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RADICAL ROUTES: THE FORMATION OF THE BOSTON SCHOOL BUS DRIVERS
UNION LOCAL 8751

A Thesis Presented

By

MACI MARK

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfilment for the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2023

History Program

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RADICAL ROUTES: THE FORMATION OF THE BOSTON SCHOOL BUS DRIVERS

UNION LOCAL 8751

A Thesis Presented

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ABSTRACT

RADICAL ROUTES: THE FORMATION OF THE BOSTON SCHOOL BUS DRIVERS

UNION LOCAL 8751

May 2023

Maci Mark, B.A., Gettysburg College
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Directed by Assistant Professor Nicholas Juravich

This thesis is both a history and an examination of the formation of the Boston School Bus Drivers Union, situating their formation in both the labor movement of the 1970s and desegregation. Thrown into the midst of the storm of desegregation the drivers are set up for failure by the Boston School Committee. Forced to unionize due to unsafe working conditions and pay cuts, the unique make-up of the drivers allow for the success. Filled with community organizers, feminists, anti-war protestors, anti-racists, members of the LGBTQ+ community, leftists, and socialists, they use new tactics, willing to challenge established union leadership and traditional organizing tactics. Their resounding success allows for the formation of one of the most militant rank-and-file unions to this day. Utilizing oral histories with members of the union this thesis attempts to bring their story to light for the first time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the generosity and support of the bus drivers who were willing to take part in this project. Of note is the help of Tess Ewing, Steve Gillis, Diane Andronica, and Chuck Rosina who helped connect me with other drivers. I would also like to thank everyone who took the time to participate in these oral histories: Tess Ewing, Gene Bruskin, Evie Frankl, Diane Andronica, Chuck Rosina, Philip Kaplan, Jimmy Thompson, Robert McClocksey, Paul Keith, Adele Angelo, Steve Gillis, Pat Morey, Jim Barrett, Bob Traynham, Charlie Williams, Mike Timmons, and others who have chosen to remain anonymous.

I would also like to thank the staff at University Archives and Special Collections at UMass Boston: Jessica Holden, Patty Bruttomesso, Meghan Bailey, Carolyn Goldstein, and specifically Andrew Elder, who has helped answer my every question and helped ensure that these oral histories will be able to be publicly available at UMass Boston.

I also wish to thank my thesis advisor, Nick Juravich, who was essential to this thesis and oral history project. From the very beginning he helped provide valuable insight and guidance, answering my late-night email questions without hesitation, and enabling this project to grow. I also want to thank my committee members, Pat Reeves who helped connect me with drivers and helped kick off the oral history portion of this project, and Jane Becker, who has helped guide my path here at UMass Boston.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, for their love and support which made grad school and everything I do possible. From the pep talks, to listening to my ideas, to enabling my ambition, it would not be possible without them.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis came about due to my work in the University Archives and Special Collections in Healey Library at UMass Boston. While inventorying Tess Ewing's collection, I began to read the materials, specifically *Hazard Lights*, the Boston School Bus Driver Union newsletter. At the same time, I was learning about the labor movement in the 1970s through my work in a graduate course in digital public history taught by Professor Nick Juravich, in which we were examining the history and archives of the Boston Teachers Union. From there, I fell down the rabbit hole, wanting to know more about the radical group of unionists in the School Bus Drivers Union who were in the eye of the storm of desegregation. This led to what would become my thesis and the creation of the School Bus Drivers Oral History Project.

Professor Pat Reeve of Suffolk University, who I met at the JFK American Studies Institute, generously helped put me into contact with Tess Ewing, who in turn helped to launch this project by recording an oral history with me, and helping connect me with many others. From there, I was able to get into contact with over a dozen former members or recently retired members of the Boston School Bus Drivers Union, Locals 8744 and 8751 of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA). Nearly everyone I connected with were happy to lend their time and talk to me. Thus, the School Bus Drivers Union Oral History Project was born. This oral history project alongside Tess Ewing's collection and Gene Bruskin's collection at UMass Amherst, form the archival base of this thesis. It has grown beyond what I dreamed of when I first reached out to Tess.

These oral histories with over 16 people who shared their voices, stories, and experiences, tell the story of school desegregation and the labor movement in the 1970s in a way

that has never been seen before, highlighting these local and national struggles in their everyday lives.

It has been an honor to get to know these folks and listen to their stories, observations, and reflections about their careers. Their voices make up the heart of this thesis, and so I would like to introduce them before we begin. From union presidents and stewards to rank and file union members, these eleven people lived and survived a tumultuous time in Boston, coming out the other side -- although its arguable if we are on the other side yet -- with new beliefs and new ideals.

Tess Ewing – A founding member of the School Bus Drivers Union she was the first President of the Hudson Yard, Local 8751. She helped write the newspaper, would be arrested for refusing to go back to work, and went eventually go on to have a long career in the labor movement, serving as president of the Laundry Workers Local 66, being on the board of the Immigrant Workers Resource Center (IWRC), helping run Women’s Institute for Leadership Development (WILD), and eventually becoming the director of the Labor Extension Program at UMass Boston Labor Resource Center.

Gene Bruskin – A founding member of the School Bus Drivers Union he was the first President of the Brush Hill, Local 8744. He was one of the first members thrown into jail in the union’s first strike in 1977 and would go on to serve in a variety of roles within the union. He would also go on to have a long labor career, eventually moving down to Washington, D.C. where he helped organize with the AFL-CIO. Recently retired, he still consults, most recently with the Amazon Labor Union in Staten Island, NY.

Jimmy Thompson – A founding member of the School Bus Drivers Union, he first served as Vice President and eventually become a steward of 40 years.

Diane Andronica and Chuck Rosina – Founding members of the union, they were rank and file members who never crossed the picket line. Driving for about 10-15 years, they helped lay a solid foundation for the future of the union.

Jim Barrett – The second president of Local 8751, following Tess Ewing, he served two terms as President and then served as steward for 40 years, retiring in 2016. Leaving a lasting impression on the union he was one of the last founding members to retire.

Pat Morey – The first financial secretary of Local 8751, arrested alongside 13 others in 1978 she served the union for many years before eventually moving on after a decade.

Robert McCloskey – A rank and file member of the union he drove with police escorts into South Boston, during the first years of school desegregation, facing violent mobs.

Mike Timmons - A longtime member of Local 8751, he got his start first at Transportation Management Company (TMC) driving for isolated school programs before eventually switching over to ARA in 1980 when the contracts got changed. Driving for almost 40 years he served in a variety of roles, from steward to trustee, to serving on the Accident Review Committee, Negotiations Committee, and the Ergonomics Committee. He is driving in Braintree now, and only ‘retired-ish.’

Evie Frankl – A founding member of the union, she became a bus driver in the 1976-1977 school year and drove for 10 years. Serving as a steward for the majority of the years, she was invested in the union as the way forward for bus drivers and for children’s safety.

Charlie Williams – A longtime rank-and-file member of Local 8751, he got his start first at Transportation Management Company (TMC) before switching over to Hudson. He drove with police escorts the first few years of desegregation, helping ensure his students safely got to school. He is still driving to this day, planning on retiring within the next year.

This thesis, with the voices of those who were part of the union is attempting to build on the scholarship on labor activism in the late 1960s and 1970s by examining the role of the School Bus Drivers Union for the first time. Accomplishing their goals in a way that was previously undone, challenging union leadership and pulling in community support, and becoming early proponents of this strategy, which would later go on to be called social movement unionism. Alongside building on scholarship on labor activism, this thesis is attempting to build on scholarship about desegregation, for the first time, considering the role of the worker within the conflict, and expanding who was affected by it.

Overall, this thesis will be examining the intersection of the Boston School Bus Drivers Union as essential in understanding both the labor movement of the 1970s and of desegregation. Understanding the formation of the Boston School Bus Drivers Union, and how they challenged established union ways, is essential to understanding what is going on in Boston at the time. Their uniqueness, in being filled with young radical, queer, feminist, leftist, and socialists, challenging union leadership and pulling in their community organizing strategy, allows them to

accomplish a lot in their first year, setting them up for success to survive the onslaught of anti-unionism in the 1980s and to be a strong union to this day.

METHODOLOGY

The conducting of an oral history is a careful and deliberate process, as folks are trusting their stories and experiences with us, the interviewer and the listener. When conducting these interviews, I went in with two core beliefs. The first is that everyone involved deserves privacy and respect, and the second is that these interviews should be publicly accessible. This thesis is the first time that the School Bus Drivers' Story has been examined in consideration of the context of the desegregation of the Boston Public Schools. Especially in light of the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of court-ordered desegregation in 2024, it is essential that these stories are recorded and accessible. And while these core beliefs seem to clash, I ensured that those who wanted to participate but were concerned about privacy had the ability to speak freely.

Many had concerns about their privacy, past illegal activity, and accusations against fellow workers. As is the case in many unions, tensions were high and many did not get along. Part of the history of this union is that of a divided union, split along political lines. Things could get ugly, and hurtful things were said or accused. In an effort to keep the past in the past, several participants ultimately decided to place an embargo on their oral histories, both for their choice of privacy and out of a desire to not disclose past activity. This decision was made by the interviewees and me on the advice of the University Archivist Andrew Elder, and was the best choice for respecting participants' privacy while maintain the public accessibility of this project.

These oral histories remain unedited, they are transcribed as is. The only time information was removed was when it was personal identifying information, like phone numbers or email addresses. I chose this method to build trust, I did not want anyone walking away from this experience feeling like their words would be changed or used to support a particular agenda, especially when navigating the divide within the union. When conducting these oral history

interviews, I made sure that everyone knew that they would be unedited and transcribed straightforwardly.

In my attempt to make these oral histories as equitable as possible I started every interview with the same question: Why did you become a school bus driver? This question kicked off the interview, and from there it would go off in its own direction. I provided a list of questions to help guide the interview, but it would often not get followed after the first question. The complete list of questions can be found in Appendix B.

As a historian, I approached this political divide while trying to maintain a neutral perspective. My goal was to hear about as many experiences and stories as possible, and to learn about the creation of this union in a way that is not told in the paper evidence. In many cases, when pointing me in the direction of who to talk to next, participants recommended that I talk to those who had an opposing view, insisting that was the only way to understand the complete history of the union. While I have attempted to talk to those from both sides of the political divide, and across race, gender, and sexuality lines, this is only a fraction of those who are part of the story of the union. My experience as a public historian has also influenced this project, helping me set these oral histories up so that they can be used in future programming, by those in the union currently, and for events or research related to the anniversary of desegregation.

In labor history, oral histories are especially important in capturing the experience, livelihood, and history of unions, and particularly the experiences of stewards and rank-and-file workers, as it is not often the case that papers and collections find their way into an archive. The goal of this thesis, and the oral history project, is to do that work: to reinsert the school bus drivers and their union into the story of both desegregation and labor history here in Boston. Creating access to a previously undiscussed history. Only two documentary collections exist that

include the School Bus Drivers Union, the Tess Ewing Collection here at UMass Boston (that started this whole project) and the Gene Bruskin Collection at UMass Amherst. All together, the school bus driver content within these collections makes up 3 record cartons (3 linear feet), an inadequate amount to properly tell the stories of the school bus drivers. It is my hope with this thesis to rectify that fact and to leave the oral history project as a legacy of their fight. I also hope to ensure that the school bus drivers are included for the first time in the discussion of desegregation in Boston.

CHAPTER 1

DESEGREGATION

“Well, there was segregation. So the purpose was just getting them to intermingle. And it started right there on my bus over the course of the year, they right on the bus.”
- Chuck Rosina¹

Introduction

Desegregation came to Boston almost two decades after the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. In Boston, the fight for equality in schools had been taking place since the 1840s, with Black families fighting for desegregation and equality of educational opportunity. By the mid-twentieth century, Latinx families had joined this fight, advocating for bilingual education and for better schools for their children. The fight both the Latinx and Black families waged continued on a parallel path, advocating for a school system that welcomed the diversity found Boston and equally funded schools and programs. But to many of the white families in Boston the fact that desegregation could come to Boston came as a shock.

This chapter surveys decades of Black and Latinx organizing for educational equality that led to the federal court’s order mandating system-wide desegregation of Boston Public Schools, as well as the white community’s reaction. Opposition to desegregation, led to focused white anger on ‘forced busing’ and thus school buses and their riders and drivers in particular. This chapter then considers the experiences of the workers who drove buses during the violent and explosive white reaction in the fall of 1974, and how these experiences shaped the organizing efforts of school bus drivers in the years that followed. After enduring attacks on school buses with the children they were transporting, these drivers resolved to stand with the Black

¹ Chuck Rosina and Diane Andronica Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection, 8.

community in support of desegregation and to build alliances with them as they sought their own rights on the job.

The Long Struggle for Equality in Boston Public Schools

While desegregation appeared to be a new issue to many white Bostonians in the 1960s and 1970s, this was not the first time that desegregation has been debated in a Massachusetts courtroom. The issue of desegregation was brought up for the first time in Boston in 1850, by the Black community in Beacon Hill, in what became an ugly fight.² A thriving Black community had grown in Boston, a center of the abolitionist movement and part of the network to freedom that made up the Underground Railroad. By the 1840s the Black community in Boston was advocating for a better education for their children through many different means. Many of these strategies would be replicated by Black and brown families over 100 years later.

In 1835 the Abiel Smith School was established in Beacon Hill for the Black students of Boston by a wealthy white business owner who wanted to give back to the community. This was the first school established for Black students in Boston. Students had previously attended a community school that was run by parents and community volunteers from the basement of the African Meeting House. Until 1835, the public schools in Boston were only for white students, despite Black Bostonians being recognized as citizens of the commonwealth.³

And while the founding of the Abiel Smith school might have been considered a victory, it did not provide an equal education to Black students. The white headmaster and white teachers quickly became known for being abusive to the students and holding racial prejudices despite volunteering to teach in a Black school. The community was split on how to handle this issue.

² Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 122.

³ Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 122.

Some, led by William Cooper Nell, wanted integrated schools, seeing that as the best path forward to getting an adequate education. Others, led by Thomas Paul, wanted an all-Black school run by Black people.⁴ These ideas would be debated once again in the second fight for desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s.

William Cooper Nell, a graduate of the Abiel Smith School, and who would go on to be one of the first Black historians, made it his life's work to desegregate Boston after the abhorrent treatment he experienced as a student. He helped to organize petitions, having both Black and white mothers from across the Commonwealth sign and gather hundreds of signatures. By 1850 Boston was the only city to have segregated schools, as the other towns and cities in Massachusetts had already desegregated. Nell also organized boycotts of the Abiel Smith School, since as Bostonians, Black students had a right to education and if they were not receiving an adequate education, they might be forced to act.⁵ These boycotts were controversial, with counter-protestors showing up and throwing rocks at Nell and into the school. Similar strategies that would eventually be used by community organizers one hundred years in the future.

Advocates for Community Controlled Schools

The fight for desegregation was further escalated by a court case that made its way to the Massachusetts Supreme Court in 1849. Benjamin Roberts decided to sue the city of Boston on behalf of his five-year-old daughter Sarah Roberts. They lived in the North End, and she was forced to walk past several different neighborhood schools in order to make her way to the Abiel Smith School. He attempted to enroll her in the nearby all-white public schools but was rejected, and in some cases forcibly removed, because she was Black. Hiring lawyers, Robert Morris, the

⁴ Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 129.

⁵ Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 129-130.

second Black graduate of Harvard Law, and Charles Sumner, who would go on to be Senator for Massachusetts during the Civil War, Roberts assembled a powerful team behind him.⁶ Sumner and Morris brought together the case, arguing that it was detrimental to the Black students to be segregated and instilled in them a sense of inferiority, an argument that would show up in just over one hundred years in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*. In 1850, they lost the case, with the city ruling that they saw no issue in the education happening in the Abiel Smith School, a similar argument to the one that the City of Boston would make in 1972, when the school committee would say that there were no issues with segregation in Boston in *Morgan v. Hennigan*.

