt, the union laid off many organizers and staffers. Stevens closed the West Boylston plant in 1982; all the union could do was negotiate severance pay. ACTWU won more than a third of its elections in the early 1980s, but this was overshadowed by plant closures and layoffs.<sup>370</sup> Facing import rates that doubled in the 1980s, Stevens, like many textile and apparel manufacturers in the United States, reduced production and shut down many operations. There were more than two million textile and apparel workers in the United States in 1973. By 2009, there were 400,000, nearly all in the Carolinas. Between 1980 and 1985, ACTWU lost more than 50,000 members.<sup>371</sup> With the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, US-owned factories flourished in the *maquiladora* zone along the Mexican border, exacerbating the decline in textile and apparel manufacturing. The Piedmont lost hundreds of thousands of jobs between 1989 and 1999, and Asian imports continued to flood American markets, especially after China's admission to the World Trade Organization in 2001.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>369</sup>Minchin, *Don't Sleep with Stevens*, 166–171.

<sup>370</sup>*Ibid.*, 175–176; Mary Robinson, *Moisture of the Earth: Mary Robinson, Civil Rights and Textile Union Activist, An Oral History, Compiled and Edited by Fran Leeper Buss* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 180.

<sup>371</sup>Minchin, “Shutdowns in the Sun Belt,” in *Life and Labor in the New New South*, ed. Robert H. Zieger (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 260, 264.

<sup>372</sup> Minchin, “Shutdowns in the Sun Belt,” 267. See also Frederickson, *Looking South*, 241–246.

Production in Roanoke Rapids declined, but the mills—and the union—survived the 1980s. WestPoint Pepperell, Inc. bought J. P. Stevens in a leveraged buyout in 1988 and broke the corporation into three separate businesses. The mills in Roanoke Rapids continued operating under the Bibb Company, and in 1993 Bibb and WestPoint Pepperell merged to create WestPoint Stevens.<sup>373</sup> When the last mill in Roanoke Rapids closed in 2003, WestPoint Stevens employed about three hundred workers, and the union local was part of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE). Two decades of assaults on unions through decertification campaigns, a deindustrialized manufacturing base, and hostility at the state and federal levels of government had considerably weakened the United States labor movement. Less than ten percent of all textile and apparel workers in the United States were organized.<sup>374</sup>

Crystal Lee Sutton remained a passionate advocate for the poor and working poor. While running a day care center out of her Burlington home, she continued to travel and speak as the real Norma Rae across the United States, in Canada, and in the Soviet Union. In a speech to flight attendants in Dallas, Texas, in 1987, she called for the elimination of the two-tier wage system, explaining how it disproportionately affected women and minorities and discouraged worker solidarity. At a high school in Graham, North Carolina, she warned students about letting racial differences impede class solidarity, telling them, “Green is the color we all need to be concerned about.”<sup>375</sup> Sutton was an activist to her death in 2009, using her own struggles with the health care industry to draw attention to the plight of many working-class families who are

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<sup>373</sup>Minchin, “Shutdowns in the Sun Belt,” 265.

<sup>374</sup>Frederickson, *Looking South*, 235.

<sup>375</sup>“Crystal Lee Sutton’s Union Experience,” speech given at Graham High School, October 11, 2000; “Crystal Lee Sutton, the ‘real Norma Rae,’” speech given at the Professional Flight Attendants Union in Dallas, Texas, April 22, 1987, both transcripts at CLS #986.87.

denied critical care after years of paying high premiums and the even more perilous situation of the millions of uninsured.<sup>376</sup>

Since 1979, “Norma Rae” has become a title of sorts, bestowed on female activists to indicate a woman who is sometimes a feminist, usually a workers’ rights advocate, and always a strong-willed leader. Journalist Barbara Ehrenreich nicknamed Ai-jen Poo, the founder of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, the “Nannies’ Norma Rae.”<sup>377</sup> In an interview in 1995, Harold McIver, director of the Industrial Union Department’s southern campaigns, continually referred to Sutton as “Norma Rae,” suggesting the deep intertwining of movie and memory.<sup>378</sup>

