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Rhode Island History

THE JOURNAL OF THE RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

FALL 2021 • VOLUME 79 • NUMBER 1



African American-Led Worker Solidarity in World War II Providence: The Story of Boilermakers Local 308

ON AUGUST 3, 1943, an African American man named George Schmoke walked into the National Urban League offices on Broadway in New York City with a story to tell.¹ Schmoke worked as a laborer at the Walsh-Kaiser shipyard in Providence, Rhode Island, making ships for the United States Navy. He was the lead man in his department, tasked by his co-workers with trying to get help for the African American shipyard workers. Schmoke told the head of the Urban League's Industrial Relations Department, Julius Thomas, that the workers were represented by Local 308 of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders, Blacksmiths, Forgers and Helpers (IBB), but because they were people of color, they were not granted full membership in the local union.² Instead, the IBB was trying to force the African American boilermakers into an auxiliary union without equal union rights.

The story of Boilermakers Local 308 is one of rank-and-file workers, led by individuals of color, fighting injustice on the World War II home front while they were building ships to fight fascism. To date, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to this episode in Rhode Island labor history, and what does exist virtually excludes the role everyday workers played in the fight against discriminatory unionism in Providence. Excluding the voices of these rank-and-file activists relegates the story of Local 308 to a mere footnote in the established historiography of the struggle for civil rights in the World War II era. The struggle in Local 308 was crucial in the eventual smashing of auxiliary

unionism in this country, but ignoring the agency of the rank and file in this struggle can make the end of formal racial discrimination within the ranks of organized labor appear to be an evil simply fading away with time, or worse, the result of federal intervention. Instead, thanks to the heroic organizing work of the rank-and-file union members, both Black and White, formal racial discrimination was exposed as Jim Crow unionism and defeated on the shop floor.

Background

In early 1942, the United States Maritime Commission (USMC) designated an undeveloped Providence waterfront area called Field's Point as a United States Navy shipbuilding port. Initially, the Rheem Manufacturing company was awarded a \$26-million contract to build navy and merchant marine ships. Construction began in the spring of 1942 with the goal of having the first keel laid by the Fourth of July.³ Rheem, a company not familiar with shipbuilding, quickly ran into construction delays, which led the USMC to cancel its contract and turn over construction responsibilities to the more experienced shipbuilding firm of Walsh-Kaiser Shipbuilding.⁴ It was California-based Walsh-Kaiser's only East Coast operation during the war, and under its management, production got back on schedule.⁵

The Walsh-Kaiser yard at Field's Point was responsible for building three kinds of ships: Liberty ships, escort ships or frigates, and combat-loaded cargo ships⁶. After the yard opened, unions from both the



Aerial photograph of the Walsh-Kaiser shipyard, July 1, 1943. RIHS collection, RHIX37131.

Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) competed for the right to represent the workers, with the AFL unions eventually prevailing in a union election during the summer of 1942.⁷ On February 22, 1943, Walsh-Kaiser signed a collective bargaining agreement with the Metal Trades Department of the AFL, and by March 1943, 11,000 workers had been hired for the Field's Point location with the ultimate goal of employing 15,000–20,000 workers. Christopher Hopkins, president of the Providence Building Trades & Construction Council, told *The Providence Journal*, "As I understand the labor requirements of the shipyard, we will be able to supply men under all classifications from within our membership."⁸

The unions with members at Walsh-Kaiser represented a broad spectrum of the labor movement, with

at least thirteen local unions, including the Teamsters, Machinists, Laborers, Painters, and Office Employee local unions representing people at the shipyard, but it was the IBB representing the bulk of the people working in the yard.⁹ In addition to the card-carrying male members of local labor unions, at least 3,000 women and approximately 500 African American workers also were employed at the shipyard.¹⁰ Despite some initial standoffishness between the White and Black workers, once the union election between the AFL and CIO was settled, it was reported the White workers were comfortable accepting their African American brothers into the union movement.¹¹

The Providence Urban League was intimately involved with the hiring of minority workers at the Walsh-Kaiser shipyard. Providence Urban League Executive Secretary James Williams established

strong ties with the burgeoning wartime production companies in the Providence area and was even given access to the shipyard hiring shack to ensure minority workers got a shot at relatively lucrative production jobs.¹² Consistent with the Urban League's mission of "self-reliance" for people of color, Williams sought to prepare African American workers for the grueling manufacturing work by circulating a flyer titled "Making Good," giving African American workers advice on how to succeed in their new jobs.¹³

Trouble Starts

In July 1943, despite the Providence Urban League's involvement, reports started surfacing that African American workers were becoming victims of discrimination. Minority workers were being issued a different kind of union dues book (used to record membership payments) than White workers. Some African American workers were offered the role of work-gang foreman but only for crews of other Black workers. The Providence Urban League reported the offers were rejected "because of the fear of increased segregation and because it may mean the freezing of Negro workers in the unskilled and lower wage positions." Most troubling to Williams and others were the stories that the IBB was trying to establish an auxiliary local union for African American members, which the Providence Urban League referred to as a "Jim Crow labor organization."¹⁴

Williams had good cause to be concerned. Providence remained a segregated city in the years leading up to World War II. In 1930, only 5,500 African Amer-

ican's lived within the city limits, mostly confined to two neighborhoods, the West End and the lower East Side, and by 1940, Blacks constituted no more than 15 percent of any one city census tract. Even though official segregation was outlawed in public accommodations by ordinance in 1885, theater owners would sell only balcony tickets to African Americans. It was reported that in at least one local restaurant, the White staff would break the glasses used by Black patrons after the glasses had been collected from the tables rather than wash and reuse them.¹⁵