While they ultimately ended up losing the court case, through the work of William Cooper Nell combined with the attention that the court case generated pushed the Massachusetts Legislature to officially put it into law in 1855 that there could be no segregated schools in Boston.⁷ The Abiel Smith School was shut down and the Black students in Boston were able to attend their neighborhood schools, integrating Boston's schools for the first time.

Many of the tactics and conflicts that happened in the 1850s show up again in the fight for desegregation in Boston once again starting in the 1960s. Boston perceived itself as a place where segregation cannot happen, partially due the fact that desegregation had already happened once before. Community activist Mel King discusses this misconception in his book, *Chain of Change*, "As far as I was concerned," King writes, "people in Boston had real delusions. Early in the discussions on the issues of desegregating the schools, people believed that because it was Boston and not Mississippi certain things could not happen here. Most people were ignoring the

⁶ Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 130-131.

⁷ Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 168.

fantastic and fanatical racism excluding people of color from total participation in the public schools.” “There was a sense of arrogance,” King continues, “around the fact that this was Boston, but at the same time, the denial of access was so much greater here. The failure to recognize this prevented people here from effectively dealing with the hostility and racism that surfaced in the 1960s.”⁸

Community Solutions

Through a combination of demographic change, redlining and urban renewal, and the actions of the Boston School Committee, school segregation reemerged in Boston after World War II, leading to another ugly fight. Black schools did not receive the support, resources, and education that the Boston School Committee provided to white schools. Despite clear evidence, the elected School Committee refused to address the inequalities between schools in Black and white neighborhoods. Instead, the Committee denied that any segregation existed, and Louise Day Hicks, its chairwomen, emerged as Boston’s top vote-getter in all elections throughout the 1960s, running on increasingly strident anti-integration platforms. As Mel King observed, “In the second half of the sixties, the Black community was frustrated by its inability to change the public schools through School Committee elections.” “Community residents,” King writes, thus “developed a number of innovative approaches to gain control over the educational system including: community controlled busing, re-naming schools in the Black community after well-known Black people, fighting to increase the number of Black principals hired, and starting community controlled private schools.”⁹

⁸ Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 13.

⁹ Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 85.

Black community activists like Mel King first attempted to influence the Boston School Committee to allocate more resources, and improve the schools. Advocacy groups including the Education Committee of the Boston Branch of the NAACP organized a “Stay Out for Freedom” day and march in 1963, asking Black students to boycott school to force the Boston School Committee to recognize that segregation existed in Boston Public Schools.¹⁰ While the Boston School Committee refused to recognize this, the boycott did force Governor Endicott Peabody to state that de facto segregation was a reality in Boston and that government agencies should take responsibility for it and work to change it.¹¹

It took until March 1964 for an Advisory Committee on Racial Imbalance and Education led by Dr. Owen B. Kiernan and appointed by the State Board of Education to find that 78% of public schools in Massachusetts were segregated and that this segregation was detrimental to the students education.¹² This report charged the Boston School Committee with eliminating racially imbalanced schools, preventing the further construction of schools which would contribute to this imbalance, and withholding state funding to imbalance schools. And recommended busing as an option.¹³ One year later, in response both to public sentiment and to influence of the Kiernan report the Massachusetts State Legislature passed the Racial Imbalance Law. Still, the Boston School Committee dodged taking responsibility by simply not recognizing the definition laid out in the Racial Imbalance Law. It would take almost ten more years before the Boston School Committee was forced to act, and when they did, they set up desegregation for failure.

¹⁰ Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 32.

¹¹ Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 33-34.

¹² Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 40.

¹³ Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 41.

The next step from the Black community, led by parents, was Operation Exodus and following it shortly METCO, a pair of community busing solutions. Operation Exodus began in 1964 as a community created solution to get students in overcrowded schools in Black neighborhoods to largely white areas where there were open seats.¹⁴ More and more parents would take the issue into their own hands, like in the case of the Boardman School in 1967, where the students would be forced to walk past heavy construction to a new school with no better conditions than their old school. The community funded their own buses, with a few private sponsors to take students to Peter Faneuil School in Beacon Hill, with about 400 students enrolled in this community led busing.¹⁵ Operation Exodus continued for several years, but ended in 1969 as a result of lack of funds. But the success and interest in Project Exodus led to what would become the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO). The Massachusetts Federation of Fair Housing and Equal Rights, a group of suburban human rights committees who had helped to get the Racial Imbalance Law passed, soon turned their focus on a voluntary program to bus Black children out of the city into better suburban schools.¹⁶ Groups like the Brookline Civil Rights Committee had asked the Brookline School Committee to accept Black students from Boston as early as 1964. By the 1966 school year after over a year of intense negotiations and lobbying the METCO Bill was signed into law, making it possible for children to attend schools in cities and towns outside of the area that they lived in. This led to the creation of METCO, funded by federal, state, and private funding.¹⁷

While successfully helping Black students get a better education than they could have received in Boston Public Schools, METCO did not address the root of the issue. As King noted,

¹⁴ Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 43.

¹⁵ Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 41-42.

¹⁶ Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 86.

¹⁷ Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 86.

“The fear that METCO and Exodus would not get to the root of the racist system in Boston was soon borne out. The School Committee voted ‘in favor’ of the METCO program, but approval was contingent on one condition: ‘Provided that this program shall not require the expenditure of funds by the City of Boston.’ METCO was actually saving the city money, as much as \$500 per child, but Boston paid nothing to the suburban systems which took in Boston students.”¹⁸ The City of Boston was still sidestepping the issue, and would rather get rid of their Black students than allow them into the better funded white schools. The Boston School Committee even found ways to make it so that they benefited from METCO. As King writes, “METCO found funds to pay other schools to educate the children that Boston was obligated to provide for and which, in fact, Boston taxpayers were already paying for.” In a particularly brazen move, “the City counted the METCO children as part of its ‘compliance; plan for the State’s Racial Imbalance Law.’”¹⁹

James Green, a labor and public historian, reflected on this movement in 2000, considering the moment when the Boston NAACP shifted its efforts to suing for desegregation:

“Given the enormous risks involved in desegregating the schools, Mel King and his allies wondered if they ‘were doing the right thing’ by supporting busing. After all, many of them had emphasized the need for community-controlled schools with funding equal to what white neighborhood schools received. Many leaders of the black education movement, doubting the possibility of equal treatment in the city of Boston, had focused their energies on busing some black children to quality schools in the suburbs in a community-controlled program called METCO.”²⁰

The Boston School Committee’s refusal to support community led programs like METCO and Operation Exodus is just one indication of how poorly the Committee would go on to ultimately implemented desegregation, when forced to do so by the federal court. If the

¹⁸ Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981): 87.

¹⁹ Mel King, *Chain of Change*, (Boston: South End Press, 1981): 87.

²⁰ James Green, *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 211-212.

Boston School Committee had been open to desegregation and had worked to make it successful, the process might have had the chance to be a much more peaceful experience for all involved.

Many of the bus drivers who would go on to drive for Boston Public Schools would start out driving for METCO. Jimmy Thompson, a founding member of the School Bus Drivers Union, being one of those. He began driving for METCO from the beginning and would place his kids in it. He explained how his “kids was going [to school] about the time, too” and he “refused to send them to Boston Public.” Instead, he “put them all in METCO. Bused them outside the city,” as it was the safest place for them to get a good education.²¹ He would go on to experience himself how bad things got for everyone during desegregation as bricks and bottles were thrown at his bus.

Latinx Community Organizing

Also in the fight advocating for better schools was the Latinx community in Boston. The Latinx community advocated for community-controlled schools and bilingual education for their children. Advocating for similar issues as the Black community - improved schools, better resources, and for community control - they ran on parallel paths and joined together in the *Morgan v. Hennigan* case that eventually lead to Judge Arthur Garrity’s 1974 ruling.²²

Before *Morgan v. Hennigan*, the Latinx community had been fighting for several years for bilingual education and for community control of schools, a similar fight to the Black community. In the summer of 1969 community organizers created the first Latin American Summer school, hosted at Hurley and Mackey Schools. This was developed by two Latina community activists who organized their own educational programs to prepare students and

²¹ Jimmy Thompson Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral history Collection: 21-22.

²² Tatiana M.F. Cruz, “‘We Took ‘Em ON’: The Latino Movement for Educational Justice in Boston, 1965-1980.” *Journal of Urban History*, vol 43 no 2 (2017): 236.

further their education since their schools were not properly teaching or providing a safe environment to learn.²³

Teachers like Armando Martinez, one of the only Puerto Rican or Cuban teachers in Boston Public Schools, advocated for community control of schools, to create a school only for Latino children so that their needs can be met in a way they were not in the public schools. In public schools, children who spoke English as a second language were struggling when their teachers could not understand them or help them and only spoke English.²⁴ The success of the summer programs, previously mentioned, showed the community activists the success of bilingual programs and in 1968 the federal Bilingual Education Act was passed, allowing Latino activists to secure state and federal grants to create six bilingual education classes and force the Boston School Committee's hand.²⁵ However, these six classes served only a couple hundred students out of tens of thousands who could benefit from these programs. Latino activists thus pushed to expand bilingual education, led by Alex Rodriguez, a member of Association Promoting Constitutional Rights of the Spanish-Speaking (APCROSS). The Boston School Committee pushed back on this, with Chairman Joseph Lee stating, "Let the record be clear that we are doing more for you than we've ever done for these others, and actually we have no right to go ahead with these special programs."²⁶ Making it clear that he thought the School Committee had done enough to support the Latino community.

²³ Tatiana M.F. Cruz, "'We Took 'Em ON': The Latino Movement for Educational Justice in Boston, 1965-1980." *Journal of Urban History*, vol 43 no 2 (2017): 238.

²⁴ Tatiana M.F. Cruz, "'We Took 'Em ON': The Latino Movement for Educational Justice in Boston, 1965-1980." *Journal of Urban History*, vol 43 no 2 (2017): 238.

²⁵ Tatiana M.F. Cruz, "'We Took 'Em ON': The Latino Movement for Educational Justice in Boston, 1965-1980." *Journal of Urban History*, vol 43 no 2 (2017): 239.

²⁶ Tatiana M.F. Cruz, "'We Took 'Em ON': The Latino Movement for Educational Justice in Boston, 1965-1980." *Journal of Urban History*, vol 43 no 2 (2017): 240.

In 1971, Boston's bilingual education program was expanded, and activist Alex Rodriguez became the first chairman of the Bilingual Advisory Council run by the Massachusetts Department of Education.²⁷ The program expanded to 61 schools and was continuing to grow, despite the continuing issues the program faced, including a lack of teachers, training, and kindergarten programs, among other things. This step forward was halted by Judge Garrity's desegregation plan in 1974, threatening all that they had worked for.

Anti-Busing Organizing Before Busing

While the Black and Latinx communities were organizing to create better conditions for their children at school, many in the white community in Boston were organizing against them, seeing 'forced busing' as the end goal of these organizing efforts and enflaming tempers against them. This movement was led, in the 1960s by Louise Day Hicks, a school committee member and later city councilor who was vehemently opposed to what she called "forced busing" Hicks went on to help found organizations like Restore Our Alienated Rights (ROAR), which attacked desegregation and framed the issue as one of neighborhood schools. This framing intentionally erased the racial factors at play, not commenting on the state of the schools that Black children had been learning in and instead stating that children were being removed from their neighborhoods where they would do better. By framing this as a neighborhood issue, Hicks and those who joined her accepted segregated Boston neighborhoods. This gave white Bostonians a way to be against busing without saying outright that they did not want their white children to be in class with Black children.²⁸

²⁷ Tatiana M.F. Cruz, "'We Took 'Em ON': The Latino Movement for Educational Justice in Boston, 1965-1980." *Journal of Urban History*, vol 43 no 2 (2017): 241.

²⁸ Matt Delmont, *Why Busing Failed: Race, Media and the National Resistance to School Desegregation*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 12.

Historian Ronald Formisano argues that the antibusing reaction was a form of reactionary populism. These antibusers, in Formisano's analysis, were trying to regain control over their lives and control over other populations that they had lost. "Boston's antibusing movement was populist in that it sprang from the bottom half of the population, from working-lower-middle- and middle-class city dwellers who felt their children, neighborhoods, and status to be threatened," writes Formisano. "Like many other citizens' movements of the 1970s, antibusing expressed rampant citizen alienation from impersonal government, drawing on an ingrained, deeply felt sense of injustice, unfairness, and deprivation of rights."²⁹ They believed they were losing rights, and even before Judge Garrity made his decision, Hicks and other opportunistic leadership had brought things to a point where antibusers could not believe that it was actually happening, not believing that 'forced busing' could happen in Boston.

In attempting to prevent desegregation, the antibusers turned around and used civil rights protest tactics, having just seen them be successful and gain sympathy from the public. But the antibusing groups were unsuccessful, as their tactics quickly turned violent, with violent groups meeting the buses and throwing things at them.³⁰ Though ultimately unsuccessful, as busing began and continues on to this day, they were not the only ones who attempted to thwart the success of busing. And their ideas were represented at the highest level, with many antibusers on the City Council, the Boston School Committee, and by the 1980s, as Mayor of Boston.

²⁹ Robert Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 3.

³⁰ Robert Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 4-5.

Morgan v. Hennigan

In 1972, a class action lawsuit was filed against the Boston School Committee in federal district court. Tallulah Morgan became the named parent in the suit, with fourteen Black families - the Morgans, Purcelles, Yarden, Wheatons, Reeds, Vaughns, Eskews, Phillips, Pruitts, Reeds, Burdettes, Crocketts, Murphys, and Means - joining her as plaintiffs against chairman of the Boston School Committee James W. Hennigan. Thomas Atkins led the charge as attorney for the Boston NAACP.³¹ The Latino community activists quickly joined as plaintiffs in this case.

On June 21, 1974, two years later, Judge W. Arthur Garrity of the United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts found that the Boston School Committee was guilty of maintaining two separate school systems, creating segregated schools. This built off the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme court case, as the first-time de facto segregation was included. The Boston School Committee had failed to act, leading to court-ordered, two-way busing.³²

School started on September 12, 1974 with racial violence at South Boston High School where students from Roxbury were being bused. Crowds of white people gathered to violently protest the new Black students and very few white students showed up on the first day of classes. The anti-busing group, led by ROAR leader Louise Day Hicks, then a city councilor, organized rallies, protests, and boycotts borrowing ideas from the Civil Rights activists, hoping to be viewed in the same light, but the anti-busing protestors quickly turned violent.³³ The City of Boston had expected the violence, providing police escorts into South Boston for the buses, but this did not prevent crowds from assaulting the buses as they attempted to approach the schools.

³¹ Zebulon Vance, Miletsky, *Before Busing: A History of Boston's Long Black Freedom Struggle*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022): 165.

³² Zebulon Vance, Miletsky, *Before Busing: A History of Boston's Long Black Freedom Struggle*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022): 4.

³³ Zebulon Vance, Miletsky, *Before Busing: A History of Boston's Long Black Freedom Struggle*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022): 168.

Busing

Having discussed both the community activism and the fight to get desegregated schools in Boston, it is time to pay attention to busing itself and take a closer look at those who were driving the school buses. The bus drivers were ground zero for desegregation. As driver Chuck Rosina recalled, “the purpose was just getting them to intermingle.” And this process “started right there on my bus over the course of the year, they right on the bus.”³⁴

The Boston School Committee hired three different companies to provide school buses and bus drivers to desegregate Boston Public Schools. Those who were hired came from a variety of backgrounds, with most of them taking this job for the convenient schedule and good pay. But these school bus drivers ended up facing much of the violence of desegregation, including the violent mobs, and resistance from the Boston School Committee. The experiences of these school bus drivers are recorded through oral history interviews meant to allow their voices, experiences, and stories to be heard for the first time. While the drivers were hired as a result of desegregation, only a handful, those driving into South Boston or into Roxbury, experienced the violence firsthand on the bus. These drivers were: Jimmy Thompson, Evie Frankl, Robert McCloskey, Charlie Williams, Diane Andronica, and Chuck Rosina.

