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Struggling over Politics and Culture: Organized Labor and Radio Station WEVD during the 1930s

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By the early years of the Great Depression, corporate-controlled national radio networks, Hollywood-centered motion picture producers, and large-circulation daily newspapers appeared to dominate the means of ideological and cultural production in the U.S.[1] Labor, progressive, and radical leaders correctly perceived the mass media as an integral part of the larger social and economic relations of production. Echoing the insights of Karl Marx, they warned of how the nation's dominant propertied classes would seek to control society's "governing ideas and motives" by manipulating the mass media to justify, among other things, "great inequalities in wealth in the community."[2] Edward Nockels of the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL), for example, protested that network radio reinforced the luster of consumption, the holiness of the marketplace, and the infallibility of business. The Socialist Party contended that commercial radio programs were as standardized as anything rolling out of a Ford factory. Nockels described such shows as bland entertainment "when not outright propaganda or delusive special pleading."[3] Such criticisms foreshadowed the arguments of *émigré* European intellectuals who, by the late 1930s, would denounce mass culture for its bourgeois "consumerism, intellectual vapidness, and political complacency," and contend that ruling groups used it "to manipulate, pacify, and control" the general public.[4]

In recent decades, historians have come to comprehend popular culture as a complicated arena of social, political, and cultural conflict. One component of this reconceptualization of popular culture has been an emphasis on the active role that workers and working-class organizations themselves played in "consuming" and "producing" cultural goods. Michael Denning has gone the furthest in arguing that the decade of the

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[1]Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, "Creating a Favorable Business Climate: Corporations and Radio Broadcasting, 1934 to 1954," *Business History Review*, 73 (1999), 221–255; Steven J. Ross, *Working-class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920–1934* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

[2]Scott Nearing, "The Control of Public Opinion in the United States," *School and Society*, 15 (April 15, 1922), 421–422 (quotations); Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 54.

[3]*New Leader*, April 24, 1926, 10 and Nov. 20, 1926, 10; *WCFL Radio Magazine*, 1 (spring 1928), 17, 52 (quotation); *Federation News*, Mar. 24, 1928, 1–2.

[4]Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos "n" Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 127 (first quotation); Ross, 265 (second quotation).

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1930s witnessed a "laboring of American culture" in which working-class Americans and their children helped to advance the "social democratization" of national culture and politics through their roles as producers (i.e. laborers in culture industries) and consumers of mass culture.[5] Denning's creative and multifaceted work explores the laboring of U.S. culture primarily, although not exclusively, through the operation of the popular culture industries themselves and the activities of key cultural and intellectual workers.

Other historians have concentrated instead on the efforts of radical groups, trade unions, or labor movement intellectuals to create their *own* media and cultural institutions. Studies of the development of labor education programs, a labor press, and workers' theater during the 1930s, for example, have provided insights into the dialectical relationship among radical organizations, trade unions, the working class, and popular culture.[6] For instance, the history of radio station WCFL, Chicago's "voice of labor," has revealed how Chicago-area unions and their leaders effectively utilized the station to engage in class warfare on the political, ideological, and cultural fronts.[7] The following study concentrates on the collaboration between the managers of New York radio station WEVD and officials of local trade unions to produce labor programming during the 1930s. WEVD's story illuminates, among other things, the contradictions and tensions encountered and generated by labor movement intellectuals as they simultaneously sought to uplift workers politically and culturally while striving to secure and enhance basic workers' rights and class consciousness.[8]

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At a December 1926 meeting, the Socialist Party's National Executive Committee decided to erect a broadcasting station to honor the late Eugene V. Debs. The Debs Memorial Radio Fund's Board of Trustees—representing a spectrum of leftist groups—agreed to make station WEVD into a "forum for liberal, progressive, labor and radical purposes, and not merely and solely as a Socialist Party enterprise."[9] Financial contributions came from garment trades unions—especially the International Ladies' Gar-

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[5]Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998), xvi–xvii, *passim.*

[6]See, for example, Lawrence W. Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and its Audiences," *American Historical Review*, 97 (1992), 1369–1399; Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, "Industrial Unionism and Labor Movement Culture in Depression-era Philadelphia," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 109 (1985), 3–26; Colette A. Hyman, *Staging Strikes: Workers' Theatre and the American Labor Movement* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997); Robbie Lieberman, "*My Song is my Weapon". People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930–1950* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

[7]Nathan Godfried, *WCFL: Chicago's Voice of Labor, 1926–78* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), Chapts. 3–6.

[8]Denning, 73–74; Elizabeth Faue, "Class and Cultural Citizenship," *Labor History*, 39 (1998), 312. Denning's concept of working-class intellectuals has much in common with Antonio Gramsci's construct of organic intellectuals. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 5–14, 340.

[9]*New Leader*, Dec. 25, 1926, 1–2; Meeting of Trustees Radio Fund, March 25, 1927 (quotation), Folder 4, Box 215, Miscellaneous Documents, Records of Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, 5619, Labor–Management Documentation Center, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. On WEVD's origin and early years, see Nathan Godfried, "Legitimizing the Mass Media Structure: The Socialists and American Broadcasting, 1926–1932," in Ronald C. Kent, Sara Markham, David R. Roediger, and Herbert Shapiro, ed., *Culture, Gender, Race and US Labor History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 123–149; Paul F. Gullifor and Brady Carlson, "Defining the Public Interest: Socialist Radio and the Case of WEVD," *Journal of Radio Studies*, 4 (1997), 203–217.

ment Workers' Union (ILGWU)—local and state branches of the party, and organizations linked to the socialists. The Debs fund bought a Long Island station in August 1927 and received a broadcast license shortly thereafter.[10] Faced with severe financial and legal problems in 1930–1931, WEVD turned to the *Jewish Daily Forward*, the world's largest Yiddish newspaper and a long-time supporter of the Socialist Party and WEVD, for help. Led by Baruch Charney Vladeck, the *Forward*'s general manager, the newspaper assumed dominant financial and managerial control over station operations. With the *Forward*'s assistance, WEVD renewed its license and built new studios and a transmitter.[11] While continuing as "a fighting, militant champion of the rights of the oppressed" and a defender of uncensored "minority opinion in America," WEVD also promised to report on workers' issues and to offer "distinctly different" entertainment programs.[12]

WEVD faced problems similar to those of WCFL, the station owned and managed by the CFL. Dependent on voluntary contributions and the resources of their parent bodies, both stations suffered financial crises, which were exacerbated by the onset of the Great Depression. Poor power, frequency, and time allotments—particularly true of WEVD—undermined each station's ability to build an audience. These problems also led to frequent legal battles with the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) and corporate radio stations and networks, thus consuming both stations' limited resources and energy.[13] Called on to defend their station's right to exist in mid-1929, WEVD's managers explained to federal authorities that they represented the only broadcast outlet in the East controlled by and "devoted to working class and liberal causes." Debs radio, insisted Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, stood "against the big chain system which 'tends to standardize—to make robots and Babbitts of the American people.' "[14]

State and corporate radio officials, however, characterized the audiences and supporters of WEVD and WCFL as special interest groups, rejecting their claims to public service as inflated. FRC attorneys asserted that "all stations should cater to the general public and serve public interest as against group or class interest."[15] Some trade union officials refuted these charges, arguing that labor was "not a special interest, but a

[10] *New Leader*, Mar. 12, 1927, 1, 3, April 2, 1927, 1–2, June 4, 1927, 1, June 25, 1927, 2, Aug. 6, 1927, 3, and Aug. 27, 1927, 1, 3; Meeting Sept. 21, 1927, Minutes of General Executive Board of International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, Collection 16, ILGWU Records, Labor–Management Documentation Center, Catherwood Library; Letter, G. August Gerber to Morris Sigman, Jan. 26, 1928, Box 6, Folder 10, Sigman Correspondence, ILGWU Records; *New York Times*, May 15, 1927, Sec. II, 1, June 6, 1927, 26, Aug. 5, 1927, 14, Aug. 22, 1927, 20, Sept. 8, 1927, 22, and Sept. 30, 1927, 22.

[11] Bernard K. Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress: Norman Thomas and the Decline of American Socialism* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 88–89, 128; Morris S. Novik, interview with author, Dec. 7, 1991, New York City; *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 1931, Sec. II, 1, and Oct. 26, 1931, 17; Letter, Norman Thomas to Roger Baldwin, Oct. 13, 1931, Folder 12, Box 29, Reel 20, American Fund Records, New York Public Library; *The Nation*, Oct. 12, 1932, 321.

[12] *New York Times*, Aug. 5, 1927, 14 (first quotation); *New Leader*, Aug. 6, 1927, 3 (second quotation); *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 1927, 26 (third quotation).

[13] Godfried, "Legitimizing the Mass Media Structure," 129–131, 135–139; Godfried, *WCFL, Chicago's Voice of Labor*, 46–165.

[14] *The Federated Press Labor Letter*, 15 (July 12, 1928), 3 (quotations); *New Leader*, July 14, 1928, 1, 3; Ruth Brindze, *Not to be Broadcast: The Truth about the Radio* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974 (Vanguard Press, 1937), 152. For similar arguments in defense of WCFL, see Godfried, *WCFL: Chicago's Voice of Labor*, 71–105.

