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WCFL: The Voice of Labor and Its Role in Union Ownership of Broadcast Media

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Abstract

In the 1920s, the invention and introduction of the radio proved to be one of the most effective tools of communication ever developed. It was direct, personal, and extremely timely. Many business organizations, groups, as well as many individuals, found radio to be an important tool to advertise products, influence public opinion, and help gain political advantage. One interested group that considered radio an effective method of promoting its goals and agenda early on was American Labor. In one specific case, while radio had its acknowledged advantages, a significant debate raged between the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and its affiliated unions in Chicago as to the value of media ownership. To some, the city of Chicago and the Midwest was and is one of the strongest labor markets in the country. As a result, a power struggle for the best way to influence the citizens of the area was waged between the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) and the AFL. This is a study that acknowledges that debate and the outcome would have significant implications for labor in the Chicago market as well as for America for over a century.

Keywords: labor radio, American Federation of Labor, Chicago Federation of Labor, Broadcast media

Introduction

In the early years of the twentieth century, the interaction of ethnic and mass cultures helped to create a philosophy that influenced the American union structure. In many ways, it energized labor to emphasize industrial democracy, social justice, and mass media promotion that became the foundation of the New Deal coalition in the 1930s (Cohen, 1990). In an attempt to counter systematic media bias against unions, labor established an early foothold in the radio industry with the establishment of the radio station WCFL, sponsored by the Chicago Federation of Labor and the Socialists' lesser-known and weaker WEVD in New York City (Fones-Wolf, 2006). To overcome the fears of individuals such as Karl Marx, unions wished to counteract the fear of the dominant propertied classes, who would seek to control society's governing ideas and motives to justify inequities in wealth in the greater community (Nearing, 1922). Of all the attempts to enter the mass media radio broadcasting market, WCFL was the first, most successful, and prominent example of labor union ownership of a commercial radio station.

The use and ownership of a radio station or a network of stations was discussed as early as 1922 but was ultimately rejected by the AFL during its 1925 convention (AFL, 1925). The leadership of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) at the time wanted nothing to do with over-air broadcasting. According to the AFL, it was an endeavor not desired or to be pursued in any American market. AFL President William Green and others believed unions themselves were the best tool for securing a position of power, and they didn't need to subject themselves to the burden of media ownership and to broadcast censorship (Godfried, 1987). However, the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) thought better of the instrumentality of radio programming to promote its agenda and support its image with the public. Therefore, the Chicago labor group committed its resources to the founding of WCFL, which was one of the earliest radio stations in Chicago and in the United States.

Bringing the Labor Message to Radio Broadcasting

Under the leadership and insistence of CFL President John Fitzpatrick and Executive Secretary Edward Nockels, the CFL Executive Board in 1924 gave the CFL full authority to pursue the establishment of a radio broadcast station (Chicago Federation of Labor, 1931). The initial vision of Nockels was that WCFL would be a non-profit station supported by contributions from workers. It would awaken the slumbering giant of labor through the influence and education of the public mind to correct wrong impressions about labor. This goal would be achieved by having the power to directly get out the truth about labor and its progressive ideas to benefit the well-being of the nation (Cohen, 1990). From early on, WCFL became known as the "Voice of Labor" and was one of the last non-profit stations to go on the air during this period (Godfried, 1987). From its start on June 19, 1926, the Voice of Labor would exist until 1978 as a unique venture in labor broadcasting not seen in its form and accomplishments elsewhere. The station began using broadcast towers and antennas erected by CFL mechanics on the Navy Pier (known then as the Municipal Pier). Several years later, the station-built towers in Downers Grove with operations shifted there in 1932 (Chicago Federation of Labor, 2003). As early as 1926, WCFL broadcasting at AM 610 (eventually AM 1000) was a force and voice of labor in the economic and sociological landscape of Chicago. With the forceful will of