Jimmy Thompson recalls the beginning of desegregation, as “that’s the only reason bus drivers started,” and how when he drove, he “was escorted by police to South Boston High plenty of times.” To meet the police, “we would meet on Day Boulevard, Carson Beach. And it would escort 10, 12 buses into the upper – into the high school.” When driving that route, “it became a major concern, ‘cause the bricks and the bottles were being thrown at the buses, you know? Blacks – besides being on the bus, you couldn’t drive through South Boston.

³⁴ Chuck Rosina and Diane Andronica Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection, 8.

Charlestown.”³⁵ The bus drivers were the ones facing the violence alongside the students, attempting to get them safely to and from school. Their experiences are essential in understanding both what the students went through to get to school but also the state of Boston at the time.

Robert McCloskey remembers the fear that came along with the violence. “I mean, you could feel it in the street coming, you know, same route every day. And as soon as you got around Day Boulevard, onto climbing the hill up to the high school ... it was shaky, you know?” Thinking about the kids, McCloskey says, “The kids I have a lot of respect for.”³⁶ Their willingness to continue showing up in the face of violence and hatred to access their right to an equal education made a lasting impression on McCloskey and his fellow drivers.

One driver Jimmy Little Richardson, who was interviewed by *The Boston Globe* in 2014, recalled how they were set up for failure. The buses, Richardson felt, were not expected to have success delivering students to their new schools, as there was fall back points and first aid stations established by the Boston police, but nothing done to prevent the mobs at the school or hold them back from the buses aside from the police escort, which let an assault on his bus happen. He was not even warned that the violence against him was a possibility.³⁷ The lack of preparation from the Boston School Committee demonstrated to Richardson that neither the success of busing or the safety of the children were a priority to the Boston School Committee.

Alongside the considerations of the violence, they faced on the job, drivers also had to consider the conflict personally. This included Black drivers like Jimmy Thompson, who put his kids into METCO (as previously mentioned) so that they did not have to deal with the violence

³⁵ Jimmy Thompson Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 21-22.

³⁶ Robert McCloskey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 7.

³⁷ Meghan E Irons, Shelley Murphy, and Jenna Russell, “History Rolled In On A Yellow School Bus,” *The Boston Globe*, September 6, 2014.

that he saw on a daily basis. Others like Mike Timmons, a white driver who did not have kids involved still had to consider their role. While he was “comfortable with the whole thing right from the start,” that did not mean that those in his family were. He “would argue with my family about it. Most of my cousins, about how wrong it was. They would be saying, and I would be sitting there saying how right it is.” While he always asserted “it was right” while helping enact what his cousins, like many others, called ‘forced busing,’ Timmons saw the implementation of court-ordered two-way busing as “handled wrong, clearly handled wrong.” His issue with it was that he saw “people were being walked over.”³⁸ There were many more personal conflicts that emerged in the coming years. Jimmy Thompson recalled how “some of the same people that threw rocks at the buses became drivers, because they needed jobs.”³⁹

Driver Jim Barrett was alarmed by what the reactions to desegregation showed in the people of Boston. When marching in the Dorchester Day Parade alongside Mel King, Jim saw kids that he knew from his bus. “And they were yelling all these racist – these were the white kids – yelling racist stuff at Mel King. And I saw them, and I knew them. And I knew that they had Black friends.” It shocked Jim, “I would have expected them to have moved beyond that. And not to be racists. But there they were, just as filthy racist as when I was a little kid.”⁴⁰ Barret’s experience revealed the depth of racism in Boston to a level that he was unaware of, despite growing up in Boston. But it did not deter him, or his union, from supporting the vision that Mel King and others put forth for a more equitable and humane city.

³⁸ Mike Timmons Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 27.

³⁹ Jimmy Thompson Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 30.

⁴⁰ Jim Barrett and Pat Morey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 35.

Conclusion

Alongside examining the school bus drivers' experience of desegregation this thesis aims to contextualize this experience within both the labor activism of the 1970s and the community activism that was happening as a result of desegregation across Boston. The school bus drivers did not attempt to unionize from nothing. Rather, their efforts to unionize derived both from desegregation and also from the rank-and-file labor militancy of the 1970s. Most importantly, drivers organized as a direct response to the Boston School Committee's attempt to set up busing for failure. In fighting for their jobs, the drivers were fighting for their students.

CHAPTER 2

UNIONISM

“There we were: this hodgepodge, interracial, whatever group of people. Front page headlines every single day”
- Gene Bruskin⁴¹

Introduction

1977 was the integral year for the school bus drivers of Boston. Hired on in the 1974-1975 school year, these bus drivers were contracted to drive the school buses to desegregate Boston. These drivers did not set out to assist in the mission laid out in Judge Arthur Garrity’s court decision and did not set out to change busing in Boston. They were here for the job. It was attractive work to a young crowd as it had flexible hours, offered health insurance, and had good pay – on the same rate as the MBTA. But when they were set up to fail by the Boston School Committee, as retribution for being the ones desegregating Boston Public Schools, they were responded by unionizing.

This chapter explores the labor movement that the school bus drivers were part of, a newfound wave of new left, militant, rank-and file activists who invigorated the labor movement in the 1970s. This new radicalism led to many strikes (many of which were wildcat, meaning illegal and/or not approved by union leadership), walkouts, and organizing drives in both the public and private sector. In Local 8751 and 8744, the personal background that many of the drivers brought into the fight - whether leftists, feminists, anti-war protestors, socialists, and in the case of a few, with their own union background - brought a newfound energy to the cause.

⁴¹ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 20.

Unionism in the long 1970s

The School Bus Drivers Union, Local 8751, formed at the end of almost three decades of a sustained political and economic power for the labor movement across the United States (and in some cases globally). This goes back to the 1930s and 1940s and the rise of industrial unionism and changes in labor law, but also stems from the 1950s and 1960s, a prosperous time in the United States, that witnessed the rise of public sector organizing, which prominently included schoolteachers and other educational workers. The bus drivers were part of a new wave of unionism that was linked with the radicalism in the 1960s, including the Civil Rights Movement, the Feminist movement, and the beginnings of the Gay Liberation Movement. These radical movements intersected with the labor movement and allowed it to grow in new ways. As Lane Windham writes, to understand the labor movement in the 1970s, we must look to “the ground level, to the people of color, young people, women, and Southerners who actively led the organizing campaigns” of this era. Their efforts provoked a “a potent backlash” but “their stories reveal how new ideas about workplace rights flowed from the civil and women’s rights movement and uncover how employers’ growing resistance to organizing played out against the background of globalization and the rise of the service and retail sectors.”⁴²

Unions were revitalized by the growth of women in the workplace and by Black and brown workers who saw how they could benefit from unions and changed their unions. During the immediate postwar decades, many labor unions had become less radical, in part because the federal government was less willing to help enforce labor law and employers were willing to

⁴² Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 81.

break the law to prevent unionization.⁴³ But those who came from the Civil Rights Movement, from the Women's movement, and eventually the Gay Liberation Movement, came in with new strategies. Using organizing skills brought in from these movements, they also brought a new willingness to challenge the employer and union leadership when necessary.

These strategies included an increased willingness to strike, especially go on wildcat strikes, which the School Bus Driver Union utilized heavily in order to accomplish their goals.⁴⁴

As stated by Cal Winslow in *Rebel Rank and File*:

“The strike is an expression of the power of workers, a fundamental weapon in their conflict with the employers, a means of defense, and at times a way of forcing concessions. Strikes are basic points of resistance to capital. At best, strikes are also moments of education and even transformation for workers. Importantly, the strike is a collective activity, and as such is central to the creation of solidarity, working-class organization, and working-class consciousness. Strikes open new vistas for workers, thereby clearing the way for higher forms of organization and consciousness. The outcome of a strike is crucial, even when what is at stake, say a few cents or a work rule, is not so great. Strikes can have symbolic importance – a sign of strength or weakness can swing the initiative to the other side.”⁴⁵

The school bus drivers were part of this wave of movements, including the civil rights, the anti-war, feminist, and the Gay Liberation Movement. But they come at the end of this wave, which was on its downswing by 1977, as employers were consistently bringing in anti-union lawyers and management and threatening to send facilities overseas. This was also an era of decreasing federal support, one that grew worse in the 1980s, as emblemized by President Ronald Reagan firing the air traffic controllers during the PATCO strike in 1981.⁴⁶

⁴³ Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 65.

⁴⁴ Cal Winslow, “Overview: The Rebellion From Below, 1965-81.” In *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s*, (New York: Verso Press, 2010), 2-7.

⁴⁵ Cal Winslow, “Overview: The Rebellion From Below, 1965-81.” In *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s*, (New York: Verso Press, 2010), 7-8.

⁴⁶ Cal Winslow, “Overview: The Rebellion From Below, 1965-81.” In *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s*, (New York: Verso Press, 2010), 21-22.

Just three years after forming, the bus drivers would enter a tumultuous decade, one filled with rampant union busting, and several attempts were made against them. This was due to a variety of reasons that Lane Windham outlines: both a reaction to the increased unionism to the 1970s but also due to political shifts with the Wagner Act. As she explains:

“Employers launched their assault on labor to counter a real and potent organizing threat: a reshaped working class that offered new promise to the flagging union movement in the 1970s. Employers believed that they needed to deflect this surge in union organizing in order to check workers’ demands for higher wage and benefit standards and to gain more control in a rapidly changing economy. They had even more than union organizing in their sights; they sought the unilateral power to set the terms for the nation’s workplaces under a globalized and financialized capitalism.”⁴⁷

Simply put, corporations and management were growing afraid of the increasing power of the workers. And here in Boston, the Boston School Committee and the bus companies had something to be afraid of. Filled with young feminists, leftists, socialists, and more, the bus drivers union was not afraid, and not going to back down from a fight.

Internal Politics: The Politics of the School Bus Drivers

The school bus drivers were one of the last unions of the long 1970s to use these radical strategies and win. They won because of their unique make-up and because of the founding members. Out of the leaders who made up this union, only one of them came in with a union background, but many of them were radicals in their own ways. Many were informed by anti-war protestors, anti-racist work, the women’s liberation movement, and more. Their radicalness is one thing that ended up attracting them to this job, but not in the way it might appear. These workers were not interested in the politics of desegregation, even though they were the ones actually desegregating the schools, actually driving the students to their new schools. Often time

⁴⁷ Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 81.

folks took the bus driving job because it allowed them to pursue their own politics and passions outside of the job. The way that this job was structured, with time off in the middle of the day, it attracted musicians, playwrights, and community organizers because it gave them time to pursue their outside passions and politics and still have a good-paying job and health insurance. While this is the case for many, it is not the case for all, for some it was just a good paying job with health insurance. And while some were aware of the impact of busing and what it meant, it was not a prime motivator for taking this job. Regardless of why they were motivated to take this job, their personal radicalism is one of the aspects of this union that is unique.

Tess Ewing, who would go on to be one of the first presidents of the union, discussed how she, “was an activist before that, but not a labor activist,” involved in organizing “a tenant union here in Cambridge where I live.” Ewing had previously “worked as a delivery driver for an auto parts store, which made me.... Three dollars an hour.” She then heard about “this job driving school buses where, uh, the desegregation bussing, when they started it was – the pay scale was pegged to what the unionized MBTA drivers were making, which at the time was \$6.27 an hour. So that sounded like a great plan.” One of the things that appealed about it was that she “can make as much money as I do driving full time, and just do it, you know, in the middle of the day I’d have off and I could go organize tenants.”⁴⁸

Tess Ewing had been a member of the radical feminist organization Bread and Roses that lasted from 1969-1971. While a short-lived organization, it would inspire other movements, many of which Ewing was involved in, like the occupation of 888 Memorial Drive, a Harvard owned building, in order to demand the creation of the Cambridge Women’s Center in 1971. This occupation was successful because it generated enough donations that by 1972 a down

⁴⁸ Tess Ewing Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 1-2.

payment was made on a building to serve as the Cambridge Women's Center where Ewing would teach for several years before becoming a bus driver. She was also part of the women's liberation movement, authoring the first lesbian chapter of the classic guide to women's health, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.⁴⁹ Taking the bus driving job allowed her to support her tenant organizing work, and she did not take the job intending to organize the place.

Others, like Gene Bruskin, who also eventually went on to become president, were creative types; Bruskin was a playwrights, working on his writing during the day. He was aware of what was going on with desegregation as he had previously been involved in anti-racist work, but that was not the prime motivator for this job. But he also identified as a leftist, "I had a very leftist perspective, but I mostly was in there to work." He reflects on the group as a whole, "it was this fascinating group of people that, you know, there were jazz musicians, some good musicians, who needed a regular paycheck and sort of got a job drivin' a school bus. There were retirees whose pension wasn't good enough. There were people like me, or Tess, or young lefties who needed, you know wanted a job. There were some of them who went in to organize, but you know, really, it was a job."⁵⁰ Only one person, Jim Barrett, came in with past union experience. When it became clear that a union was needed, Bruskin and others quickly jumped into action.

Others like Jimmy Thompson who ran his own business and took the job because it would allow him to get healthcare for him and his wife. "One of the main reasons that I began driving [a] bus, because I was self-employed and my wife medical insurance was so high that – she was diabetic, in the hospital. And there'd be insurance – the medical was killing me. For me to cover her as a private employee. So I decided to drive school bus for the benefits. Especially

⁴⁹ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

⁵⁰ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 6.

the medical. And that's how I started. And, at that time, we was making—the money wasn't even a factor, 'cause I make more money being self-employed.”⁵¹ Becoming a bus driver allowed Thompson to get health insurance, making it even more crucial to have the union when these benefits were threatened later on.

While unionizing was new to many, that was not the case for everyone. One member, Jim Barrett, who became a school bus driver since it had better pay than the cab driver he was before, came in with union experience. Previously, as a cab driver Barrett attempted to help organize with the Amalgamated Transit Workers, and had grown up in a pro-union family. When asked where his unionism came from he answered: “Well, I guess I was -- I grew up in a working-class family in Dorchester. And my father was a -- in the unions, and I got my beliefs from him. And so, I worked -- when I started working, I found I made -- life was much better in unionized places that I worked, than non-union.”⁵²

This ‘hodgepodge’ group of people, as Gene Bruskin, fondly recalls them, did not go in with the purpose of unionizing, especially as they were in the midst of the political battle that was desegregation.⁵³ They were instead forced to as a side effect of the poor execution of desegregation. This - alongside numerous other issues, like safety, seniority, and more, which will be discussed in Chapter 3: The Fight - pushed this ‘hodgepodge’ group to unionize.⁵⁴

This ‘hodgepodge’ group of people, as Gene Bruskin, kindly calls themselves did not go in with the purpose of unionizing, especially as they were in the midst of the political battle that was desegregation.⁵⁵ They were instead forced to as a side effect of the poor execution of

⁵¹ Jimmy Thompson Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 1.

⁵² Jim Barrett and Pat Morey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral history Collection: 2-3.

⁵³ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 20.

⁵⁴ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 20.

⁵⁵ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 20.

desegregation. This alongside numerous other issues, like safety, seniority, and more, which will be discussed in Chapter 3: The Fight, pushed this ‘hodgepodge’ group to unionize.⁵⁶

Ideological Divide

It is not possible to talk about the radicalism within this union without also discussing the tensions that it caused. At a broad level, this ideological divide can be described as a division between those who considered themselves leftist or socialists and those who were there to do their jobs. The leftists and socialists were split even further, with leftists bringing their personal politics to the job, and the socialists bringing their ideological politics to the job, leading to both personal clashes and to eventually political clashes that determined the trajectory of the union.

Evie Frankl defines what leftist meant to her, and what it represented for those that she worked with. In her definition, leftists did not conform to party politics, nor were they part of an organized political group, but instead brought in their ideals of creating a better workplace, that everyone deserves basic rights, and an anti-racist mindset into the work.⁵⁷ Socialists, in contrast, were typically aligned with a political party, in this case they the Workers World Party, an anti-capitalist organization for the working class, known for their militant opposition to imperialism and working to fight oppression of all kinds.