[15] *New York Times*, June 26, 1929, 29; *Federation News*, July 13, 1929, 3 (quotation), 8; *Illinois State Federation of Labor Weekly News Letter*, 16 (April 5, 1930), 3.

special approach to the general interest." WCFL attorney Hope Thompson told a Senate committee in January 1930 that "every station is engaged in propaganda all the time," thus pointing to the class base of all radio broadcasting.[16] Economist Scott Nearing simply urged radicals to pursue "educational propaganda" and to create worker-led institutions that would challenge the ruling ideology and "struggle for a new social order."[17]

Leaders of both WEVD and WCFL hoped to use their outlets to create just such a new social order by educating, organizing, and entertaining workers and their communities. Labor radio officials and their trade union allies hoped to create what Denning has called a "movement culture" with its own "alternative intellectual world …, a proletarian public sphere." Perceiving their intended audiences not as special interests, but rather as a large public of politically and economically subordinated groups, labor radio advocates fought to protect the rights of these subaltern groups, enhance their members' class identity, and increase their social cohesiveness.[18] Supporters of labor radio also agreed that working-class educational and entertainment programming should challenge the nation's dominant business and political interests. But they disagreed over how labor radio programming would promulgate a new proletarian culture and, even more fundamentally, what such a working-class culture would entail. These issues concerned WEVD's program director Morris S. Novik and the ILGWU officials who participated in the development of labor programming over the station.

Novik was a 29-year-old organizer of public lectures when the *Forward*'s Vladeck asked him to become program director in the fall of 1932.[19] Born in Russia in 1903, Novik and his family emigrated to the U.S. when he was 11 years old. After graduating from a *yeshiva* in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Novik enrolled in the public school system. Caught in the revolutionary passions unleashed by the Russian Revolution, Novik became politically active, writing articles for socialist newspapers and magazines. He spent summers at Camp Tamiment, the socialist Rand School's summer camp and school for workers. As a teenager, he campaigned for the anti-war Scott Nearing in his contest with Fiorello LaGuardia for a local congressional seat in 1918. Novik continued his studies at the New School for Social Research. As chair of the Young People's Socialist League during the 1920s, Novik agitated for socialist education in the city's public high schools and organized protests against the decision in the Sacco–Vanzetti case. In addition to political agitation, Novik participated in a number of the Young People's Socialist League's educational and social functions.[20]

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[16]*WCFL Radio Magazine*, 2 (summer 1929), 15 (first quotation); Benjamin Stolberg, *Tailor's Progress: The Story of a Famous Union and the Men who Made it* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1944), 283; Godfried, *WCFL: Chicago's Voice of Labor*, 88 (second quotation).

[17]John A. Saltmarsh, *Scott Nearing: An Intellectual Biography* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991), 185, 187–189.

[18]Denning, 67 (first quotation), 73 (second quotation).

[19]Novik was probably Vladeck's second choice as program director. WEVD hired George Maynard, formerly of the National Broadcasting Company, as program director in the summer of 1932. But Maynard resigned just before the opening of the station's new studios at the Hotel Claridge in late September. He apparently left because the station refused to challenge the hotel's practice of forcing African-American musicians to use the freight elevators rather than the main entrance. *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 1932, 20, Sept. 29, 1932, 44; *Variety*, Oct. 4, 1932, 50; John Hammond, *John Hammond on Record: An Autobiography* (New York: Summit Books, 1977), 75–76.

[20]*Variety*, Oct. 4, 1932, 50; *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 1932, 20, Sept. 29, 1932, 44; Novik interview; "Novik and LaGuardia," *The New Yorker*, 65 (Aug. 28, 1989), 24–25; *New York Times*, Jan. 2, 1925, 8,

During the 1920s Novik served as social director of the ILGWU's Unity House and, by the end of the decade, the head of the Discussion Guild. In the latter role, Novik arranged for public lectures and debates in Carnegie Hall and similar venues. "We attracted large audiences," Novik recalled, "because we debated [the crucial] issues of the day." It also helped that Novik secured the participation of intellectual and progressive luminaries such as author Will Durant, philosophers Bertrand Russell and John Dewey, and attorney Clarence Darrow. One of the most successful debates arranged by Novik took place on Saturday night, November 15, 1930, when over 4000 people jammed into the Mecca Temple to hear Dr Nathan Krass, rabbi of New York's Temple Emanuel, debate Clarence Darrow on the topic "Is Religion Necessary?" Novik and the principal speakers ensured that the debate was "a dignified discussion" of religion's importance in society. Editors of the *New York Times* thought the debate consequential enough to give it front-page coverage in the Sunday edition.[21]

In addition to his position at the Discussion Guild, Novik spent summers working at Camp Tamiment and at Unity House. The latter was conceived in 1915 by Juliet Stuart Poyntz, a Barnard College history instructor and head of the educational department of ILGWU Local 25, and by Fannia Cohn, a leading activist in the garment union. Poyntz and Cohn believed "that the Labor Movement stands, consciously or unconsciously, for the reconstruction of society." Establishing workers' education programs in the garment trades would, they hoped, promote "a feeling of community and sisterhood" and unionization among a mostly young immigrant female labor force. Located first in Pine Hall, New York (the Catskills), and later in Forest Park, Pennsylvania (the Poconos), Unity House "embodied the spirit of bread and roses" by providing both a vacation and recreational center for union members and their families and a site for discussions and forums. Cohn and Poyntz convinced the ILGWU to expand this activity and, in 1917, the first of several Unity Centers opened in a New York City public school. Located in working-class neighborhoods, each center offered "semi-entertainment with a cultural slant."[22]

Unity House's mission and programs embraced a commitment both to collectivism and to educational and cultural advancement that characterized many of the activities of Jewish-dominated unions, fraternal organizations, and socialist groups with which Novik had intimate contact while growing up. Immigrant workers attended "endless lectures [that] filled the nights of the East Side" during the early 20th century. As Irving Howe explained, these lectures served educational and recreational purposes, becoming occasions "at which all of one's deepest interests, intellectual and personal, could be

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April 11, 1927, 8; Richard J. Meyer, "M. S. Novik: Radio's Conscience," *The NAEB Journal* (March–April 1966), 8–12; Kenneth Teitelbaum, *Schooling for "Good Rebels": Socialist Education for Children in the United States, 1900–1920* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993), 31–35; Paul Buhle, "Themes in American Jewish Radicalism," in Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, eds, *The Immigrant Left in the United States* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 91–99. Novik fits the category of *plebeians* defined by Denning as "a generation of artists and intellectuals from working-class families" (60).

[21]Novik interview (first quotation); Meyer, "M. S. Novik: Radio's Conscience," 8; *New York Times*, Nov. 16, 1930, 1–2, Nov. 18, 1930, 5 (second quotation). Both Bertrand Russell and Clarence Darrow eventually had Novik manage their speaking engagements.

[22]Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900–1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 171 (first quotation), 175 (second quotation), 177 (third quotation), 178 (last quotation); Richard J. Altenbaugh, *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), 34; Stolberg, *Tailor's Progress*, 286–287.

engaged."[23] The same streets where education and entertainment smoothly intersected also witnessed mass organizing campaigns such as the 1909 shirtwaist uprising in which 20,000–40,000 garment workers demonstrated both "a growing sense of collective identity" and "increasing militancy."[24]

Novik's early life experiences reinforced his work at Unity House, where he combined education, culture, and entertainment in an effort to achieve the social, intellectual, and political development of the working class. Like Cohn and other activists in workers' education, Novik functioned as a working-class intellectual, forging "links between the labor movement and the cultural organizations of artists and intellectuals." By organizing lectures and musical programs, Novik helped to make Unity House a coveted "spot for … liberal minded talent" to perform.[25]

Familiar with his work in Unity House and the Discussion Guild, Vladeck offered Novik a position at WEVD. Novik realized that the advent of broadcasting might undermine live debates (later recalling that radio was "giving away what I was doing"), and he became fascinated with the idea of combining new and old forms of education and entertainment to advance cultural and political struggles. Though reluctant to forgo the control that his work afforded him, Novik agreed to become program director, after receiving assurances that he would have a free hand and would answer only to Vladeck and not to any *Forward* committee.[26]

Novik recognized that while WEVD could not out-compete the popular programming of network broadcasters, it could perform "outstanding community service" and become a "really significant instrument for labor and the general liberal … and progressive movements of New York City."[27] Combining the interests of workers and the wider community, WEVD could educate the public on labor, industrial, consumer, and agricultural issues, develop local talent, and present "serious … [and] popular music, plays and sports." Building a large audience for this programming required, as Novik put it, observing "the canons of good radio."[28]

Labor programs on WEVD usually fitted the contemporary programming categories of "sustained" and "sponsored." The station sustained or gave free air time to labor unions and working-class organizations to make important announcements during strikes, boycotts, lockouts, and organizing drives. At the same time, WEVD actively encouraged local unions to pay for their own programs; and it assisted them in producing these sponsored shows for the purposes of educating, informing, and entertaining an extended working-class audience.

Content distinguished the labor programs over WEVD. Some programs offered specific information on and analysis of trade union organizing campaigns and strikes, including coverage of the policies and actions of employers and government officials.

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[23]Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 238–240.

[24]Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, 57.

[25]Denning, 74; Novik interview (quotation).

[26]Novik interview; *Time*, Feb. 24, 1941, 55; *Broadcasting*, Nov. 1, 1932, 23.

[27]M. S. Novik, "Planning the Campaign," in O. Joe Olson, ed., *Education on the Air: Twenty-second Yearbook of the Institute for Education by Radio and Television* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1953), 295–296; C. S. Marsh, ed., *Educational Broadcasting 1936: Proceedings of First National Conference* (1937), 329 (quotation).

[28]"Is Labor Getting a Fair Shake on the Air? Symposium," in O. Joe Olson, ed., *Education on the Air: Seventeenth Yearbook of the Institute for Education by Radio* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1947), 123–124 (quotations); M. S. Novik, "The Unions, Radio, and the Community," in Jacob B.S. Hardman and Maurice F. Neufeld, eds., *The House of Labor: Internal Operations of American Unions* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1951), 327–332; Novik interview.

