

HOW THE UAW GREW

by
Daniel Nelson*

Of the unions that emerged in the 1930s and helped give the era a reputation for unrest and turbulence, the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW) was unmatched in size and influence. Between its founding in 1935 and the 1950 "treaty of Detroit," which symbolized its emergence as a permanent force in the auto industry, the UAW spread from 65 plants to more than 1000, from 27,000 members to more than 1,000,000, and from 24 mostly midwestern cities and towns to 300 communities in 42 states and Canadian provinces. In 1935 the UAW was the same size as the Building Service Employees and the Fire Fighters; by 1943 it was the largest American union.¹

In the process the UAW became the best known and best documented American union. In recent years, books and articles on the formative years of the UAW have provided the richest accounts of working class responses to the Depression and New Deal, the most detailed examinations of the union as a self-governing voluntary association, the most thorough treatments of the evolution of collective bargaining, and the most penetrating accounts of the union role in politics and society.² What the UAW was to the labor movement the study of the UAW has become to labor history and to industrial economics.

*I am indebted to Sidney Fine, Robert Zieger, and John Barnard for comments on an earlier draft of this paper and to Lawrence Kannae for assistance with the computations.

¹Comparisons are based on membership data in Leo Troy, *Trade Union Membership, 1897-1962* (NY, 1965). For the "treaty of Detroit," see Nelson Lichtenstein, "UAW Bargaining Strategy and Shop-Floor Conflict: 1946-1970," *Industrial Relations*, 24 (1985), 360-79.

²For the early history of the UAW see Sidney Fine, *The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle* (Ann Arbor, 1963); Fine, *Sit-Down: the General Motors Strike of 1936-37* (Ann Arbor, 1969); Walter Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement, 1935-1941* (Cambridge, 1960); Steve Babson, *Building the Union: Skilled Workers and Anglo-Gaelic Immigrants in the Rise of the UAW* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1991); Claude E. Hoffman, *Sit-Down in Anderson: UAW Local 663, Anderson, Indiana* (Detroit, 1968); Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936-1939: A Study in Class and Culture* (Pittsburgh, 1975); John G. Kruchko, *The Birth of a Union Local: the History of UAW Local 674, Norwood, Ohio, 1933-1940* (Ithaca, 1972); Joyce Shaw Peterson, *American Automo-*

Thus, in terms of union performance and of resources available to the historian, the UAW provides the best opportunity for assessing the potential of the labor movement during its mid-20th century heyday. This essay examines one feature of that achievement, the growth of union membership in the 1930s and 1940s and the social and political implications of that growth. How did the UAW evolve as an institution? What kinds of workers became UAW members? What employers were most (least) vulnerable to organization? How did UAW politics affect its growth? How did union membership increases translate into community power?

In addition to many traditional works, this study utilizes a neglected resource, the membership data that appeared in the UAW's annual or biennial convention proceedings that record the ebb and flow of the 1492 local unions that were affiliated with the UAW in the 1930s and 1940s. This information cannot convey the complexity of a given historical setting or the role of personality and personal interaction in union affairs. Nor is it free from the problems of undercounting, overcounting, and inaccurate recording that plague all union membership statistics, though competition between locals probably prevented gross distortions in the reported totals. Whatever the convention data's shortcomings, it provides the only consistent time series that relates the fortunes of the locals (the building blocks of the union) to the growing presence of the UAW in the auto industry, the economy, and American

bile Workers, 1900-1933 (Albany, 1987); Steve Babson, "Pointing the Way: The Role of British and Irish Skilled Tradesmen in the Rise of the UAW," *Detroit in Perspective*, 7 (Spring 1983), 75-95; Babson, "Class, Craft, and Culture: Tool and Die Makers and the Organization of the UAW," *Michigan Historical Review*, 14 (Spring 1988), 33-55; and Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years* (Boston, 1970). For the internal politics of the UAW see Victor G. Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW* (Boston, 1976); John Barnard, *Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers* (Boston, 1983); Irving Howe and B. J. Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (NY, 1949); Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: the Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton, 1977); Martin Halpern, *UAW Politics in the Cold War Era* (Albany, 1988); Christopher H. Johnson, *Maurice Sugar: Law, Labor, and the Left in Detroit, 1912-1950* (Detroit, 1988); Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions* (Bloomington, 1980); and Jack Stieber, *Governing the UAW* (NY, 1962). For the UAW role in collective bargaining, see Frederick H. Harbison and Robert Dubin, *Patterns of Union Management Relations* (Chicago, 1947); Robert M. MacDonald, *Collective Bargaining in the Automobile Industry: A Study of Wage Structure and Competitive Relations* (New Haven, 1963); Harry C. Katz, *Shifting Gears: Changing Labor Relations in the U.S. Automobile Industry* (Cambridge, 1985); Carl Dean Snyder, *White Collar Workers and the UAW* (Urbana, 1973); and Steve Jefferys, *Management and the Managed* (Cambridge, 1986). For the role of the UAW in politics and society see Nancy F. Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975* (Ithaca, 1990); Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: the Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana, 1987); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (NY, 1979); Nelson Lichtenstein and Stephen Meyer, eds., *On the Line: Essays in the History of Auto Work* (Urbana, 1989); and Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick, 1987).

TABLE 1.
UAW Local Unions

	<i>Total</i>	<i>New</i>	<i>Dissolved</i>	<i>Survival Rate*</i>
1935	65	65	—	—
1936	71	17	11	83
1937	209	164	24	63
1939	172	73	110	47
1940	272	120	20	88
1941	370	116	18	93
1942	452	155	73	80
1943	512	117	57	87
1944	634	160	38	93
1946	645	103	92	85
1947	817	224	52	92
1949	965	180	32	96

* Defined as the total for a given year minus the locals dissolved in the following year divided by the original total.

