BUILDING A UNION:
THE EARLY HISTORY OF UE LOCAL 610

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"If future research should prove that the industrial-union movement of the 1930s was initiated by members of a craft elite," Ronald Schatz has pointed out in a recent study of union pioneers, "the phenomenon would not be unique." As Schatz and other students of the depression-era labor movement have made clear, security minded, highly skilled, autonomous workers who transcended "feelings of fear and passivity" provided the social bases of industrial unionism.¹

Few will deny the critical importance of identifying and investigating the movers and shakers of American labor. Nevertheless, craft background may have had less to do with their ability to organize the work force than, for example, the passage of the Wagner Act or the collapse of welfare capitalism.² Although recent scholarship makes clear beyond a doubt that labor’s upsurge in the 1930s was not a

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revolutionary movement, these studies fail to illuminate the connections between the leaders and the mass of workers that resulted in industrial unionism.

This article will investigate the origins of industrial unionism in Wilmerding, Pennsylvania, in light of the policies of the Westinghouse Air Brake Company (WABCO) and the organizing campaign for Local 610 of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE). In Wilmerding, as in neighboring East Pittsburgh, the home of the Westinghouse Electric Corporation, skilled workers bent on attaining some measure of stability led the fight for unionism. But in Wilmerding, a mill town developed and sustained by the company, the workers faced a social environment different from that of East Pittsburgh. In Wilmerding, a borough well known for its tradition of labor peace and where the Westinghouse Air Brake Company not only employed but housed the workers, residents were well aware that the company dominated the industrial and social well-being of the community. When, by the mid-1930s, declining economic conditions forced the company to abandon its benefits program and reduce the payroll, workers in Wilmerding had little choice but to suffer deprivations. The recognition of their impotence, however, and the realization that the company could not or would not help to resolve their problems encouraged some workers to reexamine their position. By identifying the roots of their powerlessness in corporate strategies that pitted groups of workers against each other and by stressing the security that a union contract could guarantee, union pioneers at WABCO brought the mass of production workers in Wilmerding over to the side of the UE.

When George Westinghouse moved his air brake factory to Wilmerding in 1889, he sought, according to one account, "to build a model factory and a model town, patterned after industrial towns abroad." "The air brake inaugurated a dual development," his biographers have noted, "one a mechanism, the other an organization to make it." His employees, who formed the "organization to make it," found in Westinghouse the proverbial paternalistic protector. "As a

3 See Ronald Schatz, "American Electrical Workers: Their Work, Struggles, and Aspirations, 1930-50" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1977), for a good example of labor history as social history.
worker in his father's shop," one employee remembered, "he naturally inherited the oldtime conception of an employer as the head of a family of workmen who was responsible . . . for their welfare." 5 At the same time he adamantly defended the ideal of the open shop.

Westinghouse went beyond paternalism to champion a system of welfare capitalism that ensured industrial harmony within the shop.6 Skilled workers, paid by the piece, averaged four dollars a day — almost twice that of the prevailing wage.7 Industrial harmony, however, depended on more than high wages, and Westinghouse designed special programs to promote loyalty and continuous service to the company. "Mutual interests" and "friendly fellowship" were characteristic of Westinghouse's rhetoric; the Saturday half-holiday, adopted in 1871, gave meaning to his prose. Pension and vacation plans — adopted in 1908 and 1913 — further encouraged employee loyalty.8 The promise of old age benefits influenced the low turnover rate reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1927. And vacations, which were reserved for those workers with twenty years of service, encouraged stability among the work force. A disability benefits program, medical and surgical services, and group life insurance plans, all WABCO policies by 1924, meant that workers identified their own well-being with that of the company. "The reward," managers of Westinghouse Air Brake later pointed out, "has been seventy-five years of teamwork and achievement." 9

The "teamwork" embraced by the company, though, was definitely a one-way street. The company's conception of industrial harmony rested entirely on the workers' accommodation to company policy. WABCO workers, independent shopkeepers, and local merchants all relied on the company's good will for survival. Historian David Brody's statement that the "habit of everyone [looking] to the company for anything the community needed" applied as much to the residents of Wilmerding as it did to those who lived and worked in the steel mill towns.10 Changes in the population and the work force undercut the con-