This type of programming served, if not as an outright organizing tool, then as a vital communications link, disseminating instructions and news to workers. Labor programming on WEVD also conveyed general information about the origin, development, and purpose of the organized labor movement in ways that created and reinforced positive images of working-class organization. In this latter effort, Novik helped officials and members of the ILGWU, in particular, to educate their new members, as well as the general public, about organized labor and its role in society.

A third type of programming utilized by WEVD aimed at a broadly defined working-class audience and reflected Novik's longstanding effort to engage in social uplift. Paralleling the logic of officials in the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), Novik supported the production of "highbrow forums, concerts, and lectures" to counter the mass culture's "degrading effect on the personality of the worker."[29] He rarely considered that the goal of achieving political and social democracy necessitated the creation of a "new proletarian culture" or the formulation of an "aesthetic" and "cultural pattern" by workers themselves. Nevertheless, Novik believed in workers' need for bread and roses. He hoped that by combining educational and informational material in a variety of engaging formats—from workers' education to music appreciation to dramatic presentations to public affairs programming—he might contribute to an era of working-class enlightenment.[30]

The new program director dismissed much of WEVD's pre-1932 labor and educational shows as insignificant. Debs radio had not done "a damn thing" with its facilities, contended Novik. "It wasn't worthy of the license in the first place."[31] Such statements overlooked much of the progressive programming, including labor- and socialist-oriented shows, that aired on WEVD before Novik's appearance. During the Great Depression's early years (1929–1932), for example, WEVD broadcast a daily labor news program under the auspices of the radical news service, the Federated Press, a series of Young People's Socialist League debates on themes such as the use of the military to protect U.S. businesses abroad, discussion shows by the Birth Control League of America and the Women's Peace Union, Socialist Sunday School, programs produced by the Rand School, and a regular offering of short talks by prominent socialists and progressives. Station director G. August Gerber, in testimony before the FRC in October 1930, characterized WEVD as the "Hyde Park of the Air." Like the famous London venue, WEVD offered an open and free forum for the discussion of public questions.[32] For whatever reasons, Novik chose to ignore this legacy.

Novik's harsh assessment did reveal an oversight of early station managers: they had failed to cultivate a working relationship with organized labor. While seeking financial, political, and moral support from the labor community, radio managers had not actively encouraged trade union participation in station programming. Novik strongly

[29] Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 225.

[30] Robert J. Schaefer, "Educational Activities of the Garment Unions, 1890–1948: A Study in Workers' Education in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America in New York City" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Columbia Univ., 1951), 83.

[31] Novik interview.

[32] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Jan. 2, 1930, 26, Jan. 3, 1930, 25, Jan. 4, 1930, 10, Mar. 18, 1930, 25, Oct. 1, 1932, 7, Oct. 4, 1932, 13, Oct. 8, 1932, 17, Oct. 10, 1932, 9, Oct. 15, 1932, 17, Oct. 24, 1932, 32; *New Leader*, Nov. 9, 1929, 3, Dec. 14, 1929, 8, Feb. 1, 1930, 4, July 26, 1930, 6; *The Federated Press Labor Letter Labor's News*, June 22, 1929, 3, June 29, 1929, 7; Federated Press news article, "Debs Radio in Fight for Life," Oct. 24, 1930, "Censorship—Radio," Vol. 385, 1930, Microfilm Reel 71, American Civil Liberties Archives.

believed that a progressive radio station should "serve labor's purposes in times of economic strife" and "educate its members toward their social and economic responsibility."[33] To foster a cooperative relationship between WEVD and working-class organizations, Novik wanted trade union officials to help formulate labor shows. At the same time, Novik recognized that workers were an integral part of their communities, that labor's welfare and concerns coincided with community interests. In an effort to entertain and enlighten a broadly defined working-class audience, Novik sought to make WEVD a progressive university of the air.[34]

This idea arose from several sources. New York trade unionists, socialists, and liberals had supported the station's battle to retain its license during 1929–1932 precisely because they wanted WEVD to become "a university of the air for Public Education by [the] Progressive Movement." The commitment to progressive public education also derived from the work of activists such as Cohn and Poyntz. The success of the Unity Centers led the latter pair and the ILGWU to established the Workers' University in January 1918. Located at a Manhattan public high school, the university utilized "professors from New York area colleges to teach courses in labor problems, industrial economics, American social and political history, accounting, and modern literature."[35] Making adult higher education available on radio grew from workers' education programs, from Novik's experiences as an organizer of public talks, and from his efforts as a working-class intellectual to construct bonds between laborers, artists, and educators.

This approach to radio education differed from network radio's academic efforts. Spurred by criticism of radio's excessive commercialism and neglect of the public interest and by the fear of greater governmental regulation, network officials acquiesced to the creation of a handful of educational programs. In the late 1920s, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) introduced *American School of the Air*, a daily "attempt to teach children history, current events, geography, economics, and music through the use of radio dramas." The weekly panel discussion program *The University of Chicago Roundtable*, which the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) first aired in February 1931, featured "professors and researchers discussing topics that ranged from science to poetry" to politics. Whatever the ephemeral value of these shows and their spin-offs, they remained isolated and neglected in the world of commercial broadcasting. As one radio critic lamented in late 1935, the networks' educational departments and series received only "the trimmings of the clock, and a cancellation or last minute shift threatens any scheduled program at the slightest hint of a commercial coming into the spot."[36]

Working with fewer resources than those possessed by the networks, Novik sought to develop educational programs that would help "to raise the general level of the

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[33]Novik quoted in Marsh, ed., *Educational Broadcasting 1936*, 329–330.

[34]"Is Labor Getting a Fair Shake," 123.

[35]"Report of the Committee on the Reorganization of WEVD," attached to letter from Mary Fox to ILGWU, June 12, 1931 (first quotation), Box 171, Folder 6, Dubinsky Correspondence, ILGWU Records; Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, 179 (second quotation).

[36]J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch that Dial: Radio Programming in American Life from 1920 to 1960* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1982), 26 (first quotation), 288–289 (second quotation); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 139; A. M. Sullivan, "Radio and Vaudeville Culture," *The Commonweal*, 23 (December 13, 1935), 177 (third quotation); Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of US Broadcasting, 1928–1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 38–62.

intelligence of [WEVD's] listeners." To that end, the station began assembling a "faculty of the air" in late 1932. Liberal author, journalist, and historian Hendrik Willem Van Loon joined Novik in securing the voluntary services of authorities in art, literature, philosophy, music, poetry, history, psychology, and politics from the New York area. Each lecturer agreed to conduct a series of 15-minute classes for the radio audience. Van Loon's weekly history programs commenced in mid-November and served as the "forerunner of a wider curriculum." The radio columnist for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, noting Van Loon's reputation for presenting "corking feature[s]," urged readers to listen in to this "unusual program."[37]

WEVD's *The University of the Air* held its inaugural broadcast on January 25, 1933. Novik and Van Loon invited some 200 writers, artists, and educators, including Heywood Broun, Elmer Davis, Fannie Hurst, Michael Strange, and Louis Waldman, for a gala event at the Algonquin Hotel. During the opening show, guests "spoke their frank bits about education on the air and what it should accomplish." Broun, a radical journalist, saw "no reason why showmanship and entertainment might not be mixed with Kant, Karl Marx, Beethoven and Herbert Spencer." During the next year, *The University of the Air* offered its listeners courses in philosophy with John Dewey and Sidney Hook, psychology with John B. Watson and Olga Knopf, political economy with Norman Thomas, and music appreciation with Henry Crowell and Sigmund Spaeth.[38]

The University of the Air reflected Novik's conviction that so-called elitist culture could utilize popular culture techniques. This was evident in the participation of cultural sophisticates such as Sigmund Spaeth and Van Loon in the series. With a doctorate degree from Princeton University, Spaeth, a music critic and educator, ranked among the "luminaries of the high-culture scene" during the 1920s. While denouncing jazz's "chiefly destructive" influence on music and society, he nevertheless sought "to bridge the gap between Beethoven and Irving Berlin." By the 1930s, Spaeth had combined his musical knowledge "with a rich sense of humor" to become a popular figure on local and national radio. His *Tune Detective*, which aired over station WJZ and the NBC network, dissected popular tunes to demonstrate their origins in classical music and "to show up the tin pan alley boys for congenial but also congenital plagiarists." Spaeth's success at getting "fun out of music" carried over to his participation in both *The University of the Air* and WEVD's *Talent Detective*. The latter show aired in 1935 and copied the amateur-hour style pioneered by Major Bowes and others. But it had a distinctive twist: rather than inserting inept performers to amuse listeners, Spaeth pre-auditioned each contestant and, during the broadcast, assumed the role of "music counselor and friendly critic."[39]

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[37]Morris S. Novik, "The University of the Air," in *Education on the Air: Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Institute for Education by Radio and the Fifth Annual Assembly of the National Advisory Council on Radio in Education, 1935* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 116 (first quotation); *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Oct. 28, 1932, 23; *New York Times*, Nov. 6, 1932 (second quotation); *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Nov. 11, 1932, 15 (third and fourth quotations).

[38]*New York Times*, Jan. 26, 1933, 13; Morris S. Novik, "The University of the Air," in Levering Tyson and J. MacLatchy, eds., *Education on the Air ... and Radio and Education: Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Institute for Education by Radio, 1935* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 113; Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, *New York Panorama: A Comprehensive View of the Metropolis* (New York: Random House, 1938), 298; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Jan. 26, 1933, 21 (first quotation); *New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1933, Sec. 9, 10 (second quotation), Dec. 1, 1935, Sec. 11, 13; *New York World-Telegram*, Jan. 31, 1933.