Mary Robinson became president of the West Boylston local. After Stevens closed the West Boylston plant, Robinson worked at an axle-factory and then as a bus driver for juvenile disciplinary facilities. She organized the bus drivers and janitors and won representation by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. “I try to teach the support personnel what I learned in ACTWU,” she said.<sup>379</sup> Robinson regretted the loss of the relationships she built through the union. “I sit sometimes and think about all the wonderful people I met during our struggle,” she wrote in 1984, “and I think I wish that part of it was not over. Life is so short and the good times always go by so fast. But, as long as I can stay close to the labor movement in any way, I will be happy.”<sup>380</sup> In the early 2000s, Robinson began doing archival research and interviewing her family and elders in her community, recovering and

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<sup>376</sup>Crystal Lee Sutton, “Almost Like Committing Murder,” UAW Local 387 news, December 2009.

<sup>377</sup>Barbara Ehrenreich, “The Nannies’ Norma Rae,” *New York Times*, April 26, 2011.

<sup>378</sup>McIver interview.

<sup>379</sup> Robinson, *Moisture of the Earth*, 182, 184, 190.

<sup>380</sup> Robinson, *Dignity*, 244.



sharing local histories of black resistance in the face of lynchings and police brutality, and black women's roles in the resistance.<sup>381</sup>

For Mildred McEwen, working nights at the West Boylston mill made her feel alone and “empty.” Two things comforted her: watching the *700 Club* and working for the union. “I think working with the union is a real Christian act because you’re working for other people, not just yourself. I could do something else, I don’t have to be there [but] I want to see it through.” When the mill closed, McEwen left Montgomery to live with her daughter. A writer who interviewed her during the Stevens campaign later visited her in Sylacauga, Alabama. McEwen was working in a K-Mart. She did not miss mill work, but she missed Montgomery, working with Mary Robinson, and being a part of the union. “If I don’t get in a better frame of mind, I’m going to have to do something,” she said of her loneliness and loss of purpose. “I can’t hardly make it alone anymore. It’s really hard.”<sup>382</sup> When the mills closed, the women who worked on the Stevens campaign lost more than their jobs and their union representation. They lost an institution that provided education, leadership opportunities, and a space for developing friendships. It was at least as much an emotional and psychological loss as it was a loss of income and protection.

In Roanoke Rapids, the legacy of the Stevens campaign took hold in workers’ engagement with local politics. Bennett Taylor, James Boone, and Maurine Hedgepeth became active in voter registration drives and local elections. Between 1974 and 1984, voter registration increased by 20 percent in Halifax County (where the mills were located) and nearby Northampton County. For minority residents, registration more than doubled. Edith Jenkins, one

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<sup>381</sup>Robinson, *Moisture of the Earth*, 202-203.

<sup>382</sup>Whitley, *Dignity*, 241–242, and in *Labor Unity*, November 1980, 7, CLS #986.87.

of the first African American women hired as an operative in the late 1960s, supported the 1973–74 union drive. In the summer of 1985, she organized other black mothers through the Parent Teacher Association to picket the Weldon school superintendent, a white man in a school district that was 90 percent black, after he fired three black administrators. (Weldon is a small town east of Roanoke Rapids in Halifax County.) In 1992, Jenkins won a seat on the school board. “You’ve got to fight just to survive around here,” she said. “That’s how we won the union, that’s how I won my school board seat.”<sup>383</sup> In 1993, union workers allied with the NAACP to stop a toxic incinerator from being built near a low-income African American neighborhood in Northampton County.<sup>384</sup>

Similarly, Maurine Hedgepeth’s participation in the unionization efforts of the 1960s and 70s gave her confidence and a sense of purpose. “For a long time,” she reflected, “I thought I was here [on Earth] for somebody to pick on. I mean, I knew there was a reason for me being here, but now it’s totally different. One day about twenty years ago I woke up and I knew that things had changed, that there was a purpose for me other than just being somebody to clean up the table after everyone had eaten.”<sup>385</sup> The Stevens campaign had a lasting impact on its participants, especially the women. Their experiences as organizers and leaders motivated them as activists in other political arenas long after the 1980 settlement. Their years as union activists gave them knowledge, skills, and a sense of confidence and purpose that bolstered them long after the Stevens campaign ended.

