

“SO PROMISING OF SUCCESS”: THE ROLE OF LOCAL 88 IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY, 1937–1952

by Joyce M. Latham

On Sunday, October 31 in 1937 a group of thirteen activists employed by the Chicago Public Library (CPL) capped a labor organizing campaign at a “mass meeting” held at the John Marshall Law School.¹ As Abram Korman, the president *pro tem* explained, it was not the first attempt to organize a union at CPL. The earlier effort had occurred in 1922, and lost to the counter-effort by the administration, which organized a staff association. Korman blamed the failure of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) attempt on half-hearted effort. But he was more confident of the current undertaking as “The will and the determination to perfect such an organization were never so earnest and so promising of success.”

The “will and determination” arose not simply from the economic challenges inherent in the 1937 recession – feared by some as a reprise of the Depression – but also the political realities attached to the Memorial Day Massacre that occurred at the Republic Steel plant on the south side of Chicago. Employees were also energized by the growth and development of a new, activist union – the Committee of Industrial Organization (CIO) – that was brazenly challenging the status quo on all fronts.

One union which emerged within the CIO was the State, County and Municipal Workers of America (SCMWA), an organization primarily of government employees, with a strong white collar orientation. The president of SCMWA was Abe Flaxer, a radical organizer with roots in the rank-and-file movement of charitable organizations in Depression-wracked New York City. An immigrant himself, and a lawyer, Flaxer affiliated with the Communist Party early in his career as a labor organizer. He maintained his leadership position until the white collar union was expelled from the CIO² and most of the locals were folded back into the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Workers in the wake of the red purge in 1948/49.

But in 1937, four libraries organized with the CIO: the Library of Congress, New York Public Library, Cleveland Public Library and Chicago Public Library.³ Of these, the Chicago Public Library Local 88 left the broadest collection of materials, as they published some variant of a newsletter for all of their fifteen years with the CIO. The newsletter is available in the Chicago Public Library Municipal Reference Collection. Local 88 – later

Local 2, after SCMWA merged with the United Federal Workers of America to become the United Public Workers of America – also maintained a scrapbook, which was lost for several years in San Francisco, but then returned to the Chicago Historical Society. Abe Korman and his associates also worked closely with the national SCMWA leadership, as articles and announcements often appeared in the national newspaper, *Govt. Guide*.

The Chicago Public Library also maintains a record of annual reports and Board of Director minutes, which allow strands of research from the grassroots labor organization to be related to the administrative perspective. Head Librarian Carl B. Roden left an archive of the correspondence of his long administration and the records of the Staff Association also became available during the period of research. These records are supplemented by an emerging analysis of the alternative associations that developed in the city of Chicago during this period, which provides context for the growth of the union.

The evidence indicates that the library union pursued strategies to strengthen a failing civil service practice within CPL, improve educational opportunities for staff, extend the political role of the staff of the library, and provide cultural and social events for employees. Local 88 also took strong positions against fascism, promoted racial equity as well as rights for women, and was a consistent advocate for intellectual freedom within the profession and on behalf of patrons.

But even more than their intentional program, the emergence of Local 88 signaled a new era of library service, a challenge to the “moral uplift” model of public librarianship and a rejection of the patronage process of professionalization. With the support of the CIO, librarians were emboldened to turn away from their elitist patrons and toward the communities they served. The members of those communities then, in a cultural dialogue with the institution, changed the orientation of the local institution to reflect their identity back into the city. Public libraries have been engaging that dialogue ever since.

The Launch of the Union

Volume 1, number 1 of the *C.P.L. Union News* (CPLUN) reported that the union was organized to achieve two primary objectives – the good of the library itself, and the well-being of the Library employees, individually and collectively. The “Program of the Union” listed ten areas of concentration for the organization: Strict enforcement of civil service for all library employees; an adequate staff at all times; definite classification of duties within each grade; minimum wage of \$1200 a year for all full time employees, with part time employees paid on a proportional basis; promotional examinations and appointments from qualified lists at regular intervals; automatic increases within grades; four week vacation with pay and a thirty-five hour workweek; proper working conditions and

the safeguarding of employees health; adequate facilities as to space, equipment and supplies for carrying on the duties of all employees.⁴

The list represents a detailed challenge to the weakening of civil service practice in Chicago that occurred during the period immediately preceding the stock market failures, as well as the subsequent Depression era. Records of the Staff Association provide the evidence of the impacts of the budget cuts on staff, but the Staff Association itself had functioned primarily as an ameliorating organization.

This initial issue of the newsletter also addressed how the union had organized itself. The lead article "Union Head Addresses Staff Council" reported that the union president met with the Staff Association Council on November 30, 1937. Korman relayed the history of the formation of the union, and reminded the staff association leadership of his communication with them following the second general organizational meeting.

The question appears to be, however, who knew about the union? Who even knew that the organizational process was taking place? The editorial "No Secrecy Involved" claimed that "Announcements of the first meeting were distributed to those persons who could be reached." It did not discuss who was doing the reaching, or the influence that had on the outcome of the process. The writer noted, however, "More than ten persons, the required number for charter application, came to this meeting and voted to form a local of the State, County and Municipal Workers of America." CPL organized as an independent municipal department.⁵

The library organizers believed that an established organization had a better chance of growing than continuing a discussion of whether the library should organize at all. Organizers who attended the first meeting brought friends and associates to the second meeting, and they collaborated on the construction of a contact list. The writer of the editorial assured readers that "All union material has from the beginning been sent to branch librarians and department heads."⁶ The editorial further explained that the officers, executive board and several committees were already established and operational.