[39]Hilmes, 49 (first quotation); Sigmund Spaeth, "Jazz is not music," *Forum*, 80 (1928), 270–271 (second quotation); *New York Times*, Nov. 13, 1965, 29 (third quotation); *New York World-Telegram*, Mar. 9, 1935

Hendrik Van Loon also possessed a doctorate (from the University of Munich) and spent his life popularizing the arts and history. The author of six bestsellers and the winner in 1922 of the first John Newbery Medal for distinguished contributions to children's literature, Van Loon developed an unusual style for radio. While occasionally unnerving WEVD "engineers by his extemporaneous interjections," Van Loon became a "raconteur whose voice was tinged with melancholy as he ranged over a dozen subjects within the space of a brief conversation." Van Loon "enjoyed teaching history, especially on the adult level, and on WEVD what he had to say was more important than how mellifluously he said it." His shows generated a flood of calls "from grateful, enthusiastic listeners, most of whom spoke with a thicker accent than" his. By utilizing Spaeth, Van Loon, and other engaging progressive intellectuals, Novik hoped to provide educational fare attractive to workers, their families, and their communities.[40]

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the extent to which working-class audiences tuned into *The University of the Air's* courses, let alone ascertain whether they were edified or engaged by them. Both small and large broadcasting stations lacked sophisticated or accurate tools with which to measure the size or composition of their audiences in the 1930s. Although *The University of the Air* never attracted the attention of local advertisers, the standard, but often misleading, commercial measure of audience interest, the program's continued status as a sustaining program should not be interpreted as widespread lack of interest in its contents. Novik and Van Loon consciously kept the show free of commercial trappings. Lecturers, radio critics, selected listeners, and government regulators, who voiced an opinion about *The University of the Air*, suggested that the show respected and accommodated its audience's needs. At Novik's request, for example, the show frequently discussed social, political, and economic issues meaningful to working-class New Yorkers. The program's longevity—it continued throughout the decade—attested to its popularity among listeners within WEVD's admittedly limited broadcast range. *The University of the Air* contributed to WEVD's growing reputation as "one of the few stations in the United States which places public service above private profit and gives appropriate emphasis to the statutory obligation to operate in the public interest."[41] But creating programming *for* New York's working-class community was not the same as allowing laborers and their trade unions to formulate *their own* programs.

—footnote continued

(fourth and sixth quotations); *Variety*, Aug. 30, 1932, 48 (fifth quotation), Mar. 13, 1935, 38; *New York Post*, Mar. 2, 1935 (seventh quotation); *Billboard*, Mar. 23, 1935, 10, May 18, 1935, 9.

[40]Gerard Willem van Loon, *The Story of Hendrik Willem Van Loon* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972), 133, 270 (first, third, and fourth quotations); *New York Times*, Mar. 12, 1944, 37 (second quotation); "Hendrik Willem Van Loon" (editorial), *New York Times*, Mar. 13, 1944, 14. Although they shared characteristics with the "radical moderns" that Denning identifies as aligned with working-class intellectuals, Spaeth and Van Loon represented a different stratum of the 1930s cultural front (xv–xvi, 163–164).

[41]For positive references to the program, see *New York Panorama*, 298; "The University of the Air," *School and Society*, 40 (Dec. 15, 1934), 805–806; A.M. Sullivan, "Radio and Vaudeville Culture," *The Commonweal*, 23 (Dec. 13, 1935), 177; *New York Times*, Dec. 1, 1935, Sec. 11, 13, Dec. 6, 1936, Sec. 12, 16; Novik, "University of the Air," 115–116; US, Federal Communications Commission (FCC), *Federal Communications Commission Reports, March 1, 1937–November 15, 1937*, Vol. 4 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1938), 536 (quotation); Marsh, *Educational Broadcasting 1936*, 329; *Broadcasting*, 12 (June 15, 1937), 28; Letters, Hendrick Willem Van Loon to Morris Novik, Dec. 22, 1936 and undated (probably 1937), copies in possession of author. On the subject of conflating commercial success with cultural success, see Denning, 158–159.

Novik often lamented organized labor's slow grasp of "the possibilities of radio." He urged unions to devise radio techniques to serve the larger working-class community and "to educate [union] members toward their social and economic responsibility," not only in "times of economic strife," but also in non-crisis periods. Writing to Charles Zimmerman, manager of ILGWU Local 22, in March 1934, Novik explained that he was personally "sold on the idea of converting radio and our station in particular, into a lively medium of union education and propaganda." Given its distinguished record in workers' education and public relations, the ILGWU was a perfect target for Novik's appeal.[42]

The union's first and longest-running radio effort was *The Voice of Local 89*, produced by Italian Dressmakers Local 89. Luigi Antonini, Local 89's general secretary and an ILGWU vice-president, began giving 15-minute messages, in Italian, over station WFAB in late January 1934. As these brief talks continued, Antonini and Novik arranged for a weekly show over WEVD. The resulting Italian-language program aired on Saturday mornings and offered a "half hour of melodious music and songs with the best Italian radio artists available. 'Sketches' from proletarian life. Addresses in Italian and English by prominent Union leaders." Novik and Antonini understood that as unions grew—partly in response to federal recognition of labor's right to organize—union officials would need to use the radio to reach out to young people and "to teach the new members the history [and] the general objective of labor [unions]." ILGWU president David Dubinsky praised the local union's efforts to educate its members and its application of "showmanship" to workers' education.[43]

Showmanship, trade union education, and political commentary all came together in *The Voice of Local 89* under the supervision of Antonini. An intellectual with a "romantic-proletarian touch," Antonini emerged as an early labor and cultural leader in the Italian-American working-class community. A superb orator, Antonini spoke weekly on topics "embracing problems of general interest to the Italian workers and problems of the dress industry." In the course of discussing national and international events from a labor and social democratic perspective, Antonini analyzed health care, attacked fascism, pleaded for racial tolerance, and once gave a labor and socialist interpretation of the "life of Christ and the history of Easter festivities." Augmenting Antonini's talks were speeches by guests: Harlem Congressman Vito Marcantonio explored the prospects for a Labor Party in the U.S. in July 1935; and Angelica Balabanoff, a leading international socialist and former leader in the Italian labor movement, "delivered a stirring appeal to American labor to rally against the danger of Fascism" in early 1936. Initially 30 minutes, *The Voice of Local 89* expanded to 45 minutes in early 1935 and to a full hour by that spring. The expanded air time gave Antonini the opportunity to enhance the program's entertainment: to offer, for example, abridged versions of *Carmen*, *Aida*, and other operas and "lively sketches based on the lighter side of the worker's life arranged and presented by the best fun makers of the

[42]Marsh, *Educational Broadcasting 1936*, 329–330 (first quotation); Letter, Morris Novik to Charles Zimmerman, Mar. 17, 1934 (second, third, and fourth quotations all from Novik letters), Folder 8, Box 37, Charles S. Zimmerman Records, ILGWU Records; Susan Stone Wong, "From Soul to Strawberries: The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and Workers' Education, 1914–1950," in Joyce L. Kornbluh and Mary Frederickson, eds., *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Workers' Education for Women, 1914–1984* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1984), 42–51; Stolberg, *Tailor's Progress*, 282–287, 304; Joel Seidman, *The Needle Trades* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942), 283–284.

[43]*Justice*, Feb. 1934, 27, Oct. 1934, 19 (first quotation); Novik interview (second quotation); David Dubinsky testimony to FCC, Nov. 9, 1934, attached to listing of ILGWU talks over WEVD, Folder 6, Box 171, David Dubinsky Correspondence, ILGWU Records; Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 86–87 (third quotation); Fones-Wolf, "Industrial Unionism and Labor Movement Culture," 6–7.

Italian theatre." The added time also allowed for weekly messages in English from prominent politicians and ILGWU officials.[44]

The Voice of Local 89 proved popular and useful within and outside the Italian-American, working-class community in New York. As early as January 1936, Novik and his colleagues began negotiating with several radio stations along the Atlantic seaboard to form an eastern network for Antonini's program. That regional hook-up came to fruition the following year when stations in Philadelphia, New Haven, and Boston joined WEVD in airing *The Voice of Local 89* every Saturday morning between 10 and 11 a.m. A referendum held by unions located in areas served by the three stations disclosed broad support for the program in late 1937. A pleased Antonini noted that "this popular referendum has been an amazing revelation of the widespread popularity of our Union and the prestige it enjoys among all classes of citizens."[45]

Within months of *The Voice of Local 89's* debut, Novik urged the international union to produce its own show on WEVD. Novik suggested that 20% of a weekly labor show should "work in propaganda on union organization" and provide information or announcements about meetings and general events of interest to members. A labor program had to provide "high caliber" entertainment in order to build an audience. Satisfying the ILGWU's membership of "colored workers, Spanish and Yiddish speaking and American workers," each group with "its own distinct taste," required "a prominent international folk and character singer" who could entertain in different languages. Novik believed it "most important that we arrange a really outstanding program and not try to save by putting on something more or less mediocre." The program could be broadcast on Saturdays at 5:30 p.m. at a cost of $35 for the time slot (evenings cost $70) and $90 for "the most outstanding artists." Novik felt that "this program idea is very, very sound and I am convinced that once we get started, the program will not only arouse the attention and interest of most of your members, but will prove cheaper and more effective than any of the other mediums such as newspapers, …, etc."[46]

ILGWU officials commissioned a series entitled *The International Hour.* Beginning on April 6, 1934, and continuing for 10 consecutive Fridays at 10:15 p.m., the shows celebrated the ILGWU's 35th anniversary. Through a hook-up with other stations, the program reached audiences in New Jersey, Connecticut, and Washington, DC. The ILGWU paid for the use of the facilities and the talent; WEVD supplied technical advice and the time slot. As Novik recommended, the series included brief talks on labor issues, musical pieces, and short sketches. Dubinsky invited politicians and labor officials to speak on the program, promising that the shows "will be conducted in the spirit of a large meeting of our members and will include each week outstanding chamber music ensembles and a leading artist of the stage and concert world." Publicity fliers praised the program as "the first time that an American labor organization uses the radio to reach its membership with the message of trade unionism and workers' education."[47]

[44]Novik interview; Stolberg, *Tailor's Progress*, 111, 217, 224 (first quotation), 238–241; *Justice*, Jan. 15, 1935, 7 (second quotation), Feb. 1, 1935, 7, May 1, 1935, 6 (third quotation), July 15, 1935, 6, Jan. 15, 1936, 7 (fourth quotation), Dec. 15, 1935, 4, Jan. 1, 1937, 5 (fifth quotation).