5 ASME, George Westinghouse, 47.
6 Schacht, "Toward Industrial Unionism"; his discussion of welfare policies compares well with those favored by Westinghouse.
7 ASME, George Westinghouse, 19. A retired worker stated that $2.50 a day was a good wage in Pittsburgh.
9 Ibid., 48.
cept of "teamwork" that had linked the predominantly native-born skilled workers to the company. Between 1890 and 1910, the population of Wilmerding had increased fifteen-fold. About one-third of the community's 6,133 residents were foreign born by 1910. The influx of immigrant and black workers required a different industrial strategy. Where WABCO had earlier highlighted industrial harmony, managers now manipulated ethnic tensions to exercise control in the workplace. Cultural, ethnic, and religious ties separated foreign workers from their American counterparts in the community, and skill levels set them apart in the shop. The Westinghouse Air Brake Company encouraged such divisions and played on the foreign workers' economic insecurities, while making it clear that only docile, loyal, and accommodating workers would find secure employment.

"If you were Italian, Serbian, any ethnic background," one worker recalled, "you were pretty much relegated to the menial jobs unless you were a political friend of someone." Black workers faced similar problems. "The white workers [in the brass foundry] had the work sewn up on the machine," John Lester explained, while blacks performed the hot, dirty work at lower rates of pay. In fact, no blacks, save for the janitor, were employed in the machine shop. Women of all nationalities shared this discriminatory treatment. Thanks to their "dexterity" and nimble fingers, women could aspire to no more than repetitive, semi- and unskilled work — all low-paid jobs.

Such divisions in the workplace were not unusual American corporate practices. But the management at WABCO took their strategy one step farther: social divisions on the shop floor reflected and at the same time fueled social divisions within the community. "I remember when I was a kid," George Bobich explained, "when it started getting dark the cops used to say 'here hunkie, get on the other side where you belong.'" "The other side" referred to the other side of Turtle Creek, away from "Managers' Row." We were like a bunch of ducks," Lester added, "all the ducks go where the ducks are, and all the chickens go where the chickens are." Sociologist Jesse

11 John K. Lawless, Jr., "The Social Development of the Lower Turtle Creek Valley" (seminar paper, University of Pittsburgh, 1961), 12. Wilmerding's population in 1890 was 419; in 1900, 4,179; in 1910, 6,133. Figures cited in ibid., 14-16.
15 Bobich interview.
16 Lester interview.
Bloodsworth confirmed such reports when he noted that all the “foreigners” lived on the north side of the creek. Even the YMCA, a WABCO-funded enterprise, segregated foreign group activities until 1929.¹⁷

If white ethnics faced restrictions in the workplace and housing, blacks were the most obviously separate group. In 1904 the Pittsburgh Leader had congratulated Wilmerding for “having few foreigners and negroes of a low type among its population,” but after the First World War more blacks found a home in Wilmerding.¹⁸ By 1930 blacks numbered a little less than 2 percent of Wilmerding’s predominantly Italian and Polish population. Blacks resided in an enclave bordering the Patton Township line, and Boyd Hill became the center of black life in Wilmerding.¹⁹

“The early residents of Wilmerding came from urban districts,” a 1940 history of the borough reported, “bringing with them the habits, manners and customs of city life.” ²⁰ Social distinctions, according to the history, were mediated easily by “equality of condition” and a “spirit of cooperation.” But the spatial segregation of the ethnic and black population, the social segregation of groups in the YMCA, and discrimination on the job bespoke a stratified, ethnically divided work force in Wilmerding.

Like other preunion manufacturing concerns, the Westinghouse Air Brake Company based its personnel policies on personal patronage. Foremen and shop leaders were likely to be related to management and followed the time-honored practice of rewarding their friends and punishing their enemies.²¹ Possessing the power to hire and fire, foremen sometimes required production workers to demonstrate their loyalty in the form of cash payments, home produce, or simply personal favors. “They had the people afraid,” George Bobich, a union organizer, remembered. “In each department, each section, there was a little king, a little despot,” he explained. “If they didn’t like how you combed your hair,” he added, “they’d lay you off.” John Lester, another union pioneer, concurred. He recalled a foreman who had demanded a percentage of Lester’s paycheck as a form of “unemployment insurance.” Lester balked and refused to pay and brought the

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²⁰ Pittsburgh Leader, Aug. 28, 1904.
²¹ Ibid.
incident to the company’s attention. Not every worker was as willing as Lester to challenge the foreman’s authority. With no established grievance procedure, workers could rely only on the personal integrity of managers to mediate conflicts, which often proved a risky business. As Lester made clear, if the bosses liked you, they would fight for you; if they did not, then “out the gates you went.”