The Executive Committee listed twelve members, with A.B. Korman as president, and his Foreign Language Department assistant, Ben Hirsch, as chair of the publicity committee and member of the newsletter editorial board. Helen E. Radesinky, chair of the membership committee, had been active with the Staff Association. Marie Antoinette De Roulet, a branch librarian, served as chair of the Grievance Committee and was a key player in the development of the effectiveness of the union. She would later emerge as the union leader who attempted to yank the organization to the right during the period of the red purge.

Civil Service / Merit

Civil service, sometimes referred to as the merit system, had its roots in New York state, but the Pendleton Act, "An Act to Regulate and Improve the Civil Service of the United States," was passed at the national level in 1883, following the death of President Garfield, shot by a disgruntled patronage seeker. The city of Chicago was among the earliest adopters, also due to the assassination of its popular mayor Harrison Carter, by a similarly disgruntled office seeker.⁷

As the CPL union organized, civil service was failing its stated objectives of assuring consistency in hiring, work and promotion. Employees were working "out of title" – performing duties assigned to another level of job. Tests for promotions were frozen, in some cases for years. Open entry-level positions were left unfilled. The fiscal situation for Chicago, even pre-Depression, had already negatively impacted the civil service structure of the municipality. The creation of Works Progress Administration positions within the library for non-library workers further eroded the once secure employment structure.

While the Civil Service Commission was not under the control of the library board, automatic salary increases, promotion lists and the call for examinations were managed by the administration. In fact, personnel matters were, at that point in time, the responsibility of the Assistant Librarian, as the library had no personnel officer who could have functioned as an advocate on behalf of employees. The union issued a call for automatic increases within grades with the February 1938 issue of the CPLUN. "On January 6th it was made the basis of a resolution by the Executive Committee of the local endorsing and urging favorable action on the petitions circulated by various employee groups with the active participation of the Union." The editorial noted that funds had been released to increase the book budget, and hoped that the administration would also choose to address staff morale by re-instating automatic salary increases. The Board of Trustees did authorize, at its February 28th meeting, a restoration of salary cuts and the reinstatement of automatic increases for those who had been eligible for them in 1930. The salary adjustments were made possible by a significant increase in funding of \$400,000.⁸

The union also launched a call for promotional exams in April, 1938. They argued for promotional exams rather than open exams. Open exams would have allowed new applicants to come into the organization, but while the union recognized a need for "new blood" it did not seem "quite right that the transfusion should take place" at that point. Primarily, many staff, already working out of their class, developed professional skills without the benefit of an advanced library education. It was a concern to the union that new applicants, with library school degrees, would score better on exams than those within the organization eligible to test.⁹ Advanced library degrees were not required for professional entry positions. The library

itself maintained its own professional training program, and promotions often emerged from in-house cohorts.

Calls for examinations, publication of lists, and demands for closer adherence to standard civil service practice continued through the war years, coupled with a battle for improved salaries. However, the union knew that the success of their own agenda depended on improved funding through the taxing authority. The leadership of Local 88 made knowledge of the funding formula a priority and lobbied at both the national and the local level for improved public library support.

Salaries

In December of 1938 the CPL Employees Union petitioned the Board for a minimum salary of \$100 per month and an increase of \$20 per month for all full time employees. The union leadership did its homework, and reported that the lowest salary paid in other city departments was that of messenger, which began at \$1,080 per year. A full-time page employed at the library received \$600 a year.¹⁰ The union also requested reclassification of grade titles, one half-holiday a week for janitorial staff and time-and-a-half for hours worked in excess of the scheduled 35. It further requested a reimbursement of two weeks lost pay from the 1931 citywide cutbacks. The Board of Directors referred the issues to their Committee on Administration.

The Executive Committee of the union then wrote Mayor Kelly on January 23, 1939, concerning the same issues. They pointed out the discrepancies between library salaries and those of other city agencies.¹¹ The Mayor apparently forwarded the letter to the head librarian, and Roden's response, dated January 28, 1939, challenged several of the union assertions. He noted that Junior Clerks actually earned \$75 a month, that it was the pages who earned \$50 a month. He explained that pages usually were young boys, "employed as runners, messengers, etc., for which \$12 a week is considerably more than the commercial rate." He did concede that, with the Depression, several boys had grown into men in their page positions, and now found their responsibilities more demanding and harder to support on a page's salary.¹² While he granted that the salaries for the professional grades could see some improvement he found "the comparison with Teachers is hardly reasonable." While he did indicate some support for the call for promotions, Roden put the responsibility on the Civil Service Commission, which he blamed for failure to test.¹³

The publication of the Executive Committee's memorandum in the union newsletter also served to educate staff to the inequities, no doubt with the hope of stimulating growth in membership. While the initiative failed, it laid the groundwork for a joint campaign between the members of the union and the staff association.

“TwoWeeks” Pay

One staff person who identified her- or himself as “Patience” wrote an article for the newsletter in response to a challenge from a board member about the need for a union within the library. The employee, who began with the library around 1925, explained that in 1931 s/he took the senior examination for civil service and did not receive an appointment until after the union was in place (1937). The employee reported cuts in salaries, lack of promotions, lay-offs of colleagues, and the loss of two weeks pay that was never recovered. The employee’s supervisor lent the employee money as the credit union at that point was unable to provide much assistance. When the staff person notified the supervisor s/he would need to resign to be eligible for relief, the supervisor made arrangements for the employee to borrow \$5.00 a week from United Charities.

Each week, for eight weeks, on my way to work, I stopped at the charity office and waited in line to see my case worker. Perhaps this is one reason why the idea of professionals in the labor movement does not scandalize me.¹⁴

The union mounted a campaign to reclaim the lost “two weeks” pay. The deductions were made from staff paychecks during the last five months of 1931 in accordance with a resolution passed by the Chicago City Council. In 1936 the Circuit Court of Cook County found in favor of police officers who filed suit for reimbursement for the hours worked. As a result the City Council voted to reimburse all city employees in order to stop further suits. But the library employees were never paid.

