The Feminist Awakening of the St. Louis Teamsters

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Abstract

The Teamsters have a mixed reputation in the realm of organized labor. Known in the popular imagination for a legacy of corruption and autocratic management, the group is rarely named as a source of progressive advocacy. Known too as a union of truck drivers, the Teamsters are not often recognized for their organization of women workers. This case study of a rank-and-file movement in Teamsters Local 688, a historically prominent St. Louis, Missouri, union, challenges such assumptions. By the early 1970s, the local became a left-liberal font of activism that extended to feminist issues. Detailing 688's mission, its support for abortion rights and the Equal Rights Amendment, the creation of collective organizing spaces for trade-union women, and the launch of an on-the-ground feminist day care project, this paper addresses the synergy between the labor and feminist movements in the 1970s. It inquires into the relationship between union leadership and working-class initiative on matters of gender inequity as it documents a little-known dimension of the politics of the Teamsters Union. In a time of new possibilities for organized labor and renewed urgency for progressive social movements, looking back at the feminist awakening of the Teamsters Union shows both the possibilities and the impediments facing wage-workers' efforts for social change.

Keywords

Teamsters Union, feminism, St. Louis, reproductive rights, Equal Rights Amendment

In common parlance, the Teamsters Union is a punchline, a shorthand reference to racketeering, the unsavory collusion of organized crime and organized labor, and the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa. This history of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers of America (IBT) has been well documented in the popular media, which has made a cottage industry of Hoffa's downfall. Known too as a union of truck drivers, the Teamsters are rarely recognized for their organization of women workers. [1]

That these perceptions have such purchase makes all the more remarkable the progressive history of Local 688 of the St. Louis, Missouri, Teamsters. With a membership of around fourteen thousand

[1] Historian David Witwer documents the historical path that forged this legacy in *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). See also John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, *In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), chap. 3; Robert C. Donnelly, *Dark Rose: Organized Crime and Corruption in Portland* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011); and James B. Jacobs and Ellen Peters, "Labor Racketeering: The Mafia and Unions," *Crime and Justice* 30 (2003): 236–50. Popular press accounts that have emphasized the IBT's unsavory reputation include Steven Brill, *The Teamsters* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); and Allen Friedman and Ted Schwarz, *Power and Greed: Inside the Teamsters Empire of Corruption* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1989).

members in the early 1970s, it was the state's largest union local.[2] Capping a decade of liberal institution-building, this sprawling local's forces faced the crises of the 1960s and early 1970s with a forthright commitment to advocacy and innovative ideas for institutional change. It does not stand alone as a pocket of left-liberal activism among Teamsters. Though their work has not displaced popular perceptions of the Teamsters, scholars have highlighted these progressive moments, such as the radical insurgency of Minneapolis Teamsters from the 1930s to 1940s (Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* [Leiden: Brill, 2013], especially 1–2, and Donna T. Haverty-Stacke, "The Punishment of Mere Political Advocacy," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 [2013]: 68–93); civil rights and progressive postwar political organizing in the locals of Little Rock, Arkansas, and Chicago (Michael Pierce, "Odell Smith, Teamsters Local 878, and Civil Rights Unionism in Little Rock, 1943-1965," *The Journal of Southern History* 84, no. 4 [2017]: 925-958, and Liesl Miller Orenic, "The Base of the Empire: Teamsters Local 743 and Montgomery Ward," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 15, no. 2 [2018]: 49-75; a reform movement in IBT locals during Hoffa's reign (Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union*, 217–34); and the rise of the "militant rank-and-file movement" of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union in the 1970s and 1980s (Lon W. Smith, *An Experiment in Trade Union Democracy: Harold Gibbons and the Formation of Teamsters Local 688, 1937–1957*, [Doctor of Arts diss., Illinois State University, 1993], 51, and Samuel R. Friedman, *Teamster Rank and File: Power, Bureaucracy, and Rebellion at Work and in a Union* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1982], chap. 10). Notably, there is minimal scholarship on Teamster women's history, excepting Leah F. Vosko and David Witwer, "'Not a Man's Union': Women Teamsters in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s," *Journal of Women's History* 13, no. 3 (2001): 169–92.

In the vein of such scholarship, this article gives close examination to a short-lived moment of progressive possibility that blossomed in Local 688 before being cut down suddenly with the removal of its dynamic secretary-treasurer Harold Gibbons. It takes as its particular focus the foray of rank-and-file 688 members into feminist issues at a time when the local, perhaps incongruously in light of the international's pronounced drift into corruption and racketeering under the presidency of Frank Fitzsimmons, stood at a height of regional influence as a force in community development and public advocacy. Its turn to feminist activism also provides a perspective on how the putatively masculinist culture of the Teamsters made space for on-the-ground women's issues at the level of the local during this critical era of the mainstreaming of feminist politics.

Local 688's awakening to the relevance of women's issues to its own political ambitions came suddenly after decades of quiescence regarding its female wage-workers. It moved from the grassroots up as women seized opportunities to launch their own social movement activities from the base of the union. Men, who dominated the leadership, produced institutional opportunities for these activities to flourish. The working-class activists invested in feminist issues pursued reform that sought equality in the political sphere, with adamant endorsement of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) as a beneficial measure eliminating gender distinctions on the job and in the wider political sphere at a time when other union women struggled over support of the issue. At the same time, Local 688 activists were sensitive to inequities driven by class-inflected gender

[2] Mike Ryan, typed testimony, [Feb. 1973], Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Harold J. Gibbons Collection, University Archives and Unique Collections, Lovejoy Library, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Edwardsville, IL, (hereafter Gibbons Collection).

differences. They emphasized the toll of the criminalization of abortion on women; they organized women-only conferences to effect a form of consciousness-raising shaped by the organizing methods of the labor movement; they couched their ERA advocacy within the distinctive burdens borne by working women; and they built a day care center as a means of relieving gendered responsibilities in the domestic sphere. In producing this "mixed methods" feminist praxis, politicized leaders and members of 688 drew upon the traditions of labor feminism—the pursuit of what Dorothy Sue Cobble (2004, 56-57) named "economic rights and equality *broadly*"—while they assimilated the influences of a liberal feminism—defined, in the words of historian Kirsten Swinth, by the tendency "to work through established channels to reform institutions, laws, policies, and union contracts"—that was then transforming political and popular discourse (2018, 7).[3]

While the feminist awakening of the St. Louis Teamsters was brief, it was notable for its partnership between on-the-ground union members and the staff of their local in advocacy efforts and commitment to institutionalization of feminist reforms. It was a give-and-take between the two sustained by both membership-driven forces of representation and the leadership structures helmed by of Harold Gibbon. The speed with which these progressive elements dissipated upon the ouster of Gibbons over 1973 gives evidence of how tenuous the project was.

The article proceeds by examining four intertwined aspects of the feminist agenda of St. Louis Teamsters' working women in the early 1970s. First, it examines the state of Local 688, identifying how this moment reflected the evolution of Gibbons' visionary leadership and the responsiveness of the union's membership to progressive perspectives on social change amid the workaday tasks of organizing and collective bargaining. Next, detailing the role of women in the rank-and file, it reviews advocacy work in support of the legalization of abortion alongside the emergence of women's assemblies. These gatherings created collective spaces in which Teamster women and a broader coalition of women union members responded to both the feminist transformations affecting organized labor and the local manifestations of feminist policy initiatives. This space gave rise to action supporting the decriminalization of abortion and ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. Finally, it looks into the union's most on-the-ground—and ultimately unsustainable—commitment to feminist reform: the creation of a day care center at its union headquarters in midtown St. Louis.