Source: UAW membership study.

society. Accordingly, I have recorded the following information for each UAW local: its location, the size (in 1940) of the city or town where it was located, the state and region, the employer's size and product or products, the dates when the local first appeared in the convention record and when it last appeared, and the membership of the local for each convention year between 1935 and 1949.³ The result, I believe, is a more complete overview of the pattern of union expansion than has appeared to date.

* * *

Table 1 portrays the cumulative growth of UAW local organizations. Like all institutions, the UAW experienced successes and failures; not every local union survived and even the fastest growing locals experienced substantial turnover. The health of the organization as a whole depended on its ability to maintain existing locals and to add new ones.

³*Proceedings of the 1st Constitutional Convention, United Automobile Workers of America, Detroit, August 26-31, 1935; Proceedings of the Second Convention, UAWA, South Bend, Indiana, April 27-May 2, 1936; Proceedings of Second Annual Convention, UAWA, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August 23 to 29, 1937; Proceedings of the Special Convention of the UAWA, March 27-April 6, 1939, Cleveland, Ohio; Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Convention of the UAWA, July 29 to August 6, 1940, St. Louis, Missouri; Proceedings of the 1941 Convention of the International Union, UAWA, August 4 to August 16, 1941, Buffalo, New York; Proceedings of the Seventh Convention, 1942, of the United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, August 3 to August 9, 1942, Chicago, Illinois; Proceedings of the Eighth Convention, 1943 . . . October 4 to October 10, 1943,*

The UAW did well in both categories. Apart from 1938-39, when internal factionalism and the secession of the Homer Martin faction distorted the record, the UAW typically organized more than 100 locals per year and sustained at least eight of ten until the next convention. Unlike major unions of earlier days, the UAW suffered no period of demoralization and collapse; even the demobilization after World War II in 1945-46, which cost hundreds of thousands of UAW members their jobs, did not markedly effect the union's overall performance. This pattern emphasizes the strength of the UAW at its base and the existence of political and economic conditions that made it difficult or impossible for employers to eliminate UAW locals once they were well established.

Despite the popular association of auto production with large factories, the typical UAW local was comparatively small. Median membership ranged from 100 in 1940 and 1941, to 400 in 1944 and 1946, and 200 in 1949. Only 220 of the 1492 locals ever had more than 1000 members and only 18 ever had more than 10,000. Of the 18, six represented workers at wartime aircraft plants and declined after the war. The best known of these, Local 50 at Ford's Willow Run bomber plant, had 100 members in 1941, more than 30,000 in 1943, and 200 in 1946. Of the more permanent organizations, Local 600 at Ford's River Rouge plant was by far the largest, with 82,000 members in 1944. However, it was more than twice as large as the next largest locals, which were multi-employer amalgamated organizations in Detroit and Toledo (Locals 174 and 12). The second largest single-plant local was Packard Local 190, with 29,000 members in 1944. The largest GM local was Buick Local 599, which had more than 17,000 members in 1944. With these notable exceptions, the auto industry was an industry of medium-sized factories and the UAW a union of medium-sized locals.

More surprising, in view of the emphasis scholars have devoted to UAW leadership and factional competition, was the pattern of UAW growth through the 1930s and 1940s. As Table 2 indicates, the UAW was highly successful under each of its presidents during these years. In all three periods it outperformed the labor movement and the Teamsters (the other conspicuously successful union of the period). Several factors probably explain this unusual and perhaps paradoxical situa-

Buffalo, New York; Proceedings of the Ninth Convention, 1944, . . . September 11 to September 17, 1944, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Proceedings of the Tenth Convention, 1946 . . . Atlantic City, N. J., March 23 to 31, 1946; Proceedings of the Eleventh Convention, 1947 . . . November 9-14, 1947, Atlantic City, New Jersey; Proceedings of the Twelfth Constitutional Convention, 1949 . . . July 10-15, 1949, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Throughout this period, UAW locals received one convention vote for each 100 members or majority of 100. I have assumed that each vote represents 100 members.

TABLE 2.
Annual Membership Growth Rates
(percent)

AFL	1935-39	5
	1939-46	10
	1946-49	2
CIO	1937-39	0
	1939-46	11
	1946-49	4
UAW	1935-39	84
	1939-46	22
	1946-49	11
Teamsters	1935-39	29
	1939-46	10
	1946-49	4

Sources: UAW membership study; Leo Troy, *Trade Union Membership* (NY, 1965).

tion. First, all of the contestants for power favored a policy of aggressive organizing and bargaining. With the exception of the Martin faction in 1938-39, no group advocated a craft union strategy or a more conciliatory relationship with employers. Policy differences between the factions were often inconsequential.⁴ Even the ideological distinctions that sharply divided UAW leaders must have seemed unimportant to many members. By the standards of American politics, all of the UAW groups were far to the left-of-center. Second, auto workers were accustomed to working in a climate of intense competition and personal rivalry. Experience suggested that union factionalism was no more a harbinger of union failure than Ford-GM hostility was a sign of industrial collapse. Most of all, UAW locals were largely autonomous and self-sufficient. By the late 1930s, the UAW had developed a broad base and numerous power centers. The union's growth was less a reflection of the actions of any executive or group of executives than of the economic vitality of the industries and communities in which it operated. Despite incessant turmoil, the UAW expanded as opportunities arose.

