



BHC-MSS 0288

Guide to the Records of the Young Unionists Action League

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Descriptive Summary:

Creator: Young Unionists Action League

Title: Guide to the Records of the Young Unionists Action League

Dates: 1971-1973, undated

Quantity: 1 document box; 0.42 linear feet

Abstract: The League was a Connecticut organization comprised of union members and supporters under thirty years old. It sought to understand how problems affecting youth, within both the workplace and a broader social context, might be addressed by labor unions, and participated in labor-rights projects already underway, such as strikes and boycotts, election campaigns, and legislation lobbying. Included are newsletters, meeting minutes, policy statements, conference programs, and newspaper letters and articles, as well as a grant application, a survey form, and a term paper.

Language: English

Repository: Bridgeport History Center

Administrative History:

The Connecticut-based Youth Unionists Action League, or YUAL, was started in May 1971, following a series of conferences hosted by the University of Connecticut's Labor Education Center in cooperation with the Connecticut State Labor Council of the AFL-CIO and beginning in 1969. These meetings focused on problems encountered by union workers under thirty – or those “young in spirit” – whose education levels, demographic diversity, and number had begun to climb overall. The YUAL was designated as an official committee within the state AFL-CIO and funded in part by the organization. The group also received money from member dues; COPE, or the Committee on Political Education, an AFL-CIO division involved in elections; and a grant from the David Dubinsky Foundation, associated with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and over its lifetime from 1966 through 1976 seeking to underwrite “inventive and experimental” projects outside of typical union operation.

Responsible for initiating the League was a group of five unionists. Most evident in the collection are Lynn Zawacki, then a temporary employee of the United Steelworkers Union, and John Del Vecchio, a foundry worker and member of the USU. Tom Doyle, belonging to the International Laborers' Union, joined later and acted as a contact and in officer positions. Twenty-four years old when YUAL was founded, he was the eldest of the three.

By July 1973, the group's roster reached 96, with dozens more included on its mailing list. It boasted a high variety of professions and unions, both public and private – teachers, machinists,

pottery workers, and musicians, to name a few. Collective monthly meetings were originally held in the Steelworkers' Union Hall in Bridgeport, but then the League's regional chapters – Bridgeport, New Haven, Hartford, and others – turned to arranging their own.

The League's agenda concerned advancing labor education and legislation, eliminating sex and race discrimination affecting workplaces, organizing open shops, and eradicating unemployment. Members helped assemble and advertise union-run apprentice programs, participated in political races and policy lobbying, and backed strikes and boycotts.

A summary recounting the history of YUAL in detail and situating it in a larger context is available in an unpublished term paper in the collection's final folder.

Scope and content note:

In Activities of the Bridgeport Chapter, Meeting Minutes, and Newsletters folders, a major emphasis is placed on aiding strikers and enforcing boycotts. Targets included the Farah apparel manufacturer, Shell Oil, the Dow Company, Oneita Underwear, and agricultural corporations producing lettuce and grapes as they blocked unionization by the United Farm Workers. More locally, the League lent support to the strike carried out by 2,000 Steelworkers members at the silverware-producing International Silver Company plants located in Meriden; a Bridgeport bus-drivers' lock-out; and tense negotiations affecting both Local 1199 employees at the University of Bridgeport and first-contract terms for workers at the city's Dee-Vee Footwear Manufacturing Company, freshly organized by the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers. More social evening events were also held. For the bus-drivers, represented by the Bridgeport chapter of the Amalgamated Transit Union, YUAL members joined pickets and held a "Informal Special Program," an event collecting money and canned goods. It screened the 1964 film *The Inheritance*, a documentary about the progress made by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union since its inception in 1900, presented explanatory and inspirational addresses delivered by other AFL-CIO committee members, and exhorted Bridgeport unionists of all stripes to submit relevant complaints to Connecticut's then-governor, Thomas Meskill. A similar "Pro-Strike Meeting" was held in backing an International Machinist Workers strike taking place at the David-Standard plant in Pawtucket, Connecticut, manufacturing extrusion systems deployed in the construction of plastic and rubber goods.

YUAL also released policy statements and wrote letters to newspapers expressing support of OSHA, or the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which League members saw as under threat. Further letters criticized Governor Meskill's distribution of public money and expressed support for George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign.