The leftists of the union were Tess Ewing and Gene Bruskin, both self-identified that way. Ewing was a community activist, helping organize the Cambridge Tenants Association, was part of the feminist movement, contributing to the first lesbian chapter of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.⁵⁸ Her collection at UMass Boston features Women’s Liberation magazines from the early 1970s and self-defense guides published by the Black Panthers.⁵⁹ In Bruskin’s case, he was

⁵⁶ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 20.

⁵⁷ Evie Frankl Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 25-26.

⁵⁸ Tess Ewing Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 1-2.

⁵⁹ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

involved in the antiwar and anti-racist movement. His collection at UMass Amherst contains annotated copies of *Radical America* articles and more leftist material that he closely studied. Both of them started driving because they wanted a job to support themselves while involved in politics in their personal life.

In her interview, Ewing discussed how the union helped changed her perspective, as a leftist on unionism. In a commonly held belief by leftists and radicals at the time, Ewing wrote off the working class as already claimed by conservatives before she started driving. As she reflected on this assumption, “from the left, we always saw unions as not being particularly good guys, right? But they’re a great arena of struggle, you might say.” She went on to sum up how “unions don’t solve the world’s problems, but they’re a great place to carry out – to move things forward, and sometimes it involves moving the unions forward.” In Boston, unions had typically been made up of working class white men, who were not always the most welcoming to women, people of color, or to new ideas. But Ewing explains how much unions have changed over the past fifty years, and that “you don’t get to say things that are as far to the left in a union as you do ... because the union represents everybody in the company. It has to. Whereas if you join a left group or, like you say, a women’s liberation group, you know, a this group or a that group, and it only gets – only the people who agree join it. So you can say things that are farther out to the left, but you’re not necessarily moving anybody farther to the left because you’re trying to move things along.”⁶⁰ Within the unions, by contrast, Ewing saw the opportunity to push things in a progressive direction, and that is exactly what happened in the School Bus Drivers’ Union. The workforce was filled with those who identified with the left, but also with those open to left ideas, who saw how they worked for them. Thus, the union was able to push things in the right

⁶⁰ Tess Ewing Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 31-32.

direction, doing things like having women in leadership (something that was uncommon in Boston unions), including domestic partnership language in contracts very early on, and more.

While leftists like Ewing helped to push the union in a progressive direction, it also taught leftists about their own prejudices. Ewing recalls, “it was very enlightening for me because I had kind of – in my previous life as a leftist, I’d kind of written off the white working class of the United States, thinking they were, you know, hopelessly racist and right wing and everything. This was the time of the Vietnam War and the Hard Hats coming out in favor of Richard Nixon and – well, it was after the Vietnam War, but I mean, that was still our, you know – the conception was that, you know, Hard Hats were right wing and all that stuff. So – and I was, you know, I was thrilled to see that a lot of these white guys were very much in favor of the union, and that was an education for me right in and of itself.”⁶¹ That said, unity did not always carry the day: in certain cases the white working-class Bostonians would not stand in solidarity with other working-class folks, but instead sided with those in power along racial lines. This will further be discussed in Chapter 4: The Fight 1978. The leftists, while having their own radical politics, saw unionism as a path towards improving everyone’s working condition.⁶²

The socialist members of the union, led by Steve Kirschbaum, a member of the World Workers Party saw things a bit differently. Kirschbaum wanted to bring his party’s politics into the union, gaining union support for political issues. A staunch socialist, Kirschbaum was willing to put it all on the line, having been involved in early anti-racist movements and part of the Workers World Party. He hoped to see Workers World Party and the Union intertwined, working towards the same goals. This willingness to put it all on the line was one of the things that led the

⁶¹ Tess Ewing Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 2-3.

⁶² Aaron Brenner, “Preface,” In *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s*, (New York: Verso Press, 2010), xiii.

school bus drivers being considered a radical group. Starting out as a driver at TMC he helped to attempt organizing them, but due to abusive management and TMC losing the contract, he moved on to the other yard. Arrested in almost every injunction, Kirschbaum believed in the cause and helped stand up for it. He was eventually successful in intertwining union and Workers World politics.

Tensions emerged when those who were not socialists felt like too much time and money were being focused on issues that did not relate to the union, taking away the focus from making their own working conditions better and safer for the students. Robert McCloskey, recalls these challenges and tension. “When Tess took over, it was organized. And the first couple of presidents after that, you could tell they were, you know, liberal radicals, not radicals but liberals who wanted unionism to come back. And they really did a good job portraying what it was. Unfortunately, after the first couple administrations, when Mr. Kirshbaum and that group kind of took over, their tactics were completely confrontational. Very aggressive.”⁶³ McCloskey is describing how those in the Workers World Party began to intertwine the union for their own political agenda and those who were not socialists were not big fans of it. Jim Barrett, who served as president of the union for two terms, saw the political battle firsthand. “There became that political battle then, of, ‘we’re not giving up til this issue because this is a socialist...’ The socialist workers would have this issue. Somebody else would have another issue so it became this battle then of wills,” he recalled.⁶⁴ This leads to the other camp, those who were simply concerned with the union helping to improve their livelihoods.

⁶³ Robert McCloskey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 11-12.

⁶⁴ Jim Barrett and Pat Morey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 15.

Aside from both the leftists and socialists there were those opposed to bringing politics into the union. Philip Kaplan, who became a bus driver to support himself as a musician, took great issue with the bringing of politics into the union. Kaplan saw it as sidetracking from what the union was supposed to be about. He recalls how a few years after its creation, the union started donating and supporting causes in central America. “All of the sudden it was like the union was giving all this money,” Kaplan remembered, “to a bunch of anti-American commie rats.” He viewed these donations as illegitimate. As he explained, “that’s not what the union’s charter was. The union’s charter did not involve or include aid to foreign adversaries.”⁶⁵ While the union was very involved in the Boston community - going on to be one of just two unions to endorse Mel King’s run for Mayor in 1983 - getting involved in international politics was seen as outside of the scope of the union, and was a criticism held by many.

While all three of these groups clashed, they were able to create a radical organization. The union was radical from the start because of how it was formed, starting with a wildcat strike to force an election (in which the organized deployed one of the newly-resurgent forms of labor action).⁶⁶ And while radical for their time, and standing out from the other unions in Boston as a result of this, the School Bus Drivers worked to stand in solidarity with other unions, supporting boycotts, and sending aid to workers. As a result, they also got support from other unions.

Ultimately these three factions within the workforce were able to work together because the success they found in the union. In winning their strikes and negotiating contracts, the unity within the union came through. By the mid-1980s, however, this was no longer true. Many felt like strikes were not for the right reason and while these leaders did not cross the picket line,

⁶⁵ Philip Kaplan Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 10-11.

⁶⁶ Cal Winslow, “Overview: The Rebellion From Below, 1965-81.” In *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s*, (New York: Verso Press, 2010), 2.

they would also vote against the strikes. This eventually led to many of these leaders moving on to other jobs by the latter half of the 1980s. Many found future careers within the labor movement. Gene Bruskin who went on to work for the AFL-CIO, organizing in Washington D.C. Tess Ewing would go on to leader other unions before ending up as the director of the Labor Extension Program at the Labor Resource Center at UMass Boston. Susan Moir, another former President, went on to work at the UMass Lowell and UMass Boston Labor Resource Centers.

While this divide drove out many leftists, those who were in the union because it was a good job stayed and continued to be involved, advocating for themselves and their fellow workers. Those like Jimmy Thompson, Mike Timmons, and Jim Barrett, drove for over 40 years despite not agreeing with the socialist influences in the leadership. Jim Barret discussed the divide and how it came to be “battles among ourselves is the outside groups coming in with their own political agenda which really didn’t wasn’t very democratic.” And while he identified as a leftist, alongside his wife Pat Morey who was involved in the feminist movement, he still was not a fan of merging political parties with the union. Those who were socialists would be “using their position in the union to then foster their political beliefs onto other people. And then try to push them into the union into then – if people weren’t as left as they were or to shun or to castigate other people whose politics were not that progressive but good union people.”⁶⁷ This infighting caused friction and the city would use it to drag out negotiations. Jim Barrett, Mike Timmons, and Jimmy Thompson stayed active in the union, serving as stewards and working together, staying on for almost 40 more years despite the personal and political conflicts.

⁶⁷ Jim Barrett and Pat Morey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 23-24.

Even with the political divide within the union, they were a radical union, a result of their youth, their politics, and their personal backgrounds. Jim Barrett reminisces about being “considered the Fidel Castro’s of unions” labeled as such “by the old school guys,” At Greater Boston Labor Council meetings.⁶⁸ This radicalism would quickly come into play as the drive to unionize kicked into gear in the late 1970s.

Conclusion

The School Bus Drivers Union was widely known as a radical organization from its inception. This is due to the radicalness and diverse backgrounds of the members. The union was made up of feminists, anti-racists, anti-war protestors, leftists, and socialists, people who brought their organizing background with them. This experience, alongside the lack of labor experience, made them willing to push boundaries, and “put it all on the line.” In part due to their radical backgrounds, there was a split in the union between those who brought their personal left politics into the union and those who wanted to use the union for their political party’s goals. This split would eventually lead to a division within the union, and for several members would move on to other positions. But the experiences of many of the members laid the foundation for long labor careers, especially in the case of Gene Bruskin, Susan Moir, and Tess Ewing, who went on to work for other unions and eventually became labor educators.

⁶⁸ Jim Barrett and Pat Morey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 23.

CHAPTER 3

THE FIGHT 1977

“So, anyway, it was the founding of the union on an illegal strike, with people going to jail, and backing everybody down by class and interracial solidarity. And that was the foundation of the union.”

- Gene Bruskin⁶⁹

Introduction

The school bus drivers began to unionize due to the terrible treatment from the Boston School Committee and the bus companies. When they originally signed up for their jobs, they were paid equal to unionized MBTA drivers. When the Boston School Committee and the bus companies they contracted with cut their pay, and undermined their ability to safely do their job, the drivers took things into their own hands. They saw unionization as their only path forward.

Private Contractors

The school bus drivers hired by the Boston School Committee were hired as private contractors. Five companies were hired in 1974, Hudson, Brush Hill, Carroll, Rewhit, and Transportation Management Co. (TMC). The William Carroll, Inc. was the first bus company where the workers began to organize.⁷⁰ It was made clear from the beginning that the bus drivers were not meant to be city employees, despite being recruited to perform the same job as the MBTA and despite the fact that those who worked in similar educational areas (teachers, paraprofessionals, school workers) were city employees. This was the first indication that the Boston School Committee hoped that busing would not stick around for long, and that they would be able to fire the bus drivers.

⁶⁹ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 20.

⁷⁰ Gene Bruskin Papers (MS 1020), Box 1, Folder 20, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

At the end of that school year, in May of 1977, when a school bus driver was fired for allegedly abusing his bus and a new worse pay scale, cutting 88 cents per hour for the upcoming year the drivers decided they needed a union. By the spring of 1977 many drivers had attempted to unionize at the William Carroll, Inc, but Carroll's contract was not renewed for the next year and the drivers switched over to Hudson and Brush Hill where they continued on the fight to unionize. The Boston School Committee only resigned their contract with Brush Hill, Hudson, and TMC for all the busing needs.

The first attempt at unionization began in the 1976-1977 school year at the William Carroll, Inc, really kicking off in the spring semester of 1977. The union organizers, led by Gene Bruskin, Tess Ewing, Jim Barrett, Evie Frankel, and many others, were relatively young and new to the process; for many, it was their first time organizing. With the exception of Jim Barrett, none of them had ever been in a union before, let alone led one, but together they saw a better future ahead for themselves and their fellow workers through gaining a union.

Before jumping further into what the unionization looks like, an accurate picture of what the bus companies is necessary. In 1974 five bus companies had been contracted to drive buses, Hudson, Brush Hill, Carroll, Rewhit, and TMC, many of whom who already provided private and coach bus services, were given contracts with the Boston Public Schools. By the 1977-1978 school year this had been whittled down to just three. The two main ones were Brush Hill Auto Body Inc. and Hudson Bus Lines, with a smaller third company, TMC, driving the kindergarten and isolated routes. It was Hudson and Brush Hill drivers, many formerly of Carroll, who organized to unionize, and they would go on to form two separate unions.

Drivers did attempt to organize at TMC, where the effort was known to get incredibly ugly, with drivers being beaten, and widespread abuse across the site. Driver Charlie Williams

recalls having to rush to the bank on payday because often times the checks would not clear.⁷¹ He also recalled Steve Kirschbaum, who had gone to TMC to help organize them (from one of the other sites), had been beaten by the manager there. TMC buses were known for being in bad condition, and management did not care. While records are hard to find regarding whether any TMC drivers had a union, Mike Timmons recalls that those TMC coach drivers were already part of the Teamsters. While they had a union, it was highly ineffective and did not do anything for the drivers.⁷² This was a similar case to what was happening over at Hudson: the coach drivers had a Teamster local, but it was seen as a company union, one that catered to the company's needs.

Even the Citywide Parent Advisory Council (CPAC) would go on to request that the Boston School Committee should not renew the contract with TMC when the time came. Eventually, after 2 years, in TMC would lose the contract in 1978 and most of the drivers would move over to Hudson or Brush Hill. But TMC was never able to gain the momentum to unionize with the Steelworkers due to the abusive tactics of the managers. The unionization effort would eventually flounder due to that, which is what the Boston School Committee hoped would happen at Brush Hill and Hudson as well.

In the spring of 1977 the organizers initially approached the Amalgamated Transit Workers, who represented the MBTA bus drivers, but they were turned away. The Amalgamated Transit Workers claimed that they could only represent city employees.⁷³ The school bus drivers quickly turned to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Local 829, since they also represented drivers. The William Carroll, Inc. fought an ugly campaign to attempt persuade the

⁷¹ Charlie Williams Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 12-13.

⁷² Mike Timmons Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 2.

⁷³ Jim Barrett and Pat Morey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 8.

workers not to unionize. Pulling on typical anti-union tactics, they sent home ‘Employee Information Sheets’ stating:

“I urge each of you to question Local 829 on the following questions: a) What school bus contractors in the Metropolitan Boston area equal or surpass our hourly rate??? B) What is the initiation fee for membership in Local 829??? C) What is the cost of monthly dues, even if incapacitated??? D) Is it necessary for competent employees to incur additional expense for questionable union protection??? Be sure to have ALL the facts BEFORE you vote!!!”⁷⁴

The William Carroll Bus Company was unsuccessful in attempting to defer the unionization of their employees, but the drivers would soon hit another hitch in the road. Despite being courted by the Teamsters, the union ultimately did not take the drivers.⁷⁵ The election to unionize with Local 829 was held on June 2, 1977. About 50 drivers showed up to vote, and the Teamsters won the election. But no further action was taken: no union cards were signed, no bargaining started, no elections for positions were held. After the election support from the Teamsters fizzled out, leaving the drivers in the same place they were by the start of the next school year.⁷⁶

By the 1977-1978 school year the bus drivers were still not unionized despite their best attempt with the Teamsters. The Boston School Committee had hoped that the unionization drive would cool off over the summer, and drivers were concerned that those who led the charge would not be hired back. In addition, there was a new bus company for the school year, this time with two separate companies, Hudson and Brush Hill, with two separate yards across the city from one another. Despite these challenges, and the literal distances put between them, the bus

⁷⁴ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), Carroll Teamsters Folder, 14, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

⁷⁵ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), Carroll Teamsters Folder, 25, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

⁷⁶ Commonwealth of Massachusetts Before the Labor Relations Commission, William S. Carroll, Inc. and International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffer’s, Warehousemen and Helpers of America, Local 829. June 15, 1977, The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Labor Relations.

drivers continue their attempt to unionize. They were pushed even further when their pay was cut 88 cents per hour by these new companies.⁷⁷

Jimmy Thompson, who would go on to be a shop steward and vice president of the union, explained that when the school bus drivers heard about their pay cut, “things got a little more serious.” Their salaries to that point were based upon the MBTA rates,” but “they was moving on to make more money, we wasn’t.” This divergence particularly galled the school bus drivers, who believed, as Thompson explained, that their work was “more significant, I would say, for the community. ‘Cause we would carry kids to school, back and forth to school. Young kids, your small kids... at that time we called [them] ‘precious cargo.’”⁷⁸

Thompson was not the only one who felt this way. Gene Bruskin shared a similar sentiment, recalling how “they just cut our pay, you know. We weren’t – we had no union. SO immediately, everybody was outraged, and everybody wanted a union.”⁷⁹ This was a young group of radicals who had seen some recent union victories. In Boston, the Boston Teachers Union, a public sector union of education workers like theirs, had struck and won in 1970 and 1975. Those from New England might have also might recalled the successful 113-day strike of the General Electric workers in Lynn in 1969.