In 1937 the editors of *Fortune* noted that the Westinghouse Air Brake Company had remained “a solid, substantial and . . . profitable enterprise” that had reported a deficit only in 1933. Its employees, however, did not fare so well. The company may have been able to pay stockholders’ dividends, but in 1932 WABCO had cancelled employee benefits and had slashed wage rates 10 percent across the board. The company did provide free flour and milk for needy workers, but, at the same time, it put some fifteen hundred employees out of work. “We had Unemployed Councils here during the Depression,” George Bobich recalled. “We laugh about it today,” he added, “but at the time they served a useful purpose.” The councils, usually organized by Communist party activities, provided food and saved homes from foreclosure, but, more important, they organized the community around mutual adversity. “They got the people together,” Bobich emphasized, “and nobody cared who got called any names . . . because everybody was miserable.”

After the company had abandoned the high wages and benefits program that had made Air Brake a good place to work, labor organization began in 1937. Significantly, criticisms of the company’s domination of the community and its attempts to divide workers became critical organizing tools. A political environment more conducive to labor organization, thanks to Section 7a of the Wagner Act, made it possible for union pioneers to campaign for and establish an industrial union among Westinghouse Air Brake workers.

The ideal of class consciousness, or solidarity among all groups of workers, proved to be the UE organizers’ most effective tactic. Workers in Wilmerding embraced, albeit slowly, an organization

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22 Bobich interview; Lester interview. June Bobich, Local 610’s secretary, remembered that workers, in the early years of the union, would bring similar “payoffs” when a grievance was settled in their favor. “We told them that they didn’t have to do that anymore,” she recalled, “but the difference was that this time they wanted to.”


24 Schatz, “American Electrical Workers,” 82.

25 Bobich interview. The layoff figure is from Bobich. The *Pittsburgh Press*, Oct. 10, 1934, noted, however, that plans to modernize the nation’s railroads would increase employment at WABCO.

26 Bobich interview.
pledged to “unite all workers in our industry on an industrial basis” that urged “rank and file control, regardless of craft, age, sex, nationality, race, creed, or political beliefs.” 27 Up until 1937 WABCO had singlehandedly controlled the town and the people in it; after almost fifty years of dependence the workers were ready to demand some changes.

Late in 1936 individual Air Brake workers had met to talk about a union. Experience with the Unemployed Councils motivated some of these early organizers, while others were political radicals influenced by, if not members of, the Communist party. 28 Still others were the sons and daughters of old-time trade unionists who knew firsthand the value of a union. These workers operated secretly and relied on a network of “trust.” Union pioneers gingerly sought out like-minded workers willing to undertake the struggle. “When you went into the union,” John Lester made clear, “you had to be particular about it because you had to be strong enough to keep the boss from getting something on you.” 29 Affiliated originally with the Railway Equipment Workers Union, the Air Brake local numbered some five hundred workers in two weeks time. 30

After union members met with some Westinghouse Electric workers in 1937, they chose to join the newly chartered UE. Organizers Fred Haugh, Ernest Demaio, and Logan Burkhart of Westinghouse Electric offered support and know-how to the fledgling Air Brake local. “Organization is coming along fine at the Air Brake plant,” Burkhart reported to Julius Emspak, UE general secretary, in March. “They are coming in fast now and they want a charter.” 31


28 The question of communist influence in the UE and other CIO unions remains problematic. Although Schatz, for example, in his study of union pioneers states that “the majority were political radicals, mainly Communists or Socialists,” he also admits that few workers even now will speak candidly of involvement with the party. Maurice Isserman, in his work, *Which Side Were You On?* (Middletown, Conn., 1982), 20, states that “Communist strength in the union movement lay in control of office rather than mass constituencies, though they had some rank and file support ... among electrical workers in some UE locals.” Although Local 610, like other UE locals, split over the question of communism during the early 1950s, unlike most UE locals it remained with the UE. Only one union activist I interviewed admitted to joining the party, and only after he had been red-baited. He left soon afterwards, because, he claimed, party leaders called too often and at all hours of the night. Regardless of a union leader’s party affiliation or lack of it, the party was not an issue in organizing Local 610 and the rank and file were by and large not members.