[45]*Justice*, Jan. 1, 1936, 7, Jan. 1, 1937, 5, Jan. 15, 1937, 6, Jan. 1, 1938, 6 (quotation).

[46]Letter, Novik to Zimmerman, Mar. 17, 1934, Folder 8, Box 37, Zimmerman Records, ILGWU.

[47]Dubinsky testimony to FCC, Nov. 9, 1934, Folder 6, Box 171, Dubinsky Correspondence; publicity fliers for "The Voice of the International," Folder 8, Box 49, Dubinsky Correspondence; Letters, David Dubinsky to Eleanor Roosevelt, Mar. 20, 1934, Dubinsky to Governors of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut, Mar. 27, 1934, Folder 8, Box 49, Dubinsky Correspondence. The ILGWU series was also called *The Union Assembly* and *The Voice of the International*.

The first edition of *The International Hour* included addresses by Dubinsky and AFL president William Green and musical performances by the Hall Johnson Negro Choir and the Compinsky Trio. "We wish to make this an open forum, a great labor meeting on the air," Dubinsky told the audience, "to obtain your reactions to the great problems that confront all of us and to make our leadership as sensitive and responsive as possible to the will of the membership."[48] Subsequent shows featured speeches by Women's Trade Union League president Rose Schneiderman, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, *Forward* editor-in-chief Abraham Cahan, and various ILGWU officers. Prominent stage and concert stars included Molly Picon from the Yiddish stage and Morton Downey. Harp trios, string quartets, and other assorted musical groups and soloists rounded out the programs. The show broadcast on April 27, 1934, according to the trade paper *Variety*, had actress Alla Nazimova playing "the protagonist in a thumbnail sketch dealing with the subject of child labor. It was undiluted propaganda, but effectively put."[49]

Forbes Magazine deemed the entire series significant, "not so much because a union is sponsoring the program, but because a union is using radio for the same reason that an employer does, as a business-like method of meeting its business problems … It gives members a rallying point, keeps up the interest and builds up a definite picture of the union."[50] The ILGWU leadership considered the program a great success. Dubinsky told the Federal Communications Commission in late 1934 that the union would continue to use WEVD "to acquaint the membership … and the general public about" industrial, political, and economic problems confronting the nation.[51]

The format of live classical music, sketches, and prominent political and labor speakers, perfected by *The Voice of Local 89* and *The International Hour*, became Novik's prototype for all his subsequent labor programs. Motivated by an impending strike against shops producing children's and women's clothes in the fall of 1935, ILGWU Local 91 arranged for a series of broadcasts over WEVD. "Almost entirely composed of [National Recovery Administration, NRA] babies," the local had grown from fewer than 500 members in 1932 to approximately 6000 within a year. The majority of new members were young women who had no trade union experience. Local 91 manager Harry Greenberg sought to use the Tuesday evening broadcasts to inform members about the status of negotiations, to mobilize workers for a strike, and to "present our case to the public at large." In addition to the weekly strike-related discussions, Local 91's radio program offered talks by union officials and musical entertainment by performers from ILGWU chorus and orchestral groups. The union continued broadcasts in 1936 and 1937.[52] Using a similar format, Local 62 inaugurated a weekly show over WEVD in 1937 with the goal of educating its 11,000 members and the larger listening audience about its programs and principles.[53] In reviewing a series of shows sponsored by Local 142 in 1934, *Variety* needlessly warned WEVD and its union collaborators that they operated "under the same obligation to observe showmanship

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[48]Publicity fliers for ILGWU program; "Talk by David Dubinsky … over Station WEVD," April 6, 1934, Folder 8, Box 49, Dubinsky Correspondence.

[49]Publicity fliers for ILGWU program, Folder 8, Box 49, Dubinsky Correspondence; *Variety*, May 1, 1934, 34.

[50]*Justice*, July 1934, 2; *Forbes Magazine*, July 1934.

[51]Dubinsky testimony to FCC, Nov. 9, 1934, Folder 6, Box 171, Dubinsky Correspondence.

[52]*Justice*, Sept. 1, 1935, 7; Stolberg, *Tailor's Progress*, 234 (first quotation); *Justice*, Oct. 1, 1935, 4 (second quotation), Nov. 1, 1935, 14, Jan. 15, 1936, 2, Jan. 15, 1937, 2.

[53]*Justice*, Mar. 15, 1937, 7.

requirements that condition the efforts of manufacturers, etc." It was a point long appreciated by Novik.[54]

In the summer of 1935 the ILGWU returned to WEVD and presented a 6-week series that dramatized important events in the union's history. A member of the union's educational and dramatic staff, Florence Lasser, had been helping union members to fashion plays "out of their own life history." Lasser also authored several playlets that aired over WEVD. In the spring of 1935 she wrote *The Story of the ILGWU*. The six episodes covered everything from the arrival of immigrants in New York to the birth of the ILGWU to the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire to the NRA. Performed by the ILGWU's theater group, the play's first episode aired on Wednesday, July 10 at 10 p.m. Novik and ILGWU leaders claimed yet another triumph for "great [labor] propaganda and educational" programming. An editorial in the union newspaper, *Justice*, praised the educational department and highly recommended the series "to the thousands of our new members, to those who are eager to learn of the past and the development stages of their great organization." The editors also noted that such radio productions were a good way to inform and entertain workers, especially given "the closing of regular educational activity over the summer period."[55]

Efforts by the ILGWU and WEVD to dramatize labor history underscored the persistent challenge of entertaining and educating listeners while raising working-class consciousness. Radio drama seemed to combine socially relevant issues with entertainment. The Great Depression, the New Deal, and the revival of radical politics and working-class organizing had accelerated the development of workers' theaters across the nation.[56] In 1933, artists who believed that trade unions formed the vanguard of societal change founded the Theatre Union. They aimed to produce "plays of overtly propagandistic proletarian content," to depict "economic and social problems experienced by the majority of Americans," and to make those plays "available to audiences unable to pay Broadway prices."[57] By the end of its second season (1934–1935), 500,000 people had attended the theater's four productions, and theater critics praised the group's "honorable record for enterprise and originality" and its "creditable pioneering among new, unexploited audiences."[58] Seeking to reach the widest possible working-class audiences with their social plays, some members of workers' theater considered radio "a dramatic medium of great value, particularly to those denied any

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[54]*Variety*, June 10, 1936, 47.

[55]*Justice*, Jan. 1, 1935, 9 (first quotation), April 15, 1935, 9, July 1, 1935, 1, 13; Florence Lasser, *The Story of the ILGWU: A Radio Play in Six Episodes* (New York: Educational Department, ILGWU, 1935); Letter, Morris Novik to David Dubinsky, July 3, 1935, Folder 8, Box 49, Dubinsky Correspondence (second quotation); Letters, Novik to Sidney Hillman, July 3, 1935, Hillman to Novik, July 11, 1935, Folder 29, Box 81, Sidney Hillman Correspondence, Records of ACWA, Catherwood Library; *Justice*, Aug. 1, 1935, 16 (third and fourth quotations), Oct. 1, 1935, 12.

[56]Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 1–59; Mordecai Gorelik, "Theatre is a Weapon," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, 18 (June 1934), 420–423.

[57]Ira A. Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 97 (all quotations); Karen Malpede Taylor, *People's Theatre in Amerika* (New York: Drama Book Specialists/Publishers, 1972), 70 (all quotations come from Levine).

[58]Taylor, *People's Theatre*, 68–71; Levine, *Left-wing Dramatic Theory*, 97–98, 178; *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 1935, Sec. 10, 2, Sept. 5, 1937, Sec. 10, 1 (quotation). The Theatre Union's productions included "Peace on Earth" by George Sklar and Albert Maltz, "Black Pit" by Maltz, and "Stevedore" by Sklar and Paul Peters. Annette T. Rubinstein explains the meaning of theater in the lives of radicals during the 1930s in "The Cultural World of the Communist Party: An Historical Overview," in Michael E. Brown *et al.*, eds., *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of US Communism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 248–256.

other theater."[59] Given Novik's commitment to link workers to the world of art and to mix social commentary with entertainment, it seemed reasonable that WEVD and workers' theater would become allies.