Studies of UAW locals provide detail for the years before union security agreements influenced membership totals.⁵ Auto workers, like

⁴Halpern, 32-33, 112, 121. During World War II, conflicts over incentive pay and fidelity to the no-strike pledge temporarily overshadowed personal and factional loyalties. See Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: the CIO in World War II* (Cambridge, 1982).

⁵See, for example, Friedlander, Hoffman, Kruchko, *Birth of a Union Local*, 16-63; Wyndam Mortimer, *Organize* (Boston, 1971), 54-96; John Bodnar, "Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker," *Journal of American History*, 75 (1989), 1201-21;

other industrial workers of the 1930s, responded to general stimuli, such as the National Industrial Recovery Act, which spurred organization, and the recession of 1937–38, which discouraged it. They were also keenly attuned to developments in the industry. From their perspective, the 1936–37 General Motors strike was far more than a struggle for bargaining rights in the plants of a major corporation; it was also a test of the union's prospects and community standing.⁶

Within this larger framework, the prominence of Detroit in the auto industry and in industry generally had a substantial impact on the UAW. As an international symbol of mass production and high wages, Detroit had attracted armies of upwardly mobile job-seekers, a disproportionate share of the world's skilled metal workers, and a large number of political activists—all suggested by the presence of the Reuther brothers after 1927. The enormous power of the area's largest employers also set Detroit apart from other industrial centers in the Midwest and elsewhere.⁷

Detroit area UAW locals reflected their milieu. A large percentage of the city's activists had had prior union experiences in Britain, Germany, or the U.S., were committed to the labor movement, and were influenced by or members of socialist or communist political groups. Employer hostility did not deter them, though it kept their organizations in disarray until 1936, when economic recovery tipped the balance in their favor.⁸

A number of Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Toledo plants also had attracted union sympathizers who gave their locals a radical cast.⁹ But the context was different. The pre-Depression labor movements in those

Stephen Meyer, "Technology and the Workplace: Skilled and Production Workers at Allis-Chalmers, 1900–1941," *Technology and Culture*, 29 (1988), 854–55; Frank Marquart, *An Auto Worker's Journal: the UAW From Crusade to One-Party Union* (University Park, 1975), 79–89, 103–106; Sanford Jacoby, "Reckoning with Company Unions: The Case of Thompson Products, 1934–1964," *Industrial & Labor Relations Review*, 43 (Oct. 1989), 19–40; Stephen Meyer, "Stalin Over Wisconsin," *The Making and Unmaking of Militant Unionism, 1900–1950* (New Brunswick, 1992).

⁶Fine, *Sit-Down*, 327–29; Fine, "The General Motors Sit-Down Strike: A Reexamination," *American Historical Review*, 70 (1965), 691–713.

⁷See Babson, *Building the Union*, 28–94; Reuther, 45–64; Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 100–190. For comparisons with the region's other prominent industrial center, Chicago, see Barbara Warne Newell, *Chicago and the Labor Movement: Metropolitan Unionism in the 1930's* (Urbana, 1961), and Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York, 1990).

⁸See Fine, *The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle*, 182–430; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 71–120; Babson, *Building the Union*, 95–199; Keeran, 28–147.

⁹Darryl Holter, "Sources of CIO Success: The New Deal Years in Milwaukee," *Labor History*, 29 (1988), 199–224; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 218–29; Meyer, "Stalin Over Wisconsin"; Sidney Fine, "The Toledo Chevrolet Strike of 1935," *Ohio Historical Quarterly*, 67 (1958), 326–56; Raymond Boryczka and Lorin Lee Cary, *No Strength Without Union: An Illustrated History of Ohio Workers, 1803–1980* (Columbus, 1981), 195–98.

TABLE 3.
UAW Membership

	A Troy	B Nelson	A minus B	B ÷ A
1935	NA	27,300	NA	NA
1936	NA	23,800	NA	NA
1937	195,400	175,100	20,300	90
1939	165,300	170,300	- 5,000	103
1940	246,000	191,900	54,100	78
1941	460,800	414,600	46,200	90
1942	592,400	521,200	71,200	88
1943	908,600	725,800	182,800	80
1944	1,065,100	1,053,400	11,700	99
1946	673,200	893,000	- 219,800	133
1947	855,500	819,900	35,600	96
1949	919,200	902,700	16,500	98

Sources: UAW membership study; Troy, p. A-20.

cities had been much more assertive and the major employers were less influential. Nowhere were the contrasts between the values and interests of managers and workers as sharply etched as they were in Detroit. The hundreds of small and medium-sized locals that emerged and often flourished outside Detroit and other large cities remain a mystery. In most cases their leaders apparently had little prior experience in union affairs or collective bargaining. Employers instinctively opposed their efforts to organize but appreciated their own vulnerability to strikes.

Regardless of the setting, local initiative spelled the difference between growth and stagnation. Though UAW organizers often provided the initial impetus, local activists determined the pace of organization, the character of the local, and the likelihood of a successful employer counterattack. Once established, local leaders usually commanded the allegiance of rank and file workers, irrespective of the leaders' role in the union's internecine battles. The major exceptions were some of Martin's followers, whose rule-or-ruin tactics had a devastating impact and sparked extended internal conflicts.¹⁰

Table 3 documents other features of the process of union growth. Leo Troy reports the official union membership as reported to the CIO. I report the aggregate membership of the locals based on the convention reports in Column B. The other columns summarize the differences between the sources.

Assuming that the reports are reasonably accurate, two points are

¹⁰See Kruchko, 61-63.