One cannot recount the story of Local 688 and its progressive programming without noting the leadership initiatives of Harold Gibbons. Gibbons came of age in a radical period of trade-union organizing during the 1920s and Great Depression. He steadily ascended from his proletarian roots into well-compensated positions in the hierarchy of the IBT, holding several officer positions in the "occupationally and racially diverse" Local 688 (Bussel, 2015, 2).[4] Mellowing with age, Gibbons was a leader much like Walter Reuther, likewise a former socialist, who saw the "labor movement…as an essential lever with which to reshape society," in the words of historian Nelson Lichtenstein (1995, 439). Eventual union president Jimmy Hoffa, by contrast, made his reputation

[3]Cobble names this expansiveness "social justice feminism" in "More Than Sex Equality: Feminism after Suffrage," in *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements*, ed. Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014), 4.

[4] Bussel's biographical account provides an indispensable history of the IBT in St. Louis., 2. See also Lon Smith, "Harold J. Gibbons and Teamsters Local 688: Progressive Unionism and St. Louis, 1941–1973," in *The St. Louis Labor History Tour*, ed. Rose Feurer (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis Bread and Roses, 1994), 39–41.

through a cutthroat pragmatism, launching aggressive jurisdictional fights and making shadowy alliances. While Gibbons was not aloof from the penchant for union-raiding and shady election practices that made the IBT a pariah from the AFL-CIO, his dedication to an idealistic vision of institution- and community-building was rare in the international (Bussel, 2015, 6-7).

Local 688's multifaceted organizing efforts contribute to a broader story about how the IBT was not simply a union of truck-driving white men.[5] Early in the Local 688's history, first making inroads among the warehouse and distribution sectors, the union reached out to Black and white workers, fostering an enduring interracial solidarity. This paralleled the efforts of Little Rock, Arkansas's Local 878 to "support black voting, school integration, and fair employment laws and to form alliances with African American activists," as well as the interracialist work of Chicago's Teamster Local 743 upon its organization of the Montgomery Ward Company.[6] From there, Gibbons and his colleagues expanded their efforts outward. Regardless of its transportation origins, the IBT organized shop by shop, taking an organic view of wage-workers. It targeted manufacturing, retail, and clerical sectors—with their substantial female workforces—alongside warehousemen and drivers (Witwer, 2003, 237). Gibbons's early, and ultimately unsuccessful, campaign to unionize the retail workers of the St. Louis's flagship Famous-Barr department store compelled him to look further than male-dominated workplaces, forcing him to recognize that "any attempt to organize the retail industry …would necessitate the drafting of a campaign that reflected the goals and aspirations of a largely white-collar, female work-force," according to historian Lon W. Smith (1993, 81). This laid a foundation for his sensitivity to the restiveness of women workers in the late 1960s.

The local's early exposure to the organizing needs of women portended an ongoing institutional identity of 688 as an alternative to the vision of roughneck masculinity that dominated the wider culture of the IBT: tough, ruthless in organizing strategies, and committed to the advancement of blue-collar white males in traditionally gender-segmented occupational sectors (Vosko and Witwer, 2001, 171-74). Early on, the culture of 688 advanced a masculinity that could be read as less individualistic and domineering, more receptive to collective democratic initiatives that elevated the value of community and cooperation.

While the men who were the public face of 688 would be slow to harness the energies of the female membership, they crafted the local into a vehicle for progressive advocacy, even as the union "focused its primary attention on contract negotiations and new member recruitment programs." (Smith, 1993, 156). Gibbons's strength at the regional level—he was named "St. Louis's most powerful labor leader" by scholar George Lipsitz in 1973—created paths for the local to engage the spirit of New Deal workers' citizenship and Great Society-era yearnings, even as the era of labor-management accords smoothed out the rough edges of organizing and negotiating. While the IBT accrued a reputation as a "coercive" business union, Gibbons cultivated a staff motivated by the spirit of social democracy and worker's rights.[7]

[5] For an earlier generation of women Teamsters, see Vosko and Witwer, "'Not a Man's Union.'"
[6] Pierce, "Odell Smith, Teamsters Local 878, and Civil Rights Unionism in Little Rock, 1943-1965," 958; Orenic, "The Base of the Empire: Teamsters Local 743 and Montgomery Ward."
[7] George Lipsitz, "Beyond the Fringe Benefits: Rank and File Teamsters in St. Louis," *Liberation* 18, no. 1 (Jul.–Aug. 1973): 32; Ahlquist and Levi, *In the Interest of Others*, 56–71; Aaron Brenner, "Rank and File Rebellion, 1966–1975," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1996), 231.

The local inaugurated neighborhood development work in the 1950s with a community stewards program, which organized union members to become involved in municipal advocacy (Bussel, 2015, 90-95). In the late 1960s, animated by the spirit of the Great Society and Saul Alinsky-style neighborhood movements, 688 incorporated antipoverty and housing advocacy into its social programming. Claiming a new role in forging urban policy, the union was uniquely thrust onto the national stage for its role in mediating the country's first rent strike staged at public housing and its involvement with the Labor for Peace coalition, an antiwar labor consortium that held its inaugural conference at 688's headquarters in June 1972, infuriating IBT president and Nixon-ally Frank Fitzsimmons (Bussel, 2015, 172-74).[8]

These developments set the stage for the emergence of a rank-and-file feminist agenda that was, like the rent strike mediation and Labor for Peace, distinctive among activist ventures at the level of the Teamster local, not to mention the international. Local 688 had not made a sustained effort to speak to the 26 percent of its members who were female (a percentage that mirrored the proportion of IBT female membership more generally), and in this period, pressure emerged from within the union to give women's issues a place within its reform efforts (Deslippe, 2000, 142). The leadership was slow to provide these members access to staff positions in the local's administration, but it enabled their voices to be heard and amplified in its advocacy agenda. Contrasting with an earlier era in which working-class Teamster women had to rely on a conciliatory "incrementalism" in making workplace gains, women activists in 688 significantly expanded the purview of the union's reform agenda (Vosko and Witwer, 2001, 171). In so doing, the local contributed to a wider development in organized labor, which harnessed the momentum of the liberal feminist movement. In this atmosphere, 688 produced a handful of initiatives between 1970 and 1973 that brought them closer to labor counterparts like the United Auto Workers, whose women's department had been involved for decades with women's political mobilizations that stretched from the shopfloor to Capitol Hill (Cobble, 2004, 19).

These initiatives developed in intertwined ways. It was a give-and-take between the local's bureaucracy and the agitation of workers. Rank-and-filers pressed for attention to women's issues from the grassroots, and Harold Gibbons and his team opened institutional spaces for this to take place. The resulting projects—declarations of organizational commitments, special assemblies, lobbying efforts, and the day care center—nurtured each other; that is, until the purge of 688's leadership structure undercut the local's advocacy and community development efforts.