The Staff Association Council voted 21 to 6 to join with the CPL union in petitioning for a restoration of the lost pay from 1931. The union newsletter reported that a joint committee of the two staff organizations drafted a petition to the library Board and circulated it among employees working in the library at the time of the cut.¹⁵ Four hundred and sixty members of the staff who suffered the 14-day salary cut signed the petition, and it was submitted to the Board.

Roden had indicated to Mayor Kelly that the cost of the restoration of pay totaled about \$50,000, which was not possible in the current budget, but he appeared to indicate that the staff had a valid issue when he noted that the fact that the restoration had been granted to other city employees but not in the library “has been a source of dissatisfaction for a long time.”¹⁶ The Library Board rejected the joint petition at the June 26, 1939 meeting, however, determining that the complaint had “no validity under the law.”

Educational Opportunities

Local 88 recognized the need to inform staff of how a union operated, and what it meant for them to be organized into a union. The union appeared to

understand as well the need to address not only “bread and butter” issues, but, in keeping with national president Abe Flaxer’s stated philosophy, the reasons such bread and butter issues existed.¹⁷ The union sponsored workshops and lectures on what union organization meant, and why it was necessary. As various articles in the *C.P.L. Union News* indicate, they also sponsored lectures and training opportunities relevant to the skills of practicing librarians. The union supported internal movement up through the organization, based on in-house training programs, and also sponsored preparation classes for the taking of the civil service exams themselves.

The CPL union built labor education into its meetings as well as promoting distinct training programs. The November, 1937 meeting featured Harvey O’Connor, editor of the *People’s Press* and former member of the IWW, who described the obstacles newspaper workers confronted in their battle for better working conditions and improved wages through the Newspaper Guild. John A. Lapp, economist, addressed the open meeting on Feb. 13th about need to organize.¹⁸ A March, 1939, membership meeting concerned “The establishment of democracy in the relationship between employees and the administration as one of the most important functions of a professional union,” a topic stressed by Annette Direckman, Industrial Secretary of the Y.W.C.A. in her discussion of “The New Role of the Librarian.”

The first full lecture series, launched in the spring of 1938, addressed union topics such as “Labor Journalism,” by Harold Rossman of the Chicago Newspaper Guild; “Parliamentary Procedure,” by Ira Silbar of the National Lawyers Guild; a history of the American labor movement, by labor attorney Ben Myers; “Techniques of White Collar Organization,” by Irwin Elbar of the sister agency United Federal Workers of America. Another lecture series, also sponsored by the union during April and May of 1938 addressed library issues. Speakers from the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago, discussed “the distribution of library facilities, federal aid for libraries, the history of publishing in Chicago and library surveys.”²⁰ The fall lecture series mixed a range of topics. It included talks on youth and the public library, fascism, professional standards and union standards, adult education and, notably, a lecture by Leroy C. Merritt from the University of Chicago Graduate Library School on the “Library as a Social Force.”²¹

The classes cost \$1 per session.²² Given that staff were still advocating for competitive salaries, this is a considerable amount. While the union itself was structured to cut across all levels of staff within the organization, the fees suggest that classes were restricted to those who could afford them. As the librarians drew the highest staff salaries, they would have been the likely targets of the programming.

The education committee, chaired by the vice-president of the union, who was for many years Mary M. Taggart, changed the strategy of a lecture series to one of single lecture events similar to those organized for the union meetings. One such presentation was a report by William Spahn,

the Midwest regional representative for SCMWA, on the discussions at a recent meeting of the National Executive Board of the union in New York. The focus was on the apparent change in policy in the Roosevelt administration as the then “European war” took center stage.

Another event, very different but still motivated by educational intent was the CPL union-sponsored literary tea. The first speaker in the series was the activist black writer Langston Hughes. Hughes discussed Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and told the audience “All Negroes in the United States are subjected to the same social restriction and discrimination which destroyed Bigger Thomas. It does not matter if that person is Marian Anderson, George Washington Carver, Roland Hayes, or Langston Hughes.” Over 500 employees and friends – a “capacity crowd” – attended the program, which seemed to highlight a more intense focus on race relations by the union itself.²³

The library union also worked with other white-collar organizations in the city of Chicago to sponsor general civil service preparation classes.

The *C.P.L. Union News* was itself another educational strategy. Particularly in the first four years, it conveyed a wealth of information about union identity, collective activity and the perspective of others outside the library profession itself. The first three volumes often featured writings by influential leaders of the day, such as the scholar Alvin Johnson; Rockwell Kent, president of the United American Artists union; Mary Anderson, Director of the Women’s Bureau at the U.S. Department of Labor; and Abram Flaxer, President of SCMWA. However, despite successful fundraising parties, the printing schedule of the *C.P.L. Union News* fell off over the years. The first year (1937-1938) the newsletter was issued monthly, obviously professionally printed, well-written and thoughtfully laid out. Soon the schedule changed to every other month, while the format remained the same. At the end of 1940, the newsletter was scheduled to be printed quarterly, but with a more national focus, supplemented with a bi-weekly mimeograph *EXTRA*, with a focus on local union concerns. The final years of publication were as legal length mimeographed handouts, reflecting a serious loss of quality in production. The last few months of the union saw a contending publication called the “Library Log,” which reflected the views of the raiding right-wing union, the Government Workers’ Union. Only a few issues of it were ever distributed.