TABLE 4.
Sources of Growth

	New Members % of Total	Gain (Loss) Via Internal Growth*	Gain Via New Locals	Loss Via Dissolution	Growth	
					% Internal	% New Locals
1936	9	-4,100	2,100	1,500	0	100
1937	88	32,500	121,200	2,400	21	79
1939	23	5,900	33,100	43,800	15	85
1940	13	10,600	14,100	3,100	43	57
1941	56	220,300	12,900	1,500	94	6
1942	21	65,200	45,500	4,100	59	41
1943	29	187,800	22,100	5,300	89	11
1944	31	297,300	32,800	2,500	90	10
1946	2	-160,300	20,700	20,800	0	100
1947	3	-93,000	26,700	6,800	0	100
1949	10	61,600	29,700	8,500	67	33

* Surplus or deficit in existing locals. Computed as $NIG = (New\ Tot - New\ Mem- bers) - (Old\ Tot - Diss)$.

Source: UAW membership study.

clear. First, the UAW was subject to rapid, violent membership fluctuations. Columns A and B are "snapshots" of the organization at particular moments, which could vary by six months or more. They show that the UAW lost more members in a few months of 1946 than had been enrolled in all AFL unions as late as 1902 and in all but 5 of 55 CIO unions in 1946. In other years the UAW enlisted tens of thousands of members in equally short periods. The number of locals increased steadily but membership varied wildly from year to year and month to month. Second, the most dramatic fluctuations, in 1940, 1943, and 1946, reflected major developments associated with the U.S. role in World War II.

The influence of these exogenous events helps to explain the union's postwar policies. No UAW official could be oblivious to the risks of demobilization, of postwar recession, and of growing public hostility to the labor movement. The officers' interest in union security, long-term contracts, and similar measures was not simply a reflection of "maturity" or a desire to stifle internal dissent.¹¹ Like their constituents, they hoped to consolidate their gains before conditions changed.

Table 4 distinguishes between workers who joined existing locals and those who joined new locals. New organizations were critical to the image of "labor on the march" and to the long-term health of the

¹¹Steiber, 153-57.

TABLE 5.

	<i>UAW Membership (new organization only)</i>	<i>Percent of Actual Membership</i>	<i>Percent of ACWA-UTW Mean</i>
1935	27,300	100	NA
1936	27,900	117	NA
1937	146,700	84	126
1939	136,000	80	84
1940	147,000	77	85
1941	158,400	38	81
1942	199,800	38	97
1943	216,600	30	99
1944	246,900	23	112
1946	246,800	28	91
1947	266,700	33	87
1949	287,900	32	99

Sources: UAW membership study; Troy.

union, but they did not account for the majority of new members. Only in its formative years and in the immediate postwar period did the UAW grow primarily by organizing new locals. In other years the typical UAW recruit joined an existing local. At least 74% of new UAW members between 1935 and 1950 joined locals that had been represented at one or more UAW conventions. For many of these members, joining was not the daring act it had often been for factory workers before the 1930s and for UAW pioneers in 1933-35. But that did not mean that it was necessarily easier for the individual or less crucial for the organization. Even comparatively well-established local unions faced hazards that could lead to disaster, as the UAW's nearly 20% annual or biennial failure rate and dramatic membership fluctuations emphasize.

If the UAW had grown only by organizing new locals, it would have been a fraction of its actual size. In the left column of Table 5, I assume that existing UAW locals did not add members and that new locals were the only source of growth. The effect would not have been noticeable until 1937, and would not have been substantial until 1941. During the war years, however, the UAW would have been only a quarter to a third of its actual size. Is this a realistic scenario? Given the emphasis of the military on vehicles, it is difficult to imagine a stagnant auto industry during World War II. But other circumstances might have curtailed employment opportunities and made the union more dependent on its organizers. A notable example was the situation of the clothing and textile industries during World War II, when government restrictions severely limited employment and union growth. The right hand

TABLE 6.
UAW Members, by Firm Size
(percent of all members)

	<i>Large</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Small</i>
1940	35	45	20
1941	32	29	39
1942	49	33	18
1943	47	38	16
1944	41	43	16
1946	39	42	19

Source: UAW membership study.

column in Table 5 compares the membership of the hypothetical UAW, with growth confined to new locals, to the mean membership of the United Textile Workers and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, which were inadvertent victims of wartime priorities. The similarity is striking and illustrates the strategic position of the UAW in the economy of the 1940s.

Another contrast is equally instructive. At the beginning of the war, Sidney Hillman of the ACWA was President Roosevelt's closest labor advisor and Walter Reuther was a little-known Detroit labor leader. By 1945 Hillman's reputation was in eclipse and Reuther was one of the nation's best known union officials. Other factors, including Hillman's declining health, contributed to this change, but it was the success of the UAW that projected Reuther into a Hillman-like role by the late 1940s.¹²

* * *

One of the most common indictments of the Roosevelt Administration's management of war mobilization was that it favored big business over small business in awarding contracts for military equipment and supplies.¹³ UAW membership data provides new support for these charges. Virtually all auto and auto parts manufacturers were capable of producing war material and a high percentage of firms were organized by 1941. Table 6 shows the distribution of UAW membership between large, vertically integrated firms (General Motors, Ford, Chrysler,

¹²See Steve Fraser, "Sidney Hillman: Labor's Machiavelli" in Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, eds., *Labor Leaders in America* (Urbana, 1987), 207-33.