Local 688 veteran Donna Steininger took a leading role in advancing this work. A white woman who had been employed in a middle-class job, Steininger unexpectedly made the transition into the pink-collar clerical workforce upon a divorce that left her responsible for the support of her children. She initially joined Local 688 as a rank-and-file member employed in the offices of General Grocer. She would eventually join the staff as Assistant Education Director and business agent. Steininger can be termed what Dorothy Sue Cobble named a "labor feminist," for she "articulated a particular variant of feminism that put the needs of working-class women at its core." (Cobble, 2004, 3). Steininger recollects that the union's 1960s civil rights initiatives, which included promoting Black men to business agents and education department staff, inspired women, both white and Black, to become "more vocal to also be considered for promotion at their work

[8] See also Smith, 1993, 249–50.

sites and union." [9] This echoed changes in the UAW, in which women union members shifted their attention away from club and auxiliary activities, instead seeking greater empowerment as workers (Gabin, 1990, 222).

Steininger may have helped set the stage for more general advocacy on women's issues at 688 by putting labor feminism on the radar of Harold Gibbons. In 1969, she organized a group of seven women members to send him a brief letter challenging the union to address issues of discrimination against women. (Unfortunately, the personal stories of Steininger's comrades who were signatories are largely lost to time, reflecting the difficulty of documenting the lives of working-class women).[10] The letter noted that he cared "about so many inequities within the community" and asked him to "care about this one right here in Local 688." "The Teamster's Union (and everyone else) discriminates against women," it continued, highlighting that "women are generally paid less and fill less desirable positions both within the union and the shops covered by the union."[11]

The appearance of the letter is a suggestive, though not decisive, explanation as to why 688 fired its first collective salvo on liberal feminist issues at the 1970 City Wide Shop Conference, a biennial meeting of delegates elected from the rank-and-file membership. That year, the local had a membership of about 13,500 people, out of which 750 delegates had been elected to draft, debate, and pass resolutions on a wide range of social and economic issues. Building on an officers' report on "The Crucial 70s," which touted the union's community development activities, conference delegates called for an attention-getting slate of reforms connected to the local's broader social mission.[12] Resolutions included the group's first official call for an end to the war in Vietnam, but the scope of the conference's political interests extended in multiple directions. A resolution adopted on the topic of "abortion laws and day care centers" marked a dramatic new turn in speaking to a collection of reproductive justice-related concerns that affected working-class families.[13]

The preamble to the resolution contended that "present Missouri and Illinois abortion laws are unfair…, lead to the slaughter of many women, [infringe] on the rights of women, and…[discriminate] against the poor and working class." The resolution itself called for the legalization of abortion, the establishment of a birth control information center at the local's health care facility, the provision of abortions at the facility upon decriminalization, and the union's support of day care centers in the metro area.[14] The feminist thrust of this resolution was rooted in recognition of the inequitable burdens shouldered by working women in their reproductive capacity. The assembly called for a structural policy change of legalization, the establishment of a comprehensive community health center, and the provision of services that would enable working families to raise children in a safe environment. This was a capacious perspective on women's

[9] Donna Beattie Steininger, typed reminiscences, May 2024, in possession of the author. Ernest Calloway testifies to the participation of Black men in 688 leadership in "An Anniversary Special: Negroes in St. Louis Trade Union," *St. Louis American*, Mar. 28, 1968, 12.
[10] Attempts to reach out to other participants and their survivors have been unsuccessful.
[11] Steininger et al to Harold Gibbons, Dec. 3, 1969, in possession of Donna Steininger.
[12] *The Crucial 70s*, Officers' Report, 22nd City Wide Shop Conference, [1970], Box 41, Gibbons Papers.
[13] "Abortion Laws and Day Care Centers" in Teamsters Local 688, "Resolutions Committee Report: Twenty-Second City Wide Shop Conference," Sep. 27, 1970, Box 41, Gibbons Papers.
[14] "Abortion Laws and Day Care Centers" in Teamsters Local 688, "Resolutions Committee Report: Twenty-Second City Wide Shop Conference," Sep. 27, 1970, Box 41, Gibbons Papers.

issues that grew out of the realities of working peoples' lives. It encompassed the desire to control fertility, to have access to resources to do so, and to give wage-workers the right to nurture families.

By presciently enunciating a reproductive justice agenda in the 1970s, Local 688 distinguished itself from the efforts of other unions invested in feminist issues, which addressed workplace equity more strictly defined: matters such as job classification discrimination, wage inequities, and comparable worth (Turk, 2016).[15] The abortion resolution instead drew from a broadly organized movement supporting legalization that emerged around the country and indeed in Missouri. Aside from the Jane Collective of Chicago, midwestern locales rarely appear in the histories of agitation for abortion rights, but by 1970, abortion had become a subject of media interest and advocacy in communities that included St. Louis.[16] In the state, abortion was illegal except in circumstances in which the mother's life was in danger. In response to these restrictions, and building on the momentum of state-level legalization efforts that had blossomed around the US since 1967, activists worked from grassroots organizations such as the Committee for Legal Abortion in Missouri and the Clergy Consultation Service. They spoke out for policy change and provided on-the-ground counseling that facilitated interstate travel for abortion-seeking women.[17] In 1971, DeVerne Calloway, the first Black woman Missouri state representative and spouse of Local 688 researcher Ernest Calloway, took the legalization struggle to the state capitol. She introduced a modest bill that proposed that the procedure be allowed in cases of fetal non-viability. In the subsequent year, Teamster women rallied behind Calloway as she became a figurehead of the legalization movement in Missouri.

The inauguration of a 688 women's conference created a further venue for the examination of women's issues within the union, and this became the vehicle for grassroots political involvement around abortion decriminalization and the Equal Rights Amendment, two paramount issues often identified with liberal, middle-class, white feminism. Rank-and-file women, including Donna Steininger, organized and convened the women's conference in February 1972. Reflective of the time and the likely racial composition of the organizing committee, they inadvertently designed the agenda around a "color-blind" slate of women's union issues, not attending to the intersectional concerns faced by Black women members.

The conference was a response, and a contribution, to an efflorescence of women's assemblies among labor organizations, which were coming to terms with more general calls for female solidarity and partnerships with feminist policymakers.[18] The St. Louis conference took an expansive view of its agenda, synthesizing traditional labor concerns with issues more commonly

[15] See Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 9, for an elaboration of reproductive justice, which has "three primary principles: (1) the right *not* to have a child; (2) the right to *have* a child; and (3) the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments."

[16] Cynthia Gorney's *Articles of Faith: A Frontline History of the Abortion Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) defies this tendency and documents this history. Ruth Rosen likewise describes the geographically broad coalition that emerged among "underground network of ministers, women activists, and doctors." *The World Split Open: How the Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 53.

[17] Committee for Legal Abortion in Missouri files, folders 14–22, Dorothy C. Roudebush Papers (S0465); and Rose Jonos [M. Rose Jonas], Judith Widdicombe oral history, May 3, 1974, Box 1, Reproductive Health Services Records, (S0197), SHSMO.