Although the weak financial positions of both WEVD and workers' theater, among other conditions, limited an extensive alliance, the two did join forces on several programming ideas during 1934–1937. In 1934, during the production of the Theatre Union's first play, *Peace on Earth*, WEVD carried a 1-hour program entitled *The People's Theater*. Mary Fox of the Socialist Party conceived of the idea and made all the necessary arrangements. Airing on Sunday evenings, the talk show helped to publicize the work of the Theatre Union and "to educate listeners on the nature and aims of social theatre."[60]

During 1935–1936, the theater group and WEVD presented a series entitled *Social Plays of the Past Decade*. The 30-minute sustained program aired on Sundays at 10:30 p.m. Inaugurating the series in April 1935 was *Spread Eagle*, an adaptation of a 1927 play by George S. Brooks and Walter B. Lister which contained a strong anti-war and anti-capitalist message.[61] Albert Maltz's one-act *Private Hicks* followed and told the tale of a working-class soldier who refused to obey orders to shoot strikers during a confrontation at a Mid-west electric parts plant. Commencing in December 1935, the Theatre Union offered *Social Plays from All over the World* on Sunday at 8 p.m. Some contemporary critics dismissed these plays as "humdrum social realism" or complained that workers' theaters were "not theatres of workers at all, but theatres of didactic intellectuals who undertake to lead workers in the way they should go." WEVD's Theatre Union productions, however, generated positive responses from listeners and from trade papers. *Variety* admitted, for example, that the shows offered "a good talent outlay" for WEVD's audience.[62]

WEVD continued to support the Theatre Union on Sunday nights until 1937, when financial problems forced the theater organization to disband. Among the last of the Theatre Union productions promoted on WEVD was *Marching Song*. Written by John Howard Lawson, the play explored the interaction of race and ethnicity in the context of working-class battles against capitalists and the state. It became "one of the most polished and popular of the plays of the workers' theatre movement." On March 14, 1937, Lem Ward, the theater's general manager, and Rex Ingram, a leading African-American actor and co-star of *Marching Song*, spoke to the WEVD audience. Ingram explained how he had tired of the demeaning parts offered to blacks in motion pictures and had left Hollywood and joined the workers' theater movement in New York, appearing in several Theatre Union productions. Politically relevant musical entertain-

[59]Merrill Denison, "The Actor and Radio," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, 17 (Nov. 1933), 851.

[60]Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 62; Mark W. Weisstuch, "The Theatre Union, 1933–1937: A History" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1982), 174–175; *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1934, Sec. 9, 10, Feb. 25, 1934, Sec. 9, 10.

[61]*Variety*, May 1, 1935, 30; Ruth Gibbons Thomson, *Index to Full Length Plays, 1926 to 1944* (Boston, MA: F. W. Faxon, 1946), 91, 119, 260; Edwin Bronner, *The Encyclopedia of the American Theatre, 1900–1975* (San Diego, CA: A. S. Barnes, 1980), 437–438.

[62]Jack Salzman, *Albert Maltz* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 32; *Justice*, Dec. 1935, 12; Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 183 (first quotation); Edith J. R. Isaacs, "Communal Theatre," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, 20 (July 1936), 494, 496 (second quotation); *Variety*, May 1, 1935, 30 (last quotation). Communist-hunter Elizabeth Dilling described *Private Hicks* as a "popular Red drama" and railed against WEVD for broadcasting it. E. Dilling, *The Roosevelt Red Record and its Background* (Kenilworth, IL: published by Author, 1936), 167.

ment came in the form of four young African-Americans singing Southern work songs. The program ended with the announcer inviting listeners to write a letter of 100 words explaining "why we need a social theater." The 10 best letters would win a pair of orchestra seats to *Marching Song*.[63]

WEVD's association with socially relevant dramas persisted after the demise of the Theatre Union. In early 1938, *Variety* announced that WEVD had organized "a dramatic company of young Broadway legiters to air pale pink dramatizations." In scripts written by labor activists, WEVD hoped to offer an alternative to CBS's *Columbia Workshop*.[64] A year later, WEVD joined other stations in the New York area in broadcasting productions of the Federal Theatre's Radio Division. WEVD's *Federal Theatre of the Air* series included a radio adaptation of the Federal Theatre Project's famous *One Third of a Nation*, which dramatically exposed "the dangerous and disease-ridden housing that New York City's poor and working classes had endured for more than one hundred years." One reviewer praised the radio version as "a successful condensation" that conveyed much of the script's "original quality of intermingled terse drama and narration."[65] Throughout much of the 1930s, WEVD extended to its audience both informed discussions about workers' theater and representative productions of socially and politically relevant drama. Popular entertainment and political education naturally intersected here.

WEVD's concern with securing engaging programming, however, dissipated during times of labor trouble. Eruptions of militant working-class actions during the 1930s motivated workers and community activists to seek access to the airwaves; and WEVD made its facilities available to as many trade unions as its limited financial resources, staff, and time allowed. In September 1934, for example, WEVD supported the 400,000 mill workers from Maine to Alabama who went on strike demanding the end of brutal work practices, increased employment and wages, union recognition, and the reinstatement of workers dismissed for union activity. Industry officials, speaking over the national radio networks, denounced the United Textile Workers of America's "preposterous and ruinous demands." These broadcasts ignored how the industry manipulated state agencies to enhance industrial stability and profits at the expense of increased employment, and how it used tens of thousands of private guards, sheriff's deputies, and National Guard troops to keep mills operating.[66]

To win their strike, as Janet Irons has argued, the "textile workers had to create the political pressure necessary to give the government in Washington the backbone … to implement the workers' vision of a true New Deal." Building political pressure meant, among other things, securing popular support for the strikers' demands, which, in turn, required access to the public. The radio networks offered limited time to union officials,

[63]Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 123, 75, 76 (first quotation); WEVD Program 8:30 p.m., Sunday Mar. 14, 1937, "Marching Song" (second quotation), Albert Maltz Papers, Box 1, Folder 73, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Colette Hyman generously provided the author with a copy of this program.

[64]*Variety*, Jan. 12, 1938, 28. *Columbia Workshop*, which began airing in July 1936, presented a fair share of socially relevant productions, including Archibald MacLeish's famous verse play *Fall of the City*; MacDonald, *Don't Touch that Dial*, 54–55.

[65]Federal Theatre Radio Division, "Schedule for February 1939," Publicity—1939—FTP Radio Division Presentations—NYC Schedule, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Box 963 (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/ftad.html); Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 124 (first quotation); *The Billboard*, Feb. 4, 1939, 10 (remaining quotations).

[66]Janet Irons, *Testing the New Deal: The General Textile Strike of 1934 in the American South* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000); *New York Herald Tribune*, Sept. 1, 1934, 24, Sept. 2, 1934, 2 (quotation).

usually as part of a "balanced" discussion with industry representatives. Only WEVD continually covered the strike from the union's perspective. By the second week of the strike, WEVD had set up a direct line from union headquarters in Washington, DC, and aired "each evening a flash of the daily events as well as an address by a prominent leader of the strike."[67]

WEVD's first broadcasts for the union included a "hastily composed radio drama depicting a day in strike headquarters." The docudrama began with union staff receiving morning telegrams from strike centers all along the East Coast. As Francis J. Gorman, vice-president and strike chairman of the United Textile Workers of America, read the reports, Chester M. Wright, the union's public relations advisor, interrupted with word that troops had been called out in Connecticut. A teletype story indicated that picket lines had been fired upon. Gorman dictated a telegram to every strike sector ordering the pickets "to hold the line." He explained to his audience that reactionaries ruled the industry "with an iron and unrelenting hand" and had forced workers to take direct action.[68] Subsequent broadcasts followed a more standard format, with Gorman or other union officials explaining recent developments on the picket lines or at the negotiating table. WEVD's strike coverage also allowed other labor officials and progressives to comment on the textile workers' struggle. WEVD made its facilities available to the union until the strike came to its bitter end in late September.[69]

In an equally contentious and important dispute in 1936, WEVD assisted a local union in explaining its position to workers and the general public. Strenuous efforts by Local 32B of the Building Service Employees Union (BSEU) to organize elevator operators in 1934 and 1935 encountered fierce resistance by building owners. Frustrated by workers' advances, the city's "real estate barons" sought to crush the union. Local 32B responded with a city-wide general strike in March 1936.[70] Walter Gordon Merritt, counsel to the New York City Realty Advisory Board, frequently spoke over the microphones of network-owned stations WABC (CBS) and WJZ (NBC), denouncing the strike as an "unjustified surprise attack" and the union's demand for a closed shop as an effort to gain a "monopolistic stranglehold upon this vital industry." Merritt used the radio to threaten militant strikers with dismissal and to promise strikebreakers permanent jobs.[71]

Union officials also gained access to the airwaves, but rarely through the facilities of commercial stations. An old friend of Novik's, BSEU president James J. Bambrick, had first used WEVD's microphones to discuss union issues in the fall of 1934. In late February 1936, Bambrick's address over WEVD, "Must We Strike?," laid out the union's grievances and attacked the building owners' head negotiator. Merritt, decrying

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[67]Irons, *Testing the New Deal*, 141–142 (first quotation); *New York Times*, Sept. 8, 1934, 13, Sept. 13, 1934, 3; Letter, Morris S. Novik to Charles Zimmerman, Sept. 15, 1934, Folder 8, Box 37, Zimmerman Records, ILGWU (second quotation).

[68]*New York Times*, Sept. 12, 1934, 3.

[69]*New York Times*, Sept. 11, 1934, 17, Sept. 12, 1934, 32, Sept. 13, 1934, 3, 32, Sept. 15, 1934, 2, 18, Sept. 18, 1934, 17, Sept. 19, 1934, 17, Sept. 20, 1934, 41; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Sept. 12, 1934, 22, Sept. 18, 1934, 22, Sept. 21, 1934, 28, Sept. 22, 1934, 16; *New Masses*, Oct. 2, 1934, 14; Irons, *Testing the New Deal*, 150–173.