The Value of Membership

Local 88 of SCMWA justified its existence on the ability of organized labor to draw from a larger support base than that available to the unaffiliated worker. In fact, vol. 1, no.1 (June, 1939) of the *Govt. Guide*, the first national publication of SCMWA, carried a lead article under the heading of National Issues entitled “John Public and the ALA” to emphasize just that point. It was the fictional story of Steve Chambers, a highway surveyor

who also chaired a current events discussion group at his lodge every Thursday night. While conducting research one May evening, he learned that the reading room of the New York Public Library was due to be closed at dinner time, and so generally unavailable to the everyday worker.

In his concern that the same thing could happen in his town, Steve brought up the question with the study group. They agreed to pass a resolution in support of the library, but the support snowballed. The secretary of the AFL typographical union offered to take it to his membership, which triggered the CIO member present to also get involved. The CIO member (not surprisingly) drove the point home:

Sure, Mac, take it up with your brothers in the printers union. And I'll take it up with the nine thousand rubber workers of my local. But, Mac, you should ask the printers to send a letter to all the other AFL unions in town, especially the teachers' union, asking them to back you up with resolution. That's thirty thousand voters. I'll do the same with the CIO – that's forty thousand more...

The author of the article emphasized that the “alliance with millions of organized workers” gave new meaning to the term “people’s university.”²⁵

The outline of “How To Build the ‘People’s University’” was printed in the next issue of the *Govt. Guide*.²⁶ Capitalizing on the Joeckel and Carnovsky study that found the physical plant of CPL to be inadequate, the union presented its local campaign. The membership began by alerting likely allies to the needs of the library buildings, promoted the issue to candidates for city council, urged the library board membership to seek Public Works Administration (PWA) funding, stimulated a letter-writing campaign to the Board to reinforce their own recommendation, obtained an endorsement from the Mayor and, finally, proposed a modification to the state tax levy that would have doubled the building fund for the library. The printing of the campaign strategy was to ostensibly demonstrate that unionists did have an investment in the public interest and were concerned with more than their own salaries. However, it also provided a training ground for political activism not generally accessible outside the realm of Chicago’s local political campaigns.

Political Partnerships

Immediately upon formation, Local 88 joined the Provisional Council of Chicago CIO White Collar Unions, which included locals from eight other national organizations. The Executive Board of the union also immediately requested recognition by the Board of Directors as a representative agency acting on behalf of library employees. The union leadership similarly approached the city council and requested authorization as a representative unit for the library employees.

The political outreach continued as Local 88 joined the Non-Partisan League, Cook County committee on January 22, 1938. At least 150 unions and many progressive organizations came together with a goal of “the cooperation of labor, the farmer and all progressive forces for united political action. It aims to secure for the American people better economic security; it aims to liberate them from poverty; to safeguard our democratic institutions; to maintain our civil liberties; to preserve national and international peace.”

The partnership with other labor organizations and access to the Mayor became an issue again in 1944. Mike Mann, Secretary of the Chicago Industrial Union Council, arranged for Mary M. Taggart, as a representative of Local 88, to inform the Mayor of a decision by the Board of Directors to restrict the use of library communications structures to library business only. The issue came up twice in 1944, and both times the Board of Directors denied the right of the union to use the library delivery systems and other transmittal strategies to conduct union business.²⁷ As a result, the union requested that the Mayor consider filling new board vacancies with representatives from organized labor. The Mayor committed to making appointments to the Board representative of labor and indicated that the appointments would be made soon.

The appointment was made, in February of 1945. William Lee, President of the Bakery Drivers Union, an AFL affiliate, was named to a vacancy created when Leo Lerner, a supporter of the unions initiatives, left the Board of Directors. The union expressed appreciation for the appointment and called immediately for a CIO member to lend support to Mr. Lee.²⁸

Relations with SCMWA / UPW

Like most locals, Local 88 reported on the activities and initiatives of the national organization through the *CPL Union News*. The April, 1938, issue carried a report from Ravenna Van Houten, the SCMWA field representative in the mid-west, that the circulation of the *CPL Union News* had generated a number of inquiries into the national office. Abram Flaxer, president of the union, apparently recognized a significant opportunity and was prepared to launch an organizing drive among librarians on a national scale. To that end, SCMWA was prepared to send a speaker to the ALA national conference, as well as sponsor a booth for the conference floor. The editors of CPLUN anticipated the conference and produced a column in May-June, 1938, issue that explained SCMWA as an organization, established in July of 1937, by three affiliated locals. The column noted that the affiliates had grown to 173 locals in a single year.

The December, 1938, issue celebrated the Pittsburgh CIO convention that transformed the CIO into the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The reporter noted that “The Convention adopted a broad program of political action to defend civil liberties and extend social security to all the people in

the United States, and voiced its determination that fascism shall not come to this continent.”²⁹

The national office similarly recognized the contributions of the local organizations. In February of 1940, SCMWA formed a library committee specifically to reach out to members of the profession during national conferences, as well as coordinate activities among the library locals that already existed at that time.³⁰ During the 1941 SCMWA convention in Michigan, the membership passed a resolution supporting labor representation on library boards.³¹ Flaxer played a role in Chicago when as president of the United Public Workers³² he advocated for salary increases for library employees to the library board.