Discrimination also was an unfortunate fact of life in the labor movement. In the 1940s, at least fifteen AFL unions, mostly in the railroad industry, refused to admit African American members, while nine others restricted their membership to auxiliary unions.¹⁶ Across the country, when African American workers were hired into wartime shipyards, racist discrimination quickly appeared. In Newport News, Virginia, Blacks received only 50 percent of the wages of White workers, and in Tampa, Florida, the Ku Klux Klan visited workers' houses after African Americans protested working conditions.¹⁷ In the same summer of 1943, 300 African Americans were fired from the Kaiser shipyard in Portland and another 165 were fired in San Francisco.¹⁸ The official organ of the IBB, *The Boilermaker's Journal*, even ran a regular column called "Uncle Twiz Sez," offering advice in a racist, minstrel-show-like dialect.¹⁹ One government official was quoted as describing the IBB's discrimination as "not only a source of embarrassment to fairminded labor leaders and businessmen alike, but also a challenge to the authority and to the principles of democratic government."²⁰

In the Rhode Island labor movement, Blacks also were only a small percentage of unionized workers. Only one predominately African American union, Longshoremen's Local 1329, represented workers loading and unloading cargo ships in the Port of Providence. Founded in 1933, Local 1329 drew its membership from the Cape Verdean community in Providence's Fox Point neighborhood, and according to *A History of Rhode Island Working People*, its members performed work considered "undesirable" by the White working class.²¹

In response to the growing racism in government-sponsored workplaces, socialist union organizer A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened to march tens of thousands of African American workers to the White House if President Franklin Roosevelt didn't take action to curb discrimination in war-related production facilities.²² As a result of this radical threat, and because of similar organizing work Randolph and others led in Chicago, St. Louis, and New York in July 1941, FDR signed Executive Order 8802: Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense Industry. The order states that it is:

the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin, and I do hereby declare that it is the duty of employers and of labor organizations, in furtherance of said policy and of this order, to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin;²³

FDR went on to issue Executive Order 9346, establishing the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), which was intended to enforce the federal government's new policy of nondiscrimination.²⁴

In response to the reports of discrimination, Williams contacted the Wartime Manpower Commission with the US Employment Service to see if it could offer any assistance.²⁵ The agency told Williams, while sympathetic, it could only investigate the complaints if written affidavits were submitted formally by affected workers. It was around this time that Schmoke paid his visit to the national office of the Urban League in New York City. He clearly made an impression on Julius Thomas because Thomas's letter to Williams of August 4, 1943, is direct about what he thinks the Urban League and Williams must do. After telling Williams to expect a visit from Schmoke, he writes, "It is time for us to stop fooling around with this union relationship problem."²⁶

Schmoke was the just the person to help the Providence Urban League "stop fooling around." In addition to being a leader among his fellow workers, Schmoke was an activist within the African American community, serving as the secretary of the Colored American Club, a member organization of the NAACP, in his hometown of nearby Fall River, Massachusetts.²⁷ Born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1907, Schmoke graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in South Carolina and the Durham State Normal School in North Carolina. He eventually made his way north, becoming a teacher at the Mount Vernon School in Lincoln, Rhode Island.²⁸ He went to work at the shipyard in 1942 and emerged over the next year as

the key rank-and-file leader in the fight for equality at Walsh-Kaiser.

It is unclear when Williams and Schmoke first met, but shortly after getting word from the national offices, Williams sprang into action. On August 19, 1943, he wrote a letter about the segregation of African American workers into the auxiliary union to the US congressman for the 2nd Rhode Island District, John E. Fogarty. Fogarty responded to Williams on August 21, acknowledging Williams's letter and reporting that he had received a visit from an unnamed representative of the group of workers impacted by the discrimination at Walsh-Kaiser. Fogarty told Williams "that I would do everything I possibly could in this matter."²⁹ However, Williams would later report that Fogarty, like the other government officials he tried to work with, seemed "powerless" to do anything.³⁰

While Williams was vexed about the lack of response from government and agency officials, the IBB moved ahead with its plans to establish an auxiliary union for the African American workers at Field's Point. On orders from the IBB headquarters in Kansas City, in September 1943, Local 308 Business Agent John Maguire started distributing new membership cards to African American workers.³¹ After the AFL won the union election, all workers filled out the same "Application for Membership" form. Now, however, African American workers were told to fill out new pink cards, and, to make matters worse, they were told they would have to pay a reinstatement fee.³² Given the increasing pressure to segregate and the lack of support from government agencies, if the workers were going fight the discrimination in the

union, they would have to fight from within the local union.

Their first opportunity to confront the union was at a September 1943 Local 308 membership meeting. Schmoke took to the floor and asked pointed questions of the union leadership. He asked why African American workers were forced to wait an unreasonable amount of time for their union books and why, when they did get them, they were forced to pay a \$13 reinstatement fee despite the fact they hadn't received their membership books in the first place. He asked about the status of the auxiliary union and whether it did in fact exist. If it did, he asked, "Who formed it? Where was it formed? Who from this local voted for it?" The answer he received from an unnamed international representative of the IBB was simply that the Boilermakers convention of 1937 directed the union to create the auxiliary unions for African Americans.³³

This didn't satisfy the members of Local 308, White or Black, because at the same meeting, White boiler-maker Jack Norton made a motion to admit all workers into Local 308 regardless of their skin color, until such a time as the African American workers voted themselves to form an auxiliary union.³⁴ The motion passed unanimously with "a great deal of applause."³⁵ This interracial solidarity, in defiance of the IBB, was an important example of African Americans leading the way and their White union brothers following. Without Schmoke first challenging the imposition of the auxiliary, Norton would not have had cause to submit his motion for consideration.