[18] Harold Gibbons to all Female Members, n.d., Joint Council 13, Box 3, folder 2, Gibbons Papers; Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*, 202–203.

associated with liberal feminism. Organizers emphasized that on-site childcare would be offered, with men staffing the facility. Initial publicity highlighted workshops on such bread-and-butter issues as pensions, job and contract discrimination, and women's representation in union leadership, but the conference ended up garnering headlines for its wage-working delegates' passionate call for the legalization of abortion.[19]

Reportage from the newspaper of the regional council of Teamsters underscored that "legalized abortion, an adequate childcare system, and an end to stereotyped thinking about women only as mothers, nurses, teachers, secretaries, or maids are not only the demands of radical feminists." Even as the newspaper distinguished rank-and-file concerns from the broader feminist movement, it described the alignments. At the assembly, attendees heard from panelist DeVerne Calloway about the progress of her legalization campaign. They also heard from an in-house obstetrician who advocated abortion reform.[20]

The rank-and-filers who attended and added their voices by organizing and serving on conference panels to the cause were not a passive audience to the outside experts. They took initiative in this window of opportunity to identify themselves publicly as wage-workers with their own rationale as to why abortion and women's autonomy deserved a place on the Teamsters' political action agenda and in the policy-making of Missouri legislators. They spoke from their experiences of structural injustice, placing a working-class spin on the consciousness-raising phenomenon highlighted in feminist intellectual life. Attendee Mary Fedak, employed by the Missouri Candy Company, put abortion access in terms of resistance to male domination. "We've had nothing but men for the last 100 years," she insisted. "Men have decided what a woman is going to do. They keep us pregnant and barefoot and can walk out on us and leave us with children. It's time we decided whether or not to have them."[21]

Some of these women became further involved in the legalization fight as they joined a lobbying delegation supporting Calloway's bill at a hearing in March 1972. Rose Roberts, employed by General Grocer, offered testimony publicizing the union's resolution supporting the elimination of legal restrictions on abortion.[22] The bill was not successful, and Missouri would have to wait until the January 1973 *Roe* decision of the US Supreme Court to secure a supersession of its criminal statute. With this development, rank-and-file activists turned their attention elsewhere.

For one, the 1972 women's conference planted seeds for future women's labor conferences. In so doing, the Teamsters further contributed to the movement taking shape in a variety of union internationals and locals. This movement grafted the consciousness-raising impulse that developed out the feminist movement on to the representative assembly structures of organized labor. Historian Dennis A. Deslippe (2000, 116) explains that after infighting over the repeal of protective labor laws sorted itself out over the late 1960s and early 1970s, "working-class feminists around the country forged interunion coalitions to demand gender equality." In such fashion, the Teamsters joined forces in 1973 with other women union members of the region to convene St. Louis

[19] "Preparations Now Under Way for 688 Women's Conference."
[20] "Local 688 Women Members Voice Concerns about Women's Rights," *Missouri Teamster*, Feb. 18, 1972, 1.
[21] Lois Timnick, "Give Women a Say in Abortion, Female Teamsters Demand," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, n.d. in Reproductive Health Services Records, SHSMO.
[22] "Women Testify for Abortions," *Missouri Teamster*, Mar. 17, 1972, 3.

Women's Labor Conference. It was sponsored by 688 but open to all women union members. Conference organizers enlisted legendary St. Louis union leader Ora Lee Malone, a one-time garment piece-worker and eventual business representative with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America whom historian Keona K. Ervin named "one of St. Louis's most important black freedom and economic justice advocates," in the chair role (2023, 163). In an invitation letter, Malone appealed to union women's potential for solidarity across lines of occupation and organizational affiliation to encourage them to be aware of "the talent, ambition, and potential ability lying dormant in our society, particularly among working people." The conference aimed to "generate this stored energy into action."[23]

The 1973 conference saw attendance increase from the roughly 75 people who attended the 1972 meeting to around 400 participants, mostly women, representing 30 different unions. Addie Wyatt (Amalgamated Meatcutters and Butcher Workmen) and Florence Criley (United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers) gave keynotes. These speakers, luminaries in the realm of women's labor, represented internationals that had an exceptional commitment to civil rights and related progressive causes.[24] They delivered messages rallying support for the machinery of labor by advocating the organization of unorganized women workers and an increase in women's involvement in union leadership. They additionally called for ratification of the ERA.[25] The conference took a wide view of the issues affecting working women and showed sensitivity to Black women's presence in organized labor, reflected in the programming and evoked in a conference emblem of a black hand clasping a white hand.[26]

The St. Louis Women's Labor Conference occurred concurrently with a series of regional meetings that led to the creation of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). Sources are murky on the relationship of the former to the latter. The St. Louis Labor Conference was not organized by the national founders of CLUW and, judging from the archival records of the national CLUW, it bore no formal connection to what the national group named as its predecessor meetings. Founding CLUW president Olga Madar went so far to say that one of these official predecessor meetings "was the first of its kind in the history of the labor movement!"[27] Yet, Donna Steininger recollected that she was in contact with Madar as those predecessor meetings were being planned concurrently with the St. Louis conference. Madar, she noted, "got me on board with her great idea for an organization of union women to organize the many women workers into unions to improve their wages and working conditions and get them pensions. I sent out the call in our area."[28] The St. Louis assembly created a continuations committee to establish its conference as the starting point for a new organization, suggesting there were linkages among the efforts, an assertion affirmed in

[23] Ora Malone to Ellenor Tiffany, Jun. 7, 1973, St. Louis Women's Labor Conference Collection (S0110), SHSMO.
[24] For these unions' commitment to progressive women's issues, see Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*; and Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest*, *1900–1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006),151–52. Malone supported the ERA in advance of the wider union's support of the issue (Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*, 194).
[25] "Women Labor Meeting," *Missouri Teamster*, Dec. 21, 1973, 8.
[26] Myrna Fichtenbaum to Florence Criley, correspondence, Oct. 8, 1973, in Ora Lee Malone Papers (S0670), SHSMO.
[27] Olga Madar to Myra Wolfgang, correspondence, Jun. 30, 1973, box 2, folder 5,Coalition of Labor Union Records (LR000664), Part 1, Series I, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI (hereafter, CLUW-WSU).
[28] Steininger reminiscences.

secondary scholarship.[29] At any rate, there was synergy: shortly after Chicago hosted the inaugural national CLUW convention in April 1974, a Saint Louis chapter of the Coalition of Labor Union Women was founded, with Steininger initiating the group's founding charter and 688's headquarters hosting its meetings.[30]

The founding of CLUW, and by extension, the St. Louis Labor Conference, marked a high point of optimism in the power of working women to transform organized labor from within with ambitions to bridge labor organizations to local and national political struggles. Organizers and delegates aimed to raise women's participation in their own unions as well as to shape policy issues affecting all workers. Though, as Cobble (2004, 201) asserts, union women were not "latecomers to the new feminism," but rather "initiators," this moment reflected a new development in interunion organizing as it put an indelible trade-union stamp on the liberal feminism of the 1970s. "CLUW identified with the women's movement from the very beginning," writes scholar Diane Balser, and representatives of Local 688 identified themselves closely with CLUW in its early years (Balser, 1987, 160). The St. Louis chapter sent two members of Local 688 to the national governing body soon after its founding: Donna Steininger as an executive board alternate and Rose Bode, a rank-and-filer employed by Yellow Freight, as a convention convener.[31]