Edward Nockels, WCFL became the voice of labor for the Chicago Federation of Labor to support and represent the role of labor in the economic heartland of America's Midwest for over half a century. Over the decades, the station struggled to stay on the air because of tight budgets and lagging financial support (Godfried, 1987). To counteract some of its financial difficulties, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, WCFL tried a variety of programming ideas to get the word out about the value of labor in society. These efforts included launching the WCFL Radio Magazine in 1927 and entering into an agreement with the Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Movement of America in 1928 to provide a service to farmers, in addition to airing general commercials (Federation News, 1929). The station worked hard to survive the late 1920s and the difficult Depression-era 1930s by broadcasting a weekly program called "Junior Federation Club," which was a cooperative effort with the city's teachers' unions. In addition, other programming included classical music, vaudeville and live dance hall music, public affairs programming, and as an early pioneer of baseball broadcasting of both the Chicago Cubs and Chicago White Sox games (Godfried, 1978; Jorgenson, 1949). Beyond that, WCFL also was broadcasting special events such as the Tunney-Dempsey championship boxing match from Soldier Field in 1927 and trying new ideas, such as entering into an agreement to broadcast as part of the NBC Blue Network (Godfried, 1987; WCFL, 2010).

WCFL and the Federal Government's Efforts to Reform U.S. Broadcasting

Shortly after the development of radio and over-the-air broadcasting began, the radio broadcasting industry exploded on the scene in the 1920s. It appears that early license applications were not reviewed with sufficient attention, causing an overabundance of radio stations, which created very crowded airwaves. Among those many applications was WCFL, which was approved to broadcast at 610 kHz (Chicago Federation of Labor, 2003). Therefore, throughout the early years of broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s, WCFL, as well as many other radio stations, was faced with constant challenges from the United States Chamber of Commerce licensing authority known as the Federal Radio Commission (FRC). The FRC had a series of issues with WCFL as a broadcast station such as being a "station of special interest propaganda" and it determined that its license was deemed unconstitutional because of its labor-biased philosophy in a time of chaos during a glut of excessive applications not properly vetted when first considered for approval (Davis, 1928; FRC 1929). Eventually, the furor related to broadcasting oversight settled down, and WCFL, as well as many other stations, were able to survive the intense scrutiny of the time (Morgan, 1933).

The Voice of Labor and Beyond

Over the years, a persistent and major problem for the U.S. labor movement has been in effectively communicating its message to its members, interested parties and the general public. In order to deal with this reality organized labor tried a variety of methods to get across their message through traditional means such as general media coverage via newspapers, television, and commercial radio news broadcasts as well as internal means such as member newsletters and announcements. As an example, the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) published *New Majority* (later renamed the *Federation News*), a weekly newspaper that began in 1919 as well as establishing a labor new service that existed well into the 1920s (Godfried, 1987). In

attempts to be even more progressive, the CFL resorted to the latest technology available to get the message out whether it be the development of radio broadcasting in the 1920s or through today's methods of social media. When it comes to the early use of radio, there is no doubt that WCFL in Chicago was the prime example of not only depending on sponsored radio broadcasting to get its message out but also actually owning and operating its radio station for over fifty years. Because of the general belief by labor that media would only find labor issues to be minor and incidental along with a hostility toward unions who would be a threat to organize media sources, some unions found the best way to address this reality was through direct broadcast media ownership (McChesney, 1992).

Throughout the 1930s WCFL lived up to being the "Voice of Labor" by continuing to provide supportive coverage of labor organizing efforts related to the campaign to organize packers in 1933 and an effort related to steelworkers in 1934 (Newell, 1961). However, it was increasingly evident that the station was evolving into a conservative operation not unlike its capitalist rivals in competing for important advertising dollars and as a result, the station did finally show a profit in 1940 (Jorgenson, 1949). The shifting away from predominant labor programming was becoming abundantly clear with the death of Nockels in 1937 as WCFL seemingly was abandoning its unique role in broadcasting to becoming more of a central and dominant part of Chicago and U.S. working-class culture (Cohen, 1990). Over the next 30 years, WCFL would become a contradiction to its labor roots with minor acknowledgements of labor coverage, trade union, and community service coverage. By the 1970s, WCFL fell victim to the same forces that were plaguing the labor movement in terms of a clear labor message and the interest and support of the public. This resulted in the station programming more commercially oriented entertainment as a leading rock music station to promote itself as "Big 10 Super CFL" to compete with cross-town rival station WLS, Radio 89 (Kunichoff, 2017; Lenehen, 1974). After years of struggle and a lack of financial success, the once great station of labor communication was described as Chicago's "sewer of news and public affairs" in 1976 which led the Chicago Federation of Labor to sell the failing station in 1978 (Deeb, 1976). Over the next nine years, ownership of WCFL changed along with trying various programming formats such as talk, adult music, and religious formats until 1987, when it ceased operations entirely and was sold again. After the sale the call letters of the station were changed to WLUP and then in 1993 to the current WMVP to reflect its programming emphasis on sports as an ESPN/Disney affiliated station for a time (Feder, 1998). The station is now under the current ownership and operation of Good Karma Brands (Feder, 2019).