29 Lester interview.


31 Logan Burkhart to Julius Emspak, Mar. 6, 1937, in UE Archives, Archives of Industrial Society, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh, D/6-84 (hereafter cited as UE Archives ... AIS).
By April 1937 the Air Brake local counted some fifteen hundred supporters. By May President C. J. ("Speedo") Clements reported the official affiliation of Local 610 with the United Electrical Workers, which in turn was part of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).  

Leaders of the organization campaign generally worked in the Standard Brake Shop (Department D) or the West Machine Shop. Bench hands and machinists, laborers and electricians, welders, plumbers, and grinders all played a role in delivering their departments into the union fold. Women workers took part in the drive and claimed their share of "union pioneers." The original founders and leaders of the union were drawn from a cross section of the Air Brake work force in terms of skill, residence, and gender. The Standard Brake and the West Machine shops, both manned by skilled workers, provided the industrial roots of over half the union pioneers.

More important than skill level, however, was the union pioneer's identification with a "working class" or experience with a trade union. John Ritter, for example, could trace his activism to his father and grandfather, both solid union men. Sam Pack was the son of a Wobbly, as members of the Industrial Workers of the World were known. Both recalled previous organizing experiences in the coal mines and steel mills, respectively. Others drew on their fathers' and their own experiences at WABCO. John Lester, a black, had been with the company for fourteen years before the organizing campaign — he and others like him knew what the company had to offer. Most union pioneers, then, were the hard-working sons and daughters of hard-working parents. They knew that their future, like their past, would be tied to the company.

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33 Ibid. In 1944 Harold Briney began a series of articles on the history of Local 610 that included a list of the local's "leading workers" or union pioneers. Unfortunately, the local preserved only the first column. Nevertheless, using Briney's list and supplementing it with names of elected officials and stewards, we can get a good idea of who became active unionists.

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35 Union pioneers in 610 do not differ significantly from those identified by Schatz.
Management at the Westinghouse Air Brake Company early recognized the dangers of an independently organized work force. When officers of the newly chartered Local 610 met with company representatives in May 1937, they were surprised to learn that the company had a letter on file from an independent union claiming to speak for the majority of WABCO workers. "Therefore they could not recognize us as the exclusive bargaining agent," Chief Steward Harold Briney pointed out, "and the company refused to have a card check of our members."  

Management’s "independent union," the United Employees' Association (UEA) appeared at WABCO in April 1937. The UEA included supervisors and engineers as well as production workers. One member, who later supported the UE, was promised a foreman's job if he would campaign for the UEA; others were, pure and simple, the "bosses' men." "They were company men and we knew that," Bobich pointed out. "That was just something we had to work with."  

The growing UE local could not allow the company to have the last word. "The company is hiding behind the skirts of the Employees Association which is nothing but a company union," C. J. Clements reported to the press. "They try to deceive us into thinking it is an independent group," he added, "but its only objective is to defeat the CIO with company money." To underscore his point, Clements notified the regional office of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) that Local 610 was ready for an election. At the same time, Clements alerted the press that Local 610 would take to the picket line if the situation was not quickly resolved.  

On September 9, the regional office of the NLRB in Pittsburgh heard the case presented by Local 610 and the UEA. WABCO representatives remained "neutral," wishing only that their employees receive fair representation. After hearings lasting all day, during which attorney Charles L. McCormick of the UEA introduced a mass of testimony favoring the inclusion of salaried and clerical workers in any future union vote, the NLRB recommended to the Washington office that an employee poll be taken at Wilmerding. In October the NLRB in Washington ruled that clerical workers, foremen, and superintendents could not participate in the election.  