Teamster women became part of the vibrant national and local CLUW groups. Indeed, a Teamster helped stage one of the most powerful moments at the Chicago conference. Local 743 trustee Clara Day embraced United Farm Worker (UFW) organizer Josephine Flores on the stage, making an emotionally charged gesture of solidarity across the fractious relationship between the unions occasioned by the Teamster raids of UFW constituencies. Though organizers sought to involve the UFW's Dolores Huerta in the group, the assembly struggled whether to issue a statement in support of the UFW's grape, wine and lettuce boycott, ultimately demurring in an apparent attempt to court IBT involvement.[32] Day distinguished herself among the Teamsters for her visible leadership and mentorship in a local that, like 688, "developed an extensive service apparatus, instituted internal organizing and education, fostered a presence in public life, and followed a constant and creative organizing agenda that managed a changing metropolitan economy and workforce in terms of both types of work as well as racial justice and comity." (Orenic, 2018, 50). Early on, she reached out to Malone and Steininger, thanking them for the "work you are doing in St. Louis."[33] Later,

[29] Silke Roth, "Political Socialization, Bridging Organization, Social Movement Interaction: The Coalition of Labor Union Women, 1974–1996," (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 1997), 68; Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement*, 226; Diane Balser, *Feminism and Labor in Modern Times* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1987), 154

[30] St. Louis, Missouri Chapter, "Application for Charter," Nov. 10, 1974, box 55, folder 17, Coalition of Labor Union Records (LR000664), Part 2, Series VIII, Walter Reuther Library. For a broader introduction to the St. Louis Chapter of the CLUW, see Gretchen Arnold and Ilene Ordower, "'We Were on a Mission": Feminist Activism in St. Louis in the 1960s and 1970s," in *Left in the Midwest: St. Louis Progressive Activism in the 1960s and 1970s*, ed. Amanda L. Izzo and Benjamin Looker (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2022), 184–87.

[31] "Teamster Elected to CLUW Office," *Missouri Teamster*, Oct. 21, 1977, n.p. in Newsclippings, box 4, folder 23, Coalition of Labor Union Women, St. Louis Chapter Records (S01016) (hereafter, CLUW-STL), SHSMO; Steininger reminiscences.

[32] Olga M. Madar to Edie Van Horn and Addie Wyatt, Oct. 22, 1973, box 2, folder 5, Part 1, Series I, CLUW-WSU. Roth, "Political Socialization, Bridging Organization, Social Movement Interaction," 278–80; "Labor Union Women Form Coalition," *The Militant*, Apr. 5, 1974, box 4, folder 23, CLUW-STL, SHSMO; Balser, *Sisterhood and Solidarity*, 163-164. An account that more fully examines the relationship between the CLUW and IBT would be a valuable addition to the literature, one that further amplifies the IBT's willingness to engage in left-liberal projects.

[33] Clara Day to Ora Malone, Mary Bolden, and Donna Steininger, Aug. 29, 1974. Box 1, folder 5, Ora Lee Malone Papers, SHSMO.

Steininger and Bode would successfully wage "an intense campaign" for the election of Day to a vice-presidency position in the national organization.[34]

Scattered 688 women helped build the St. Louis CLUW and, for a time, the national organization. Grace Maglione served as treasurer of the local group in the mid-1970s and handed the baton over to another 688 member, Marinda Wright, in the latter part of the decade.[35] Donna Steininger, briefly a member of the national group's Coordinating Committee, remained only peripherally involved. Steininger explains that this was because CLUW's organizing efforts were "complicated and formidable." Success at organizing traditionally female sectors—which was her priority issue and that which was articulated as a central emphasis at CLUW's founding—was "time-consuming and rare." She was not satisfied with the progress made at this goal, and she identified jurisdictional disputes, such as that which divided the IBT and UFW, as a source of this difficulty. Though centrally involved at the beginning, she drifted from the groups.[36] While Teamster women were not as front-and-center at the St. Louis CLUW in the later 1970s as they had been at the chapter's founding, Local 688's headquarters continued to host CLUW meetings.[37]

St. Louis's CLUW shared a trajectory with the national organization, placing emphasis in the earliest years upon organization-building; "equal pay, equal rights, and equal opportunity"; organizing unorganized workers; and encouraging "women to take leadership and policy making roles within their own unions at all levels."[38] Both groups lobbied intensively for the ERA. Disappointing some who "wanted more attention to sexual politics and gender roles," the national organization initially placed an "unrelenting focus on economics and on policy linked to jobs and unions"—pay discrimination, job classifications, livable wages, pension and maternity benefits, and occupational safety (Cobble, 2004, 203). It expended considerable effort establishing an organizational structure between 1974–77. This period was marked by internal struggles over the direction of its advocacy: whether it should prioritize the existing realm of organized labor or branch out into more expansive leftist concerns. It supported chapter-level work, but until the late 1970s when it found its footing, its direct programming was most visible in the form of conventions and a national newsletter (Balser, 1987, 175-193). In its early years, the St. Louis CLUW was able to launch more on-the-ground ventures, in both the realm of organized labor and beyond. It successfully fought a right-to-work measure, rallied behind the unionization of public employees, and started a coalition to stop runaway shops. Members also participated in demonstrations in support of imprisoned rape victim Joan Little and became stalwart opponents to the closing of Homer G. Phillips Hospital, which served St. Louis's Black communities.[39]

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[34] "Teamster Elected to CLUW Office," Oct. 21, 1977.
[35] "WE want to tell you about," press release, n.d., box 4, folder 24, and General membership meeting minutes, Feb. 18, 1978, box 3 folder 18, CLUW-STL, SHSMO.
[36] Steininger, reminiscences.
[37] Pamphlets, Press Releases, Resolutions, and Statements, CLUW-STL, SHSMO.
[38] St. Louis Coalition of Labor Union Women Constitution, 1975, box 3, folder 18, CLUW-STL, SHSMO; CLUW Constitution, 1975, box 87, folder 3, Part 1, CLUW-WSU.
[39] "Coalition of Labor Union Women: 655 Strikes Quick Shops" press release, n.d., in Pamphlets, Press Releases, Resolutions, and Statements, box 4, folder 24, CLUW-STL, SHSMO. For the Joan Little case, see Christina Greene, *Free Joan Little: The Politics of Race, Sexual & Imprisonment* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022); for the Homer G. Phillips struggle, see Ezelle Sanford III, "'Save Homer G. Phillips and All Public Hospitals': African American Grassroots Activism and the Decline of Municipal Public Healthcare in St. Louis," in Izzo and Looker, *Left in the Midwest*, chap. 12.

Teamster-originated women's conferences and the participation of their members in the CLUW coalition created spaces for collective consciousness-raising and public advocacy around working women's issues, but, as with abortion, members of 688 were already primed to participate in policy debates. This was evident in mobilizations around the Equal Rights Amendment, which had become the primary site of organizing in the liberal feminist movement after it was passed by Congress and turned over for state ratification in 1972. In 1973, Missouri became a battleground state upon the eruption of organizing from conservative women, including St. Louis's force-of-nature activist, Phyllis Schlafly.