Reciprocity

Local 88 in turn supported the leadership agenda. Where SCMWA resisted the “European” war, Local 88 also resisted the war. When SCMWA moved to support the war, so did Local 88. After the 1944 re-election of President Roosevelt, the local newsletter ran front page congratulations to the CIO on the success of the Political Action Committee (PAC) as there was no “denying that the PAC’s campaign of education made the great majority of members in the American labor unions see the issues clearly.”³³

The *CPL Union News*, in its list of highlights for 1944, celebrated the distribution of *Ballot Box*, a publication of the CIO PAC which detailed the voting record of members of Congress concerning issues they considered important for the American people. As the article noted, *Ballot Box* was a controversial publication and the union compounded the controversy by using internal library distribution channels to disseminate the information. The March 27, 1944, minutes of the monthly meeting of the Board of Directors contains a memo from Carl Roden, read into the record as new business and addressed to all department heads and branch librarians, calling for the mimeographed communication to be “disregarded and discarded.”³⁴

“Culture of Unity”

In her discussion of CIO industrial organizing in Chicago in the thirties, Lizbeth Cohen observes that the CIO promoted a “culture of unity” in order to weaken the power of the employers to play employees against each other. As blacks and Mexicans had been used as strike-breakers in the past, the CIO countered that strategy with inclusiveness across racial and ethnic barriers.³⁵

The white-collar unions pursued similar opportunities to develop a sense of community. Korman and the leadership of Local 88 created more immediate and frequent engagements, often in the homes of staff. A Mexican Fiesta party, hosted by Bertha Schuman, in September of 1938 was followed by a

Creole Gumbo Party, given for the benefit of the *CPL Union News*, at the home of Charlemae Rollins, of Hall Branch, on Saturday November 12th. Just two weeks later the union held its first anniversary dinner celebration, which attracted two hundred to the Medinah Athletic Club.

The second annual *Union News* party was also held at the home of Abe Korman and the speaker, M.E. Cordulak, offered his observations on the status of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, which he had recently visited. The raffle and the party raised \$174.35 for continued publication of the *CPL Union News*.³⁶ The union also included theater events and lectures, such as the Langston Hughes presentation and tea. A broader based event, the first annual Chicago SCMWA dance, was offered in December of 1942, and was open to servicemen. Local 88 ran a regular canteen for servicemen during the Second World War. The range of events varied, and the objectives were the same as the national agenda: break down barriers based on race, ethnicity and class...create a sense of belonging. Braced by the philosophical support of the broader CIO, the frontline librarians addressed racial issues in a much more direct way than the administration of the library.

Civil Liberties: Racism

The African-American library in Chicago was the George Cleveland Hall Branch, named for Dr. Hall, a surgeon and activist who was the second African American to serve as a Director of the Board of the Library, from 1926-1927. The branch opened in 1932, built with funds from the local philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, and Vivian Harsh was appointed the first African American branch head in the city. Charlemae Hill Rollins was the children's librarian there from 1932-1963 and became the first African American president of the Children's Services Division of the ALA. She was an author of books for children and also served as a vice-president of Local 88.

The Hall Branch, which served as one anchor of the African American community in the southside Bronzeville community, provided a point of intersection for the union with the African American community. Both Vivian Harsh and Charlemae Rollins knew the African American writers of their day, such as Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright. The branch sponsored a Book Review and Literary Forum, where Hughes presented regularly. The staff sponsored the DuSable History Club which stimulated fifteen separate history clubs in the library by 1944.³⁷

It was through the Hall Branch that Local 88 established relationships with Hughes and Bontemps. While the Hall Branch provided a center for the African American community in the city, their participation in the union also created an avenue to influence the political positions of the union itself. SCMWA, as a whole, was known for an activist position on the improvement of civil liberties; the black activist Ewart Guinier was one

of the co-founders of SCMWA itself.³⁸ However, the presence of a local African American membership reinforced the national agenda.

The union became an advocate for the passage of anti-poll tax legislation, which prevented African American and poor white citizens from voting due to an inability to pay the tax.³⁹ The staff also produced “We Hold These Truths,” a pamphlet published by the Education Committee of the union as a contribution to Negro History Week, celebrated February 13-20 in 1944.⁴⁰ Librarian Ruth Puffer chaired the Education Committee that produced the reading list; other members included Vivian G. Harsh, Marie Antoinette de Roulett, Charlemae Rollins and Mary M. Taggart.⁴¹

Programming that supported tolerance included “a noon-hour Book Talk for that week about books by and about the Negro. Exhibits and programs in branches varied in form and content from a series of events scheduled for each day as held in one branch, Langston Hughes at another branch, to attractive window and room displays in others.” The focus was on “racial tolerance, changing attitudes and open minds.”⁴²

The union also sponsored a viewing of the film *The World We Want to Live In*, presented by the Roundtable of Christians and Jews.⁴³ Several of the leaders of the library union were Jewish, beginning with Abe Korman and Ben Hirsch, including other Jewish members of the staff, such as Ruth Puffer, Bertha Schuman and Karl Jenkinson. Abram Flaxer, president of SCMWA, was also Jewish. Jewish staff members were prominent within the union organization.

Chicago was certainly not the only library system to engage on the issue of racial division within the profession – the debacle of Richmond⁴⁴ dated from 1936 – but the high profile of the participants helped to reinforce the significance of the issue among library practitioners.

Civil Liberties : Intellectual Freedom

The September, 1938, issue of the *CPL Union News* carried a short report of the action during the ALA national convention in Kansas City by the Staff Organization Round Table (SORT) on the practice of censorship. Concerned that “There has been evidence in this country of the exercise of bias in the selection of books and in the administration of library service” the round table membership characterized censorship as a breach of library ethics and called for a public repudiation of such practice. The Chicago Public Library had already issued its repudiation of censorship in 1936, when the Board of Directors issued the first intellectual freedom policy.⁴⁵ But, in the winter of 1938, Forrest Spaulding, the director of Des Moines Public Library, presented the Library Bill of Rights resolution passed by his board to the profession as a whole. Representatives of the profession then adopted the *Library Bill of Rights*, with modifications, as an ALA policy during the 1939 ALA national conference.⁴⁶

The passage of the resolution rejecting the practice of censorship by librarians followed a resolution against fascist book burning and a call for international protests against the practice, and another resolution protested the dismissal of Philip O. Keeney, the librarian at Montana State University who promoted a progressive agenda. The three actions occurred in series, and reflect a strong progressive influence on the SORT assembly. The sequence clearly embeds the roots of the anti-censorship resolution in the vocal left-identified membership of the organization.