In the interval after the NLRB's preliminary findings, Local 610 organizers strove to win over the WABCO workers. "During the

37 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Sept. 10, 1937; Bobich interview.  
38 Pittsburgh Press, July 18, 19, 1937.  
39 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Sept. 9, 10, Nov. 10, 1937.
past few years the Airbrake management had taken advantage of the Depression and the men's resulting fear of unemployment," the union paper reminded Air Brake workers, "to reduce the widow's pension, employee insurance, and other grants at the same time that it continued to pile up heavy profits." The union based its organizing campaign on increased job security, a thirty-six-hour work week with no loss in pay to "spread work and not misery," double time for overtime "to insure the hiring of more workers," and a signed contract "to hold up before the unorganized workers . . . as a guide that they too may start on the road to democracy and industrial freedom." 40 Seniority and an active shop steward system would protect the workers from arbitrary foremen.

By the winter of 1937, organization was well underway. The most readily organized workers came out of the Coreroom and Foundry where working conditions were the most harsh. "The foundry workers were better to organize," George Bobich remembered. "It was dirty, hot, tough work and the issues were there: hard work, worst conditions . . ." John Ritter, a steward in the Coreroom, had based his campaign for the union on service, seniority, and an equal opportunity for overtime work. "I didn't care who the man was," Ritter explained, "if he had the service, he got the job. And," he added, "the girls knew that they didn't have to pay me for a favor." By playing on the company's discriminatory and arbitrary policies, Ritter delivered the Coreroom as one of the first solidly UE departments in WABCO. 41

John Lester, who worked in the brass foundry, faced both industrial and racial barriers when he campaigned for the UE. Management up to then had successfully divided the work force and had exacerbated racial tensions in an attempt to break the union. "Management told the whites, 'they're gonna give the black folks your job,'" Lester noted, "while they told the blacks that 'the union is going to kick the blacks out.' But," as Lester reiterated, "the UE stood for every man getting his equal share — the union principles were for the working men as a whole." For Lester, the union symbolized a change in social relations among workers as much as it did a change in industrial relations. "There's no doubt about attitude change," Lester concluded, "the union stressed a better relation among the workers. People began looking for power for themselves." 42

Although working conditions were equally grim, the Blacksmith

40 Airbrake Accelerator, Nov. 15, 1937.
41 Bobich interview; Ritter interview.
42 Lester interview.
Shop was not so easily organized as the Coreroom. A large and powerful foreman named Brodie held sway in the shop, and he ruled with an iron fist. "The hell hole of Calcutta, that's what we called it," Sam Pack remembered, "with a great big boss who had all the people buckled over." Work in the shop was hot, dirty, and dangerous and was carried out largely by "foreigners." "They'd see the boss coming," Pack pointed out, "and they'd start to pick up anything and get down to work." As late as 1942, with a union contract in hand, the Blacksmith Shop workers still bowed to Brodie. "A guy would be scared to give me his dues," Pack explained. "He didn't want the boss to know that he was in the union — they were still scared and they didn't trust anybody." 43

WABCO workers went to the polls at Wilmerding's Philaretic Hall on November 9; of the 4,452 votes cast, 2,369 were in the UE's favor, to 1,908 for the UEA. Local 610 carried 53 percent of the vote — not an overwhelming victory, but enough of a margin to get the organizing campaign really moving. "The election," the Airbrake Accelerator contended, "was only the means of establishing the union as bargaining agent. Now," the editors continued, "we must complete the building of a militant, well-organized, and well-functioning union in the plant. . . ." 44

The election, as John Lester pointed out, indicated that Wilmerding's workers woke up to "common sense." The successful drive at WABCO had proved three things: that the divisive policy of the company nurtured rather than eradicated worker discontent; that skilled and unskilled, black and white, male and female workers could work together in their own self-interest; and that the eventual strength of the local would be determined by the strength and responsiveness of the shop floor organization. The union had cleared the first hurdle by winning the election and earning certification from the NLRB, but there were more and higher hurdles still to come.

Although the Westinghouse Air Brake Company had always taken pride in its forward-looking, liberal policies, Works Manager George Blackmore fought hard against the union. "Anyone who thinks about the problem at all," he pointed out to his employees, "must realize that no management can successfully operate a plant where it does not have discipline. If the employees think that management is going to abdicate its rights and allow Union officers to take

43 Pack interview.
44 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Nov. 10, 1937; Airbrake Accelerator, Nov. 15, 1937.
possession of its plant and property," he warned, "there is [going to be] a long period of hardship ahead for all of us."  