[70]Service Employees International Union (SEIU), AFL–CIO, *Local 32B–32J: Sixty Years of Progress, 1934–1994* (New York: SEIU, 1994), 14; *New Masses*, Mar. 10, 1936, 3. Building owners dismissed with impunity elevator operators who participated in organizing efforts in 1934–1936. Interview, David Godfried with author, Dec. 8, 1989, New York City.

[71]*New York Times*, Mar. 7, 1936, 2 (first quotation), Mar. 11, 1936, 1; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Mar. 7, 1936, 2 (second quotation).

"hate the employer" rhetoric from "irresponsible" labor leaders, told newspapers and radio stations that the "elevator boys" already received fair compensation for their "light, unskilled, unexacting, and intermittent" work.[72] The intense animosity between the union and building owners exploded into violence in the streets and a vitriolic exchange of words in the press and on radio.

Every Tuesday evening during the short strike, Bambrick spoke over WEVD. He described developments in the negotiations, criticized the strikebreaking efforts by the building industry, and reiterated the union's demands for wage increases, reduced hours, improved working conditions, and the closed shop. In addition to allowing union officers to explain the purpose of their strike to the city's working and middle classes, WEVD conveyed important strike information to the rank and file. These services helped maintain a high level of union militancy and garnered significant public support for the strike. Indeed, by making its facilities available to the elevator operators, WEVD helped the strikers to solidify a developing alliance with the middle-class tenants residing in struck buildings, an alliance that weakened the resolve of the city's real estate powers.[73]

With a limited budget, sustaining programs for striking unions proved a continuous burden for WEVD. Broadcasting news flashes and speeches from Washington, DC, during the 1934 textile strike, for example, cost the station $50 a day. Committed to continuing five or six broadcasts per week "as long as we feel that it is helping the strike," Novik raised the necessary amount of money by soliciting small financial contributions from David Dubinsky and the presidents of local garment trade unions.[74] To finance a weekly labor news review with "a radio labor editor and a brief address by" union representatives, WEVD publicity director George Field pleaded for $65 from local trade unions in early 1935.[75] Station officials warmly welcomed business sponsorship for labor programming. They were pleased that Avalon Cigarettes, a subsidiary of Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company and a firm that employed "union workers under union labor terms," sponsored Chester M. Wright's syndicated labor news show on Fridays at 10:30 p.m. in 1937.[76]

The scheduling and financial problems that WEVD faced in trying to assist labor organizations during various crises demonstrated the limitations of alternative radio functioning within a commercial system. WEVD needed sponsored programming to help offset the cost of the labor shows that it sustained. But as sponsors demanded peak listening hours, commercial programs began to squeeze the station's sustained labor and educational fare into smaller and smaller time slots or off the air entirely. With only 57 hours of broadcast time per week in 1935, WEVD devoted well over one-third to sponsored shows. Two-thirds of WEVD's broadcast schedule came before 6 p.m. and, through part of the mid-1930s at least, WEVD had to leave the air each day between

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[72]James J. Bambrick, *The Building Service Story* (New York: The Labor History Press, 1948), 39, 48 (quotations); *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1936, 17; Walter Gordon Merritt, *Destination Unknown: Fifty Years of Labor Relations* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1951), 221.

[73]Bambrick, 39; *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1936, 17, Mar. 2, 1936, 1, Mar. 3, 1936, 29, Mar. 6, 1936, 3, Mar. 10, 1936, 21, Mar. 16, 1936, 4, Mar. 17, 1936, 29; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Mar. 13, 1936, 2; *Daily Worker*, Mar. 5, 1936, 6; *New Masses*, Mar. 17, 1936, 12–15, Mar. 24, 1936, 20. See also Grace Palladino, "When Militancy Isn't Enough: The Impact of Automation on New York City Building Service Workers, 1934–1970," *Labor History*, 28 (1987), 196–220.

[74]Letter, Novik to Zimmerman, Sept. 15, 1934, Folder 8, Box 37, Zimmerman Records.

[75]Letter, George Field to Charles Zimmerman, Jan. 9, 1935, Folder 8, Box 37, Zimmerman Records.

[76]*Justice*, Mar. 15, 1937, 15. Avalon had also sponsored WEVD's coverage of the AFL convention in Tampa, Florida, in 1936. *Justice*, Nov. 15, 1936, 9.

9 and 10 p.m. This left the station with a mere 19 hours in prime evening time. Novik had recommended that the ILGWU should schedule shows on Saturday afternoons, in part because it was less expensive for the union, but also because it cleared the few prime time evening hours for regular commercial programming. From the beginning of Novik's reign, WEVD urged labor unions to sponsor their own shows over the station. When they acquired free access to WEVD's facilities, socialists and union activists were subject to abrupt cancellations if sponsored programs became available. The growing importance of securing advertisers gradually pushed progressive programs off prime time schedules. Vladeck himself admitted in 1937 that "we are more conservative than we should be."[77]

The commercial fare that helped WEVD to subsidize its progressive programming also had links to the working-class communities that Novik and trade union leaders hoped to tap. From its early years, WEVD had opened its facilities to ethnic programs, especially Yiddish-language shows. The *Forward*'s own sponsored program, *The Forward Hour*, became one of the most popular Yiddish shows on WEVD and all of radio during the 1930s. It was joined by many other commercial programs, including *The Yiddish Philosopher*, *The Newsboy*, *The Merry Cantor*, *The Marriage Bureau*, and *Uncle Nokhem and his Kiddies*. Typical of these commercial shows were programs sponsored by the baking firm of A. Goodman and Sons, which specialized in Passover foods. *Synagogue Melodies*, a Wednesday evening musical show that aired in the spring of 1933, presented, according to *Variety*, a different set of "high quality" cantors each week, singing a mixture of religious and secular music. "Besides the solo and choral singing there's a rabbi" to help listeners prepare for Jewish holidays and "to append a sermon on some topic of current moment." In a March 1933 broadcast the commentary focused on Nazi persecution of Jews in Germany and recommended protest actions.[78] Other programs included soap operas and comedy skits with versatile performers from Yiddish theater. Yiddish programming over WEVD frequently encompassed subjects relevant to the lives of the mostly working-class audience. "Judiciously phrased" advertisements in Yiddish and English urged the consumption of everything from noodles to furniture to headache remedies to Coney Island excursions.[79] Whatever the social or cultural impact of WEVD's sponsored Yiddish programs on its working-class Jewish audience, these commercial ventures helped to free time and resources for WEVD's labor shows.

The financial pressures of a commercial broadcasting system, nevertheless, forced Novik and his assistants to insist that, whenever possible, trade unions had to pay for their own programming rather than have the station sustain the labor shows. *The Voice of Local 89*, *The International Hour*, and other programming produced in collaboration

[77]FCC, *FCC Reports, July 1, 1935–June 30, 1936*, Vol. 2 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1937), 232–233; Letter, Charney Vladeck to Jacob Billikopf, Jan. 19, 1937 (quotation), I–13 "V" General Correspondence, Microfilm R 1870, Baruch Charney Vladeck Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University; *Variety*, Feb. 24, 1937, 44.

[78]Novik interview; Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 289; *Variety*, Mar. 28, 1933, 36 (quotations), Feb. 13, 1934, 38; *Billboard*, Jan. 13, 1934, 13. Henry Sapoznik's forthcoming study of Yiddish entertainment and his radio documentary, *On the Air: Yiddish Radio 1925–1955*, contain the most comprehensive review of Yiddish radio programs from the 1930s.

[79]*Variety*, July 11, 1933, 42, Aug. 8, 1933, 39, Mar. 27, 1934, 38 (quotation); *Billboard*, Mar. 3, 1934, 14. See also Ruth Glazer, "The World of Station WEVD: Erev Shabbos in Yiddish-American Culture," *Commentary*, 19 (Feb. 1955), 162–170.

with ILGWU locals accepted this rule. Commenting on this situation in early 1937, *Variety* noted:

> WEVD has managed through the last few years to make its stand for trade-unionism more or less pay. In New York, where militant trade unions abound like peanuts in Virginia, unions have gotten into the habit of buying time at straight rates for self-propagandizing and, more often, for calling strikes and maintaining morale during their duration. WEVD still airs sustaining periods for trade unionism, but now only when some particular phase of it looms largely in public prints and consciousness. Also these sustainers are now confined to merely one or two shots, and only when some w.k. [well known] figure can be obtained to pull heavy listening audience.[80]

WEVD's labor programming policy remained in place even when Morris Novik left the station to become the manager of WNYC, New York's municipal radio outlet, in February 1938.

George Field succeeded Novik and found ironically that his job had become more difficult because of an expansion of the station's operations. By the fall of 1938, Debs radio had added 36 hours to its broadcasting schedule—the result of a Federal Communications Commission decision allowing WEVD to purchase station WFAB and its air time. The *Forward* company paid approximately $85,000 for WFAB and funded new broadcasting facilities for WEVD on West 46th Street.[81] These expenses necessitated the securing of more commercial programming and, as a result, the limiting of time available for organized labor and the socialist movement.

As Field took up his new position, the Social Democratic Federation, a creation of the Old Guard of the Socialist Party, requested WEVD to make time available for its members to discuss topics of socialist philosophy and to offer a socialist perspective on contemporary problems. Field gave the Federation a 15-minute slot on three Friday evenings a month in early 1938. Over the course of the next year, the station altered both the days and times of broadcast "because of commercial commitments."[82] In the summer of 1940, Field discontinued the program because the station "had to rearrange our entire evening broadcast schedule to make way for a full-hour commercial variety show." Socialist discussions reappeared in the fall, but remained subject to rescheduling decisions. Organization officials lamented "that these changes are usually abrupt and are necessitated by the commercial department of the station and since our time is not paid for, we have to adjust ourselves to whatever free time we can get."[83]

ILGWU locals responded favorably to a campaign by Field to expand union sponsorship of labor programs. As popular as ever, *The Voice of Local 89* continued its weekly shows into the 1940s and beyond. In November 1939, it celebrated the union's 20th anniversary with an international radio broadcast transmitted from WEVD to Europe

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[80] *Variety*, Feb. 24, 1937, 44.

