



## ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Angelique Bamberg

### The Design of Democracy: Steelworkers Hall in Aliquippa

Aliquippa's history as a steel town is written in its city plan, and its history as a frontier of labor relations is inscribed in the architecture of one its most distinguished buildings. From 1943 until the early 2000s, a Classical Revival former bank at 501 Franklin Avenue served as the headquarters of the United Steelworkers Local #1211.

At the turn of the 20th century, Jones & Laughlin was one of the giants of Pittsburgh's mighty steel industry. Unable to physically expand its Pittsburgh site to meet demand, J&L bought land up the Ohio River to build a new plant near the tiny hamlets of Woodlawn and Aliquippa. Because these lacked the housing and facilities to support J&L's expected workforce of several thousand workers and their families, J&L also built a town, complete with homes, schools, churches, company store, and a main commercial street, Franklin Avenue, that led straight to the steel mill.

J&L painted this endeavor as benevolent and progressive, but by owning most of Aliquippa's property and infrastructure, J&L virtually controlled its workers' lives. The mill's managers formed a Republican political machine. They controlled the police and even church leadership and coerced mill employees to register to vote as Republicans and to vote a straight ticket in elections. Above all, the



**Built as a bank at 501 Franklin Avenue, Aliquippa, in 1927, its frieze proclaims its longtime association with the United Steelworkers Local #1211.**

Photo by Angelique Bamberg.

company suppressed all attempts by its workers to organize a union. Its union-busting tactics included spying, harassment, intimidation, blacklisting, violence, and jail time. No wonder Aliquippa was nicknamed "Little Siberia" by the 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

However, the bleak economic conditions of that decade also provided new opportunities for unions to gain a foothold. In 1935, the National Labor Relations Act guaranteed protection for unions and their activities. When J&L refused to comply, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) in Aliquippa asked the Supreme Court to uphold these protections—and won.

The 1937 decision transformed life in Aliquippa and bestowed new purpose on the

former bank. Pro-union Democrats replaced the J&L Republican machine, and in 1943, the United Steelworkers Local #1211, successor to the SWOC, purchased 501 Franklin Avenue as its headquarters.

The building had been erected by the First National Bank of Woodlawn in 1927 but, during the Depression, the bank failed. Next, the union adapted it to become its union hall and offices. It inscribed the local's name on the frieze facing Franklin Avenue, proclaiming its ownership and co-opting the symbolism of the Classical Revival bank for the United Steelworkers.

Represented by the balance and symmetry of the classical orders, as well as the durable value of its materials, the building's architecture



Keystone with the insignia “USA” added by the United Steelworkers of America to the proscenium around the stage in the space of the former bank vault.

Photo by Angeliqe Bamberg.



The United Steelworkers converted the former banking hall to a union hall, but its most recent use was as a gymnasium.

Photo by Angeliqe Bamberg.

conveyed strength, stability, and rootedness in the ancient ideals of democracy. The same symbolic messages helped correct the perception that the union was made of confrontational rabble-rousers as leaders sought to earn the respect of company management and the public.<sup>2</sup> The union converted the two-story banking hall for use as meeting, assembly, and event space. Where the bank vault had been, the union installed a

small stage. A keystone they placed at the top of the proscenium bears the insignia “USA.”

Within these limestone walls, Local #1211 built social, economic, and political clout in Aliquippa. It formed committees to arbitrate disputes with management, helped other workers in the town to organize, prepared immigrant members and their families for U.S. citizenship, and obtained wage increases which allowed their children to attain the middle class.

It also worked to heal ethnic and racial divisions that J&L had fostered and exploited. The building is a monument to the pioneering work of the United Steelworkers Local #1211 to uphold workers’ rights and democracy in Aliquippa. ⚙️

<sup>1</sup> National Historic Landmark nomination (draft). Aliquippa Historic District, Aliquippa, Beaver County, Pa.: 1997, 10.

<sup>2</sup> David Pacchioli, “Forged in Steel” (Penn State News: January 1, 1999), <https://news.psu.edu/story/141007/1999/01/01/research/forged-steel>.



Postcard, 1936, showing the Jones & Laughlin Aliquippa Works in relation to the Ohio River, the railroad, and the town. Franklin Avenue can be seen at the lower-middle right, along with the tunnel that led from the town, under the railroad, to the mill.

Collection of Mark DiVecchio.