Korman was certainly there. His message in the May-June issue of the newsletter indicates Local 88s involvement. He wrote: "In the Staff Organizations Round Table are represented many types of staff organization. We are glad to be affiliated with them and partake of the opportunity to give and take of the different levels of experience afforded in this organized effort. The C.P.L. Employees Union is of that group of organizations in the SORT which is committed to affiliation with the organized labor movement of the country..."⁴⁷

The Toman Branch Challenge

The Toman Branch Library Forum came under attack by some residents who objected to the content of the discussions. The Toman Branch library had opened in 1927 on the south side of the city and served a largely Bohemian community. Unlike other immigrant communities that experienced the "Americanization" strategies of their local libraries, the patrons of Toman infused the branch with the culture of the Czech community. The discussion Forum was organized by the community leadership in 1931 and continued into the 1960s. The Forum had achieved national prominence and functioned as a model for similar programs in other libraries. Edith Wolinsky, a librarian at the branch, was also a union officer. The speaker, however, who presented the free speech position to the Board was Roderick Ginsburg, a merchant and community leader.

The Board re-affirmed the right of the Forum participants to uncensored speech, and made it clear it was a matter of library policy and not simply applicable to the Forum itself. As the news article noted, in 1936 "The Librarian and the Committee on Library with Dr. Preston Bradley as Chairman, took the logical and dignified view that 'the Library asserts its rights and duty to keep on its shelves a representative selection of books on all subjects of interest to its readers ... including all books on all sides of controversial questions.'"

However, positions had altered, if ever so slightly, since 1936 and the author of the article went on to add "To this dignified position we may add that the Library is a democratic institution supported by all the people and functioning in a democratic state, and consequently has the affirmative right to give the democratic viewpoint priority and prominence over all other undemocratic theories and viewpoints. At a time like this when

democracy is under pressure in Europe and Asia, American public libraries must rid themselves thoroughly of the 'myth of impartiality' ... and become militant advocates of the democratic faith."⁴⁸

"Books vs. Hitler"

The SCMWA Resolution on Foreign Policy, passed at the national Second Biennial Convention in September of 1941 at Lansing, Michigan, galvanized the members of Local 88. The national union affirmed that fascism was an attack on labor, and noted that "it was particularly brought home to government employees by the tragic news of the mass imprisonment of one thousand city employees in Oslo, Norway, at the orders of the Gestapo." The resolution also denounced appeasement of Hitler and called for a "swift and crushing military defeat."⁴⁹ The Nazis had also invaded the Soviet Union in June, in violation of the treaty signed in 1939. As the national union abandoned its pacifist position, so did the locals.

In October of the same year, the CPL Employees Union arranged a city-wide rally "in protest of the debasement and destruction of culture now taking place in all countries occupied by the fascists."⁵⁰ Karl Jenkinson, an officer in the union, presented a resolution denouncing the "medieval burning of books; the murder and humiliation of writers, scholars, teachers; the destruction of libraries and schools." They resolved that "we Chicago Librarians, intellectual and cultural workers assembled at a meeting sponsored by the Chicago Public Library Employees Union, Local 88 (SCMWA) at the Hotel Hamilton, Friday Nov. 28, protest these acts of brutality and inhumanity and pledge to do all in our power to wipe out this scourge of humanity and support the foreign policy of President Roosevelt of giving aid to all countries fighting Hitlerism and fascism."⁵¹

The union passed its resolution just days before the December 7 attack on Pearl Harbor and the German declaration of war against the United States. Roden called a general meeting of senior staff on December 23. Cast as a "War Against Hitlerism," the administration announced that library branches and facilities would host civilian defense activity whenever needed and that there would be no "business as usual" in the Chicago Public Library. Korman used the opportunity to address collection development issues, and charged staff to be more rigorous in their selection practice. He cited two examples: a "mendacious piece of writing" by Jan Valtin, *Out of the Night*, which the library had readily available for public selection and a more scholarly work, *Soviet Power* by Hewlett Johnson, the Dean of Canterbury, which was restricted in closed stacks.⁵²

Editors of the newsletter began to carry reviews of "Books that lose the war...books that are read by many people – which teach unconsciously those attitudes which we are fighting to eradicate. We are fighting injustice and intolerance across the seas, and we should warn the people when we hand out books that subtly teach intolerance at home...It is the westerns,

detective stories and cheap love stories which are read in great numbers.”⁵³ A criticism of *A Man Lay Dead* by Ngaio Marsh noted that the detective writer seems to “Spend all her time convincing people that Russians are always ridiculous, always conspirators, always Orientals, and thank God for dear old England, always doomed to be foiled in their dirty machinations.” Other titles included Zane Grey’s *Majesty’s Ranch* and *Plantation Murder* by Christine Govan. *Great Ceasar’s Ghost*, by Malcolm Coles, was also seen as racist, and many copies were returned to the publisher before making it to the shelves. Korman and Roden debated the removal of the book *My Name Is Million*,⁵⁴ with Roden advising Korman to leave it where it was as removing it might cause more problems.⁵⁵

The *News of SCMWA*, a later version of the national newspaper of the union, carried significant spreads on members of Local 88. One example was the center spread in the July 1944 issue, which featured Charlemae Rollins and “Books on the Negro.” It identified Rollins as an active member of the library union, and related resistance to racial inequity to strategies for winning the war. The unidentified author of the article wrote that “Books can build understanding and tolerance, or they can spread confusion and prejudice. In the hands of young people, books can promote the fascist idea, or they can help build the better world that we are fighting for.” The article also included two columns, one headed “Books for Democracy” and the parallel column, “Books for Fascism.” The “Books for Democracy” column promoted books that offered positive images of the Negro, such as *Journey Cake* and *Steppin and Family*. The column of fascist titles listed *You Shall Have a Carriage* and *Jump Lively Jeff* as promotions of racial stereotypes in support of a fascist agenda.