After the September union meeting, Williams sent a letter to the African American workers commending

Local 308 for their efforts fighting against the auxiliary union.³⁶ Describing the action as "thoroughly democratic and American," he said to the workers, "You ought to take great pride in belonging to a Local that is willing to take such action, when it is known that the International Union feels otherwise about the matter." He exhorted the African American workers to attend union meetings, to "sell the idea" of blocking the auxiliary "to all the workers at the yard" and to "talk it up strong!"³⁷ In late October or early November, Williams met with Local 308 Italian-American President Americo "Joe" Petrini to talk about the auxiliary issue and was pleased to find him opposed to the creation of the Jim Crow union. Williams told Petrini that he intended to send a letter to all the African American boilermakers, asking them to support Petrini's reelection to local union president in upcoming elections, and that he was for a "strong #308, and with no unfair, un-American auxiliary" [emphasis in original].³⁸

Schmoke also continued to agitate against the Jim Crow auxiliary within the ranks of Local 308. At a November local union meeting, Schmoke stood for nomination to the IBB convention scheduled for January 1944, only to be told by International Representative William Buckley (who would later serve at the IBB general secretary treasurer) that as a member of the auxiliary, Schmoke was not eligible to be a candidate.³⁹ Schmoke later reported that Buckley "made it quite clear that because I was colored and a member of the auxiliary," he could not stand for election, despite being nominated from the floor.⁴⁰ Although his nomination was thwarted, Schmoke wrote a passionate letter to Williams that Williams in turn used as the foundation for his subsequent letter to the African American boilermakers

about the upcoming election. In his letter, Schmoke magnanimously wrote, "[R]ecent developments indicate that we should present our solid support, to ensure election of those men who were nominated for office in your union, at the last meeting of November 3. We are convinced that these men if elected will sincerely cooperate with the Urban League to preserve our status in the Union as full and equal members."⁴¹

True to his word, Williams produced an election letter he mailed to the African American workers for the local union election set for December 14.⁴² Williams retroactively received permission from the board of the Providence Urban League on December 6 to officially use Providence Urban League office supplies for the campaign, producing an "Appeal to Colored Shipyard workers."⁴³ Tying the fight for equality to the fight against fascism, he opened his letter by telling workers, "Our nation today is fighting for its very life. Whether the nation survives as a democracy, and as a land of full opportunity for all people, may be determined in some measure by what we do here in Providence next week." Ignoring the potential risk of being characterized as an outside agitator, he included in the mailing an election leaflet for the Petrini slate of candidates. He encouraged the workers to vote, writing "DO YOUR SHARE! Help make democracy real. Join the fight on the home front for fairness, justice and equality."⁴⁴

The Local 308 Election

Election day was December 14, 1943, and the atmosphere around the shipyard was intense. Williams

enlisted the support of John Lopez from the Providence NAACP to join him outside of the local union office in case there was any trouble.⁴⁵ African American members cast ballots throughout the day, but as voting ended, events became troublesome. International Representative Paul Hovey told the African American members that they were not allowed in the union hall for the ballot counting and that they would have to leave. The African American workers initially refused. With tensions running high, Williams and Lopez conferred with Petrini about what to do next. After being assured the local union had enough support to overturn the decision of the international representatives on hand, the African American boilermakers left the union hall and joined Williams and Lopez outside.⁴⁶

Sure enough, inside the union hall, after a debate, the White workers voted to overrule the international union officials and once again treat the African American workers as full members. Williams later reported that if the vote had been against full rights, he was concerned about “immediate civil disturbances.”⁴⁷ Despite the vote of the local union, the international union officials ordered all of the votes of African American union members to be marked with a “C” and segregated the ballots in a separate envelope and refused to count them. With about 2,700 votes counted and a reported 400 “C” ballots uncounted, the Petrini slate lost by 120 votes.⁴⁸

Devastated, Williams and Lopez immediately plotted their next move. Lopez contacted Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP legal department, who agreed to take the matter to court. He rushed to Providence to meet with Petrini and local NAACP attorney Joseph

LeCount. Statements were taken from four of the African American union members, including Schmoke, Gerald Hill, Allan Bonay, and Carleton Blunt, and a request for an emergency restraining order was filed in Superior Court on December 16. On December 17, 1943, Superior Court Judge Charles Walsh granted a temporary restraining order that stopped the IBB from destroying the contested ballots. Judge Walsh set a hearing date on the matter for January 3, 1944, giving both sides time to prepare their arguments.⁴⁹

The members of Local 308 met again, on December 29, to debate what to do with the contested ballots of their African American union brothers before the Superior Court hearing. Jack Norton, who was a candidate for financial secretary on the Petrini slate, submitted a resolution to the membership that called for “. . . all votes, considered as being under protest, but duly cast and accepted into the ballot boxes by all parties concerned, at the regular election for officers to preside over local 308, said election held on December 14, 1943, should be counted and credit for same given to the respective candidates.”⁵⁰ The motion passed, but the appeal of the Local 308 members was denied by International Representative Buckley, setting the stage for a court battle in the new year.