[81] *New York Times*, Feb. 10, 1938, 23; *Broadcasting*, Feb. 15, 1938, 85; *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1938, 10; Letter, George Field to Charles Zimmerman, June 11, 1938, Folder 8, Box 37, Zimmerman Records, ILGWU; *New York Times*, June 4, 1938, 13, Oct. 16, 1938, 12.

[82] Letters, August Claessens to George Field, Feb. 26, 1938, Field to Claessens, June 27, 1938, Claessens to Judge Jacob Panker, Sept. 6, 1938, Claessens to Louis P. Goldberg, Dec. 16, 1938, Field to Claessens, Jan. 19, 1939 (quotation), Reel 18, Social Democratic Federation Records, 1933–1956, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York City.

[83] Letters, Claessens to Goldberg, April 19, 1939, Field to Claessens, July 1, 1940 (first quotation), Claessens to Field, July 10, 1940, Claessens to Hedwig Wachenheim, Dec. 13, 1940 (second quotation), Reel 18, Social Democratic Federation Records, 1933–1956.

via stations in Boston.[84] Field met with representatives of garment unions in the fall of 1938 and discussed the creation of a *Labor Hour* that would air several evenings a week. Sponsored by participating unions, the program would offer organized labor regular and continuous access to the airwaves, as opposed to the "scattered, isolated efforts" of unions in the recent past. By early 1939, ILGWU Locals 22 (Dressmakers), 35 (Cloak Pressers), and 62 (Undergarment Workers) had created shows that alternated in the 8 o'clock hour on consecutive weekday evenings. For instance, Local 22's Thursday broadcasts included popular international folk songs, labor skits by the Local 22 Players, guest speakers on pertinent topics, and weekly addresses by the union's secretary-manager, Charles Zimmerman. A February 1939 program urged union aid to refugees from fascist Spain and featured instrumental Spanish music performed by the ILGWU Mandolin Concert Ensemble and Spanish airs sung by union members. Yona Finkelstein, of the ILGWU, wrote and sang an original song dedicated to the heroic workers and peasants of Spain.[85]

Field tried his best to demonstrate the advantages of labor programming to uninitiated unions. The ACWA's Jacob Potofsky, for example, thanked WEVD for the opportunity to participate in the gala show that celebrated the dedication of WEVD's new home in the fall of 1938. "This broadcast was our first experiment in radio," wrote Potofsky in December 1938, "and I am pleased to tell you that we consider it an outstanding success, so much so … that we will plan a series of similar broadcasts during the next few months." Potofsky thanked Field for "your help in introducing us to this medium."[86]

Despite their positive experiences with WEVD, leaders of the ILGWU and the ACWA did not commit their limited resources to long-running labor shows. In the fall of 1939, Field again attempted to interest the garment unions in a revised *Labor Hour*. He suggested that "four friendly local unions" should sponsor a 1-hour show on two weekday evenings, with each union having its own 15-minute period. Each segment could contain news from Europe—especially relevant, given the volatile situation abroad—followed by short musical selections and concluding with a short talk by officials of the sponsoring unions. The resulting "vital" and "timely program" would, according to Field, attract the attention of both union members and the general public. Union officials, however, did not embrace this cooperative radio venture, even at the "modest cost of $40 a week" per union.[87] Field also failed to convince the ILGWU to sponsor a 10-week experimental run of a labor serial that "is a sort of *Rise of the Goldbergs* of the ladies' garment industry."[88] Although he proposed different labor show formats—including the *Union Hall*, a weekly half-hour series with a moderator, two distinguished speakers, and the studio audience participating in a discussion of subjects of interest to the rank and file—Field could not secure regular union sponsorship for

[84]*Justice*, Oct. 15, 1939, 5, Nov. 15, 1939, 1, 6.

[85]Letters, George Field to Charles Zimmerman, June 11, 1938, Sept. 14, 1938 (quotation), Oct. 11, 1938, Folder 8, Box 37, Zimmerman Records; *Justice*, Dec. 1, 1938, 6, Dec. 15, 1938, 6, Jan. 15, 1939, 6, 7, Feb. 1, 1939, 2, Feb. 15, 1939, 6, 7, Mar. 1, 1939, 15.

[86]Letters, George Field to Jacob Potofsky, Oct. 18, 1938, Potofsky to Field, Dec. 3, 1938 (quotations), Folder 3, Box 127, Papers of Jacob Potofsky, Records of ACWA.

[87]Letters, George Field to Jacob Potofsky, Aug. 4, 1939 (mistakenly dated 1935), Potofsky to Field, Aug. 8, 1939, Field to Potofsky, Sept. 6, 1939, Folder 3, Box 127, Papers of Jacob Potofsky, ACWA Records; Letter, Field to Charles Zimmerman, Sept. 6, 1939 (quotations), Folder 8, Box 37, Zimmerman Records, ILGWU.

[88]Letters, George Field to David Dubinsky, Sept. 19, 1939, Nov. 3, 1939 (quotation), Jan. 23, 1940, Folder 6, Box 171, David Dubinsky Correspondence, ILGWU Records.

any of them.[89] When unions did sponsor shows, Field could not break the format established by Novik and the ILGWU.

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The experiences of the ILGWU with WEVD during the 1930s highlight important aspects about labor's relationship with radio broadcasting and the trade union movement's understanding of cultural and political struggle. The ILGWU's long and distinguished record in workers' education and its multifaceted "cultural front" activities—everything from theater groups to choral and instrumental ensembles to an array of sporting teams—confirmed the union's commitment to cultural struggle and its recognition of how that struggle overlapped and intersected with important political and economic battles.[90] A willingness to struggle on the cultural front made ILGWU labor intellectuals open to the use of radio broadcasting. Novik, Field, and other WEVD managers assisted labor officials in understanding the advantages of radio programming. ILGWU leaders supported short-term labor radio programming for immediate economic and political gains in the midst of strikes, organizing campaigns, or political elections. But only Antonini and a handful of other union innovators recognized the importance of maintaining continual access to the airwaves for ongoing political, economic, and cultural battles. Most ILGWU officials never ventured beyond the perception of radio as a medium for advancing the other forms of cultural and political struggle. Radio, for example, could effectively inform and entertain workers when the unions' regular cultural and educational activities closed for the summer. Radio was a means to an end, not an end in itself.

The difficulty of getting trade unions to devote time, energy, and money to the production of regular labor programming over WEVD was not unique. WCFL in Chicago confronted a similar problem, and, in their own ways, so did the labor film movement and labor press.[91] Part of this dilemma derived from WEVD's poor power, frequency, and time allocations, which made it difficult for large numbers of working-class families with inexpensive radio equipment to tune into the station at a particular hour. Distracting and, at times, debilitating conflicts with government agencies further undermined the resources and resolve of Debs radio. Because commercial networks and powerful independents possessed the financial resources necessary to afford the best available talent and production facilities, they broadcast more polished shows than did WEVD. In addition, mainstream broadcasting outlets offered programs that working-class audiences frequently found comforting or attractive, despite subtle or egregious anti-labor messages.

WEVD and its labor programmers never did overcome the tendency to serve their listeners as consumers rather than engaging them as collaborators. The station privileged programming *for* the working class over programming *by* the working class, and fell short of offering a full selection of the diversity of opinion among workers. Operating, as it did, through the official structure of the organized trade union movement, WEVD neglected dissident voices. Its coverage of the 1936 elevator operators' strike depended exclusively on speeches by BSEU president Bambrick. The

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[89]Letters, George Field to Charles Zimmerman, Oct. 29, 1940, Will Herberg to Field, Nov. 16, 1940, Field to Zimmerman, Dec. 16, 1940, Zimmerman to Field, Dec. 20, 1940, Folder 8, Box 37, Zimmerman Records, ILGWU.

[90]*Justice*'s regular column entitled "On the Cultural Front" outlined the various activities of the union's cultural groups during the late 1930s, e.g. *Justice*, Nov. 1, 1939, 12.

[91]Godfried, *WCFL: Chicago's Voice of Labor*, 124–127; Ross, 227–234.

station did not open its microphones to rank-and-file activists who might have criticized the union's lack of democratic procedures or challenged Bambrick's unilateral decision to halt a militant strike for the promise of state arbitration. Nor did WEVD offer either union officials or mill workers the opportunity to analyze the failed 1934 general textile strike.[92]

These limitations notwithstanding, working-class intellectuals made significant use of WEVD and provided crucial services for working-class movements and trade union audiences during the 1930s. Intellectuals within the trade union movement itself created labor programs like *The Voice of Local 89*, while those employed by the station devised general educational programming such as *The University of the Air*. These and similar programs over WEVD helped to inform rank-and-file workers of important trade union matters, correct the mainstream media's distorted depictions of working-class movements, assert a positive and enlightened working-class perspective on a variety of contemporary issues, and entertain its audience. While WEVD rarely allowed workers themselves to represent their own concerns and aspirations, labor movement intellectuals did their best to shape cultural and political programming to benefit working-class members and their communities.

[92]*New Masses*, Mar. 24, 1936, 4–5; Irons, 154–181.