In 1970, the IBT—not known for [its] advocacy of "women's issues," as Deslippe points out—joined a small group of unions that spoke in favor of the amendment in advance of the AFL-CIO, which continued its opposition to the measure until October 1973. This somewhat shaky claim refers to a statement in support of the ERA submitted by Jimmy Hoffa to the 1970 Senate Equal Rights Hearings (Deslippe, 2000, 141).[40] The IBT does not seem to have advanced this endorsement as a resolution in its national conferences, and its official publication, the *International Teamster*, ignored the issue throughout the 1970s.[41] Local 688, however, took up the fight.

The ERA was a controversial one for labor because for decades, unions had been bedrock supporters of sex-based protective legislation for wage-earners. They linked women workers' health to such restrictions as limitations on hours and job weight-limits. Multiple factors converged to displace this historic positioning. Over the late 1960s, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission initiated judicial actions striking down sex-based protective legislation as a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and grassroots agitation within the unions pushed against the laws as a barrier to women's advancement in the workplace (Cobble, 2004, 190, Deslippe, 1996, 156). Deslippe asserts that while the AFL-CIO "did not speak for unions" in its ongoing opposition to the ERA, "the federation's position on legislation generally reflected that of the labor movement." (Deslippe, 2000, 136). In such fashion, the IBT, expelled for corruption from the AFL-CIO in 1957, momentarily outflanked the labor alliance in its support of liberal feminist agendas that emphasized equal rights.

Much of the publicity surrounding Local 688's endorsement of the ERA spoke to the philosophical issues of women's equality that inspired a panoply of non-labor liberal feminist groups to rally behind the amendment.[42] As Donna Steininger testified before the Missouri legislature, the ERA would "bring women into the mainstream of American Society and out of the shadows."[43] A 1972 City Wide Shop Conference resolution promised that the ERA would "provide us all with the opportunity to share in rights, responsibilities, and rewards of our society without legal restrictions based on sex." This statement enumerated the impact of the application of the ERA to legal distinctions such as age at marriage, child custody and divorce laws, and social security benefits.[44]

[40] See also Laurie Johnston, "Women Observe Their Franchise" *New York Times*, Aug. 27, 1971, 30.
[41] See *The International Teamster*, 1968–1982.
[42] Marjorie J. Spruill names these liberal politicos the "feminist establishment." *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), chap. 2.
[43] Donna Steininger, typed testimony, [Feb. 1973] Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Gibbons Collection.
[44] *Report of the Resolutions Committee to the 23rd City Wide Shop Conference of Teamsters Local 688*, Sep. 24, 1972, [14], Box 43, Gibbons Collection.

Still, even as it forged its alliance with feminists outside of the labor movement, Local 688 called attention to the ERA as a solution to workplace inequality as well as a path to social equity for the working class. It put action behind its resolution. In early 1973, the local sent a twenty-two-person lobbying delegation, with five members who provided testimony, to a General Assembly hearing for Missouri's ratification vote. Testimony highlighted that the union local as a whole endorsed the ERA. It also lent the voices of working-class women and men to debates over the amendment. From both angles, Local 688 attempted to disabuse myths that were shaping the ERA fight as Schlafly and her STOP-ERA forces launched their aggressive campaign to halt the ratification drive, initially seen as an easy victory. This was rooted, according to Kirsten Swinth, in an economic commitment to the increasingly obsolete male-breadwinner model of wage-work. While anti-ERA forces centered their struggle on protecting the "'endangered' housewife," 688 representatives staked their claim in support of the amendment by highlighting men as supporters of women's wage-work and by deploying the testimony of working-class women who sought to break out of the limitations of "female economic dependence." (Swinth, 2024, 736).

At the hearing, Mike Ryan, director of 688's Community and Political Department, reported on the pro-ratification resolution adopted during the City Wide Shop Conference by calling attention to the demographics of that representative body of members, noting that 75 percent of the conference delegates were men.[45] Joe Randazzo, a rank-and-file member who was also a committeeman in suburban St. Louis County, underscored this strategy of union men as interested parties in the ERA. He explained his position in terms of the problems he saw with how many women in his community had been "the victims of sex discrimination in their jobs." He assured legislators that he was "not a supporter of all the causes of Women's Liberation [and] not a radical," identifying his solidarity with his status as a community leader and worker rather than as a leftist or political activist.[46] While ERA opponents attempted to paint ratification supporters as radical women who would upend gender norms, Ryan's and Randazzo's testimonials showcased working-class men as moderates who were supportive of women's equality claims.

The remainder of the testimony was provided by women who endorsed the ERA as a working women's issue and who also spoke out against the alarmist claims being aired by opponents of the ERA. They pushed back against perceptions that labor was hostile to the ERA, and they added personal accounts which emphasized how economic inequality and uneven burdens of the domestic sphere affected working women. Steininger laid blame for the widening gender wage gap on "government action in maintaining discriminatory laws and in having discriminatory practices in employment and education."[47] She also pointed to the ERA as a solution to unjust sexual assault laws, which recognized only women as victims.

Steininger's union colleagues further highlighted the centrality of divorce to working women's interest in ratifying the ERA, arguing, according to Swinth (2024, 736) that the measure would "enable better economic security for divorcing women". Rose Roberts offered her story of being divorced and responsible for three children to explain her distinctive perspective on "the inequities of our society" as she provided statistical accounts of the gender pay gap, the irrelevancy of protective legislation, and insufficiencies of support from men in divorce cases The remedies, she

[45] Mike Ryan, typed testimony.
[46] Joe Randazzo, typed testimony, [Feb. 1973], Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Gibbons Collection.
[47] Steininger, typed testimony.

argued, would be provided by the ERA.[48] Wilma Woodside likewise spoke to the burdens borne by divorced women as she pointed out the ways in which "the cost of living is not bracketed by sex"; not all women had the privilege of being taken care of by a man. For them, pay inequalities meant considerable economic hardship. "Rents are not lowered because there's no man in the household," she underscored.[49]

The women's remarks addressed wedge issues raised by ERA opponents, such as child support and sex crimes at the same time that they deployed the identity politics and economic priorities of working-class women. The testimony was to no avail as the state senate voted to kill the amendment.[50] Undaunted, the local affiliated itself with St. Louis's August 25, 1973, ERA march. Coordinated with other national rallies on the anniversary date of the women's suffrage victory, the demonstration heard from 688's Rose Roberts, as well as US Representative Martha Griffiths (D-MI).[51] With the publication of the city's two daily newspapers suspended due to a strike, the event suffered from a lack of reportage, Still, the socialist newsletter *The Militant* reported that it was the city's largest women's demonstration "for decades," with 350 marchers and hundreds more lining the route. Roberts rallied the crowd to recognize that "women are still the lowest paid members of the work force and that all women, including organized and unorganized workers and housewives, must unite to win their rights," bearing out Swinth's claim that feminist activists pursued "economic autonomy, whether through properly valued household labour and fairly compensated waged work, or by provision of adequate government benefits." [52]