Everybody was on board with the union. “We had, I think we each had 150 or so drivers. Everybody wanted a union.... So, we – we immediately went to the teamsters, and they were – didn’t seem interested. And we kept reaching out to the teamsters, ‘cause they were the transportation union, and they kept ignoring us.”⁸⁰ At this time there was even already an established Teamsters local with Hudson for their coach and charter buses. But the Teamsters

⁷⁷ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 8-9.

⁷⁸ Jimmy Thompson Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 3-4.

⁷⁹ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 7-8.

⁸⁰ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 7-8.

would not take the school bus drivers, and the drivers eventually concluded that the Teamsters “were willing to pass up a few hundred new drivers ‘cause there was some kind of pay-off.”⁸¹ These problems – corruption, unresponsiveness, and lack of union democracy – were common to Teamsters locals all across the country in the 1970s, and in 1976, a group of young radicals very much like the Boston school bus drivers formed a radical rank-and-file organization, Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), in Cleveland. It would soon spread across the country.

Had they organized just a few years later, the school bus drivers might have become part of TDU, but in 1978, the Teamsters were not ready for a change of pace in Boston. Still determined to form a union the leaders next went to the Amalgamated Transit Workers, “We had a meeting, probably around October, with the Amalgamated Transit Workers, and the head of the union came, we met at some hotel in Boston.” Gene Bruskin recalls, “we brought about fifty workers. Now, when you got to organize someplace, and you try to make contact with some of the leaders, they come in with ten people, you’re ecstatic.” Jim Barrett had previously been in the Amalgamated Transit Workers, its where he had his union experience when he was a cab driver. The Amalgamated Transit Workers seemed like a good option after the Teamsters, one of the only other transportation unions.

Gene goes on to recall how they were turned away:

“We filled the room, and the transit workers union president started explaining what a good union they were, and we’re all sittin’ there, and then all of a sudden someone comes into the room and says ‘Pst.’ Calls him out, the president” when he came back in the room he announced “I’m sorry, that was the Teamsters Union. You’re in their jurisdiction, we can’t take you, see you later, and walks out.”⁸²

⁸¹ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 7-8.

⁸² Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 8-9.

Despite, as Bruskin states, “practically protesting at the Teamsters,” the Teamsters would still not meet the drivers but were also ensuring that they could not join other unions. This was also happening at the same time as major corruption scandals break out in the Teamsters on both a local and national level.⁸³ But conspiracy about corruption is not even needed here. One of the biggest Teamster Locals in Massachusetts, Local 25 made it very clear their thoughts about desegregation. At a meeting in 1974 they voted to adopt a resolution opposing busing.⁸⁴ The fight with the Teamsters would go on for over a year, ending up in the State Labor Commissions courtroom several times.

As newcomers to the labor scene many of the lead organizers didn’t really know what to do. Gene Bruskin and Evie Frankel took the next steps:

“We went home and opened up the phone book to the page for labor unions. It was two pages of unions. And we just called – this was in between runs – we called every single union. We just worked down the list. And everyone one of them said, ‘Well, you now, we can’t really take you because that – you know – that’s really the Teamsters’ territory.’ Nobody would mess with the Teamsters.”⁸⁵

All the way at the bottom of the list was the United Steelworks of America. Bill Foley, the District Superintendent was put on the phone, and Bruskin and Frankl explained, “Nobody will take us ‘cause they – ‘cause of the Teamsters.” Foley replied, “The fuckin’ Teamsters. They threw me out of a secondary story window. We’ll fuckin’ take you.”⁸⁶

From there, they proceed to have a meeting with Foley, another regional leader from the Steelworkers and about forty drivers. After Foley went through what the Steelworkers offered

⁸³ Katherine Ohms, “Examining Corruption and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters: The Distorted American Interpretation of Organized Labor.” Order No. 1596583, State University of New York Empire State College, 2015.

⁸⁴ Robert Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 84.

⁸⁵ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 9-11.

⁸⁶ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 9-11.

one driver stood up and asked, “Mr. Foley. All due respect. Why would the bus drivers be in the Steelworks?” Mr. Foley replied, “Young man, what’s a school bus made out of?” As Bruskin recalls, “the whole room went, ‘oh.’ So that was the last time that anybody ever asked that question.”⁸⁷ The drivers proceeded to sign union cards, but the saga with the Teamsters would continue. “The state held some kind of a hearing in November, and the Teamsters came to the hearing with their attorneys and they said, ‘You can’t join the Steelworkers, you’re already in the Teamsters.’”⁸⁸

This debacle with the Teamsters, which would continue on for several more months, demonstrates how much was at stake for the school bus drivers, and how many people hoped to see them fail. The Teamsters’ opposition to desegregation, and to bringing the school bus drivers into their union, demonstrates how racism around desegregation undermined solidarity between workers. If workers like the bus drivers were having their pay cut, working in unsafe conditions, and advocating for job safety, why would the Teamsters reject them? Perhaps because they assumed busing would be short-lived and so to delay organizing and unionization would potentially prevent them from forming at all. The Boston School Committee hoped for this as well, which is why the drivers were not hired as city employees, despite doing the same job as MBTA drivers. Ironically, this created an even greater reason to unionize.

But desegregation brought out conflicts both about race and class in Boston. For decades the unions in Boston had been dominated by white working-class men. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that the unions (many of which are the big trade unions) had to start accepting women and people of color due to the Civil Rights Movement, and then, only grudgingly or in response

⁸⁷ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 9-11.

⁸⁸ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 9-11.

to state and federal action. Desegregation challenged the status quo, impacting the kids of these white working-class workers. Boston's large, powerful, and conservative coalition of building trades unions also passed a resolution opposing desegregation, and fought regularly with Black Latinx, and Chinese organizers in these years over access to union construction jobs.⁸⁹ Even the militant BTU opposed Judge Garrity's order, if not desegregation at large, and struggled to adapt to the Judge's order that Boston Public Schools take affirmative action to hire Black teachers. In many cases, when it came to desegregation, racism and racial identity superseded class solidarity. The Teamsters reject solidarity with the school bus drivers, in part, because they were the ones enforcing desegregation. The drivers are the ones who on the daily basis take the students out of their neighborhoods, away from their friends, and into new schools.

It becomes clear that the Teamsters are delaying the unionization process, potentially as previously mentioned because they were paid off, but also because the white working class, who would have made up the Teamsters, did not want desegregation to progress. Having held an election on June 2, 1976 which they won, they then did nothing with it, did not sign cards, did not hold attempt to bargain for 4 months. Continuing to delay the process intentionally. They would succeed as they prevented the drivers from organizing with the Amalgamated Transit Workers and fought the Steelworkers in court for months. Ultimately delaying the process by up to 8 months. In the case of desegregation race trumps class solidarity.

Desegregation was a racial battle, with white Bostonians against everyone else, including the bus drivers. Alongside the students the bus drivers are the ones who face the brunt of the violence. With police escorts rocks, bricks, and more are thrown at the buses. Bus drivers

⁸⁹ Robert Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 84.

struggle to get their students to school, instructed by the police to keep on driving no matter what. It was expected for the bus drivers to meet these crowds, it was known throughout Boston that there would be violence, but no further protection was given the buses than to have a police escort. Nothing to stop the mobs. The courts would go on to attempt to play on these racial lines to fight unionization when in December on strike, an injunction is filed against the drivers and Connie Cushing a white working-class mother from the South End is called up and has to either be jailed or go back to work. The judge chose her thinking that she would cross the picket line due to her race. But she does not and is thrown into jail.⁹⁰ The school bus drivers were everything that the unions in Boston were not, young, radical, and queer, and not backing down in front of a fight.

Teamsters v. Steelworkers

The initial meetings with the Steelworkers took place in October 1977, two months into their new, worse contract with Hudson and Brush Hill. Once the drivers signed with the Steelworkers, the Teamsters did start trying to court the bus drivers, hosting an informational meeting on, even going as far as handing out membership cards.⁹¹ Despite not actually wanting to organize the bus drivers, they aimed to attempt to prevent the Steelworkers from taking them. In addition, to the companies, Hudson and Brush Hill, the Teamsters were the better option, as they had a local already established with Hudson, where they were somewhat of a company union: an empathetic to the company union that advocated for the worker, but was not willing to push the line or harm the company.⁹² The tactic of using a company union was popular in the

⁹⁰ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 17.

⁹¹ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 58, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

⁹² Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 81, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

1970s, as it allowed a union to form without the company losing a lot of control.⁹³ It would include things like a grievance process, but would make deals with the company that were not in the best interest of the worker and have a delegate system, only a democracy in name only.

This conflict between the Steelworkers and the Teamsters continued for almost two months, and many drivers got involved. On November 14, 1977 driver Frank P. Dettorre writes an open letter to his fellow drivers asking them to sign with the Steelworkers. He saw them as a better option, highlighting their choice in union and signed off with a plea:

“Next time you look in the mirror, be proud of what you see. I know I am. We do not live by bread alone.
I wish to be heard,
Frank P. Dettorre”⁹⁴

While the fight to unionize had started out due to a fired worker and pay cuts, it quickly grew to include better working conditions. In an open letter to the management on October 13, 1977 they list these grievances, a restoration of the 88 cent per hour pay cut, a return to the hourly pay system instead of flat rate, better maintenance for the buses and highlighted another drive that was fired, Steve Kirschbaum:

“On October 6th, after nearly a year of employment with Hudson Bus Lines, Stevan Kirschbaum was illegally and unjustifiably terminated. The Company admits that there was no problem whatsoever with Mr. Kirschbaum’s work record. We have evidence including witnesses that Mr. Kirschbaum was fired for exercising his constitutional right to engage in union activity. We feel that this type of arbitrary action threatens the job security of us all. Therefore we demand that Mr. Kirschbaum be reinstated and that the company refrain from further unfair labor practices”⁹⁵

⁹³ Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 88.

⁹⁴ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 61, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

⁹⁵ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 52, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

Steve Kirschbaum would go on to be rehired and would be right back in the middle of the fight to unionize. Attempting to force action on the company, the drivers walk out on October 14th demanding safer working conditions and shutting down Boston Public Schools for the day. Drivers were threatened with firing when they refused to drive unsafe buses or routes that were not realistic in the time allotted.⁹⁶

Also highlighted in the Hudbrush News (the newsletter for both the Brush Hill and Hudson yards) were the asks of the grievance committee to Hudson management. These were four asks that were part of what the workers were negotiating to get included in their contract.

“1. The need for a fast procedure for all pay/time disputes be set-up so that anyone with a problem can see one person who would be able to check your time card and make any adjustment necessary within a day. A plan is due today.

2. Management agreed to reinstate the two-hour guarantee for all work that isn't tied in to existing run, i.e., any run (such as O.R.C.) that you would have enough time to return to the garage and then go to your pick-up, shall be considered charter work – 2 hours minimum. ALSO any and all Drivers who have these types of runs WILL be paid retroactive for all previous work done which they weren't paid the 2 hour minimum.

3. We also raised the issue that at least ½ hour is needed in the morning to do the circle check, sweeping of the bus, have repairs made, etc. PLUS the time needed to drive to your pick-up, i.e., 7:00 a.m. pick-up – 15 minute drive plus pre trip inspection – 30 minutes = a report time of 6:15 a.m. A decision from management is also due today.

4. The Grievance Committee raised the demand that the Company compensate Medford drivers for their time on the shuttle coming into Boston as was done in the past. The company said they would consider the demand.”⁹⁷

These issues came down to safety issues. The bus drivers did not have enough time to check the buses in the morning and the company and school district did not trust the drivers to know the buses best or allowing them to advocate for themselves. Through this advocacy for safety for

⁹⁶ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 68, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

⁹⁷ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 62, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

their students or, as Jimmy Thompson puts it “precious cargo,” the school bus drivers were able to connect their struggle with the needs and concerns of parents. when they do eventually go on strike, less than a month from this newsletter being written, they had the parents on their side.

Strike Looms

On November 10, 1977 the Steelworkers sent a letter to both Hudson and Brush Hill requesting recognition as the collective bargaining agent for the bus drivers, beginning what would become a long court battle.⁹⁸ Many elections were being promised by the Massachusetts Labor Relations Commission, but due to the Teamsters claiming the drivers were already part of their union this process was dragged out through a series of hearings and court cases.⁹⁹ By November 20, the drivers were fed up. At their union meeting, they voted to strike on December 7, if an election date was not determined in the next two weeks.

In preparation for the strike, and to get community support, the drivers wrote multiple letters to the parents of Boston Public School students and community leaders, explaining that they were striking for the safety of the students and for better working conditions.¹⁰⁰ Their letter asked parents to stand in solidarity with the drivers, both for their working conditions and for student safety. As they wrote:

“We are asking the parents of the children we drive to stand behind us. Remember, if a bus comes to pick up your child on Wednesday with a new driver, the driver may be inexperienced and may not even have a proper license.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 63, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

⁹⁹ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 65, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

¹⁰⁰ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 70, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

¹⁰¹ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 70, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

Many other unions and community organizations lent their support and solidarity to the school bus drivers. Articles were published in the *Parents United: The Newsletter of Boston Public School Parents*. Dennison House, allowed drivers to have their meetings there and the BTU allowed the drivers to use their union hall for meetings as well. The solidarity shown to the bus drivers came mostly from newer, younger unions, like the BTU, which had only won collective bargaining rights in 1965, or community organizations like the Dennison House, which served working-class families and those who lived in poverty. Unlike the Teamsters, both were willing to show class solidarity, even across racial lines, to stand in support of their fellow workers. In the BTU's case, their support was clearly due to facing a similar struggle. While the drivers brought the students to their new schools, physically getting them there, the teachers were the ones who are integrating the learning, welcoming new students, and creating a new environment for learning.

In a similar vein, gaining the trust of the parents was an integral part of the bus drivers' strategy, and is one reason that they would go on to be successful. With the community organizing that had gone on in the Black and Latinx community, there was still an activist foundation that wanted to see their children succeed in school. Organizations like the Citywide Parents Advisory Council (CPAC) were formed and helped ensure that students got to school safely and on time. Standing in solidarity with the bus drivers made sense for them. There were many groups like CPAC made up of both Black and white parents that wanted to see desegregation be successful.

Wildcat Strike

After delay after delay, the drivers were done waiting. Gene Bruskin recalls the moment a wildcat strike was called:

“It was the third hearing when it became clear that the labor board was just not gonna help. We stood up and said, made a statement with a room full of drivers.” [the hearings were held during the day between runs] “With all due respect, you can decide whatever you want, Labor Board, but on December 8, the school – if we don’t have a date for an election soon, the school bus drivers are walkin’ out.” They then left the room.¹⁰²

A wildcat strike was a common tactic used by rank-and-file unionists at the time: a strike called without approval of their local or international leadership. In this case, Bill Foley of the Steelworkers did not know or approve of this strike. But this strike was to pressure the state board and the company into taking action. The United Steelworkers of American District One Office, with Bill Foley as the Director, issued a press release on December 5, 1977 attempting to avoid the strike by outlining the grievances, asking for the election to be held, and contract negotiations to start:

“We want to emphasize that we do not want to strike, and will do everything we can to avoid it. We in no way want to hinder the desegregation process, or disrupt the education of the children. Many of the drivers have children themselves, and understand the problems that a strike would cause to parents, especially working parents.”¹⁰³

They go on to explain that it was voted on by the union members and that they are willing to “negotiate with anyone, anywhere, any time” to help call off the strike.¹⁰⁴ The Steelworkers were desperate to avoid the strike. The drivers willingness to go on wildcat strikes is one thing that makes them unique, many would not have been willing to challenge union leadership and go out on illegal strike.