Besides WCFL and WEVD, there were numerous attempts and various forms of radio broadcast formats, such as Seattle's CIO radio, that were used to promote the cause of labor and its associated unions (Baunach, 2011). The leaders and supporters of these stations had hoped that they could use these outlets to influence and create a new social order through education, organizing, and even entertaining the community to acknowledge and understand the role of unions in greater society (Godfried, 2001). Some referred to it as a "movement culture" to advocate for and enhance class identity and social cohesiveness (Denning, 1998). Overall, these somewhat heroic and visionary efforts were viewed as noble attempts to support and further the ideals of the role of labor and unions in society. Unfortunately, with their demise

over the years, it now just seems to be a little-remembered effort of a bygone era.

Conclusion and Recent Labor Promotion

WCFL was a fifty-year experiment based on the idea that labor could help enhance its image and power through broadcast media. While it was the first to do so, WCFL introduced the idea that labor had alternative ways to communicate its message. Although its existence and purpose were better known and understood in the early years, this creation of the CFL as part of the American Federation of Labor continued to be an active part of everyday life in Chicago for decades. Its origins in labor power and influence slowly became a faded backdrop subject to the many attempts to become commercially successful in the field of media broadcasting. Looking back along the way it is clear that it lost its focus and energy to continue as a voice of labor as it fell victim to the forces of the market to try to stay relevant and engaged, and financially viable. The ultimate irony seems to be that, contrary to William Nockel's vision to be a beacon and a (the) voice of labor, in the rare occasion these days that anyone thinks about the station it is because of its popularity in its rock programming in the 1970s and not because of its initial purpose to promote the American labor movement in Chicago and the Midwest.

For a significant part of fifty years, and especially since the 1960s, many listeners of WCFL who grew up in the Midwest and had no idea that one of most popular rock radio stations was actually a unique media source of labor influence even though much of its existence since the mid-twentieth century was a period of rich labor history which had a major impact in the American economic system. As a force in AM broadcast media, many listeners we're basically unaware of its roots and early beginnings. Other than identifying itself as the "Voice of Labor" in its station identifications and call letter jingles, it was better known as a contemporary radio station competing in a strong market fighting for young adult listeners more interested in rock and roll than supporting any kind of labor ideology.

Recent attempts to convey the labor message via radio programming is even more of a struggle to be heard and survive as many are dying on the vine and the future of labor and progressive radio is bleak at best (Weinger, 2014). The decline of radio and traditional labor promotion has given way to other means. Despite the resurgence of labor power in recent years as seen from some impactful strikes and several successful organizing campaigns such as at Amazon and Starbucks, a great deal of labor promotion is now achieved using virtual union organizing and through the utilization of social media and digital communication (Orechwa, 2021). Just as interesting, many employers are now using social media to counteract the effects of unionization and through attempts of actual union busting campaigns (Green, 2022). With recent technical developments and the explosion of available information related to all topics, it only seems to make sense that labor-related promotion has moved to the digital platform. It was well documented that about 80 percent of each of the groups of people such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z use social media at least one time per day (Choudhury, 2021). Regardless of the type of media, be it radio or social media, there is a real felt need to continue to get out the word on behalf of labor to counteract the push of anti-labor sentiment at the federal and the state levels over the

years.

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Appendix