By 1940 the company refused to open contract negotiations on any reasonable basis. From the moment of certification, the company had assumed a steadfast position: the union had no right to raise questions of wages and working conditions, and these were to remain "matters entirely for the company to decide." The company had also resolutely reserved the right to hire and fire. "Any other theory," the company explained, "would be practically admitting the union to comanagement with the company." The Westinghouse Air Brake Company, then, would negotiate with the union only as long as hours, wages, working conditions, and seniority remained under company control. From management's point of view, the union had only the right to submit grievances, and even this was subject to company interpretation.

Fortunately for Local 610, the NLRB did not concur with the company. After a series of formal conferences involving the board, the union, and the company, the NLRB found the Westinghouse Air Brake Company guilty of discrimination and refusing to bargain. On August 5, 1940, the NLRB ordered the company to bargain collectively with Local 610. Forced to open negotiations on "bread and butter" issues and seniority, the company nevertheless attempted to reassert its authority. In January 1941, a company notice appeared on the bulletin board. "No employee is required to join the union," the notice proclaimed. "Solicitation of membership or dues in unions or other organizations is not permitted on company property." One month later, the company tried to reduce the number of shop stewards from one hundred twenty-five to twenty-five, and offered a contract between the company and individual workers — not the union. Paternalism and "industrial harmony," the watchwords of an earlier hegemony, died hard at Westinghouse Air Brake.

The union leadership, anxious to take on the company, welcomed this opportunity to challenge these offers in full view of the membership. "Local 610 takes the position of refusing to comply with what we feel is an arbitrary and provocative ruling on the part of the

45 Blackmore to the workers who did not walk out, Feb. 14, 1941, UE Archives, D/6-431, AIS.
46 *UE News*, Aug. 10, 1940.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Company notice, Jan. 22, 1941, UE Archives, D/6-431, AIS.
50 *UE News*, Feb. 15, 1941.
company," the union officially replied, "and we will continue to carry on our organizational work as in the past." 51 To demonstrate their sincerity, three thousand WABCO employees walked out on February 6, 1941, for a one-hour meeting to discuss the company's latest proposal. 52 "I cannot help but feel," Blackmore later informed his workers, "that most of those who walked out... did so because of the persuasion of irresponsible Union leaders, rather than as a result of any deliberate judgment of their own part. The responsibility for preventing a long shut down..." he continued, "is upon the loyal employees who have been with us for years." 53 One such worker, however, who had, like his father, been with the company for years, saw it differently. "Either you have a union or you don't have a union," John Ritter pointed out, "and I'd rather not have a union at all than to have to take what the company offers. I'd taken that all my life," he concluded, "and I didn't want to take any more of it." 54

While company executives attempted to nullify the effects of unionism, members of Local 610 began to organize their counterparts at the Union Switch and Signal Company, a subsidiary of WABCO located in nearby Swissvale. In order to squelch this move, the company accused union organizers of being "reds." Local 610 ignored the name-calling and concentrated on bringing Union Switch and Signal into the UE fold. "We must win Switch and Signal's election to strengthen our hand with Airbrake," James Matles, president of the UE, counseled local leaders. "We must fight this case according to our plans and not according to the company's." 55

In January 1941 Local 610 informed W. H. Cadwallader, vice-president and general manager at Union Switch and Signal, that the majority of production and maintenance workers had designated the UE as their bargaining agent. 56 One week later, the leaders of a company union resigned their positions. "We do not wish to continue either membership or office in a company-dominated organization," they explained, "whose only purpose is to try to keep an honest industrial union... out of the plant." 57 Industrial unionism versus company unionism became the major issue in the organizational campaign at Union Switch and Signal. When the company again injected

51 Albert Smith to Blackmore, Jan. 23, 1941, UE Archives, D/6-431, AIS.
52 *UE News*, Feb. 15, 1941.
53 Blackmore to the workers who did not walk out, Feb. 14, 1941, UE Archives, D/6-431, AIS.
54 Ritter interview.
55 James Matles to Local 610, UE Archives, D/6-447, AIS.
56 610 News, Jan. 22, 1941.
57 Ibid., Jan. 27, 1941.
the issue of communist unionism, the local stood firm. "No attempt by the Company union to change that issue to one of Communism can distort the Basic Facts," election handbills boldly proclaimed. "Smoke that awhile, you boys from the company union."  