The night before the strike was to begin, on night of December 7, 1977, the Judge John T. Ronan of the Massachusetts Superior Court issued an injunction, ordering anyone who went on

¹⁰² Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 12.

¹⁰³ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 71-74, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

¹⁰⁴ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), HUD BRUSH Folder, 71-74, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

strike to be arrested.¹⁰⁵ This also caused the Steelworkers to be at risk of being fined since this strike had been declared illegal. As a wildcat strike, this was not approved by the Steelworkers and Bill Foley did not see it coming. Gene Bruskin recalls how terrified the Steelworkers were, that they would get fined and dragged into it. On the first day of the strike, “when it’s zero degrees and we’re all out on the picket line,” a car pulled up, a Cadillac, inside of which was Bill Foley. Foley, Bruskin recalled, “stops in front of the picket line and says, “We’re with you brothers and sisters all the way!” Foley left from the picket line, went to the airport and flew out of Boston, “so he could just deny all credibility.”¹⁰⁶ Evie Frankl recalls a similar story of Bill Foley coming to the picket line in his Cadillac and telling people to go back to work, to “be on record telling us to go back to work.”¹⁰⁷

On the morning of December 8, 1977, no school buses rolled out of the yard. It was zero degrees outside, and school was canceled, since Boston Public Schools did not want students standing in the cold. With half the union on the picket line, the district had no way of being able to tell what routes could run and so school was cancelled across the district.¹⁰⁸

Warrants were sent out for the arrest of the union leaders. Many of them managed to dodge being served, as there was two picket lines, at the separate yards, and also by avoiding going home. But by the next day many of them had been served and they were ordered to show up in court. “The court’s packed, you know, with dozens and dozens of driers, there’s a room full of lawyers, there’s the judge up front, and he... issues his proclamation,” Gene Bruskin remembers. This proclamation stated “we have to go back and he has the subpoenas or you know court orders for all of us” The judge started calling everyone by name, starting with Gene, and

¹⁰⁵ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 13.

¹⁰⁶ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 18-19.

¹⁰⁷ Evie Frankl Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 21.

¹⁰⁸ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 14.

informed him “if you do not agree to go back to work, we will go – we will immediately put you in jail, and for up to four months.” Gene replied, “I’m not goin’” and was dragged out. The rest of the drivers in the room started chanting: “You jail one, you jail us all! You jail one, you jail us all!”¹⁰⁹

These proceedings were closely covered in the news, with *The Boston Globe* reporting heavily on it since it caused school closures. The *Globe* had paid attention since the October walkout that left 30,000 kids without a way to get to school. They published photos of Gene Bruskin and Connie Cushing, the only two to be arrested in court, being taken to jail. *Globe* reporter Fletcher Roberts interviewed driver, Steve Kirschbaum, who shared his disdain for the court, stating, “the court has shown nothing but contempt for us. We want a union and they have used every trick to deny us.”¹¹⁰ It was part of the organizing strategy to get media attention, to help show what they were fighting for and also to help gain support to help bring attention to the issue. That is why they pulled in CPAC and published press releases about their intentions. *The Boston Globe* continued to keep an eye on things even after the strike was over and the election was scheduled. Continuing to report out on the election results. The Steelworkers won at both Hudson and Brush Hill, with over 200 out of 250 at Hudson and 50 against 6 at Brush Hill.¹¹¹

Driver Mike Timmons, thought that the *Globe* liked to overblow the radicalness of the union. When considering why the union was radical, he concluded, “I never really thought that it had anything to do with the members personally. As far as whether or not they were straight or gay, or Black or white. I think the newspapers liked to jump on things. I never felt we were really radical.”¹¹² While Timmons positions the drivers as not necessarily a radical group, instead just

¹⁰⁹ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 15-16.

¹¹⁰ Fletcher Roberts, “2 Striking Bus Drivers Sent to Jail.” *Boston Globe*, December 10, 1977.

¹¹¹ Fletcher Roberts, “Bus Drivers Want Steel Union as Agent,” *Boston Globe*, December 23, 1977.

¹¹² Mike Timmons Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 33.

doing what needed to be done. Pat Morey discussed the connection that she saw of those in the union, who were organizing, being “politically attuned to the struggle of working-class people.” For her, it was “a true thing for the ‘70s. The whole thing that was happening in Vietnam, all that. That it was a large political consciousness for the working class in a number of people that were there.”¹¹³ While Timmons did not consider himself a radical, that did not make his solidarity ‘not radical.’ Given how ugly the fight got, and the lack of solidarity from some other unions, it was a radical action to stand in solidarity as bus drivers, something that Timmons did.

Young Radicals

As the School Bus Drivers’ leadership were a young radical group, filled with leftists, socialists, anti-war protestors, they were not afraid of putting it all on the line. Gene Bruskin recalls a scrappy moment shortly after he was arrested:

“They called a press conference in the hallway, and there were dozens of press, this was national news, and the press said, ‘Well aren’t you afraid you’re gonna get fined or something?’ and the drivers took all the nickels and dimes and everything and put it on the table and says, ‘What? You got it, you can have it.’”¹¹⁴

After Gene Bruskin was arrested, the court called up Connie Cushing, a white working-class woman with four kids from Southie who the court thought would return to work. Instead, she refused and was sent to Framingham women’s prison. The judge was attempting to play into the racism of the day, assuming that Connie would not cross the race line, and instead cross the class line. But the judge only managed to aggravate the situation. After Connie was taken away, “the judge closed the hearing, because in those situations, the only power the judge has is the power to intimidate us, and jail us.” As Bruskin explains, “once we weren’t willing to – to be

¹¹³ Jim Barrett and Pat Morey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 5.

¹¹⁴ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral history Collection: 16-17.

intimidated, and our lawyers said, ‘Your honor, in all due respect, if you jail all the bus drivers, there’s nobody to drive the buses.’”¹¹⁵

The drivers were a united front. They were willing to stick together and be jailed over this fight. This was incredibly consequential to them; without the union they could not get the pay that they were promised and could not safely deliver their ‘precious cargo.’ They had been caught in the middle of the fight for desegregation. These terrible conditions had been created because the Boston School Committee hoped that busing would not last more than a few years or for it to fail, allowing schools to return to their segregated state.

By the next day an agreement was reached. An election would be held in two weeks and Connie and Gene were released. Despite the fact that the Boston School Committee wanted busing to fail, busing was an integral part of school in the 1977-1978 academic year. Without buses students would not have been able to attend, showing just how valuable the labor of the school bus drivers was, they were integral to student success. The drivers had the ability to close the school district and would use that ability again when, in the coming years the conflict continued to escalate.

An election was scheduled for December 22, and the Steelworkers would go on to have a long-fought-for victory, forming Local 8751 for the Hudson yard and Local 8744 for the Brush Hill yard. At a time when unionism was on a decline on the national front this was a decisive victory, due to the fact that this was a young, radical crowd. Made up of those who were part of the women’s liberation movement, socialists, anti-war activists, and more they were a different type of union than ones established decades ago, willing to push boundaries and unafraid of

¹¹⁵ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 17.

being the consequences. 1977 would prove to be a momentous year for the school bus drivers, but it was only the beginning. In 1978 the fight would continue as bargaining began.

Conclusion

Forced to unionize due to fired coworkers and pay cuts, the school bus drivers were set up for failure by the Boston School Committee. The Boston School Committee doubled down, once the union was finally won, which would lead to a tedious negotiations process that itself would lead to another wildcat strike. The organizing background of the members made them willing to push boundaries, like going on illegal wildcat strikes, and to use organizing strategies to help draw people in, such as using media and gaining community support outside of the labor movement. Ultimately it leads to success for the drivers and positioned them in the middle of both a racial and class split in Boston.

CHAPTER 4

THE FIGHT 1978

“And, as union goes, always comes strikes. Strikes was the parent. Had to be, for us to make any advancement towards equality, towards pay’s concern, benefits, and all the other -- as it goes on with it.”

- Jimmy Thompson¹¹⁶

Introduction

The new year brought in hope for the new contract to be negotiated in 1978, but it quickly turned foul as negotiations stalled between the Boston School Committee, the bus companies, and the bus drivers. The bus drivers’ asks were to have job security -- so that regardless of which company got the contracts, the same drivers would be hired -- medical benefits, and for their wages to be restored from the 88-cent pay cut.¹¹⁷ As the drivers understood it, it all came down to money: the School Committee and the bus companies did not want to pay them for the extra time it would take to do their job safely.

Gene Bruskin, the President of Local 8744, recalled that since issues were about safety, they first went to CPAC to help address these issues. “So we went to them and told them that we wanted to fight with them – with them to get more safety on the buses.” In addition to cutting the drivers’ pay 88 cents an hour in 1977, the school committee had cut bus monitors, which led Bruskin to note, “it really was dangerous.” Bruskin and the union reached out to “any parent we could talk to” and soon the Citywide Parents Advisory Committee was covering the drivers’ contract campaign sympathetically, even running an editorial of theirs. The union produced buttons reading, “Safety for the Children, Keep the Union Drivers,” a slogan of the campaign. As Bruskin explained, “we just built in this idea of safety as – and community support— as sort of

¹¹⁶ Jimmy Thompson Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 5.

¹¹⁷ Tess Ewing Collection (SC-0386), Temps Folder, 104, Courtesy of UMass Boston University Archives and Special Collections.

central to our organizing.”¹¹⁸ While union organizing was new to many of the leaders, gaining this community support was not. This was a similar tactics used in Tess Ewing’s community organizing with the Cambridge Women’s Center. It was also a similar tactic used by the anti-war protestors, and anti-racist organizers. Pulling from many leaders’ past community organizing skills allowed drivers to be stronger and to employ new strategies that other unions might not have. Traditionally, unions were great at standing in solidarity with one another, but here, as previously discussed, they could not gain this support, and turned to other community groups.

Negotiations

For most of the bus drivers, the 1978 contract campaign was their first time ever negotiating, as they were new to unions and still in their twenties. Many had never negotiated a contract on their own, much less collectively. This freshness allowed them to bring some unorthodox methods into bargaining. As Gene Bruskin recalled, “the first bargaining session was held in the Park Plaza, “the legendary upper class watering hole of Boston.” The drivers arrived “with a committee of about a dozen of them, rag-taggiest lookin’ people, you know, we’re lucky they didn’t throw us out of the hotel.” The drivers sat down at a long boardroom table with a gold-plated coffee and tea service set up atop it, and awaited the arrival of the company’s delegation: “Three Anzoni brothers and their attorney, who was sort of like a white-show attorney lawyer, you know, an old white-haired, very distinguished-looking.” One of the Anzoni brothers puts what Bruskin describes as “must’ve been his grandfather’s leather briefcase... family heirloom” on the table, something the drivers interpreted as an attempt to intimidate them.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 21-22.

¹¹⁹ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 24.

As President of Local 8751, Gene Bruskin was “supposed to be the head of bargaining” but made sure to explain to everybody that:

“When you’re sitting at the bargaining table, you are equal to the company. By law. They cannot tell you what to do, they cannot tell you what to say. You are legally equals. Now, the next day, when you go back to work, it immediately reverses, and they’re the boss again. But at that moment, we’re equal.”

Alongside the bargaining committee was the Steelworkers rep, Ray Merry, who had lots of bargaining experience. As soon as everyone was settled at the table, he pointed to the briefcase. “In all due respect, Mr. Anzoni,” Bruskin recalls Merry saying, “you don’t bring the cash to the first meeting,” Merry’s quip humiliated the Anzoni brothers and helped to pump up the workers as bargaining commenced.

The unorthodox manners of the bus drivers came to light early on in the process. When one of the drivers, Dee replied to the company saying, “well that’s a lotta shit,” the Anzoni brothers protested. Dee, remembering he was an equal at the table, replied, “I can say anything I want. If I wanna use the word ‘shit,’ I’ll use the word ‘shit.’ Shit, shit, shit.” The company lawyers left the room to confer before returning, and ultimately continued bargaining as there was nothing to prevent Dee or anyone on the bargaining committee from stating what they wanted.

Later in the day, Melvin, Dee’s fellow organizer, described by Bruskin as a serious-looking African American man in a ‘faux leather floor length coat’, leapt up while the company’s representatives were whispering to each other, avowing he’d heard them utter a racial slur. As Dee held him back, Melvin screamed the company’s bargaining committee out of the room. Once they were gone, Dee turned to the rest of the drivers, saying “We taught those son of a bitches, huh?” As Bruskin recalled, “Ray Merry almost had a heart attack” and the company lawyers called a close to the day’s session. The next day, however, “everything, sort of the

attitude changed, you know? And they – we started some really serious bargaining. That was my first introduction to the collective bargaining process.”¹²⁰

Despite this progress, the company would not meet the union’s key demands, and the drivers began planning to strike again.¹²¹ The focus here was on the safety of the school bus, both on time to check the buses in the morning and on rehiring since experienced drivers were safer drivers. If they were not city employees then the drivers (and busing) could be gotten rid of in the future.

As discussed in previous chapters, in order to gain success, the school bus drivers reached out to different community groups to gain support. One that they worked with closely on the safety matter was with the Citywide Parents’ Advisory Council (CPAC). As early as January 11, 1978, when they were just beginning to negotiate, school bus drivers attended a CPAC meeting and spoke about the poor conditions, noted in the meeting minutes:

“Representative of the bus drivers were introduced next, the drivers wished to speak on what they considered serious safety problems in the operations of buses. They then reviewed a number of problems which were either in violation of state law or of the contract and recounted a number of incidents where faulty equipment had almost caused a serious accident.”¹²²

The CPAC responded by forming a sub-committee to investigate, and on January 19, members of CPAC went to the bus yard and inspected the buses themselves. They found “a number of safety hazards and contract violations,” which led to the plan of a press conference in the upcoming weekend.¹²³ CPAC helped the drivers go to the press, alerting *The Boston Globe* to the

¹²⁰ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 22-27.

¹²¹ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 22-27.

¹²² Citywide Parents Council Records (0450.002.) Series III: Citywide Parent Advisory Council (CPAC), 1975-1982: CPAC Monitoring, 1979 - 1982, Box: 1, Minutes Folder, Citywide Parents Council records, 0450.002. City of Boston Archives.

¹²³ Citywide Parents Council Records (0450.002.) Series III: Citywide Parent Advisory Council (CPAC), 1975-1982: CPAC Monitoring, 1979 - 1982, Box: 1, Minutes Folder, Citywide Parents Council records, 0450.002. City of Boston Archives.

fact that in January 1978, 60 buses failed their state inspection. As reported in the *Globe* at the end of January, CPAC made a statement: “CPAC also learned in conversations with drivers that many of the schedules routes leave little time for pre-trip inspection of vehicles, safe-loading and unloading and traffic or weather delays.”¹²⁴ CPAC encouraged parents to bring it up with the Boston School Committee.

The drivers continued to work with CPAC, showing up at their March 9, 1978 meeting members to warn that a strike was looming. As the meeting minutes note, “they stated that to date Hudson Bus Lines has not met with them to negotiate a contract and that Brush Hill has been very difficult to negotiate with. They stated that a strike was possible because of this.”¹²⁵ CPAC hoped to avert a strike, due to the impact it would have on the students, and urged the school committee to bargain in good faith. They planned to pressure both the Boston School Committee and the City Law Department, “to insure that school buses are safely operated and that they arrive at their destinations on time.”¹²⁶ Having warned CPAC, their community partners, the bus drivers forged on ahead, and would soon be on strike.