The ultimately-failed Burke-Hartke Bill, which would have imposed taxes on the profits reaped by companies moving their production abroad and protected US workers from job loss by establishing import restrictions, served as a substantial focus for the group. Members testified in its favor when it underwent debate at Connecticut's state capitol, as well as distributed pamphlets explaining its principles. First proposed in 1971, it would be quashed in 1974. The YUAL agitated against corporations' "Multi-National" shifts more generally, composing a resolution submitted to the AFL-CIO George Meany. President Nixon's Pay Board generated League ire as well, given the legal and business elites manning its payroll and its rejection of limits that might be placed on prices and company earnings.

The “Conferences” folder includes the agenda of one arranged by the YUAL, titled “Tools for Social Change” and assembled at the University of Connecticut’s Labor Education Center in June 1972. It was estimated that there were sixty attendees, all of them under thirty years old. Speakers and panel participants represented a wide range of positions: they included the regional president of the International of Electrical Workers as the key speaker, joined by union bargainers, employees of AFL-CIO branches such as the policy-directive A. Randolph Institution and the politically-engaged COPE, and journalists. Topics included “Labor, Minorities, and Liberals” and “Getting Your Message Across.” Accounts of the conference, among other topics, are present in the “Publicity, news articles and letters to the editor.” A week after it was held, the *Bulletin*, a paper published by Workers’ League, relayed the successful move made by its affiliated Young Workers Liberation League, Young Socialists, and Puerto Rican Socialist Party in instigating a vote on whether a labor third party should be established. Despite having to face “one liberal Democrat after the next... hold[ing] together the old illusion of the Democrats as friends of labor” and outwit “incredible bureaucratic manipulation,” the majority of attendees sanctioned the proposal.

YUAL also helped promote the Bridgeport Recruitment Training Program – initially the Joint Apprenticeship Program – begun by the city’s chapter of Workers Defense League, a national organization emerging from socialist-group background in the 1930s and dedicated to protecting workers’ and civil rights. The project consisted of holding recruitment talks, offering exam tutoring, and clarifying what the jobs – including carpenters, painters, ironworkers, and drafters – would entail. The committee in charge was comprised of six to eight members, half unionists and half management personnel.

A survey composed for distribution to YUAL members inquired information about their demographics and family background, political leanings (ranging from “socialist” to “conservative Republicans”), satisfactions and frustrations with union representation, and beliefs as to whether unions might engage with social and political struggles taking place outside of the shopfloor and affecting youth in particular.

The Membership Lists folder includes an invitation flyer to an AFL-CIO meeting focused on “fighting against inflation and Unemployment,” with no specification of its year.

The David Dubisnky grant application lists the League’s accomplishments and emphasizes a need to expand its body and marshal “a widespread, responsive, enthusiastic membership.”

Arrangement notes:

Folders are arranged by topic.

Administrative information:

Provenance: Gift of Nancy Del Velcchio (ACC.#2014.07)

Preferred Citation:

Records of the Young Unionists Action League (BHC-MSS 0XXX), Bridgeport History Center, Bridgeport Public Library.

Names and Subject Tracings

Personal names

Meskill, Thomas J., 1928-2007
Vecchio, John del

Corporate names

Young Unionists Action League
Farah Incorporated
International Silver Company, Meriden, Conn.
American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
University of Connecticut. Continuing Education Services. Labor Education Center
Workers Defense League

Subject tracings

Boycotts--United States
Labor--Connecticut
Labor policy--United States--20th century
Labor unions--Organizing--United States
Strikes and lockouts--United States

Box 1

Series I

1. Activities of the Bridgeport chapter, undated
2. Committees, apprenticeship, undated
3. Committees, unemployment, undated
4. Conferences, Apr. 4, May 9, May 16, Jun. 10, 1972
5. David Dubinsky Foundation, fundraising, undated
6. Membership lists, Dec. 1972, Jul. 1973, Oct. 1973, undated **[MORE PRECISE DATES]**
7. Membership, survey, undated
8. Meeting notes, Nov. 18, Dec. 9, 1971, Mar. 18, 1973, undated
9. Newsletters, Dec. 1972 – Oct. 1973
10. Organizational charter-mission, undated
11. Publicity, Burke-Hartke program, Feb. 21, 1973
12. Publicity, news articles and letters to the editor, Nov. 18, 1971, Sept., Dec. 1971, Feb., Mar. 1972, undated
13. Publicity, press releases, Jan. 24, Apr. 11, May 26, Jul. 14, 1972
14. Term paper, "Young Workers – Young Trade Unionists," undated