Court Battle

On January 3, 1944, the workers and the union appeared before Judge Alexander Churchill in Providence Superior Court. Both White and African American workers testified on behalf of the complaint, which was now amended from demanding the court order a new elec-

tion to asking the court to declare African American boilermakers “entitled to vote at all elections without a designation or restriction as to or because of race, creed or color.”⁵¹ Jack Norton alerted the court to the December 29 union meeting where once again the local union members voted for equal rights for their African American brothers. Norton also testified that Samuel Parillo, John Jeremiah, and Louis Werner, members of the local union election committee, were willing to count all the ballots but were barred from doing so by Buckley. According to Norton, even though the wishes of the local union members were clear, Buckley told the workers he needed to seek instructions from the IBB about what to do with the contested ballots.⁵² On the issue of the contested ballots themselves, Carleton Blunt was asked by Attorney Aram Arabian, representing Buckley, about what he knew about the “C” appearing on the ballots. “Nobody ever told you what that ‘C’ stood for,” Arabian said. Blunt, true to his name, replied, “I had a pretty good idea.”⁵³

When Buckley took the stand, he testified that he did not order the ballots of black workers to be marked with a “C” and that his only instructions were only members of the official union, not the auxiliary, could vote. When pressed by Marshall, Buckley offered that if the candidates on the two competing slates had agreed to count the “C” ballots, he would have agreed to do so. Pressed again by Marshall about whether he had called the meeting of the local union on December 29 to consider the question of the ballots, Buckley parried and told Marshall, “. . . I called the meeting to attempt to straighten out a muddled situation. No resolution was requested by me.” Marshall, keeping the

pressure on Buckley, asked, “Wasn’t a resolution put to the body as result of your statement why you had called the meeting and didn’t the lodge recommend that these ballots be counted?” Buckley responded, “That was their recommendation to me.”⁵⁴

Buckley was saved from further damage to his credibility by an objection raised by local union attorney Harold Arcaro and sustained by Churchill, thus stymying Marshall’s advance. Undaunted, Marshall changed course, asking Buckley that if a member of the Providence auxiliary union didn’t like the supervising officers from the White local, what could these workers do about it. Buckley answered that they could attend the IBB convention and make a protest. Marshall pounced. “But didn’t you say yesterday that auxiliary members were not eligible to attend conventions of the International Brotherhood?” he asked. “That’s right,” Buckley answered, “but their friends could go.”⁵⁵

Churchill obviously was not impressed with Buckley’s testimony because on January 13 he issued a ruling in favor of the African American workers. In a key victory for Schmoke and the others, Churchill’s decisive ruling said:

I rule that the conduct at the election of December 14, 1943 and that the by-laws and constitution of the so-called ‘auxiliary,’ insofar as they discriminate between members of the colored race, Negroes, and persons of all other races, as compared with the by-laws and constitution of the Brotherhood, are illegal and void.

Churchill added:

I rule that colored members of the so-called auxiliary are members of the so-called auxiliary members [sic] of Local 308, and that their dues ought to be kept in Rhode Island.⁵⁶

Marshall and the others were ecstatic about Churchill's "epoch-making decision."⁵⁷ However, Churchill's ruling was only on the request for a temporary restraining order, not a permanent injunction. Another hearing would be needed to decide the matter on a permanent basis, so another trial was scheduled for later in the spring.

Getting Organized

The workers faced an immediate problem after the Churchill hearings: how to fund the continued fight. It appears while the Providence Urban League and Providence NAACP were willing to offer what support they could in the form of office supplies and moral support, financing the campaign would fall to the workers themselves. This wouldn't be easy, given the wartime needs of families. According to attorney LeCount, the transcripts alone from the two days of hearings before Churchill cost \$350, a staggering amount considering the workers at Field's Point made only eighty-eight cents per hour as laborers and a dollar twenty per hour as boilermakers.⁵⁸ LeCount also made it clear that while he was supportive of the cause of the Local 308 members, he would need to get paid to continue representing them in court.⁵⁹

In response to the workers' financial needs, Schmoke and his comrades formed the Allied Victory Commit-

tee. Schmoke served as chairperson, Lopez from the NAACP was treasurer, Williams acted as publicity director, and at least 25 other members of Local 308 were committee members.⁶⁰ Schmoke took on both fundraising responsibilities as well as drafting communication material for Williams. In a leaflet titled *A Statement from the Allied Victory Committee*, Schmoke laid out the philosophy of the organization.⁶¹ "Unionism," he wrote, "has become such a vital factor in our daily lives that no one is immune to it." But lest anyone think he and his comrades were looking to start a "civil war" within the labor movement, he made it clear that they were, in fact, fighting for the very principles labor organized around:

We have a profound belief in the future of organized labor, but that belief can only be sustained by the right to work and earn a living on an equal and impartial basis . . . Our contention is not against organized labor and its proclaimed principles. It is against a small and vanishing, but powerful and yet existing element of labor which is fighting a desperate and losing battle to maintain an anti-American barrier between white and colored workers. They would prevent a real alliance of the democratic elements of American Labor if they could.⁶²

It is uncertain from the record to what extent, if any, the Allied Victory Committee was inspired by the national Double V campaign. Soon after the war began, African American newspapers, led by *The Pittsburgh Courier*, began talking about the war effort happening on two fronts. The first was the war in Europe

against the fascists, but the second was the war at home against segregation and a "Jim Crow military." Despite the lack of official linkages, the rhetoric used by the Allied Victory Committee is similar and innovative, applying the same argument to the civilian war-effort workforce, not just to African American military service people.⁶³