Many factors made 1978 a difficult year for negotiating a contract. The Teamsters were appealing the election with the Hudson yard, forcing more elections. Brush Hill had negotiations going on, those mentioned by Gene Bruskin previously, and by March they had gotten nowhere. Both yards got together to discuss the crisis. The Steelworkers informed the drivers that a strike

¹²⁴ Fletcher Roberts, “Registry Flunks 60 School Buses.” *Boston Globe*, January 31, 1978.

¹²⁵ Citywide Parents Council Records (0450.002.) Series III: Citywide Parent Advisory Council (CPAC), 1975-1982: CPAC Monitoring, 1979 - 1982, Box: 1, Minutes Folder, Citywide Parents Council records, 0450.002. City of Boston Archives.

¹²⁶ Citywide Parents Council Records (0450.002.) Series III: Citywide Parent Advisory Council (CPAC), 1975-1982: CPAC Monitoring, 1979 - 1982, Box: 1, Minutes Folder: March 9th Committee Minutes, Citywide Parents Council records, 0450.002. City of Boston Archives.

would be illegal, and the international union would be unable to protect them. But despite its illegality the bus drivers voted to strike for a union contract.¹²⁷

Strike Two

On April 10, 1978, the school bus drivers walked off the job for the second time in just a year. Their demands were a union contract that contained job security, medical benefits, and better safety requirements. The drivers quickly brought parent supporters on board by advocating for better safety features on the buses for their children. The Citywide Parents Advisory Council condemned the companies' bad faith bargaining. This support was not a guarantee, as bus driver Robert McCloskey recalled:

“It was always difficult, because in order to have the parents as allies, you gotta provide good service. The parents do appreciate having the buses come and pick up their kids and take them to school. It's a huge burden that's take off their shoulders you know? But they needed to be reliable as far as times and everything like that.”¹²⁸

As long as the drivers held up their end of the bargain, McCloskey recalled, they could count on parent support. “The public, when they saw the strikes, most of them agreed with what we were talking about until the last couple [years after 1980], I think.”¹²⁹

Alongside the parents the bus drivers were also able to gain support from the Boston Teachers Union (BTU), the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA), several different AFSCME and SEIU Locals, the Boston Labor Council, and others who would go on to show up on the picket lines to support the strike. A downtown strike support march was held with other local unions and family members showing up in support. The families of the bus drivers went into the Boston School Committee's President Finnegan's office, occupying it and demanding

¹²⁷ Gene Bruskin Papers (MS 1020), Box 1, Folder 20, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

¹²⁸ Robert McCloskey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 16.

¹²⁹ Robert McCloskey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 16.

that he intervene to settle the strike.¹³⁰ Despite the fact that they had been turned away by so many unions, out of fear of the Teamsters, they were still able to gain support because of their advocacy for the children, and because they turned to groups outside the labor community. Gaining support from CPAC, and the Dennison House, they were able to show how they were advocating for children's safety, and able to show how theirs was a similar fight to those that other unions were fighting, which is why it is a lot of public sector unions like the BTU and MTA showed up.

Solidarity was strong on the picket line. This was still many drivers' first time in a union, and even their first or second strike ever (their first one being just a few months prior). Drivers had a variety of experiences on the picket line. Chuck Rosina, one of the drivers recalls convincing a friend not to cross the picket line:

"I mean, there was one friend of mine. You know, smoking pot was illegal in those days... But there were some drivers who did partake in the weed. And they knew who each other was. It's not something you, didn't do while driving, you know, after work and stuff. But so this one woman, this strike was illegal, so she goes and gets a bus and starts driving out. And I jump in my car, 'cause I smoked some joints with her, I know. So I go chasing after her in my car and she's in her bus. And I get around her and I actually, on [Hyde] Park Ave, I just cut right in front of her. I block [Hyde] Park Ave and jump out of the car and says, 'What are you doing?' She [replies] 'This strike is illegal.' I say, 'well so is smoking pot but that doesn't stop you.'¹³¹

As Rosina remembers, she returned back to the yard, no longer crossing the picket line.

Chuck Rosina is a great example of how strongly these workers stood with one another, Rosina did not hold a leadership position, but still did not budge on the picket line and helped convince others to join it. Rank and file members like Chuck Rosina are what made the union strong, allowing them to stand united against the bus company and the School Committee. Going

¹³⁰ Gene Bruskin Papers (MS 1020), Box 1, Folder 20, "The History of the Boston School Bus Drivers". Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

¹³¹ Chuck Rosina and Diane Andronica Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 12-13.

back to their unorthodox strategies, to prevent buses from leaving the yard, some members were known to bring a machete to the picket line and slash the tires of the buses.

Drivers were brought closer through how badly they were treated by the company and how bad their working conditions were. At first they starting out wanting better working conditions, and as more and more people got on board, the management and the Boston School Committee got worse, disrespecting the drivers, ignoring their requests for safer buses, attempting to fire union leaders, and redrawing the routes. It was also partially due to the nature of the work; it was awful to have to drive buses with police escort, unsure if they would make it each day, and performing work that much of Boston hated. It helped to bring the drivers together, as they understood what each other was going through. It brought people from all walks of life together and gave them something in common. And when they were disrespected, they then stood with each other.

Over the course of this two-week strike, 150 citations were issued to drivers who were nowhere to be found in court when served. A total of 14 workers were jailed, including the entire Hudson negotiation committee, for refusing to return to work.¹³² Those who were jailed included Steve Kirshbaum, Tess Ewing, Mary Lou Bagley, Pat Morey, John Sullivan, Felix Bardassarre, William McGaragle, Sandra Thomas, Linda Tate, Richard Ploss, Frank Dettore and Lewis Johnson, who were thrown inside Charles Street Jail or Framingham Women's Jail.

Once again capturing the attention of reporters, this was closely covered by *The Boston Globe*. Even after being arrested Steve Kirshbaum gave an interview from inside the Charles Street Jail, explaining how he paid close attention to the case, listening in over the radio, and that

¹³² Gene Bruskin Papers (MS 1020), Box 1, Folder 20, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

he had not lost faith in the strikers and still found ways to show solidarity. Paul Langer, reporting for the *Globe*, noted how Kirshbaum “had taken to wearing makeshift strike badges made by obliterating the word ‘Lucky’ from a package of Lucky Strike cigarettes.” Even when things seemed to be going badly he did not lose faith in his fellow union members, stating, “Nobody’s doing five months... All we’re doing is getting a little respite from the picket line.”¹³³

By the end of week one the court forced the companies to reach a settlement with the drivers or to send them to jail as well. After almost three months they were going to negotiate in good faith. The strike was successful. Jimmy Thompson recalled how striking was their best bargaining tactic: “We had to say, we’re going on strike. What other thing did we have to withhold? Our labor. Our – we had to say, we’re going to go on strike. So, that’s what we did. And we used it to our advantage, and it paid off. It paid off.”¹³⁴

The Hudson committee negotiated on behalf of all the drivers since the Brush Hill committee was still in jail, which had been intentional, as the Boston School Committee was using the court in attempting to prevent good faith bargaining. The fourteen who were arrested were released shortly after the new contract had been signed.¹³⁵ In this contract, drivers won a grievance procedure for the first time, protection against arbitrary firings, a bidding system for routes, and the restoration of the 88 cent pay cut with back pay, alongside a \$1 pay raise over the next two years, health insurance, and life insurance. Overall, it was a big victory for the drivers.¹³⁶ Two locals were established, Local 8744 and Local 8751 at the separate Brush Hill

¹³³ Fletcher Roberts, “Jailed driver hasn’t given up: Bars don’t throttle his aim of getting a bus contract,” *The Boston Globe*, April 18, 1978.

¹³⁴ Jimmy Thompson Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 30-31.

¹³⁵ Paul Langer, “School Bus Drivers Out of Jail but some Angry,” *The Boston Globe*, April 23, 1978.

¹³⁶ Gene Bruskin Papers (MS 1020), Box 1, Folder 20: History of the School Bus Drivers Union 1983 Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

and Hudson yards, although they would go on to merge into the Local 8751 within the next few years. A Joint Council of Boston School Bus Drivers was established and included both locals.

Community Support

Out on strike the bus drivers could only have been successful with the support of the community. Having worked previously with CPAC to attempt to avoid the strike, and to show them what was important, their support was essential. The CPAC's goal was to get the busses rolling again and for them to stay rolling. But the CPAC official position on the strike was not resounding. In the draft proposal that was circulated, (I was unable to find the official release about it) they state:

1. Our overriding concern is that the buses get rolling again and stay rolling.
2. We believe that there must be a contract between the companies and the drivers because:
 - a. It's the best way to insure that service continues uninterrupted.
 - b. It's the best way to insure that buses are in good operating condition.
 - c. It's the best way to insure that the drivers receive the proper training and licensing.

It is clear from our inspection last January that the companies, especially Hudson, have littler or no concern about the safety of our children. The drivers, to their credit, have demonstrated much greater concern.”¹³⁷

They go on to discuss how the Boston School Committee and the City have not acted in good faith, how they first tried to block the formation of the union, and how they could have entered into negotiations to avoid the strike. By seeking the jailing of drivers, the Boston School Committee further undermined an atmosphere where negotiations were possible. Ultimately CPAC concluded:

“We insist that the City and School Committee take any and all action to bring all parties back to the table and that the bus companies begin to negotiate in good faith. This

¹³⁷ Citywide Parents Council Records (0450.002.) Series III: Citywide Parent Advisory Council (CPAC), 1975-1982: CPAC Monitoring, 1979 - 1982, Box: 1, Minutes Folder: Proposed Position on School Bus Strike April 12, 1978, Citywide Parents Council records, City of Boston Archives.

situation must be resolved before the end of school vacation. There are only two months of school left. Our children must not be abused any further.”¹³⁸

With the support of organizations like CPAC who only wished the further the interests of the students, the drivers were able to gain allies in the community who, while they did not like the effect of the strike, understood why it needed to happen.

The school bus drivers also gained support from the Boston Teachers Union, whose own militancy had led to successful strikes in 1970 and 1975. While more conservative on the issue of desegregation than the drivers, and facing their own internal issues due to court-ordered hiring of Black teachers, the BTU supported the bus drivers, lending their union hall as their meeting place, (where Local 8751 continue to meet to this day), showing up on picket lines, at support marches, and covering the drivers’ issues in the *Boston Union Teacher*. While the bus drivers were a much more radical union than the BTU, there was still space within the BTU for progressives. Tess Ewing recalls working with BTU President Kathy Kelley, who was pretty progressive herself. One of the few women leaders in the Boston labor scene, she was a pioneer at the time and lent support to the school bus drivers.¹³⁹

Conclusion

The victories that the school bus drivers accomplished in the span of just one year were a testament to their unity. Only a militant, radical, rank-and-file-led union could have accomplished what they did: two wildcat strikes and a successful negotiation, alongside the solidarity they were shown from community groups like CPAC and the parents support they

¹³⁸ Citywide Parents Council Records (0450.002.) Series III: Citywide Parent Advisory Council (CPAC), 1975-1982: CPAC Monitoring, 1979 - 1982, Box: 1, Minutes Folder: Proposed Position on School Bus Strike April 12, 1978, Citywide Parents Council records, 0450.002. City of Boston Archives.

¹³⁹ Tess Ewing Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 22-23.

were able to garner. A long and tedious process was worth it for the new energy and willingness to push the limits for those who were the first to lead Locals 8744 and Local 8751.

CHAPTER 5

SUCCESS

“I have always thought that’s the beauty of the union. You could speak your mind, Nobody can fire you for it.”

- Mike Timmons¹⁴⁰

Introduction

This thesis has examined the first two years of the School Bus Drivers Union, analyzing their unique situation and unique membership and why they were able to be successful. Local 8751 is still around almost fifty years later. Having been built on a strong foundation, they would weather the next decade of anti-unionism and continue on, ensuring that students make it to school safe and sound to this day. The drivers led the charge for what a progressive union looks like in many ways, such as being one of the first unions in Boston to include domestic partnerships protections in contracts, a measure added by one of the first presidents Tess Ewing.¹⁴¹ The School Bus Drivers Union found success in many different ways, primarily in their building of a strong union that stood in solidarity with each other. They continued to stand as one of the most militant rank and file unions in Boston to this day, helping establish a new type of unionism that would take public sector unions by storm in 30 years, called social movement unionism.

The drivers also found success in being one of the last unions to form in the 1960s and 1970s wave of organizing here in Boston. By the 1980s, anti-unionism had made its way here to Boston, and to the bus yards specifically, with an attempt to fire almost all the drivers arriving in 1980 when a new contract was negotiated. While listed separately here, the successes are not

¹⁴⁰ Mike Timmons Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 13.

¹⁴¹ Jim Barrett and Pat Morey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 27.

distinct from each other and are not possible without the intersection between the solidarity felt within the union, the wider labor movement, and how desegregation impacted it all.

Unity

The success found in the School Bus Drivers union is in part because of the community they formed with each other through their youth, and their radicalism, a community that stood with each other despite differences in political ideology and differences of opinions. Standing together on the picket line, Jimmy Thompson recalls frustration with the Steelworkers strike pay requirement on one of their later strikes. “There was a stipulation that [we] had to work the picket line at least twice a week to be eligible for the strike fund... I thought that was atrocious.” And when a single mother made her way there one night, “they wouldn’t give her the strike fund, because she didn’t participate.” That struck Thompson, and is something that he “remembers to this day” and “still haven’t forgiven those for not giving.” He would go on to give her his own funds for being on the strike line. He felt that the international was not as supportive as they could be given what they took out of their pay. “We was up to almost 8—700, 800 members at one time. That was good money for the International, man.”¹⁴²

Despite his frustrations with the Steelworkers’ inflexible bureaucracy, Thompson always understood the benefits of being in the union, recalling how he “fell in love with the unions, too.”

“Like I became involved and made the comparison to the union and non-union, made that comparison. I do think, to this day, that unions are better for the average working man. Because they couldn’t just fire, they wanted to, they couldn’t do this ‘cause you had to be represented at the table. They had to have just cause to fire, to give discipline.” While that does not mean there are issues within the union, which included “lot of double standards in the union, too... but as the shop steward, I was on real alert on that, because I never had one person fired that I represented.”¹⁴³

¹⁴² Jimmy Thompson Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 16-17.

¹⁴³ Jimmy Thompson Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 17-18.

Those who served as stewards, like Jimmy Thompson, were proud of the work that they had accomplished, and of those who they were able to represent. Strong stewards are what make rank-and-file unions like this one so successful. Here in the School Bus Drivers Union, those like Thompson, Timmons, and Barrett worked hard to ensure that their fellow workers were heard, and their grievances addressed.

Mike Timmons recalls the beauty of the union: “I have always thought that’s the beauty of the union. You could speak your mind. Nobody could fire you for it.”¹⁴⁴ Having held many different positions throughout the union Timmons felt empowered by it, saying “I spoke to more than one driver who said they were afraid if they spoke up about what they really believed as far as where the union was going, that the people in power at that time would not represent them. If they got in trouble they wouldn’t have anybody to represent them. That wasn’t really true, but I understood.”¹⁴⁵ Even when he had personal conflicts with other union members, it never stopped him from speaking his mind or holding positions such as steward, trustee, and being on both the Accident Review Committee and the Negotiations Committee. He also saw what the union did for its members:

“A lot of the drivers own houses, which is pretty good. Pretty damn good, you know? It was all because of the union. We got the benefits and we got the money. We were paid well, we were paid very well. We weren’t being paid the most out of other areas, but the benefits were there. I liked the job because I could take time off if I needed it with my family.”¹⁴⁶

Alongside other drivers, Timmons helped to run programs supported by the union teaching the students about bus safety. He would go into the schools and tell them how to safely walk around the buses, and for the drivers he worked with Susan Moir to help run the

¹⁴⁴ Mike Timmons Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 13.

¹⁴⁵ Mike Timmons Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 9.