¹³Jim F. Heath, "American War Mobilization and the Use of Small Manufacturers, 1939-1943," *Business History Review*, 46 (1972), 295-319; Paul A. C. Koistinen, *The Military-Industrial Complex: A Historical Perspective* (NY, 1980), 70-71; Harold G. Vatter, *The U.S. Economy in World War II* (NY, 1985), 55-61.

International Harvester), medium-sized, multi-plant manufacturers (Bendix, Eaton, Studebaker), and small, single plant producers.

During the peak years of war production (1942-44) UAW membership was substantially redistributed in favor of large and medium-sized firms. In 1941, 133,000 UAW members worked for the largest companies and 162,000 worked for the smallest. In 1944, the respective totals were 432,000 and 168,000. The Ford contract accounted for 70% of the increase in large firm membership in 1942 but rising employment totals thereafter were crucial.

Next to the growth in total UAW membership, the expansion of the UAW presence in the Big Three auto firms was the most notable development of the war years. In the 1930s, the principal UAW strongholds had been medium-sized corporations such as Studebaker, Nash, and Hudson, that were dependent on a single plant and an uninterrupted supply of vehicles. The great strikes of 1937 at GM and Chrysler shifted the balance of power; Chrysler employees temporarily became the largest single group of UAW members. The 1939 GM tool and die makers strike marked another advance for the UAW.¹⁴ But as Tables 7 and 8 make clear, it was only war mobilization that permitted the UAW to take advantage of these gains.

Between 1939 and 1941 the number of GM UAW locals doubled and union membership tripled. The 1941 Ford agreement had an even more dramatic impact; the number of Ford locals quintupled and the company became a union shop at a time when employment was increasing rapidly.¹⁵ The foothold of the 1930s became one of the labor movement's great success stories of the 1940s. In the following years, the fates of the UAW and the Big Three firms were closely intertwined.

If liberal Democrats had succeeded in forcing the Roosevelt Administration to award more military contracts to small firms, the UAW would likely have been smaller and more dependent on its organizers. The Addes and Ruether factions, which drew most of their support from the larger, established locals and the General Motors locals respectively, would have had even greater difficulty consolidating their positions. Conceivably, the divisions of the war period might have persisted or another faction might have emerged as a significant political force.

In any case, it is clear that government had a substantial impact on the growth of the UAW. Federal labor law and NLRB activities had

¹⁴See Fine, *Sit-Down*; Jeffreys, *Management*, 71-87; John Barnard, "Rebirth of the United Automobile Workers: the General Motors Tool and Die Makers' Strike of 1939," *Labor History*, 27 (1986), 165-87; Kevin Boyle, "Rite of Passage: The 1939 General Motors Tool and Die Strike," *Labor History*, 27 (1986), 188-203.

¹⁵Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford; Decline and Rebirth, 1933-1962* (NY, 1963), 164-67; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 734-51.

TABLE 7.
UAW Membership at GM and Chrysler
 (percent of all wage earners)

<i>Year</i>	<i>GM</i>	<i>Chrysler</i>
1935	3	2
1936	1	2
1937	7	26
1939	15	53
1940	14	51
1941	28	62
1942	38	NA
1943	35	48
1944	44	52
1946	59	71
1947	59	68
1949	48	70

GM and Chrysler employment was calculated at 87% of total employment reported in *Moody's Manual of Investments, American and Foreign, Industrial Securities 1935-1949*. The 1940 Census of Manufacturers reported that 87% of auto industry employees were wage earners.

Sources: UAW membership study; *Moody's Manual of Investments, American and Foreign, Industrial Securities, 1935-1949* (NY, 1935-1949).

a positive impact in the late 1930s, but rearmament and Lend Lease were far more influential. The government's practice of deferring to the military on procurement issues was almost as important.¹⁶ Union leaders were alert to these links. Their interest in postwar national politics was a natural outgrowth of their realization that government spending on defense had provided a massive, inadvertent stimulus to union growth.

This perception may have been related to the increasing diversification of the UAW after World War II, one of the most intriguing developments of the 1940s. At first the UAW had been an organization of automobile workers, primarily craft and body plant employees. By 1941 it had recruited large numbers of semi-skilled workers in the auto firms and even larger numbers of employees in the independent auto parts companies, but it remained closely identified with the auto industry. During the war it enlisted many aircraft and farm machinery workers, plant guards, and other non-auto industry workers. After 1946, it turned more aggressively to other occupations. Only 6% of UAW members worked outside the auto industry in 1940. By the late 1940s,

¹⁶Donald Nelson, *Arsenal of Democracy; the Story of American War Production* (NY, 1973), 198-200; Koistenin, 71-73.

TABLE 8.
Big Three Membership

	<i>GM</i>		<i>Ford</i>		<i>Chrysler</i>		% UAW Membership
	Locals	Memb	Locals	Memb	Locals	Memb	
1935	16	4,500	1	100	4	600	19.6
1936	10	2,100	0	0	4	500	13
1937	19	14,800	3	2,100	7	17,800	20
1939	25	28,300	1	400	8	25,300	31.6
1940	41	30,200	5	600	9	32,000	32.7
1941	52	75,300	7	9,000	12	43,000	30.7
1942	53	104,700	40	95,000	16	47,200	47.3
1943	54	136,200	37	141,600	18	46,200	44.6
1944	56	179,600	42	172,800	19	56,500	38.8
1946	60	155,100	41	131,100	19	48,400	37.5
1947	69	193,400	42	112,900	18	51,300	43.6
1949	85	167,300	52	117,200	21	60,300	38.2

Source: UAW membership study.