White and African American workers contributed what they could to the fundraising effort.⁶⁴ Williams reached out to local clergy about holding fundraising events at their churches, and Schmoke began a letter-writing campaign.⁶⁵ While everyone to whom he wrote is not known, it is known that he contacted Vera and Albert List, whom he described to Williams as former employers who also just happened to be wealthy philanthropists.⁶⁶ The impassioned letter is written with intimacy, indicating a closeness to the family of more than just an employer/employee relationship. Schmoke tells the Lists, "My association with you permits me to know that whenever you feel that a matter or cause is of a sincere and worthwhile nature, you have not in the past hesitated to give what ever help you could reasonably afford, and which you felt was compatible with the circumstances as you see them." Mrs. List sent him a check for ten dollars.⁶⁷

Schmoke also sent a fundraiser letter to Marshall Field, newspaper publisher and heir to a department store fortune. It is unclear what prompted Schmoke to write to Field, nor do we have his letter, but in May, on the eve of the trial's next phase, Schmoke got a response from John P. Lewis, managing editor of the New York daily newspaper *PM*, which Field funded. Lewis told Schmoke, "We believe the issues which

your group has raised are most important and that the welfare of all union men will be advanced if the case can be pushed through to a proper decision." Enclosed with Lewis's letter was a check for \$350, the entire amount needed to pay for the transcripts.⁶⁸

In mid-May 1943, the trial on the final status of the auxiliary union reconvened in Providence Superior Court. This time Judge Patrick Curran served as the presiding justice. The lawyers for the IBB attempted to discredit the plaintiffs by calling the judge's attention to the financial backing they were getting from "outside groups" such as the Providence Urban League, NAACP, and the Allied Victory Committee.⁶⁹ Williams was singled out as an "agitator" engaged in "inflammatory" activities undermining the war effort. The IBB lawyers moved to compel the lawyers for the African American workers to ask the court to decide if they wanted the judge to decide on the matter of the election results from December 14 or on the larger issue of whether African American workers were to be equal members of the union.⁷⁰ Curran seemed keenly aware of the implications of a potential ruling, musing out loud to the court that the case was the most important that had come before him.⁷¹ He denied the IBB lawyers' motions, and the trial proceeded.

Many of the same witnesses covered similar territory as in their previous testimony, but some key new insights were added into the record. Union steward for Local 308 John Geremia, another member of the election committee, testified that Paul Hovey told him, "Johnny, these colored fellows cannot vote in the election."⁷² African American boilermaker Gerald Hill told the court that although his ballot was marked with

a “C,” he was able to rub off the marking before he slipped the paper into the ballot box.⁷³ Schmoke testified that when he joined Local 308 in September 1942, he filled out a “White” application that was accepted without question.⁷⁴ Anna Cavallaro, an office staff person for Local 308, contradicted Schmoke, telling the court that each of the African American workers named in the complaint had indeed filled out auxiliary membership cards. Charles Lawrence, the corresponding secretary for Local 308, read the letter he received from the International Union in response to the questions Schmoke had raised at the September 1943 union meeting.⁷⁵ This letter told the local union that the bylaws adopted by the international convention “compelled Negroes to join auxiliaries rather than full union lodges.”⁷⁶

Buckley returned to the stand, this time telling the court the African American workers could have formed an auxiliary union but declined the opportunity. He admitted to denying the African American workers access to the December 29, 1943, union meeting but noted that the “C” on the ballots simply stood for “contested.” He added that at the January 1944 convention of the IBB, rules concerning African Americans were “liberalized” in order for three African American members to attend. Additionally, he told the court the insurance company providing member benefits would no longer charge Black workers higher premiums.⁷⁷

In an interesting twist, one that until now has not been part of the story of Local 308, Pauline LeBlanc, an office clerk hired by Local 308 to work for the union, testified that it was she who marked the

disputed ballots with a “C.” While she was unable to remember who it was that told her to mark the ballots, she counted only 73 “C” ballots after the election.⁷⁸ This bombshell piece of testimony raises all sorts of complications for the complainants. Recalling that the original claim by the workers was that as many as 400 African American workers had their ballots segregated and that the Petrini slate only lost by 120 votes, if LeBlanc was correct, even if all the “C” ballots were votes for Petrini, his slate still would have lost the election.

What impact LeBlanc’s testimony had on the case goes unremarked on in the source material available, but very shortly thereafter, the hearing concluded without a decision. The attorneys for both sides entered into a consent decree that called for part of the dues of African American boilermakers to be transmitted to the union headquarters in Kansas City and for Black workers to get the same insurance coverage as their White counterparts. Churchill’s ruling on full equality for Black union members stayed in effect. Curran told both sides they had a week to submit briefs, at which time he would take the case under advisement pending a final decision.⁷⁹

A final decision never came. While the case before Curran was unfolding, similar cases in California were being heard and eventually decided against the Boilermaker’s Jim Crow auxiliary scheme. Also, as D-Day came and went and the Allied victory in the war seemed inevitable, shipbuilding operations started to scale down. Within months of the Curran hearing, rumors of layoffs, initially denied by the company, began swirling in the shipyard, and in July the follow-

ing year, the Wartime Commission formally announced the Field’s Point location would be decommissioned. Local 308 was dissolved in October 1946, and the case before Curran was formally dismissed on February 3, 1956.⁸⁰