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<sup>383</sup>William Adler, “A New Day in Dixie,” *Southern Exposure* 22, no. 1 (1994): 18.

<sup>384</sup>*Ibid.*, 24–25.

<sup>385</sup>Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise*, 180.

Just as the Stevens campaign changed women's lives, so, too, the union learned lessons that supported later efforts. ACTWU became UNITE in the 1980s and continued to organize in the South. Plant closures made organizing more difficult, but did not completely halt the union's efforts. In one instance, UNITE organizers followed laid-off garment workers in the Miami, Florida, area into their new occupations in nursing homes and successfully organized about 250 workers.<sup>386</sup> The Stevens campaign promoted women's leadership and a more community-based approach that many organizers adopted in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>387</sup> Joe Uehlein organized furniture workers in 1979 in Tupelo, Mississippi, "where [we] organized through the churches. We set up the women's organizing project. We were doing all this community stuff." Uehlein reflects on the changes in the union leadership's attitudes in the 1980s, a change he credits to the 1970s Stevens campaign. In Tupelo he hired two women organizers. "I remember it really clearly," he says, "because when [they] showed up, it was like the talk of the union movement." By the late 1980s, the Industrial Union Department had set up the Women's Organizing Project and female staffers and organizers were more common. "A lot of things led to that, but clearly the J. P. Stevens thing, with *Norma Rae* the movie coming out, Crystal Lee being the leader, that had a lot to do with it."<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>386</sup>Bruce Nissen, "A Different Kind of Union: SEIU Healthcare Florida from the Mid-1990s through 2009," in Zieger, *Life and Labor in the New South*, 291.

<sup>387</sup>Groups like Interfaith Worker Justice organize within and without the formal institutions of the labor movement on issues of wage theft, the right to collective bargaining, immigration and labor laws, and corporate responsibility for workers' safety and public health. See "History," Interfaith Worker Justice, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://www.iwj.org/about/history>. For a recent essay on the alliances between labor and women's groups in North Carolina, see Jennifer Ferris, "Are you One of the 90,000 NC Women Living on the Edge?," March 19, 2014, Women AdvANCe, accessed June 3, 2014, <http://womenadvancenc.org/are-you-one-of-the-90000-nc-women-living-on-the-edge/>. For a recent essay on conservative and corporate alliances against labor, and religious organizers' responses in North Carolina's "Moral Mondays," see Dan T. Carter, "North Carolina: A State of Shock," September 24, 2013, *Southern Spaces*, accessed June 3, 2014, <http://southernspaces.org/2013/north-carolina-state-shock>.

<sup>388</sup>Uehlein interview.

Even as the number of textile mills and factories declined in the South, new Norma Raes emerged. Luvernal Clark was a case in point. She began working at the Jim Robbins Seat Belt factory in Knoxville, Tennessee, on July 5, 1971. She learned from her church that the factory was hiring African Americans. She was hired and signed a union card on her first day. Clark had been working at the factory for ten years when a round of massive layoffs occurred. She found out from other workers that the company did not call her back when her time came. “I was raising sand,” Clark said, “because by then I had read union books [and] the contract so I [knew they had to hire me back].” She filed a grievance with ACTWU. The union business agent, Mark Pitt, and the southern regional director, Bruce Raynor, talked to Clark about getting more involved in the union. “In that particular time my home life wasn’t as good as it should have been. They knew that I was kind of, like, having issues at home, so they wanted me to get involved, I think to get my mind off all that stuff.”<sup>389</sup>