the proportion of non-auto workers was twice as great, numbering more than 100,000. Half of the locals formed after the war were outside the auto and auto parts industries. There is no evidence of a deliberate plan of diversification, though it was common knowledge that other unions, such as the Teamsters, were diversifying. Yet the commitment of Thomas, Reuther, and others to "organize the unorganized," coupled with a pervasive sense of the fragility of the UAW's wartime achievements, amounted to the same thing.¹⁷ The desirability of additional members in stable industries was one point the union's factions could agree upon. This trend probably peaked in 1950. Thereafter, the public's seemingly insatiable appetite for automobiles, the expansion of Big Three production and employment, and the steady growth of the economy gradually blunted the lessons of the war period and arrested the tendency to look beyond the auto industry for members.¹⁸ By the 1960s, when the problems of the postwar industry became more apparent, the likelihood of a fundamental change in the character of the UAW had also diminished.

* * *

Because of its ties to the auto industry, the UAW was a union of midwestern workers. In the 1930s, as Table 9 reports, more than 9 out

¹⁷See, for example, *Report of Walter P. Reuther Submitted to the Twelfth Convention, UAW-CIO, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 10, 1949*, 8-9.

¹⁸See William Serrin, *The Company and the Union: The Civilized Relationship of the General Motors Corporation and the United Automobile Workers* (NY, 1974).

TABLE 9.
UAW Membership, By Regions
 (percent of UAW members)

	<i>Midwest</i>	<i>Northeast</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>W. Coast</i>	<i>Trans-Miss</i>
1935	97	0	0	0	<1
1936	96	2	0	0	<1
1937	90	3	<1	<1	<1
1939	92	2	<1	<1	<1
1940	91	3	<1	<1	<1
1941	91	5	<1	<1	<1
1942	85	9	<1	2	<1
1943	82	11	2	2	1
1944	78	13	2	2	3
1946	78	13	2	3	3
1947	81	11	3	2	2
1949	78	12	5	2	2

Source: UAW membership study.

of 10 UAW members lived in the Great Lakes states, principally Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Indiana. That proportion dropped as the union organized war workers in other areas, but remained at 78% in 1949. Of the other regions, only the Northeast, with 9% of UAW members in 1942 and 13% in 1944, and Canada, with 5% in 1949, had a significant presence in the union before 1950.

Within the midwestern states, UAW members tended to live in the largest cities. In the mid-1930s, the UAW had had its deepest roots in communities such as South Bend, Racine, and Toledo, but after 1937 — as the UAW became more representative of the industry's labor force — Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and their environs became the principal centers of union strength, as Table 10 indicates. This level of concentration declined after World War II. Yet in 1949 half of all UAW members worked in cities of more than 500,000 while only 10% worked in communities of less than 20,000. Early analyses of the UAW often commented on the workers' "individualism," "supposedly a result of their" rural origins and comparatively brief exposure to modern industry.¹⁹ It is equally likely that the workers' behavior reflected the rootlessness of the large cities in which most of them lived and the impersonal environments in which many of them worked.

The concentration of UAW members in Midwestern cities made the union an important force in community life. Table 11 reports UAW

¹⁹For example, see Clinton S. Golden and Harold J. Rutenberg, *The Dynamics of Industrial Democracy* (NY, 1942), 113-118; Philip Taft, *The Structure and Government of Labor Unions* (Cambridge, 1954), 216.

TABLE 10.
UAW Membership by City Size (% of UAW Total)

	500,000 +	100,000-500,000	20,000-100,000	0-20,000
1935	26	24	42	7
1936	37	15	42	7
1937	66	10	18	6
1939	63	12	22	2
1940	67	12	17	4
1941	70	12	13	8
1942	62	14	16	7
1943	56	16	17	11
1944	54	17	17	12
1946	52	17	19	11
1947	48	23	19	9
1949	50	16	24	10

Source: UAW membership study.

TABLE 11.
UAW Density
(% of employed population)

	1940	1949-50
Detroit	15	24
Cleveland	2	5
Milwaukee	5	5
Michigan	7	19

Source: UAW membership study; *Sixteenth Census of the U.S.: 1940, Population, III, Labor Force, Part I*, Tables 41, 42 (Washington, DC, 1943), 58-59; *Census of Population* (Washington, DC, 1952), part 22, 59, 84; part 35, 102; part 49, 61.

membership as a proportion of all employed workers in 1940 and 1949-50 in Detroit, Cleveland, and Milwaukee and the state of Michigan. Rarely has a single union commanded such a constituency in so many of the nation's largest cities. Yet a burgeoning membership did not automatically or inevitably translate into community power. In Flint and in other towns that were heavily dependent on auto plant employment, the emergence of the UAW had far-reaching implications for members and for outsiders.²⁰ In larger cities, on the other hand, UAW locals contributed to an enhanced union presence that was potentially important but fragmented because of the conflict between the AFL and CIO, the

²⁰Edsforth, *Class Conflict*, 176-88.