Post-Trial Drama

The end of the trial was not the end of the drama involving the members of Local 308. In September 1945, Petrini was still fighting with the IBB about the status of Local 308’s autonomy. On September 6, at a local meeting, Petrini questioned Hovey about the status of dues money collected by the local and then transferred from the local treasury to the international headquarters in Kansas City. In response, Hovey physically attacked Petrini, punching him in the eye and bloodying his face.⁸¹ Petrini filed charges, but the investigation went nowhere as witnesses were reluctant to talk to the police. Petrini filed a \$5,000 suit against Hovey for damages, but the record is unclear if the suit ever proceeded because Hovey was later arrested on an unrelated gun charge in Boston and sentenced to six months in the House of Corrections. The judge in the case remarked during sentencing that “defendants with guns without authority are potential murderers.”⁸²

After Petrini was assaulted, the Allied Victory Committee made one last effort to organize its members to get the benefits they were promised and to try to recover some of their dues payments. Schmoke and Allan Bonay, along with Williams and Lopez, placed an ad in *The Providence Chronicle*, a local Afri-

can American newspaper, calling for a meeting of former shipyard workers to talk about their continued efforts.⁸³ The archive material of the Providence Urban League ends there, without any acknowledgment of the success or failure of these efforts.

Even as Local 308 faded away, Schmoke continued his activism. He was a participant on a panel with IBB Vice President William Calvin on the subject of “The Post War Industrial Outlook for Negroes” during an October 1944 symposium at Howard University in Washington, DC. He remained steadfast in his opposition to Jim Crow unionism, demanding Calvin explain why the IBB still refused to allow Black boilermakers equal status in the union. He defiantly told the assembled academics and dignitaries:

Any serious look into the coming post-war era poses some very provocative questions for the colored American ship worker. The chief question concerns the continuance of the tacit agreements between management and certain elements of organized labor which by writ or ritual discriminate against colored mechanics and unskilled ship workers. While such practices are not general throughout the structure of organized labor, they are nevertheless used, and in many cases are condoned by management.⁸⁴

After the war, Schmoke moved on from the shipyard, taking a job at the Newport, Rhode Island, torpedo factory. He turned his activist energies more toward his Fall River home, staying active in Urban League and NAACP issues, even serving for six years on the local port authority board. He died in 1972 at the age of 65.⁸⁵

Conclusion

The seemingly quiet end to the Local 308 effort to end Jim Crow unionism raises more questions than it answers. For one, what was the actual status of the contested ballots? Were there as many as 400 of them as George Schmoke and his comrades alleged, or were there only 73 as Pauline LeBlanc testified to. Her assertion seems to have gone unchallenged, calling into question the claim that there were hundreds of contested ballots. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that racist officials from the IBB “lost,” “misplaced,” or outright stole another 300 ballots, but it is hard to imagine an attorney with the reputation of Thurgood Marshall not pressing this point if he thought there was even a hint of impropriety. But it is equally plausible that there were only 73 “C” ballots. After all, if there were more than 10,000 members of Local 308, and the election of December 14, 1943, had about a 30 percent turnout, is it really likely that nearly 100 percent of the Black members showed up to cast a vote, especially given the contested nature of the election? Perhaps they were more motivated than the 70 percent of their co-workers, but it would mark a dramatic voter turnout differential, and even with heroic get-out-the-vote efforts, seems improbable.

The question remains, why would Petrini lose the election? Why would the election even be that close? Unlike other places around the country, such as Portland, Oregon, where local union officials were decidedly against integration, and Bethlehem Steel’s Baltimore Shipyard, where White workers went out on a “race strike” rather than welcome Black workers into the ranks, Local 308 seemed committed to inte-

gration on principle.⁸⁶ It repeatedly passed resolutions of support for a single interracial union and was willing to stand up to enormous pressure from its international union to segregate into White and Black locals. The local leadership was willing to work with outside organizations such as the Providence Urban League and the NAACP to fight for what it saw was right, and White members were willing to follow the lead of their African American union brothers. However, in the end, the members voted for local officers who took the side of the international union in favor of Jim Crow unionism.

Despite the inconclusive results in Rhode Island, a similar court case was heard in 1944 in California, and there, the state supreme court decisively ruled against the IBB auxiliary system. As a result, the union abolished all of its auxiliary unions and by 1948 fully integrated its local unions.⁸⁷ Throughout the post war years, the AFL gradually improved its stance on race relations, and by 1964, AFL-CIO President George Meany stood side by side with Martin Luther King Jr. as President Lyndon Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

In 2006, the IBB published a history of the union titled *Grace Under Pressure*.⁸⁸ The story of Local 308 does not appear in the text, and according to a staff member in the union headquarters, records for the local are nonexistent.⁸⁹ The Judicial Records Center for the Rhode Island Judiciary in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, also reports that the court records from the 1944 Boilermaker case no longer exist in its archive.⁹⁰ The story of Local 308 could very well disappear into

the historical ether, relegated to footnotes in better studies of more important events. That would be a shame because, for a moment during one of this country’s most trying times, rank-and-file African

American workers led their White union brothers in a struggle for unity that yielded important and tangible benefits for the entire working class.