The union also promoted materials in support of the Soviet Union as an ally. In keeping with the ALA agenda of placing emphasis on materials that would deliver facts and *ideas* that would enable readers to make “intelligent decisions” the newsletter promoted reading materials. The employees union stated a belief in “offering decisive aid in winning the war and peace.” The column then recommended a list of items on the Soviet Union.⁵⁶

Recommended reading lists were a common practice in libraries, but it appears that the union was often engaged in “correcting” the image of the Soviet Union during this period. It helped when the ALA designated May 1-6, 1944, Russia Book Week in an attempt to promote reading of books that would “foster friendship and understanding.” But the political positions reinforced views of the unionists as “a bunch of reds.”

As early as 1938, Korman had indicated his concerns that “the greatest minds are languishing in exile and in concentration camps” and libraries were being burned to the ground.⁵⁷ It was Korman who conveyed the anguish of the practitioners’ witness to the intentional destruction of any alternative to an Aryan culture. The fact that the Jewish race was a target for destruction lent an immediacy to the unionists’ agenda; at that time they

viewed the Soviets as a line of defense against Hitler. However, while they adopted the position of civil liberties for the African American community, they did not expand their advocacy to the Roosevelt administrations' illegal incarceration of Japanese Americans. They actually devoted little attention to the Pacific war; the focus was on defeating Hitler, which suggests that the Nazi program of Jewish genocide was a driving factor for the union. Korman himself died in December of 1945, the victim of a hit-and-run accident, before the purge of the leftists began.

The Purge

The left-led unions of the CIO supported the third party candidacy of Henry Wallace in 1948. As a result, the centrists and right-wingers of the CIO finally convinced Philip Murray, president of the union, to eliminate the leftists from the organization. The CIO expelled ten unions and lost anywhere from 675,000 to 1 million members. In Chicago, the raid on what was then Local 2 of the United Public Workers was led by Antoinette de Roulet, one of the original organizers of the library union. In September of 1949 she announced the formation at the library of Local 1215 of the Government and Civic Employees Organizing Committee, the CIO successor to United Public Workers.

As president of the new rival union she released a flyer called "The Union Story" which detailed the reasons for the raid:

We do not deny any one the right to his beliefs. If an individual believes in the communist philosophy, that is his own business, but *he should keep it his own business*, and not involve those who do not share his belief. A person should be able to belong to a UNION without being thereby committed to philosophies and movements in which he does not believe.

For De Roulet, the concept of "right wing" is not characterized as conservative: "it means middle of the road liberal – the mental climate of most of our people."⁵⁸

Ben Hirsch took up the defense of the UPW local:

IS OUR UNION A GOOD UNION? Has it helped you to live more decently and to do the things which make you happy? Has it helped you to become a better librarian and a better citizen? Has it helped the library and the people who use it?

You and I know the answer. It has been for these twelve years and still is a good union...Our union has done the many little and big things which make our lives a bit easier and happier.⁵⁹

However, on March 1, 1950, United Public Workers lost its charter with the CIO. It attempted to continue as an independent, but actually only

persisted long enough to move its remaining members into other white collar unions. The old Local 2 of UPW moved into AFSCME, bringing this initial experiment in radical politics to a close. But the experiment itself cannot be considered a failure.

The choice of the original thirteen organizers to affiliate with SCMWA was significant. It introduced a radical analysis into the discussions of the role of the public librarian in American culture, an analysis not previously considered due to the association of the public library with the propagation of “high culture” and the maintenance of the status quo. The radical analysis stimulated a potential identification of the public librarians with an expanded user population representing multiple classes, ethnicities and races. Librarians as unionists tested that identification through their participation in union activities as well as professional activities, and tested their significance through the promotion of cross-cultural programming, alternative publications and advocacy for working class branch services.

The reason the significance of the public librarians affiliation with the left-led CIO is obscured is precisely because the left lost the battle of cultural orientation. While white-collar workers were allowed to “experiment” with alternative analyses and cultural strategies for social change as long as there was no serious challenge to the mainstream culture, at the point at which the status quo became nervous about the potential impact of the left, they obliterated it. Organizations were broken up, the leadership was marginalized and silenced, and the written records were destroyed or dispersed. But there is enough evidence to prove that public librarians did, indeed, try to shatter “the normative expectations under which they normally labor[ed].”⁶⁰ We only need to grant the experiment credibility.

Footnotes

1. CPL Municipal Reference, October 1937. The actual number of attendees is not recorded. See The Abram Flaxer Papers; Wagner #73; box 2; folder 16; Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives; New York University.
2. At the point at which it was expelled, SCMWA had become the United Public Workers of America, due to a merger with the United Federal Workers of America.
3. Milwaukee Public Library organized as an AFL affiliate.
4. Chicago Public Library Union News (CPLUN) December, 1937, p.1
5. American Catholic History Research Center & University Archives. The Catholic University of America. Congress of Industrial Organizations Records. State, County and Municipal Workers of America. Series 1, Box 10, Folder 1 10 9 (CUA CIO SCMWA)
6. CPLUN, December, 1937, p.2
7. See Rung, M.C. *Servants of the State : managing diversity & democracy in the Federal workplace, 1933-1953*. Athens : University of Georgia Press, particularly the chapter “Building the New Deal Civil Service.” Also Goldhor, H. (1943), “Civil Service in Public Libraries.” *Library Quarterly*, v. XIII, #3, pp. 187-211.
8. See CPLUN, March, 1938, p.1. \$400,000 in 1938 would be equitable to \$5.5 million in 2006 (<http://www.westegg.com/inflation/>). The significant amount of the increase also indicates that the salary issue had been planned. The unions actions probably served to underscore a pre-existing initiative.
9. CPLUN, April, 1938, p.4. “Testing” for civil service professional positions relied