UAW's internal divisions, the wartime emphasis on national unity, the demands of collective bargaining, and other factors.²¹

The emergence of UAW locals raised the total number of union members and gave organized workers additional influence. But the concentration of UAW membership in economically diverse communities with traditions of union activism muted its impact and in most cases meant that it had less effect than the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) or the United Mine Workers (UMW) had in the isolated villages and inward-looking cities characteristic of the steel and mining industries.²²

Probably the best measure of the union's broader impact was the changing character of midwestern politics. By virtue of its burgeoning membership, the UAW made the midwestern states far more receptive to union initiatives than they had been in the past. Union leaders became prominent in Democratic affairs and sponsored candidates, including union members, for elective and appointive posts. By the late 1930s, all of the midwestern legislatures had pro-union factions that promoted "little" Wagner Acts, increases in spending for social welfare programs, and related measures.²³

But here, too, the UAW had less power and flexibility than its membership totals suggested. Conventional party politicians were highly adaptable and many union members continued to place religious, ethnic, and racial loyalties above union membership. UAW efforts to elect mayors in Detroit produced embarrassing failures in 1937, 1943, and 1945.²⁴ Fay Calkins' study of CIO-PAC efforts in the Midwest during 1950 tells a similar tale.²⁵ A landmark state law, the UAW and CIO-sponsored Wisconsin Labor Relations Act of 1937, gave way two years

²¹Thomas W. Gavett, *Development of the Labor Movement in Milwaukee* (Madison, 1965), 161-70; Meyer, "Stalin Over Wisconsin," 92-118, 157-209. Also see Newell, and J. David Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics* (NY, 1969), 83-85.

²²Ronald L. Filippelli, "The History Is Missing, Almost: Philip Murray, the Steelworkers, and the Historians," and Mark McCulloch, "Consolidating Industrial Citizenship: the USWA at War and Peace, 1939-46," in Paul F. Clark, Peter Gottlieb, and Donald Kennedy, eds., *Forging a Union of Steel: Philip Murray, SWOC, and the United Steelworkers* (Ithaca, 1987), 8-9, 46-47, 84-85.

²³See, for example, Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy, The New Deal Years* (Chicago, 1979), 353-73; Milton Derber, *Labor in Illinois; the Affluent Years, 1945-1980* (Urbana, 1989), 185-86; James H. Madison, *Indiana Through Tradition and Change* (Indianapolis, 1982), 257-58; Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago, 1989), 118-56; Margaret Collingwood Nowak, *Two Who Were There: A Biography of Stanley Nowak* (Detroit, 1989), 129-83; Holter, "Sources of CIO Success," 218-19; David M. Oshinsky, "Wisconsin Labor and the Campaign of 1952," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 56 (1972-73), 109-118.

²⁴Alan Clive, *State of War; Michigan in World War II* (Ann Arbor, 1979), 166-68; Meier and Rudwick, 198-205; Carl O. Smith and Stephen B. Sarasohn, "Hate Propaganda in Detroit," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 10 (Spring 1946), 24-52.

²⁵Fay Calkins, *The CIO and the Democratic Party* (Chicago, 1952), 13-36, 30-54.

later to the Wisconsin Employment Peace Act, a forerunner of Taft-Hartley.²⁶ In Michigan, the UAW became a force in state politics only by obscuring the links between itself and Democratic candidates.²⁷ A study of the 1952 elections found that UAW members relied primarily on television for election information; the union was at best a minor influence.²⁸

* * *

By any measure the UAW had a remarkable record in the 1930s and 1940s. It outperformed every other major union, developed an organization that was diverse by every gauge except geography, and provided hundreds of thousands of industrial workers with opportunities that had been unlikely or unthinkable in earlier years. It also became a symbol of the potential of the labor movement. Although the UAW was *sui generis*, its experiences provide a useful perspective on union growth during the middle decades of the 20th century. At least four features of that experience have broader implications.

First, the success of the UAW was largely the success of UAW locals. Their achievements in the 1930s and to a substantial degree in the 1940s reflected an ability to enlist the talents and energies of thousands of ambitious individuals who had been attracted to the auto industry because of its reputation for high wages and rapid advancement. In contrast, the international officers and staff seem to have devoted most of their time to political intrigue and, with notable exceptions, such as the General Motors strike of 1936-37 and the Ford campaign of 1940-41, paid little attention to the challenges of organizing members and locals. As late as 1946 Walter Reuther used the chief organizer's post to buy the cooperation of his political adversary, former president R. J. Thomas.²⁹ Though UAW organizers were more effective than the AFL officials of the NRA period, the individuals who had the greatest impact, and who bore the greatest responsibility for UAW growth, were the formal and informal leaders of the locals.

In organizational terms, the union's vitality in the 1930s and 1940s was associated with a high degree of decentralization and local union autonomy, hallmarks of successful unions in the early 20th century. But in the 1930s and 1940s the more centralized, authoritarian approach, epitomized by John L. Lewis, Philip Murray, and Sidney Hillman, cap-

²⁶Holter, "Sources of CIO Success," 218-21.

²⁷Stephen B. Sarashon and Vera H. Sarashon, *Political Party Patterns in Michigan* (Detroit, 1957), 55-58.

²⁸Arthur Kornhauser, Harold L. Sheppard, Albert J. Mayer, *When Labor Votes: A Study of Auto Workers* (NY 1956), 92.

²⁹Reuther, 259.

tured the public imagination, and undoubtedly the imaginations of many workers. The role of government in industrial relations during World War II gave added importance to centralized union management. Reuther, after winning control of the UAW in 1947, greatly enhanced the powers of the international officials and staff in both collective bargaining and internal union operations. In the process he significantly changed the culture of the organization. Whether he also vitiated the ability of the locals to enlist the interest and energies of rank and file workers is less certain. In this context it is sufficient to note that Reuther's policies were consistent with those of other large and successful unions at the time and were subsequently cited as evidence of the inexorable maturation of the labor movement in the 1950s and afterward.³⁰

Second, the UAW, like the auto industry, was diverse, embracing workers of varying skills and responsibilities. The popular association of the union with assembly line workers was highly misleading. In the 1940s the UAW represented workers in many different industries as well as many jobs, presumably embarking on a path that had proven highly successful for earlier American unions and that would prove even more successful for unions such as the Teamsters in the postwar era. Yet it appears that the UAW slowed this process at a crucial time, presumably because of the allure of the auto industry, symbolized by the General Motors contract of 1950. Rather than become a union of metal industry employees or manufacturing employees, the UAW remained a union of auto and auto parts workers. This was a substantial achievement, but it meant that the union's potential growth and influence were limited and that UAW membership would remain concentrated economically and geographically.