NOTES

1. Julius Thomas, letter to James Williams, New York: Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library, August 4, 1943.
2. Officially, the shop-level organizations for the IBB are referred to as “Lodges,” not “Locals.” In practice, the words are interchangeable. Most often in the archival material used for this paper, the shop-level organization is referred to as a “Local” but not exclusively. For the sake of consistency, I will use the designation of “Local” except when used in a direct quotation.
3. C. Roger Wallin, *Ships From Field’s Point: Providence RI 1942–1945* (Pittsburgh: Dorrance Publishing, 2017): 6.
4. Ibid, 8.
5. Tim Colton, “Walsh-Kaiser, Providence RI,” October 13, 2010, accessed October 1, 2017, <http://shipbuildinghistory.com/shipyards/emergencylarge/kwalsh.htm>.
6. Wallin, *Ships from Field’s Point*, 6–8.
7. School, Graduate, “The Howard University Studies in the Social Sciences: The Post-War Industrial Outlook for Negroes Papers and Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Conference of the Division of the Social Sciences.” Co-Sponsor: The A. Philip Randolph Fund October 18–20, 1944 (1945). Graduate School Publications. 5. http://dh.howard.edu/gs_pub/5. P.58 Hereafter, The Howard conference.
8. “AFL Able to Fill All Labor Needs at Walsh-Kaiser.” *The Providence Journal*, March 20, 1943.
9. Ibid. The local unions were Boilermakers Local 308, Machinists Local 1597, Carpenters Local 1192 and 94, Laborers Local 271, Painters Local 195, Teamsters Local 251, Plumbers Local 238,

- Electrical Workers Local 1327, Guards and Firemen Local 23515, Office Employees Local 23259, Hoisting Engineers Local 57-C, Glaziers Local 1333, Sign Painters Local 729, and Blacksmiths Local 643.
10. Wallin, *Ships from Field’s Point*, 5.
11. The Howard Conference, 55–56.
12. Richard F. Irving, *Toward Equal Opportunity: The Story of the Providence Urban League in the 1940s* (Master’s thesis, Brown University, 1974): 22.
13. James Williams, “Making Good: Twelve Points for Colored Workers in Industry and New War Jobs.” n.d., Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library. Williams’s “Making Good” flyer was warmly received by the Rhode Island business community, even drawing a letter of praise from Henry B. Sharpe, president of the Browne & Sharpe manufacturing company.
14. Unattributed, “Union Bias Reported at Shipyard,” Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library, July 7, 1943.
15. Norma LaSalle Daoust, “Building the Democratic Party: Black Voting in Providence in the 1930s,” *Rhode Island History*, vol. 44, no. 3 (1985): 81–88.
16. Thurgood Marshall, *Supreme Justice: Speeches and Writings*, ed. J. Clay Smith Jr. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003): 77.
17. Andrew E. Kersten, *Labor’s Home Front: The American Federation of Labor During World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2006): 79–81.

18. William H. Harris, “Federal Intervention in Union Discrimination: FEPC and West Coast Shipyards during World War II,” *Labor History*, 22:3 (1981): 325–347.

19. Kersten, *Labor’s Home Front*, 79.

20. Harris, “Federal Intervention in Union Discrimination,” 335–336.

21. Buhle, P., Molloy, S., & Sansbury, G. (Eds.) 1983. *A History of Rhode Island Working People*. Kingston, RI. Rhode Island Labor History Society.

22. Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 429.

23. Executive Order 8802 dated June 25, 1941, General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives. <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=72>.

24. Franklin D. Roosevelt: Executive Order 9346 Establishing a Committee on Fair Employment Practice, May 27, 1943. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/210091>.

25. Unattributed, “Union Bias Reported at Shipyard,” Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library, July 7, 1943.

26. Julius Thomas, letter to James Williams.

27. George Schmoke, handwritten letter to James Williams, n.d., Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

28. George Schmoke obituary, *The Fall River Herald* (Fall River, MA), February 1972.

29. Congressman John Fogarty letter to James Williams, August 21, 1943, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

30. Unattributed, “Timeline,” n.d., Urban League of Rhode Island, Providence College Library.

31. Unattributed, “Statement,” December 4, 1943, Urban League of Rhode Island, Providence College Library.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid. Irving names the IBB representative as Paul Hovey, and it is likely the case that it was him. However, the statement document he uses as a source does not in fact name Hovey.

34. On the issue of Norton’s race, while I point out above that Kersten misidentifies him as Black, the documents within the PUL archive clearly show that he was White. This includes the December 4, 1943 statement document and multiple handwritten statements in the Urban League of Rhode Island Collection identifying Norton as White.

35. Ibid.

36. James Williams, “Dear Friend Letter,” September 15, 1943, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

37. Ibid.

38. James Williams letter to Americo Petrini, November 4, 1943, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

39. “Negroes Press Injunction Plea.” *The Providence Journal* (Providence), May 16, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

40. Ibid.

41. George Schmoke letter to James Williams, November 9, 1943, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

42. James Williams, “An Appeal to Colored Shipyard Workers,” n.d., Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

43. Irving, *Towards Equal Opportunity*, 28.

44. James Williams, “An Appeal to Colored Shipyard Workers.”

45. Irving, *Towards Equal Opportunity*, 29.

46. Ibid, 29.

47. Ibid, 28–29.

48. Ibid, 29.

49. “Union Election Taken to Court.” *The Providence Journal* (Providence), December 17, 1943, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College.

50. John Norton, “Resolution,” December 29, 1943, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

51. “Union Election Protests Heard.” *The Providence Journal* (Providence, Rhode Island), January 4, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island, Providence College Library.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. “Buckley Denies Ordering Marks.” *The Providence Evening Bulletin* (Providence), January 6, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

55. Ibid.

56. Kersten, *Labor’s Home Front*, 97–98, and Marshall, *Supreme Justice*, 19–20.

57. Marshall, *Supreme Justice*, 19–20.

58. Collective bargaining agreement between the Walsh-Kaiser Company, Inc., and the Metal Trades Division of the American Federation of Labor, February 23, 1943, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

59. Joseph LeCount, letter to John Lopez, February 28, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

60. List of Allied Victory Committee Members, n.d., Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

61. George Schmoke, “Statement from Allied Victory Committee,” handwritten notes and unattributed newspaper clipping, n.d., Urban League of Rhode Island, Providence College Library.