Clark became a shop steward in 1982 and eventually vice president, then president (after ACTWU became UNITE). She was the first African American woman to be president of a UNITE local. “[This] was a whole new ballgame for me,” she said. “It was amazing. It was like I’d never seen or even thought that I had the right to demand anything. [Laughs] But I did. This was negotiations. It was give and take, give and take, give and take. It was just amazing to me because I was representing,” she said. “The more I learned, the more I wanted to help, the more I wanted to do. It was a different life.” Through her union activism, she connected with other women in 1984 in the Tennessee Committee on Occupational Health and Safety (TNCOSH).

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<sup>389</sup>Luvernal Clark, interviewed by Joey Fink for the Southern Oral History Program, U-0617, May 14, 2011, Knoxville, Tennessee.

Clark played a pivotal role in the passage of the “Chemical Hazard Right-to-Know” provisions of the Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Act.<sup>390</sup>

Clark’s activism took her away from home, to labor conventions and other factories, and to meetings, public hearings, and demonstrations. “Back then,” she recalled of the 1980s, “it was campaign after campaign after campaign and we were winning, and I think that just got my blood boiling just that much more, because we were winning those elections.” Clark made it clear that her experiences and identity beyond the shop floor and union hall made her a more effective organizer, and credits the ACTWU men and women she worked with for recognizing that and encouraging her. “You go out and talk to workers, trying to organize a union, what is a Bruce Raynor or a Mark Pitt or a Doug Gamble going to be able to tell them? They ain’t never worked in a factory. Well, Mark did. I think Bruce might have. But I’m a young person, I’m a mother, I’m a wife, and I work in a factory, and I can relate to them about stuff that’s going on in their factory.” As shop steward and her local’s president, she became “psychologist, union rep, and counselor,” helping co-workers negotiate shop floor problems along with addictions, divorces, custody battles, and depression.<sup>391</sup>

In the early 1990s, Clark was part of a group of east Tennessee workers and activists who visited the *maquiladora* zones in Mexico, a trip organized by the Highlander Center to investigate the plight of Mexican workers in the American companies that fled just across the border in search of cheaper labor and fewer regulations. When she returned, she spoke at churches, schools, union conventions, and the University of Tennessee. “I mean that tore me up,” she reflected. Seeing how the Mexican workers lived and investigating the factories, she realized

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<sup>390</sup>For more on TNCOSH, see Jessica Wilkerson, “Out Front and Strong: Local Women on the Tennessee Committee on Occupational Safety and Health,” in *WorkingUSA*, Volume 11, Issue 4: 477–498, December 2008.

<sup>391</sup>Clark interview.

that the only people to blame for the job losses in her hometown were the factory owners. “[I] went everywhere and talked [so that] everybody would be aware and we’d get more people involved.” She appeared in the documentaries *From the Mountains to the Maquiladoras* and *Morristown*, describing her tours of the Mexican factories and her stays in the *colonias* with Mexican women workers and their families. After her Mexico trips, she worked with union organizers, immigration advocates, and Highlander activists to support the organizing efforts of white, African American, and Latino/a workers at a poultry processing plant in Morristown.<sup>392</sup>

Clark’s story shows her path from a strong but quiet and inexperienced working mother to a local leader in her union and community. She has followed the factories that ran away to the *maquiladoras* and experienced the effects of globalization firsthand, when her husband’s factory closed and he lost his pension along with his job. She can claim victories on the shop floor and in state legislatures that are directly linked to the on-the-ground efforts of activists and workers since the 1960s to open up workplaces to women and minority men, democratize unions, and mobilize the southern working class. Her experiences in the 1980s and 1990s show how workers carried forward the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s movements.