Despite the Teamster effort to make the amendment a working people's issue, Missouri became one of the states where the ERA went down to defeat. During the decade, the state assembly would consider the ERA several more times, and only once—1975—would it pass the House of Representatives' vote, to be defeated by the Senate.[53] Local 688 did not muster a presence at subsequent lawmaking sessions, but in 1977, the Teamsters would lend their name to the continuing ERA fight by donating their office space to the Missouri Equal Rights Amendment Coalition. This gesture reciprocated for the coalition's participation in a successful effort to defeat right-to-work legislation in the state's 1978 general election.[54] Indicating the ongoing synergy between the feminist movement and organized labor, the Joint Council president explained: "'Leaders of the women's movement threw themselves into our fight and gave 110 percent to help us beat that onerous amendment."[55]

The Teamsters faced insurmountable odds attempting to advocate for abortion rights and the ERA in the face of an implacable state government. Working on the community scale, 688 was able to launch an initiative that had been an ongoing concern of the labor movement, the feminist movement, and their allies in government: day care centers. Day care had become a growing object

[48] Rose Roberts, typed testimony, [Feb. 1973] Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Gibbons Collection.
[49] Wilma Woodside, typed testimony, [Feb. 1973] Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Gibbons Collection.
[50] Mike Ryan to HJ Gibbons, "Equal Rights Amendment," memorandum, Feb. 9, 1973, Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Gibbons Collection.
[51] "Women Set ERA Rally," *Missouri Teamster*, Aug. 17, 1973.
[52] "Women March for ERA, Abortion Rights," *The Militant*, Sep. 7, 1973, 17.
[53] Missouri Equal Rights Amendment Coalition Records finding aid, 2, SHSMO.
[54] William C. Lhotka, "Right to Work Soundly Defeated," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Nov. 8, 1978, 1A.
[55] "Teamsters 'Committed to ERA,' Donate Office to Mo. Coalition," *St. Louis Labor Tribune*, Oct. 11, 1979 , box 2, folder 73, Missouri Equal Rights Amendment Coalition Records (S0437), SHSMO.

of interest to elected officials after becoming a demand of women activists of the 1960s. The issue was not new; it had been an area of policy mobilization since World War II brought the matter to the fore, but postwar changes in the workforce made the need particularly manifest (Cobble 2004, 133-34). As historian Deborah Dinner points out, women's participation in the workforce was on a steady increase, but "growth in maternal employment during the postwar decades had far outstripped the rise in women's overall workforce participation: The latter had doubled while the former had increased eightfold" (Dinner, 2010, 587). Between 1969 and 1970, Senator Walter Mondale (D-MN) and Rep. John Brademas (D-IN) lobbied for federal day care funding. Their efforts culminated in a Comprehensive Child Development Act that was passed by Congress in December 1971, only to be vetoed by Richard Nixon with a vehement rebuke that drew on anti-communism to explain his opposition (Dinner, 2010, 614-15, Cobble, 2004, 197).

Despite this bitter disappointment, day care did not drop off the agenda of its advocates, including representatives of business and industry who interpreted the lack of day care availability as a threat to worker availability and productivity. In this atmosphere, unions emerged as a potential source for solutions as providers and funders (Dinner, 2010, 603, Swinth, 2018,168-69). This was the impetus for conferences convened by the AFL-CIO, a major backer of the Comprehensive Child Development Act, across 1971 and 1972, such as that held in Chicago on "Labor's Stake in Child Care." This meeting highlighted a facility operated in the city by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers while calling attention to the shortage of day care availability as well as the need for women's activism in unions to make child care a priority.[56] Support for union-sponsored day care centers extended to the international work of the AFL-CIO, with a number of programs sponsored by the African-American Labor Council focusing on day care initiatives in African countries.[57]

In so doing, Local 688 was active in what Swinth termed "feminism's forgotten fight": labor's efforts to remake the balance of work and family life through cultural and policy change (Swinth, 2018, 3). It joined this struggle early in the 1970s, as it had tethered day care plans to its abortion resolution in the 1970 City Wide Shop Conference. The conference staked a union commitment to "assisting in the increase of day care centers, where children would be safe and well cared for as parents work."[58] This came about in recognition of an inequitable division of household labor. Harold Gibbons advanced the proposal as a demonstration project, and the facility took shape at 688's headquarters over late 1972.[59] Reportedly over 50 thousand dollars were spent to renovate the space, which, adjusted to inflation in 2025, adds up to over 375 thousand dollars.[60] Concerns about the financial investment emerged early on, even as the union forged on and a staff of two teachers and a director were hired.[61]

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[56] Carolyn Toll, "Union Women Tell Need for Day Care Programs," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 15, 1972, B6. See also "Day Care Center System Urged," *Missouri Teamster*, Jul. 16, 1971, n.p.

[57] See, for example, Patrick J. O'Farrell to Margaret Johnson, memorandum, Nov. 13, 1979; and "Planning Mission for a Labor Day Care Center Development Program," Feb. 26, 1979 in Patrick J. O'Farrell Files, Accession AR1990-0152-LBR, 1973–1982, Women's Programs, 1980s: Child Day Care Centers Pact, African American Labor Council records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland, College Park, MD.

[58] "Local 688 Resolves to Move Ahead," *Missouri Teamster*, Oct. 23, 1970, 5.

[59] "Child Care Center to Open in January," *Missouri Teamster*, Oct. 20, 1972, 12. Local 688 explored the possibilities for creating a second facility in a white working-class neighborhood in the city. See Community/Political Action Department Report, Jan. 1971–May 1971, Box 43, Gibbons Collection.

[60] Jake McCarthy, "The New Teamster Faces," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Nov. 28, 1973, 3A; Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI Inflation Calculator, https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl, accessed Dec. 15, 2025.

[61] America 2000 Board of Trustees meeting packet, Apr. 1973.

From the start, the venture was touted as a "St. Louis first: union-sponsored child care," and its beneficiaries were imagined as working-class families who could avail themselves of a newly accessible resource.[62] But efforts to leverage community resources, rather than those of the union, showed that the center could not be launched primarily as a Teamster project for its wage-earning families. The union called upon nearby Saint Louis University students and the retiree residents of a Teamster housing development as volunteers, and the effort cast a wide net in search of participants, particularly pursuing clientele who could utilize federal day care subsidies. Early newsletters suggest a facility that could have been operated by any day care provider, with reports of art projects, outings, and the hiring of staff members. The location, financial earmarks, and publicity afforded to the venture made the Teamster connection clear; the hiring of a male care provider testified to the active pursuit of gender equality.[63]

"According to chit chat," Donna Steininger asserts, "the short-lived Teamster day care facility was a big bust."[64] Steininger had no association with the project, but indeed the gossip suggests that the day care facility may have been launched without sufficient planning or buy-in from union members who might have used its services. The scope of the investment and the difficulty attracting clients created a financially precarious situation. While the Amalgamated Clothing Workers operated successful day care efforts in Chicago and Baltimore, they had a higher proportion of women members, who presumably utilized the facilities, than the Teamsters (Swinth, 2018, 17).[65] While supportive of the issue from its earliest years, it was not until 1979 that the national CLUW made a formal call for day care benefits in collective bargaining agreements; Local 688 may have simply been ahead of its time (Swinth, 2018, 174).