¹⁴⁶ Mike Timmons Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 30.

Ergonomics Committee. Taking over from her when she left, he worked to teach drivers how to drive the bus and sit in ways that would not cause long term damage to their body.¹⁴⁷

Alongside Jimmy Thompson and Mike Timmons, Jim Barrett fondly recalled his time as a bus driver. Jim Barrett enjoyed being able to work with the students and the perspective that driving provided him:

“But it’s real human emotion, the bus driving, yeah. I mean I felt -- I don’t know about you, because you had left long before me, but doing it all that time, it pulled on my heart strings to walk out the last day. It was -- having gone through all that, it’s like your life comes to an end or something. Even though, it’s not. It’s only your workplace, but if anything, it’s a job that brings a lot of rewards and a lot of frustration, too. But, as with life. (laughs) So it’s a life experience.”¹⁴⁸

All three of them held various union positions, from President, Vice President, to trustee, but they all remain incredibly proud of the work that they did as Stewards. Many never having had a driver fired in their 40-year tenure. The strong rank-and-file foundation allowed for this type of success and protections even almost fifty years later.

The experience of these longtime drivers helps to show how integral unions were to their livelihoods. The union allowed them to flourish in their jobs, find a community, and better working conditions. Standing together on the picket line, serving as stewards, or at the year-end barbeque, the solidarity with one another was won through hard fought strikes, compromise, showing up for one another - whether as steward, or as president ensuring that all members are represented in contracts - and their determination to create the best working conditions possible for their students and themselves. Mike Timmons summed it up best stating, “The union really -- I think people misunderstand unions. I think unions make mistakes, too. That might be why sometimes the bus drivers are called radical because they push too hard for certain things. But I

¹⁴⁷ Mike Timmons Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 31.

¹⁴⁸ Jim Barrett and Pat Morey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 32.

don't understand why a worker wouldn't want a union."¹⁴⁹ A union with members of lesser fortitude and willingness to push boundaries might not have prevailed.

Political Influences

As a group of relatively young workers - most of those who were founding members being in their 20s or 30s when they began – the drivers were a new generation who had not previously been part of unions (with the exception of members like Jim Barrett who had previously been a steward in the Amalgamated Transit Workers) and who were willing to challenge the status quo. This union was made up of anti-war protestors, feminists, hippies, and socialists. They were willing to stand up to the status quo, willing to put it all on the line and not willing to back down. As Tess Ewing said, as a leftist, she had not realized how unions bring people together but was pleasantly surprised in the solidarity found there.¹⁵⁰ This group of young radicals found unionism as an answer to their struggles as workers.

Tess Ewing explains the perspective she entered union organizing with as a leftist: “from the left, we always saw unions as not being particularly good guys, right? But they're a great arena of struggle, you might say... Unions don't solve the world's problems, but they're a great place to carry out – to move things forward, and sometimes it involves moving the unions forward.” This is in part due to many unions' struggle to change and accept a new generation of members, but this was also in part due to the time that she was working in. The 1970s was a decade that witnessed the passage of new anti-discrimination laws, and Title IX protections that allowed for legal protections for these new ideas. While bus drivers were hired indiscriminately,

¹⁴⁹ Mike Timmons Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 39.

¹⁵⁰ Tess Ewing Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 31-32.

having these new protections in place afforded Tess a security that would not have been there only 10 years earlier. Now, they were a place to continue pushing in a progressive direction.

Ewing went on to discuss the international influences in the change in unions, “the unions over the last X number of years have really changed in the US from being pretty conservative back in the ‘70s, you know, supporting US foreign policies in Central America.... being extremely racist and sexist – to being very different now and that’s partly because of US progressives being actively involved.” She continued, discussing how immigrant workers also help to push the unions to the left, as “other countries’ unions are often much more progressive than here, particularly Central America. We had a lot of influx of Central Americans after the US interventions there, and they had much more leftist history in their unions.” She concludes by reflecting on both her path in unions and what she can see it doing for progressive and leftist organizations, “I’m happy to, you know, to have landed up in unions even though that wasn’t where I had originally intended. And you don’t get to say things that are as far to the left in a union as you do and – because the union represents everybody in the company. It has to.”¹⁵¹

The school bus drivers were ahead of their time, both for being young radicals, but also because they were far more progressive than most other Boston unions. In these years, building trade unions - carpenters, electrical unions, and iron workers - were forced by law to take minority workers, which made white workers feel like they were being left out.¹⁵² Only through Title IX and through anti-discrimination laws were minorities and women welcomed into these more traditional unions. That is not to say that all were not welcome, there were several with more progressive leans, like the Boston Teachers Union that had their own internal battles.

¹⁵¹ Tess Ewing Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 31-32.

¹⁵² Robert Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 16.

During desegregation the Boston School Committee was court ordered in 1975 to hire more Black teachers. The court found that there was inadequate recruitment of Black teachers, seen demonstrated in Mel King's struggle to get a job as a teacher in Boston Public Schools just a few years earlier. Judge Garrity ordered that for every white teacher one Black teacher also needed to be hired, with the goal of having at least 20% of teachers be Black. The BTU fought this decision, saying that 20% was an unreasonably high demand. This all came to a head in 1980, as budget cuts loomed and 710 tenured teachers would be laid off, with the Judge ruling that layoffs would preserve the 20% rule and not follow seniority. Ultimately, 710 white tenured teachers were laid off to keep the 20% of teachers that were Black, and BTU members threatened going out on illegal strikes several times.¹⁵³

Tess Ewing recalls the fight between the conservatives and the progressives in the BTU, those who wanted to allow layoffs to happen based only on seniority and the progressives who wanted the Black teachers to be retained to keep the twenty percent level. Tess Ewing recalls, while "the Boston Teachers Union was integrated," this was not the case for all unions in Boston at the time, but "one thing that was different [about the bus drivers] was that it started integrated. The Boston Teacher's Union was going through a lot of shit at the time over the issue of super seniority, because what happened was that teachers of color were hired historically after white teachers, so they had less seniority. So whenever there was a layoff, the teachers of color would be laid off." But there were a few progressives in the BTU who "wanted to have super seniority where teachers of color didn't lose their jobs right off. And that caused a lot of divisions within the Boston Teacher's Union."¹⁵⁴ While a more conservative union, the BTU was still making

¹⁵³ Eleanor Katari and Ari Branz, "Black Choices, Black Voices Navigating the Layoffs of 1981," Exploring the Boston Teachers Union Collection. <https://blogs.umb.edu/btuhistory/digital-exhibits/black-voices-1981/>

¹⁵⁴ Tess Ewing Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 20-21.

change. Tess Ewing recalls working with Kathy Kelly, the president of the BTU at the time, “she was one of the pioneering women union leaders in Boston. There were very few at that time. And she was good. She was progressive.”¹⁵⁵

While the BTU had a tumultuous time during the early years of desegregation, they still managed shared their resources and supported the drivers in their efforts. They covered their strikes in the *Boston Union Teacher*, and also lent them their union hall for meetings still to this day. And after several decades of work, the BTU become one of the more progressive unions in Boston, embracing their diverse membership and championing their students and their diverse backgrounds, and even forming a Truth and Reconciliation Committee in 2020 to address past wrongs. While the school bus drivers are not the only progressive union in Boston, they help lead the way.

The solidarity shown between the School Bus Drivers and other community groups in Boston would continue to grow. They would go on to be one of two unions to endorse Mel King in his 1983 Mayor race, marching with him in the Dorchester Day parade.¹⁵⁶ The drivers cultivated a vital sense of community, hosting legendary year-end barbeques that people continued to talk about to this day. Overall, their willingness to keep pushing is what allowed them to have one of the last successful union campaigns during the 1970s wave in Boston.

Labor

A resounding success in the labor world, the school bus drivers were one of the last groups of the 1960s and 1970s organizing wave to be so successful, with their strike to get an election and their contract. Their unity and radicalism, as mentioned previously, is what allowed

¹⁵⁵ Tess Ewing Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 22-23.

¹⁵⁶ Jim Barrett and Pat Morey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 35.

them to be successful in what quickly became a challenging time for unions across the country. It would also allow them to be successful in pushing back against the Boston School Committee, which even almost 50 years later, is still not a fan of busing in Boston. Their dislike of busing is still taken out on the school bus drivers due to their not being city employees, making it possible to fire them sometime in the future. While essentially performing the same job as MBTA drivers who are employed by the city and working to support schools, similar to the many support staff city employees in schools, drivers are still private contractors. Their retirement is not a city pension, unlike the MBTA.

For many drivers, their first labor union, Local 8751 helped create a sense of lifelong solidarity between its members. Many of whom would go on to serve in other capacities within the labor movement. Gene Bruskin spent ten years with the bus drivers before moving on as a union organizer with the Laundry Workers. He then got “hired at a job in DC in a national union, moved to DC, and I’ve been here ever since, starting in 1990.” While this was not the future he had originally the future he envisioned for himself, it was the School Bus Drivers Union that helped him get his start, “the foundation that I got there, that really framed what I was trying to do, and still trying to do the rest of my life.” And while he is retired now, he calls it being “re-deployed” when he consults, like he does, “working with the Amazon workers in Staten Island as an advisor.”¹⁵⁷

Tess Ewing would go on to become President of the Laundry Workers Local 66, before moving on to other ventures like heading the Labor Extension Program at UMass Boston. She also went on to help found the Gay and Lesbian Labor Action Network (GALLAN), one of the very first gay and lesbian labor organizations. Susan Moir, another former president would leave

¹⁵⁷ Gene Bruskin Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 44-45.

to go on work in labor education at both UMass Lowell and UMass Boston at the Labor Resource Center. Countless members, like Jimmy Thompson, Jim Barrett, Steve Kirshbaum, and more would stay on for another 40 years.

The school bus drivers were not without their own internal conflicts; many would split with the union and leave due to the political conflicts with those who were part of the Workers World Party and wanted to bring socialist politics into the union. While many were critical of bringing socialist policies into the union, it did allow boundaries to continue to be pushed. and for those that came from both socialists and leftist's backgrounds to continue to use community organizing techniques.

Jim Barrett recalls the conflicts:

“Battles among ourselves is the outside groups coming in with their own political agenda which really didn't – wasn't very democratic. And to use their position in the union to then foster their political beliefs onto other people. And then try to push them into the union into then – if people weren't as left as they were or to shun or to castigate other people whose politics were not that progressive but good union people.” It led to a “real divisions.” Which were not “good for the union. It wasn't good for us to be in-fighting. Because the city picked up on it, and then, of course, used it.”¹⁵⁸

This conflict is what eventually led to many original members like Gene Bruskin and Tess Ewing to leave. But many did not have the privilege of leaving, often it was only white drivers who left to pursue labor careers, as driving was a good paying job with retirement.

The school bus drivers lead the way into what became the future of public sector unionism, particularly in teacher unions, combining social movement unionism and bargaining for the common good. This is the path that the BTU followed more recently, which has allowed them to become a strong union that is able to advocate for themselves and their students. Today, this vision is seen in movements across the country.

¹⁵⁸ Jim Barrett and Pat Morey Oral History, School Bus Drivers Oral History Collection: 23-24.

Desegregation

Ultimately, the creation and the foundation of the School Bus Drivers Union all comes back to desegregation in Boston. Hired to put into action the desegregation of Boston, the school bus drivers were those who faced the day-to-day conflict alongside the children and are still around making sure that Boston is desegregated today.¹⁵⁹ The need to unionize came about because of the way that the Boston School Committee wanted desegregation to fail. Underfunded, undercut, and unsafe, the bus drivers had to advocate for themselves and their students.

The failure to support, listen to, or respect the bus drivers came through in a variety of ways. This lack of respect permeated the issues, both in the way the School Committee did not trust the bus drivers to know their buses well enough to know that they were unsafe, and in a similar vein, in not trusting them to know the streets of Boston well enough to know when a route would not work. The bus drivers were constantly pushing back against the Boston School Committee, saying that the buses were unsafe, or that the routes were unreasonable. The Boston School Committee was setting up the bus drivers for failure.

This eventually was brought to the attention of CPAC, both by the school bus drivers, but also through parents and student complaints. The bus drivers brought the safety issues to CPAC in early 1978, as previously discussed, in regard to preparing to go on strike and attempting to negotiate for a better contract. But CPAC also took notice of the issue of students making it to school on time, specifically students in kindergarten and in isolated programs due to poor management at TMC, a bus company that was given a smaller contract by the city. While they had attempted to unionize with the Steelworkers alongside Hudson and Brush Hill, they were

¹⁵⁹ The validity of whether or not Boston is desegregated based on socioeconomic class can still be questioned.

unsuccessful due to the abusive management tactics. But CPAC took note and requested that TMC not have their contract renewed for the upcoming year in March 1978. Earlier in March, they wanted to bring up issues with TMC to the Boston School Committee, holding them in contempt for their failure to get students to school on time.¹⁶⁰ Going as far as asking for contempt against TMC, and asking for a new company to bid on the contract for kindergarten and isolated student routes. Despite all of this the Boston School Committee would fail to act, renewing the TMC contract for the next year much to the chagrin of CPAC and parents.

The following school year, 1978-1979, CPAC went on to suggest monitors on buses both for safety, so that bus drivers did not have to manage the students, and to help get students to school on time. But the Boston School Committee failed to respond. At the November 8, 1978 CPAC meeting, a new fact finding committee was formed to investigate why the transportation was so poor, which was why they suggested the monitors. But by February 1979, the Boston School Committee had still refused to answer their inquiries or to meet with them.¹⁶¹

Once again, it was clear how the Boston School Committee wanted busing to fail. The drivers remain private contractors despite now having worked for the Boston Public School system for the last 48 years. The School Committee has kept them that way to make it so that they would be able to end the program eventually, but they have been unable to do so. *Morgan v. Hennigan* was closed in 1994, but busing, and the need for competent drivers, continues.

¹⁶⁰ Citywide Parents Council Records (0450.002.) Series III: Citywide Parent Advisory Council (CPAC), 1975-1982: CPAC Monitoring, 1979 - 1982, Box: 1, Minutes Folder: Committee Report March 22, 1978, Citywide Parents Council records, City of Boston Archives.

¹⁶¹ Citywide Parents Council Records (0450.002.) Series III: Citywide Parent Advisory Council (CPAC), 1975-1982: CPAC Monitoring, 1979 - 1982, Box: 1, Minutes Folder: Meeting Minutes February 14, 1979, Citywide Parents Council records, City of Boston Archives.

Conclusion

The creation of the School Bus Drivers Union Local 8751 was both an integral part of desegregation in Boston and part of a labor organizing wave that had been taking place across the country. With the need to unionize apparent due to poor treatment by the Boston School Committee, who wanted busing to fail, the drivers stepped up and put up a fight not to be forgotten. Made up of young socialists, anti-war protestors, and feminists, the drivers put up a fight that the Boston School Committee did not see coming and managed to advocate for themselves and their students, creating a radical route for success.

APPENDIX A

List of Oral Histories recorded in the School Bus Drivers Oral History Project:

Tess Ewing

Gene Bruskin

Diane Andronica and Chuck Rosina

Philip Kaplan

Jimmy Thompson

Robert McCloskey

Paul Keith

Adele Angelo

Steve Gillis

Pat Morey and Jim Barrett

Bob Traynham

Mike Timmons

Charlie Williams

Evie Frankl

APPENDIX B

These are the questions used in the School Bus Drivers Union Oral History Project. Every interview started with the same question, “Why did you become a school bus driver?” Not all conversations reached all the questions, but they all started in the same place.

Why did you become a school bus driver?

What is your personal background in labor unions?

Did you work on the newsletters? What motivated you to do that? Have you written for newsletters before?

Did you hold a leadership position? What motivated you to run for it?

What was your experience in the Union like? What were the Union meetings like?

Did you go on strike? And if so, what was that experience like?

What types of issues did you deal with driving the school bus?

Did you deal with issues as a driver related to desegregation?

What is your favorite memory of driving the students?

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