Third, the UAW experiences underlined the importance of World War II to American labor history. After six years of painful, often desperate struggle, the UAW was, in 1939, a successful union; it was as large as the Carpenters, the Machinists, and the ILGWU, famous unions with much longer histories. It also had a reasonably bright future, thanks to its contracts with GM and Chrysler. While it had enlisted only a small minority of GM employees and a larger minority of Chrysler workers, it had an excellent chance to grow as employment increased. A union strategist might have envisioned a future like that of the 1950s, with job losses in the smaller companies offset by gains in the larger firms, especially the Big Three.

War mobilization radically altered this prospect. Military spending created full employment in 1941 and sustained it in 1945-46, when a

³⁰See Steiber, *passim*.

1920–21 style recession would have provoked employer attacks and raised the possibility of a union retreat like that of the early 1920s. Government policy also favored large firms and facilities, an important boon to the UAW and other unions that had a foothold in mass production industry. Government made a vigorous anti-union policy virtually impossible for large and visible corporations. By the late 1930s, GM and Chrysler had adopted “realistic” industrial relations policies, designed to contain UAW influence and interference. With the coming of the war, however, the companies shifted from restricting the spread of the UAW to restricting its encroachment on day-to-day operations. Most observers have concluded that they succeeded, though at the cost of an increasingly legalistic approach to employer-employee relations.³¹

The war experience seemingly confirmed the wisdom of the manufacturers’ strategic retreat. Wartime rank and file unrest, which reached epidemic proportions by 1944, was highly concentrated in plants that had no history of union activity. The Ford Rouge and Willow Run plants and the Chrysler Chicago engine plant, none of which had been organized before 1941, together accounted for more than one-half of the industry’s wildcat strikes in late 1944 and early 1945.³² The lesson was not lost on GM and other executives; the UAW, aggressively contained, might be worth the cost.

Did these changes, coupled with the unions’ wartime no-strike pledge, produce a different, less militant, and less aggressive union presence? Certainly the union role in industry changed, but whether organized workers and their representatives were less militant in 1945 than in 1941 is debatable. Most postwar observers believed that the huge membership surge had made the UAW more aggressive and formidable. Perhaps the most sensitive measure of the impact of the war was the employers’ sense of their declining fortunes. Though they retained the “right to manage,” they viewed it as small consolation for the concessions they had made during the early 1940s. Valuable as the union’s disciplinary role might be in some situations, a majority of employers surely would have opted for the *status quo ante bellum* had they the choice.

Fourth, the UAW experience illustrated the vulnerability of modern

³¹Howell J. Harris, *The Right to Manage; Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940's* (Madison, 1982); Lichtenstein, “UAW Bargaining Strategy,” David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America; Essays on the 20th Century Struggle* (NY, 1980), 173–214; Sanford M. Jacoby, *Employing Bureaucracy; Managers, Unions, and the Transformation of Work in American Industry, 1900–1945* (NY, 1985), pp. 260–74.

³²Daniel Nelson, “Detroit: Modernisierungsdruck auf Industrie und öffentliche Verwaltung,” in Marlene P. Hiller, Eberhard Jackel, Jürgen Rohwer, eds., *Städte im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Ein internationaler Vergleich* (Essen, 1991), 139–40.

industry and the comparative invulnerability of other institutions to union influence. Though UAW leaders were not uniformly successful, they greatly expanded the workers' claims on their employers. Studies of production and personnel management before the 1930s underline the character of these changes. In addition, UAW leaders were the architects of a private welfare system that soon overshadowed the American welfare state and became a model for the big business sector of American society. Outside the firm and workplace, the influence of the UAW was more limited. Rarely did the UAW achieve the degree of influence in local politics that the building trades organizations had long enjoyed or in community affairs that the UMW exercised in many mining communities. In most cases the UAW became part of a pluralistic system that emphasized negotiation and compromise. The result of union growth, then, was not a "laboristic" society, but a larger role in the distribution of community resources than auto workers had known or anticipated in the 1920s and early 1930s.³³

It is important not to exaggerate the significance of the UAW for an understanding of the midcentury labor movement. In many respects the UAW was distinctive. Its experiences are of little help, for example, in explaining the growth of union membership and collective bargaining in the regulated industries and public services (the union frontiers of the 1950s and afterward). Even in mass production industries, the UAW had limited usefulness as a model, as is demonstrated by studies of the Steelworkers, the CIO union that came closest to duplicating the UAW growth record of the 1940s.³⁴ Nevertheless, the UAW demonstrated, better than any labor organization, what a union could and could not achieve under reasonably favorable conditions. Above all, it showed that rapid membership growth was possible despite persistent employer opposition, modest direct government assistance, and paralyzing internal divisions. It is this record, more than any other feature of UAW history, that commends the auto workers of the 1930s and 1940s to students of the 20th century labor movement.

³³See Sumner H. Slichter, *What's Ahead for American Business* (Boston, 1951), 189.

³⁴See the essays in Clark, Gottlieb, and Kennedy.