The day care center's fate was sealed when the venture launched at the same time that the IBT initiated the removal of Harold Gibbons from his union offices. Tensions between Gibbons and international president Frank Fitzsimmons had simmered for some time. Gibbons was a Hoffa loyalist, and Fitzsimmons had no intention of relinquishing his presidency to a rehabilitated Hoffa, who angled to return to his former position after the commutation of his prison sentence in 1971. Gibbons's refusal to endorse Richard Nixon in the 1972 election proved to be a final provocation for Fitzsimmons (Bussel, 2015, 173-74).

There were other instabilities in 688. Distance grew between the affiliations of the rank-and-file and the liberal visions of Gibbons and others empowered in the union hierarchy, including the agents and staff who helped put his politics into practice. Many Teamsters of Local 688 had joined the white-flight exodus from St. Louis city, connecting with a suburban politics of resentment against the type of reforms envisioned by the union leadership during this period (Bussel, 2015, 129, 163-64). Judging from the archival papers of Harold Gibbons or the news disseminated by *The Missouri Teamster* magazine, no other Teamster locals in the region expressed the political consciousness or left-liberal outlook of 688. In fact, Locals 600 and 682 participated in a June 1970

[62] "St. Louis First: Union-Sponsored Child Care," *Missouri Teamster*, Jan. 19, 1973, 7.
[63] "News from America 2000 Child Care Center," newsletters, Mar. 15 and Apr. 19, 1973, in America 2000 Board of Trustees Meeting Packet, Apr. 1973.
[64] Steininger reminiscences.
[65] Per the calculation of Deslippe, "The Female Membership in Labor Organizations with More than 250,000 Members" in 1978, the Amalgamed Clothing Workers were 66% female, while the IBT stood at 25%. *"Rights, Not Roses,"* 142.

pro-war "hard hat" parade in St. Louis, which became notorious for the violence that was directed at antiwar protestors along the parade route.[66] Moreover, an insurgency within 688 charged Gibbons with absenteeism, neglect of rank-and-file democracy, and personal enrichment from union funds.[67]

Broadly speaking, members' interest in what Robert Bussel names "total person unionism"—the notion that the union was responsible for motivating wage-workers to act as citizens and community activists—was on the wane (Bussel, 2015, 6-7, 123-25). Local 688 faced further challenges wrought by broader trends in organized labor. While public sector and service industry organizing grew over the 1970s, the historic sites of union power, which encompassed the jurisdictional terrain of the Teamsters, struggled amid deindustrialization, automation, and deregulation.[68] In the early 1970s, there were still instrumental forces in Local 688 driving its ambitious advocacy program and turning people out for such ventures as the women's conferences and lobbying delegations. Yet these forces were fragile and lacked staying power once Gibbons was no longer at the helm of the local and regional offices.

There was a house-of-cards effect when these pressures forced Gibbons to resign from his offices, save the international vice-presidency, where he was relegated to margins of involvement. Asserting that demand for day care was insufficient to operate the facility successfully, the new Secretary-Treasurer of 688 closed the venture less than a year after it opened.[69] Lon W. Smith explained the broad scope of subsequent changes: Gibbons's "successors scuttled many of his projects, closing Teamster day-care centers, dismantling his community stewards' programs, shutting down two neighborhood service centers….and failing to negotiate increases in employer contributions to the [health care facility], thus threatening its solvency" (Smith, 1993, 251). The feminist awakening quieted. While Steininger remained employed a staffer by 688, other women members who had been visible in the abortion, conference, and ERA initiatives disappeared from the available archival record. A few footnotes to the post-Gibbons years proved to be exceptions on matters of social advocacy. This included 688 members' continuing, if spotty, involvement with the CLUW and the donation of Teamster office space to the Missouri ERA Coalition. Such activity, however, had a much lower profile than earlier efforts.

With Local 688 activists' inability to advance the abortion and ERA fights in Missouri, as well as the failure of their day care center, one might cast the legacy of Teamster labor feminism as

[66] "Teamsters in Hard Hat Parade," *Missouri Teamster*, Jun. 19, 1970, 5; "Some Violence at March Backing War," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jun. 8, 1970, 1A. While letters to the editor in the *Missouri Teamster* praised Local 688 for its refusal to participate in the parade, the local AFL-CIO newspaper celebrated parade participants as "decent Americans [who] marched to show that patriotism is not corny and is not a dirty word," and it vehemently denounced antiwar demonstrators as "professional…agitators" and "stupid young people." "Over 40,000 March in Patriotic 'Hard Hats' Parade Last Sunday," *St. Louis Labor Tribune*, Jun. 12, 1970, 10.

[67] Jake McCarthy, "Gibbons Quits Teamster Post," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 24, 1973, 1A; Robert Wheling, "Key Incidents Are Cited in the Fall of Gibbons," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 25, 1973, 1C.

[68] 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), 23–25, 153. Notably, the IBT expanded its organizing efforts into the service, office, and technology industries in the 1970s, yet it faced the same struggles as other unions in mobilizing these difficult-to-organize sectors. See Spencer Hester, *I Am a Teamster*, 2, 62–63; "Teamster Women: Talented, Tenacious and Tough, They're Making the Union Better than Ever," *The International Teamster*, Jan. 1979, 12–14.

[69] Jake McCarthy, "The New Teamster Faces."

minimal. However, despite the tenuous nature of the Teamsters' involvement with feminist issues, there is a significance in this short-lived period of reform. First, it shows that the union had an influence in connecting a working-class feminism with mainstream liberal political developments in the late 1960s and early 1970s, belying perceptions that the Teamsters were solely a conservative, even reactionary, organization. St. Louis Local 688 demonstrated that there remained a place for innovation and left-leaning political involvement in the wider culture of organized labor, and that these places were created by women and men working in diverse settings, even in pockets of the IBT. Second, Local 688's advocacy and women's institution-building reveals the power and reach of liberal feminism in the early 1970s. This was not the radical feminism of the leftist theorists of the movement but instead a policy- and solidarity-oriented working women's feminism that reshaped the political scene of the decade, regardless of the fate of the Equal Rights Amendment. It was also a grassroots feminism, one that was influenced by the leadership structure of the union but one that depended upon on-the-ground energy of rank-and-file members who attended conferences, served on lobbying delegations, and assisted in the preparation of a day care facility. And notably, while women took the reins in crafting this alliance with the broader feminist movement, men in the union assumed pivotal supporting roles: they passed resolutions, authorized conferences, organized lobbying delegations, and committed themselves to the launch of a day care center that might have had a profound effect on empowering union parents, especially women, had the logistics not failed.

These conclusions speak to the innovative power of organized labor and the working-class appeal of feminist reform. Our contemporary moment may be one of despair, of even panic over the future of working people and of progressive politics. Local 688's determination to fight for a more equitable society in the early 1970s is a reminder that labor unions, working on the level of community as well as the shop and the state house, are a powerful source of resistance amid overwhelming odds. With drives such as the Starbucks and Amazon organizing campaigns, the twenty-first century brings new possibilities for labor as a working-class social movement vehicle. Looking back to the feminist awakening of the Teamsters Union Local 688 suggests both the potentialities and the impediments facing collective efforts for social change.

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