- heavily on the currency of advanced education in “scoring”.
10. CPLUN, January, 1939, p.1,3
 11. CPLUN, February-March, 1939, p.1,4
 12. Chicago Public Library Special Collections (CPLSC) Roden, 1939
 13. CPLSC, Roden, 1939
 14. CPLUN, October-November, 1938, p.4
 15. CPLUN, April-May, 1939, pp.1,3
 16. CPLSC, Roden 1939
 17. The Abram Flaxer Papers; Wagner #73; box 1; folder 3; Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives; New York University p. 64
 18. CPLUN, March 1938, p.1
 19. CPLUN, April-May, 1939, p.4
 20. CPLUN, May-June, 1938, p.3
 21. CPLUN, November/December, 1938, p.1
 22. CPLUN, March 1938, p.4
 23. CPLUN, May-June, 1940, p.5
 24. CPLUN, April, 1938, p.1
 25. *Govt. Guide*, June, 1939, pp. 5-7
 26. *Govt. Guide*, July 1939, p.10
 27. *Proceedings*. Chicago Public Library Board Of Directors (CPLBOD), 1944-1945, pp. 69, 147.
 28. CPLUN, February 18, 1945, p.1
 29. CPLUN, December 1938, p.2
 30. CPLUN, January-February, 1940, p.3
 31. CPLUN October 20, 1941, p.1
 32. In 1946 the State, County and Municipal Workers of America merged with the United Federal Workers of America to create the United Public Workers of America, with Abe Flaxer as president.
 33. CPLUN, November 30, 1944
 34. CPLBOD March 27, 1944, p.84
 35. Cohen, L. (1990). *Making a New Deal : Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*. New York : Cambridge University Press., p. 340-341.
 36. CPLUN, February/March, 1939, p.3
 37. Knupfer, p. 63.
 38. Mike Gold, in a letter to Flaxer in 1986, quoted a section of a book entitled *Union Power and New York – Victor Gotbaum and District Council 37* by Jewel Bellush and Bernard Bellush. He wrote “...Flaxer along with Frank Herbst, Jack Bigel, Ewart Guinier, and others, set about organizing fellow social workers in the Bronx and elsewhere in the city into what became known as the Association of Workers in Public Relief Agencies ...” Guinier later served as president of SCMWA Local 176, New York University. Tamiment Library. Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives. Abram Flaxer Papers. WAG 73, #1.
 39. The poll tax continued in several southern states until the Kennedy administration prioritized the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, which eliminated the poll tax in national elections. It was ratified in 1964.
 40. Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, published in 1944, certainly reinforced commitments among librarians to social and economic equality, but it should be noted that the attention on race as an issue within the Chicago Public Library gained traction earlier in the 1940s.
 41. CPLUN, December, 1943. Knupfer does not address the union activities of the Hall staff, because she was not aware of them. She characterizes the “ambitious task” as the work of a “special committee organized to compile a bibliography of books and periodic literature on the history of black life in the western hemisphere” (p. 61). My own discussions with the CPL archivists for both the main library and the Harsh collection indicate that there was no awareness of this early library union.
 42. Chicago was not the only library system to engage on the issue of racial division. The American Library Association became involved with the question of racial equity in the late 1920s, and actually sponsored a study of discrimination as it applied to libraries in the first half of the 1930s. See Barker, T. D. (1936) *Libraries of the South : a report on developments, 1930-1935*. Chicago: American Library

- Association. The ALA also had to deal with the controversy of the Richmond conference. See Preer, J.L., "This Year – Richmond!" The 1936 Meeting of the American Library Association, *Libraries and Culture*, Spring, 2004, v. 39, #2.
43. CPLUN, September 1, 1942
 44. Preer, J.L., "This Year – Richmond!" The 1936 Meeting of the American Library Association, *Libraries and Culture*, Spring, 2004, v. 39, #2.
 45. See Latham, "Wheat and Chaff: Carl Roden, Abe Korman and the Definitions of Intellectual Freedom," unpublished manuscript.
 46. Geller, pp. 172-174
 47. CPLUN, May-June, 1938, p.1
 48. CPLUN, January, 1939, p.4. The writer of the article is unidentified, but the tone is similar to Korman.
 49. CPLUN *Extra*, October 9, 1941.
 50. CPLUN *Extra*, October 27, 1941
 51. CPLUN *Extra*, December 5, 1941.
 52. CPLUN *Extra*, December 23, 1941
 53. CPLUN, August 1942, p.2 This observation is balanced by the use of popular propaganda by the Nazis to demonize their opposition. The University of Illinois Library at Urbana-Champaign possesses a collection of German World War II belles-lettres that are designed to promote the Nazi agenda through popular literature.
 54. There are two *My Name is Million* shown as available at that time. One appears to be a Polish title concerning WWII, and the other is by the Polish poet Adama Mickiewicz,
 55. CPLSC Roden 1943
 56. CPLUN, November 1942, pp. 1,2
 57. Chicago Public Library Municipal Reference Collection, 1938.
 58. See *The CIO'S Left-Led Unions* (1992), editor Steve Rosswurm, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, p.2.
 59. Chicago Historical Society. Government Workers Union Archives (CHS GWU)
 60. Raber, D. (2003). "Librarians as organic intellectuals : a Gramscian approach to blind spots and tunnel vision." *Library Quarterly*, vol. 73, no. 1, p. 52.