62. Ibid.

63. Kimberley L. Phillips Boehm, *War! What Is It Good For?: Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from WWII to Iraq* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 24–25.

64. George Schmoke letter to Vera and Albert List, February 25, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island, Providence College Library.

65. James Williams, “Dear Reverend letter,” n.d., Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

66. Ibid.

67. George Schmoke handwritten letter to James Williams, March 1, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

68. John Lewis letter to George Schmoke, May 15, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

69. Irving, *Towards Equal Opportunity*, 32.

70. Ibid, 32.

71. “Pink Union Card Signed By Worker,” *The Providence Journal* (Providence), May 23, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

72. “Negro Ban Laid to Parent Union,” *The Providence Evening Bulletin* (Providence), May 29, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

73. “Negroes Protest Election Action,” *The Providence Evening Bulletin* (Providence), May 17, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

74. “Negroes Press Injunction Plea,” *The Providence Evening Bulletin* (Providence), May 16, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

75. “Final Summation Set In Next Week,” *The Providence Journal* (Providence), May 7, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

76. Ibid.

77. “Union Auxiliary Offered Negroes,” *The Providence Journal* (Providence), May 16, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

78. “Union Hits Race Case Testimony,” *The Providence Journal* (Providence), June 6, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

79. “Shipyard Negro Testimony Ended,” *The Providence Journal* (Providence), May 15, 1944, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

80. Kersten, *Labor's Home Front*, 98, and Irving, *Towards Equal Opportunity*, 26.

81. "Local President of Boilermakers Charges Assault," *The Providence Journal* (Providence), September 7, 1945, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

82. Unattributed newspaper clipping, "Paul Hovey, Unionist, Held," n.d., Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

83. "Attention! Former Shipyard Workers," *The Providence Chronicle* (Providence), September 15, 1945, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Library.

84. The Howard Conference, 55–62.

85. Schmoke obituary, February 1972.

86. Kersten, *Labor's Home Front*, 81–91, and Irving, *Towards Equal Opportunity*, 25.

87. Kersten, *Labor's Home Front*, 98.

88. International Brotherhood of Boilermakers Archives, *Grace Under Pressure: A History of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders, Blacksmiths, Forgers, and Helpers, AFL-CIO* (Kansas City: International Brotherhood of Boilermakers Archives, 2006).

89. Many thanks to Mallory Smith of the IBB in Kansas City for help with this project. According to Smith, the international union's retention policies make it likely the records of Local 308, if they were ever collected, were destroyed some time ago.

90. Phone call to Judicial Records Center on 10/30/17.

ANDREW POLTA

Disorderly House Keepers and the Struggle for Respectability in Early Nineteenth-Century Providence

IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY, the town of Providence seemed to be sliding into chaos. It saw two destructive riots in 1824 and 1831. Complaints of disorder, vice, and immorality deluged the town council, and attempts to stem the tide yielded only more complaints. However, with an assist from the local courts and a step-up in the enforcement of Rhode Island's vagrancy laws, the council made a show of cracking down on social disorder in the late 1810s and 1820s. The primary targets were several neighborhoods in Providence's North End, where sailors between voyages sought out the grog shops, dance halls, and brothels and where many of the town's Black and poor residents made their homes.

Susan Parr Gardner and Rosanna Jones—the former White, the latter Black¹—lived and worked next door to each other in this notorious section of Providence. Their names appear throughout Providence town council and court documents of the early nineteenth century, often in connection with social disorder in their neighborhood. Historians of eighteenth-century Rhode Island have used similar records to assemble fine-grained portraits of colonial society and culture, providing a window into the lives of people who did not or could not write themselves into the historical record.² Nineteenth-century records reveal that Jones and Gardner tried to distance themselves from the disorder associated with their surroundings and to avoid the backlash of popular anger and government crack-down. Despite representing significantly different levels of threat to Providence's social and moral order,

both women pursued a strategy of cultivating good relations with the kinds of men trying to stem the disorder. The successes and failures of these two women's efforts to maintain their livelihoods present a picture of early nineteenth-century Providence where the distinctions between orderly and disorderly, and between reputable and disreputable, blur.

Providence's Recorder of Deeds demonstrates that both Jones and Gardner were substantial property owners and businesswomen. By 1821, Jones, a single Black woman, owned land worth more than \$1,000 on the "street leading from Stevens Bridge to Jabez Whipple's [house]," on modern-day Hewes Street, in a small neighborhood then known as Stampers Hill.³ In 1824, she purchased a second house in another infamous quarter of Providence, on the south side of Olney's Lane near where it ran into North Main Street.⁴ By 1820, Jones had a new neighbor, Gardner, a single White woman. Gardner's property, worth \$1,700 in 1821, also was on "the street leading over Stephens [sic] Bridge," right next to Jones.⁵ Like Jones, she also owned a house on the south side of Olney's Lane.⁶

Despite their similar property holdings and location, Jones and Gardner ran very different establishments. Jones kept a boardinghouse catering to poor White and Black families at her Hewes Street house. Census records from 1820 and 1830 show that Jones's tenants were a mix of Black and White men and women of various ages, including children under ten, with what look like several established couples—pairs of men and women around the same age.⁷ William Greene was

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