Southerners for Economic Justice continued organizing in the Carolinas after the 1980 settlement. Its “job rights workshops” in unorganized plants in the Carolinas developed into the Worker’s Rights Project (WRP), which claimed several state legislative victories, most notably a 1986 South Carolina law making it harder for companies to dismiss injured workers. WRP expanded into the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFÉ) in 1987, which then

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<sup>392</sup>Fran Ansley and Anne Lewis, “Going South, Coming North: Migration and Union Organizing in Morristown, Tennessee,” *Southern Spaces*, May 19, 2011.

broadened to include concerns over immigration, criminal justice, and domestic violence.<sup>393</sup>

With organized labor under attack from corporations, conservative think tanks, well-funded political action committees, and some state governments, the numbers of functioning labor temples and union halls has fallen across the United States, making projects like WRP and CAFÉ all the more valuable for worker education and empowerment.

The Carolina Brown Lung Association continued mobilizing disabled and retired workers through the early 1980s. By 1986, over \$24 million had been awarded to sixteen hundred claimants in the Carolinas. BLA succeeded in raising the federal standards for cotton dust levels in the mills and reform workers' compensation laws in South Carolina. By 1981, there were fifteen chapters in five states in the southern Piedmont. Many occupational health advocates credit these gains to the increased media attention after 1975. The BLA's connection with the Stevens campaign helped educate southerners about byssinosis and pressure lawmakers. In 1981, however, OSHA, under President Reagan, destroyed brown lung brochures, while the Reagan administration worked to relax cotton dust standards. By the late 1980s, the alliance between brown lung activists and textile unions was thin. BLA was embroiled in a battle with OSHA over an audit, and the union lost over sixty percent of its elections in the South.<sup>394</sup>

The Stevens campaign left a legacy for manufacturers and employers, as well. Since 1980 companies across the United States have copied the tactics that Stevens used against the textile union in the 1960s and 1970s. More employers deliberately violated labor laws, using the same intimidation and harassment tactics. By 1980, at least one out of every twenty workers who had

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<sup>393</sup>Janice Fine, "Workers Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream," February 2006, "Publications," Economic Policy Institute, accessed May 6, 2014, [http://www.epi.org/publication/books\\_worker\\_centers/](http://www.epi.org/publication/books_worker_centers/).

<sup>394</sup>Botsch, *Organizing the Breathless*, 160-161. Szpak interview. Brody interview.

voted for a union in an NLRB election was dismissed.<sup>395</sup> The totality of workers' stories of struggle and survival since the 1960s – the good and the bad, the victories and the losses – help to illustrate the magnitude of the problems that workers faced, especially women and people of color, and the ways they used their unions to grapple with these problems.

When the last mill in Roanoke Rapids closed in 2003, WestPoint Stevens employed about three hundred workers. Looking back over the previous thirty years, Bennett Taylor, the last president of the Roanoke Rapids UNITE local, said in a gentle voice tinged with sadness and pride, “J. P. Stevens was, at that time, known as the number one [labor] lawbreaker, and for us to organize J. P. Stevens back then,” he paused, and took a deep breath, “we made history. I think it’s a good legacy. Maybe people don’t talk about it enough.”<sup>396</sup> The union, its allies in the Stevens campaign, the African American workers who pushed into the mills and sought to organize them, and the working-class women who put themselves front and center to win union representation blazed a trail that has outlasted the mills they organized.

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<sup>395</sup>Lane Windham, “Knocking on Labor’s Door,” 6-10. See also Minchin, *Don’t Sleep with Stevens*, 182.

<sup>396</sup>Taylor interviewed in “North Carolina Now,” UNC-TV, June 25, 2003, accessed at Sutton, ACC #986.87.



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### **Interviews by Timothy Minchin**

Bruce Raynor  
Jettie Purnell  
Bennett Taylor  
James Boone  
Maurine Hedgepeth  
Linwood Ivey

### **Interviews by Author**

Reverend Joseph Battle  
Charlotte Brody  
Luvernal Clark  
Mimi Conway  
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