Despite their bravado, union leaders feared the effects of red-baiting — especially because some active unionists were also active communists. UE members from Wilmerding and East Pittsburgh manned the plant gates at Union Switch and Signal to get the union message to the workers. Business Agent Albert Smith, grateful for the aid of "ample forces from Airbrake, and Electric, including several girls," confidently reported that "we managed to nullify whatever effect the initial red-baiting might have had." 59 When the votes for the certification election were counted, Union Switch and Signal had "thrown out a company Union" by favoring the UE 825 to 53. 60 This decision seemed to awaken WABCO executives to the reality of industrial unionism. They could no longer ignore or subvert the union presence: the victory at Union Switch and Signal had made clear that the UE would have to be recognized and reckoned with.

Before the victory at Union Switch and Signal, union negotiators had made little progress towards completing a contract with the Westinghouse Air Brake Company. The company still refused to discuss seniority issues, severance pay for draftees, wage increases, or vacation benefits. And, despite an NLRB directive the previous year, WABCO also continued to refuse the union bulletin board privileges and wage rate information. 61 "It seems to us," Albert Smith wrote to Works Manager Richard W. Landis, "that what you understand to be collective bargaining is a situation wherein the Company establishes certain employer-employee relationships at will and then proceeds to abolish or amend these relationships without any consultation with the legally designated bargaining unit." 62 "This anti-Union and anti-American attitude of the Westinghouse Airbrake company must be smashed," the local asserted, "and Local 610 is prepared to smash it." 63

Certification at Union Switch and Signal, combined with the Air Brake workers’ willingness to strike over contract negotiations, forced the company to bargain collectively with Local 610. Although Air

58 Ibid. (Switch edition, Apr. 8, 1941).
59 Smith to Matles, Apr. 10, 1941, UE Archives, D/6-431, AIS.
60 UE News, Apr. 19, 1941.
62 Smith to Landis, Feb. 10, 1941, UE Archives, D/6-431, AIS.
63 Union Generator, Apr. 1941. The Union Generator was the union paper for Local 601, Westinghouse Electric.
Brake workers had never before struck the company, in April 1941 they voted four to one to walk out. One week before the scheduled strike, however, WABCO workers were granted a ten-cent per hour general wage increase. Three weeks later almost five thousand Air Brake workers and fifteen hundred Union Switch and Signal workers ratified identical contracts that included wage increases, double time for Sunday work, and time and a half for Saturday work. Strict seniority was assured as was a "share the work" procedure.64 Most important, the contract called for a shop stewards' council, allowing one steward for every fifty workers.

Although the company still dominated the community in Wilmerding, the union had nevertheless made progress in four short years; by 1941 nearly seven thousand workers had joined the UE fold. More than that, nearly seven thousand workers had been willing to put their immediate security on the line and strike against the company if they had to. Local 610 emerged from the fight as the workers' designated representative in labor and industrial relations. The hard-won contract demonstrated the union's gains and aspirations: seniority, shop stewards, and a grievance procedure delivered the individual workers from under the foreman's thumb.

The company's fight against the UE makes clear that the struggle for industrial unionism was not easily won. At least at the Westinghouse Air Brake Company, the union did not come into being merely to integrate workers better into the increasingly complex organization of the corporate world. Neither, however, did the struggle demonstrate that WABCO workers sought a revolutionary solution to the problems engendered by national depression or the corporate organization of industry. Workers in Wilmerding, Pennsylvania, like workers in other industrial centers, organized primarily to achieve security and respect in the workplace. A signed contract symbolized, for these workers, a new era of industrial relations. The company, no longer omnipotent, grudgingly recognized the union's mandate. While the union continued to challenge the company, at the same time it demanded industrial discipline from its members. That is not to say that either side surrendered the fight, or that the interests of the union and the company converged. Rather, industrial organization at Wilmerding was a compromise whereby the company accepted the union as an unpleasant but inescapable fact of life in return for guarantees from labor leaders that workers would carry out their jobs with a minimum of disharmony.

64 *UE News*, May 3, 1941.